Sunday, February 7, 1999
LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE
Matthew 5:13-20

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 others 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 hoped to become a doctor, 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 his 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 and 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 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 the pressures that arise when you go against 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 can be equally fateful.

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 when I said "yes" against my better judgment, I experienced the enormous fatigue that always accompanies doing something when your heart is not in it.

There are, of course, some things we need to do even when we don't feel like it. We all have responsibilities and duties which must be carried out in spite of our changing moods.

What I'm talking about here is much more than that. It's the tendency to allow ourselves to be made over into other people's images because we have so little self-worth, and one way of getting a tiny bit is to give in order to earn the approval of others.

Here's a story about a woman I shall call Grace. As far back as she could remember, she thought of herself in negative terms. 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.'"

Grace 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.

Early childhood 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 coming to the correct conclusion is another thing.

In the case of Grace, 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 quite different than what you are right now."

Grace was not attempting to blame others for her low sense of self-worth. 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 had little value as she was. A mood of dissatisfaction settled over her whole existence and became the vantage point from which she interpreted everything.

Grace 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 she was 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 ten years in the working world, Grace 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 causes. How can you relate warmly to people 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.

Grace 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 today — the passage from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus told his disciples, "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 basket 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. She had worth already because she was created in the image of God 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 said, "You are the light," and then suggested how what is given is to be used. "No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket but on a lampstand so that it illumines all that is around it."

Here's a metaphor I like which helps me to understand how each one of us is the light. Since you are created in the image of God, you have the light of God within you. It is your job and mine to reflect that light in the same way as a mirror reflects light. You and I are not the source of light, but that light which is truth, understanding, love, and knowledge is here, but it will only shine in the dark places if you and I reflect it.

"You are the light." All you need to do is to acknowledge that gift from God by letting your light shine. To be sure, there are always people around with bushel baskets or blankets who are ready to cover up our light. Some do it out of jealousy, others because they can't stand light in anyone, and still others are afraid of light.

And we sometimes cover up our own light. We hide our talents and abilities. This can happen because of one or more of the following reasons.

There are those who are convinced they have little or no light to let shine. In order to allow their light to shine, they need to let go, to release certain limiting self-beliefs or emotions which cover up their light.

Extreme anger can be the bushel basket which covers the light which God has given you. I've met people who hold on to their anger toward their parents for the way they were raised, or toward their spouse for disappointing them, or toward life itself for presenting them with injustices. They focus on their anger so intently that they are blind to the light of forgiveness and release. They are filled with light, but it is covered up with anger.

Fear can be the cover which keeps the light which God has given you from shining. It can be the bushel basket which covers it.

The opposite of fear is courage. It sometimes takes a lot of courage to put your light on a lampstand and let it shine.

Here's another way of looking at it. There will be times when you have difficulty seeing the light that God has given you, or you might even think the light has gone out because of a lack of power. You may experience "power leaks" that rob you of your ability to let your light shine. In those times, you will need to identify what is robbing you of your power and patch the leaks.

Power leaks come in many forms: intimidation, discouragement, and disappointment, setbacks, rejection, or loss, just to name a few. One way to patch these power leaks is to look back at your earliest successes as a way to remind yourself of what you are capable of.

Another way, and perhaps the best way to patch those power leaks, is to remember that the light you have has its source in God. You are the light of the world because the light of God can shine through you. That means that the source of that power is inexhaustible. No matter how big the leak is, there will always be enough power available to keep the light shining. Sometimes, however, we let ourselves get out of line with that source of power, so we have to rediscover it.

So we always face the decision — will we allow other people's bushel baskets or our own to cover up the light? Or will we have the courage to place our light on a lampstand and let our unique light be a contribution to the world?

In some ways, like the example of Grace, each one of us is searching for a way to amount to something. In the coming of God in Jesus, we are told that search is answered. "You are the light of the world." All you have to do is to realize it and accept it.

Soren Kierkegaard said 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. Amen.