Sunday, February 8, 1987
LAMPSTAND OR BUSHEL?
Matthew 5:13-16

Text: Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

From the moment we are born into this world, other people’s desires and needs begin to affect us. There are those who want us to be one kind of person, and there are those who have something else in mind for us. The poet E.E. Cummings wrote: “To be nobody-but-yourself in a world that is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight and never stop fighting.”

A minister I know told of his own struggle with this problem. He said that from the earliest memories of his childhood, he knew that the members of his family wanted and expected him to become a physician. His grandfather on his father’s side was a well-known country doctor, clearly one of the illustrious achievers in the family. His father had aspired to study medicine, but when he graduated from college, there were younger brothers and sisters to be educated. Then World War I came along, and he was never able to fulfill this dream. Therefore, he, the grandson, was expected to fulfill his father’s dream and follow in his grandfather’s footsteps.

As far back as he could remember, he was called the “little doctor,” and he was given toy stethoscopes and little black medicine cases for Christmas and was constantly reminded of this family hope.

There is little wonder, then, that he grew up into adolescence with a powerful sense that this was what he was destined to do with his life. However, there were several factors in his life that began to cause him some doubt. He had almost no practical dexterity. He had trouble doing little intricate things with his hands. He had not, for example, mastered the art of tying his own shoes by the time he was in the first grade.

Then, when he got to high school and began to take chemistry, he found that he was intellectually capable of doing the work but had no genuine enthusiasm for scientific endeavors at all. His great joy was with people and ideas. He was much more excited about school politics and subjects like history, English, and religion than spending hours in a laboratory dissecting animal or plant life.

These and other experiences led this young man to decide when he was still in college that perhaps he should become a minister. He remembers still how disappointed the members of his family were with his decision. They had wanted and needed something from him that he was not honoring.

Frederick Buechner had a similar experience. He grew up in a Unitarian home where organized religion was a rather low priority, and when he made a rather abrupt decision to enter seminary and start preparing for the ministry, it caused great dismay in his family. He writes that not long after this, he was having Sunday lunch with one of his grandmother’s closest friends — a wealthy, highly placed Bostonian lady. There was a table filled with guests that day, and when a lull came in the conversation, his hostess said icily, “I hear you’re planning to enter the ministry. Is this your own idea, or were you poorly advised?”

It's no wonder that we all sometimes resonate with E.E. Cummings' words, "To be nobody-but-yourself in a world that is doing its best night and day to make you everybody else is to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight and never stop fighting." It is not easy to cope with the pressures that come from others or arise when you cross other people's desires.

On the other hand, when you give in at this point and let other people make you over or follow their desires, that is equally painful. I can remember too many times in my life when I have not had the fortitude to say "No" to a project that someone wanted me to do — a project that I did not have the time or the skill to carry out, and yet I said "Yes" against my better judgment. And then I experienced the enormous fatigue that always accompanies doing something when your heart is not in it.

I think many times we let ourselves be made over into other people's images because we have so little self-esteem, and one way of getting a little bit is to give in and try to earn self-esteem by trying to earn the approval of others.

Here's a story about a woman I shall call Julia. As far back as Julia could remember, her beginning point in self-awareness was decidedly negative in tone. She said that from the very beginning, she did not like the way she came from the hand of the Creator. She imagined herself as an emptiness, a big fat zero, one who somehow did not measure up as she was. She said that she remembered one particular Peanuts comic strip that described her perfectly. In the cartoon, Charlie is lamenting to his friend Linus about his chronic life-long sense of insecurity. "It goes all the way back to the beginning," he says, "the moment I was born and stepped on the stage of history, they took one look at me and said, 'Not right for the part.'"

Julia was not able to trace out all the causes of this self-despising. She did remember that again and again in her early days, she was told, "If you are ever going to amount to anything, you have to make something of yourself."

She said that she was sure that those who said this meant it to be a source of motivation to inspire her to make the most of what she had been given, but that's not what she heard. Child educators have pointed out that children are often excellent observers but poor interpreters. They hardly miss a thing when it comes to taking it all in, but drawing the correct conclusion is another thing. In the case of Julia, she said that she took these words as an assessment of her condition rather than as a challenge to her potential. She interpreted them to mean, "As you are just now, you do not amount to anything, and if there is ever going to be any significance to your life, you are going to have to go somewhere else and import it and become something other than what you are right now."

Julia was not attempting to blame others for her low self-esteem. She knew that each one of us has some responsibility for the images of self that we create out of what goes on around us. She knew that she was the one who had somewhere along the line decided that she was not good enough as she was. A mood of dissatisfaction settled over her whole existence and became the vantage point from which she interpreted everything.

Winston Churchill used to tell the story of a British family that went out for a picnic by a lake. In the course of the afternoon, the five-year-old son fell into the water. Unfortunately, none of the adults could swim. As the child was bobbing up and down and everyone on the shore was dissolving in panic, a passerby saw the situation. At great risk to himself, he dived in fully clothed and managed to reach the child just before he came up for the third time. He was able to pull him out of the water and present him safe and sound to his mother. Instead of thanking

the stranger for his heroic efforts, however, the mother snapped peevishly at the rescuer, “Where’s Johnny’s cap?” Somehow, in all the commotion, the boy’s cap had gotten lost. Out of all the facets of that episode, the woman found something with which to be dissatisfied.

Julia decided that the only way a nobody could become a somebody was to compete and achieve. Perhaps this would fill her emptiness.

She tried everything. In the early grades of school, she learned how to maneuver her way into becoming the teacher’s pet. Later on, she ran for every school office she could. She became a cheerleader and made the best grades possible. She said that by untiring effort and manipulation, she managed to become fairly successful. And she remembered not only taking pride in what she was accomplishing but also beginning to experience the dark side of this approach to life — she began to feel contempt toward those who were not doing as well.

This overwhelming necessity to achieve, not for the joy of achievement in itself, but in an attempt to make something of herself, continued through college and on into her working life. She had a good job, was making more money than most young women her age, and yet she still felt an emptiness.

After about ten years in the working world, Julia began to feel an overpowering sense of fatigue. She said, “Do you realize how much energy it takes to always have to succeed and come out number one?” She was also beginning to sense how lonely and isolated this way of living leaves one. How can you relate warmly to persons when you realize that at a deeper level, you are competing with them and trying to outdo them? She began to remember times that she had not been able to reach out and identify with another’s needs because her own need to be approved was so overwhelming.

Julia had been a church attender off and on after she got out of college, and she had grown up in a Christian environment, but she had not been very deeply affected by it all. Then one Sunday morning, in the midst of her growing despair, she found herself in a worship service again. The scripture reading that morning was the same as was read here this morning — the passage from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus told his disciples and tells us as well— "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to the whole house. Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and give glory to God.”

In that moment, it dawned on her that she had worth already by the grace of creation and did not have to strive or achieve to acquire it. Jesus did not say she had to turn the world upside down. She did not have to outdo all others in order to earn light or work vigorously in order to achieve light. Jesus simply says: “You are the light,” and then suggests how what is given is to be used. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel but on a lampstand so that it illumines all that is around it.

This very clearly says that the light we already are, that is, the unique shape of our own created being, needs to be acknowledged as a gift and then made a good present for someone else by being allowed to shine in all its uniqueness. To be sure, there are always people around with bushels who are ready to cover up our light in their desires or needs. And we ourselves, at times, try to put our light under a bushel. Sometimes too, we need help in discerning what our light is.

So we always have the decision — will we allow other people's bushels or our own to cover up the light according to what they want or need? Or will we have the courage to place our light on a lampstand and let that unique light be a contribution to the world? Lampstand over bushel is the highest challenge each one of us faces.

Here was Julia. Here is each one of us, looking everywhere in the realm of achievement for a way to amount to something, and all along the worth had been right there within her, and it is within us. All we have to do is to realize it and accept it. "You are the light of the world."

Soren Kierkegaard says that all sin goes back to a single root — namely, our refusal to be what God created us to be. Every gift you have been given by God in creating you is the light to be given to others. You are the light of the world. Will you put the light on a lampstand or let it be hidden under a bushel? Amen.