

Burning Brightly

^{NRS} **Luke 8:16** "No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. ¹⁷ For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. ¹⁸ Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away." ¹⁹ Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. ²⁰ And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." ²¹ But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

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When I first looked at this short passage in Luke, it seemed to almost be a series of unrelated statements. "Nobody lights a lamp and then covers it up. Listen carefully. Those who have will receive more. My family is those who listen to my words." Gradually, however, the themes became both clearer and began to be interconnected.

Light is such a strong symbol for us. Lady Liberty holds up her torch in the middle of New York harbor. My parents sang a song that began, "By the light, of the silvery moon. . .". Newscasters have guest experts and ask them to shed some light on the day's news. We use light to symbolize freedom, romance, and knowledge - and many other things. When Cathy and I first moved to Missouri, we did a lot of camping. We both love the outdoors and we had good memories of camping as scouts when we were growing up. We were soon reminded just how dark it can get out in the woods at night. So it wasn't long before we bought a Coleman Gas Lantern. It was amazing. When you got the gasoline in it and pumped it up, and lit it - those two nylon mesh mantles would begin to glow so bright that it hurt your eyes to look at them. Then we'd find a place to hang it up high, where it would illuminate the whole campsite.

In scripture, light is often a metaphor for the knowledge of God or the presence of God - and those may be interconnected rather than distinctly different things. In the book of Exodus we read, ^{NRS} **Exodus 34:29** "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near and he gave them, in commandment, all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai." It says that Moses' face was all lit up because he had been talking with God. Was it because he had been near God - or because he had been hearing the message of God? The text doesn't distinguish between the two!

Jesus is the light of God's Word, come into a dark and confused world. Jesus often spoke in parables. In this text in Luke, Jesus says when you want to shed some light on things you don't hide the light - you lift it up! His purpose in the parables wasn't to conceal, but to reveal. But parables do require initiative and responsibility on the part of the listener. And Jesus says in this text to pay attention to how you listen. Listening and understanding must go together - pay attention to how you listen. Many of us just sort of half listen. When something comes along that fits with our wants or our viewpoint, we kind of perk up and take notice. When something challenging is in the text, when something confronts our assumptions or our lifestyle, we can get pretty hard of hearing. We talk about how our children or our spouse seems to have selective hearing, but we all do it. Our hearing is crystal clear when Jesus says, "I'm going to prepare a place for you." We can be as deaf as a post when Jesus says, "Pray for those who persecute you."

When we read scripture, "We must always be careful not to consider it casually or hear it only superficially. God's Word demands a radical openness on our part, our most serious and thoughtful consideration, and our most trusting response."¹ "Those who lean forward to hear, those who invest trust and commitment, who come to the . . . word seeking, asking, and hungering, - these are the ones to whom 'more will be given.' Those who think they already know, who acknowledge no blindness, who listen with ears that

only register likes and dislikes, who fold the arms against the chest waiting to be convinced or entertained - these are the ones who discover painfully that even what they thought they had has been taken away."² How does that happen? If you're content with the memories you have of the Bible stories you heard as a child in Sunday School, if you love the Christmas story and are moved by the crucifixion and the resurrection, but feel little need to know more than that about your Lord and your faith, then your faith will shrink and wither and go weak and useless. Understanding is like a muscle that grows more effective the more it is exercised. If you aren't feeding your faith with careful listening, thoughtful reading, and active study, then you're starving your faith and it can only weaken.

We know that when we misbehave, when sin is strong and virtue is weak, that we're likely to suffer the consequences for our lack of virtue. But, "We may suffer . . . as often from lack of knowledge as from lack of virtue; and when the opportunity for knowledge is given us and we neglect it, lack of knowledge means lack of virtue."³ Jesus says, "Pay attention to how you listen." Listen carefully. Exercise your mental muscles. Think about what you're reading. Keep on studying and develop greater and greater understanding.

It isn't just a simple matter of deeper and deeper understanding of the text as written, although "listening carefully" does lead to clearer understanding. But it also prepares you for the help of the Holy Spirit. In the sixteenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he has more to tell them but they're not yet ready to hear and receive some of his message. Jesus says that after he's gone, he'll send the Spirit to continue guiding the disciples and to continue declaring Christ's message to us as we are able to receive and understand. (John 16:7-14) All through history, God has gradually unveiled his will for his creation. But before we can be led to greater revelation, we must absorb what has already been revealed. God will impart more truth to those who make use of what they have already heard. The Holy Spirit will guide us to even deeper interpretation of the scriptures - after we have listened carefully to what is already before us in the text. In so doing, those who have much will receive even more.

At the beginning of this chapter, Luke has made specific mention of several women who have been traveling with Jesus and his disciples. They are literally followers of Christ, like the other disciples. What's more, they've been putting their money where their mouth is, so to speak, because we're told that they have been providing financial support out of their personal resources. Presumably, Susanna, Joanna, Mary Magdalene and the other women are there, along with the twelve, when Jesus' mother and brothers show up to see him. Because of the crowd, Mary, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas wait outside and send word in to Jesus. When he's told that his family is outside, Jesus seems to say, "My family is bigger than you might think. "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

In this short passage, Jesus has begun by proclaiming that he's holding the light of God's word high, for all to see. But it's important that we listen carefully, so that we will hear all of the message, not just what we want to hear. As we study and learn, the Holy Spirit will be with us, revealing even more of God's will to us. And now Jesus takes this to the next level. And again, we need to pay attention to how we listen. What we want to hear is that those who know Jesus are his family. Those who read his teachings are his family. Those who study and those who financially support Christ's work are his family. We'd like to hear that. But if we pay attention to how we listen, we realize that all these things are important - but not quite sufficient to be part of Christ's family. Jesus says, "Those who hear the word of God and do it are members of my family. Hearing is the beginning. Fully engaged listening is important. Studying and being open to the expanding revelation by the Holy Spirit makes life fuller and richer. But to be part of the family, you also have to act. You have to do. Hearing and doing is what makes people part of Jesus' family. What you learn is to be internalized. It's to become part of who you are. What you know seeps out into your everyday life and becomes part of how you act, the choices you make, the way you choose to spend your time, the way you see and treat other people. And in so doing, the light of Christ shines through you.

The other side of the coin here is that Jesus is also saying that blood kinship buys no special consideration in God's kingdom. Jesus is saying that those waiting outside to see him are his family - just like all people who hear God's word and do it. Mary was part of the body of disciples who were in Jerusalem during the final week. She stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus hung there. Mary was there with the others on Pentecost. Tradition is strong that one of Christ's brothers, James, was the leader of the church in

Jerusalem. These are not the special privileges of kinship. They are the actions of those who hear God's word and do it. Just as the earthly family of Jesus had no special claim to position, so today those whose families have been Presbyterians for many generations, or those who are the sons and daughters of ministers or General Presbyters, or Moderators of the General Assembly have no special place in the church. While there are some traditions where the minister's spouse is given a title and obligations, I believe that our failure to do so shows wisdom and close attention to this text.

There's a wonderful corollary to this. If your Momma or your Daddy or your ancestor or your spouse can't make you an important member of Christ's family, neither can they drag you down. It doesn't matter if you come from a long line of abusive, lazy, promiscuous, drug-crazed, profligates and horse thieves. In fact, it doesn't matter about your own past either - if you're willing to go on the journey toward the light - reading, being careful how you listen, seeking ever deeper understanding, letting the Holy Spirit whisper in your ear, and doing --- doing God's word. And Jesus will call you "Sister." He will call you "Brother." There is no higher title in heaven or on earth. Amen.

^{NRS} **John 16:7-14** Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.⁸ And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:⁹ about sin, because they do not believe in me;¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer;¹¹ about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

^{NRS} **Luke 8:1-3** Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

^{NRS} **Matthew 13:55** Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke, NIB* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995) p 181

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, WJK, 1990) p 113

³ John Knox, *The Gospel According to St. Luke, IBVol. 8* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1952) p 152