

Casting Shadows

Sixth in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

by

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Acts 5:12-16

¹²Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, ¹⁵so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. ¹⁶A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

We can easily call this a transition scene, resting there as it does between two major acts in the unraveling story of apostolic leadership. This passage falls right after the story of Ananias and Sapphira. You remember them?

They are the couple who don't give fully of their gifts as they are called. Then they lie about it to Peter, are called out by him, and drop dead on the spot. Now that's what we call a killer stewardship sermon. But those aren't the verses of the day.

The verses this morning immediately precede the story of the angel of the Lord; who opens the prison doors to release the recently arrested apostles so that they might preach God's liberating good news at the temple. But those aren't the verses of the day either.

Our text is right there in the middle, between the signs of God. A mass of people gathered on the eastern side of the temple's outer court, and even greater numbers of people are joining in the way of Jesus.

But it is the character of Peter who grabs our attention here. V.15 says the sick were laid on cots and mats in the street "in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by." Our text concludes "and they were all healed." *Cured* as the NRSV says it.

What does all this even mean?

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In my little hometown growing up in the Midwest, there were a handful of colorful characters who live on in the collective memory of time. There was the respected doctor who ran off with his nurse and then built a grand house right across the street from his horrified ex-wife.

There was the politically-connected farmer who, after finding out his son-in-law changed his party affiliation, blew up the bridge that connected their farms. There was the mayor, who was also an

auctioneer, and who had a reputation for talking so fast in town council meetings a budget would be passed without anyone knowing what was in it.

But there are also those who stand above the rest in our communal stories, not because of their perfection, but because their lives and personal character pointed to something beyond themselves.

They seemed to emanate humanity at its best; the joy, the hope, the laughter, the courage. In their daily living we saw the Christ of it, and we couldn't help but want to be near them. They were like stars, pulling us into their gravitational orbit.

In our town his name was Ron Bell. He was not a native to us, he was born several counties over, which means we initially viewed him with an air of suspicion. But in 1961, at 24 years old, he began teaching in our local junior high school and slowly won us over. We fell in love with his wonderful wife and children, and embraced him as our own when he became active in all sorts of local civic engagement.

Ron worked his way up the district ladder and became a principal and eventually a superintendent. His kindness was fabled, his work-ethic legendary. He was that man whom everyone wanted to know or be known by. I knew him and loved him. So did everyone else I know.

The truth is, folks like Ron don't just live in small towns, we have all probably known people like him. Without even recognizing they are doing so, they call us to be better than we are.

Which leads me to assume Peter's character must have been regarded in similar fashion. So convinced were folks that he was filled with the divine that they hoped his passing shadow might be enough to restore their own tired lives and broken bodies. Imagine the kind of witness that takes, often without realizing. For who pays attention to their own shadow?

Today is Dedication Sunday, where we make promises and pledges to contribute our own time, talents, and treasure to further the Kingdom of God here in this place.

But I must confess to you that the most pressing response we can give to God's invitation is much more than a pledge card; it's our very lives God wants. All of which begs the question: what kind of shadow are you casting? Do you live your life in a way that shares the Christ of it?

Quaker pastor, Phil Gulley, says folks are drawn to the Christ of our character far more than they are to the quality of our doctrine. He tells the story of encountering a local man that invited him to have lunch.

Gulley knew the man by reputation. He knew him to be intelligent, outspoken, capable of much kindness, and that the man openly identified as an agnostic in a community not known for its religious diversity.

Gully writes,

“Because I was his guest I wanted to steer the conversation toward topics that might interest him, so I asked him about his new home, recently built outside of town in a wooded setting.

‘It’s just a house,’ he said, swatting away the topic as one would a pesky fly. *‘What I want to know is why you became a pastor.’*

I gave him the stock reply—that I was in it for the money.

He laughed, then said, *‘No really. I really want to know.’*

I told him I found the study of theology interesting, and that I valued the sense of community a church provided, and that helping others navigate life was meaningful to me.

'I don't believe in God,' he said. 'Would I be welcome in your church?'

'Certainly,' Gulley told him.

'Would I eventually have to believe in God in order to stay there?' Gulley thought for a moment before answering him. Then he replied, "If some people discovered you didn't believe in God, they might try to convert you. If they couldn't, they might grow upset with you. But as a pastor, I don't think belief can be compelled. I only care about your beliefs insofar as they affect your behavior. Given that, I would prefer a congregation of kind atheists over a congregation of hateful Christians. But if you became a kind Christian, I would not be disappointed."¹

For me, as a Presbyterian minister, the truth is somewhere in the middle. We as Christians in the Reformed tradition care deeply about our theology, but if our theology doesn't transform how we live, it won't amount to a hill of beans.

To follow Jesus in this messy world, all the while acknowledging our own messy lives, means to bear witness to the love, mercy, peace, freedom, and justice of God. This work is not the root of Christianity; it is its fruit.

The ways and teachings of Jesus are, as theologian John Leith wrote, "not arbitrarily imposed on life but are descriptions of the way human life is meant to be lived."² Jesus' concerns should be our concerns, his ethics our ethics, his compassion ours as well. To be a Christian is to be shaped by the life of Jesus, as the old hymn invites us "to tell the old, old story, of Jesus and his love."

¹ Gulley, Philip. *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. 68-69.

² Leith, John H. *Basic Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993. 215.

To be sure, we are not a community of the perfect. We are a community, to borrow a Latin phrase, *in via* on the way; to becoming more loving, more compassionate, more just, more inclusive, more holy (understanding that holiness means to reflect the divine image).

The basic question being asked of us today is not *how much will you pledge?* but *what kind of shadow are you casting?* How does your life embody the life of Jesus?

A better way to put the question is the way the preacher Fred Craddock did when he asked in a sermon once, “How did you respond to human need?”

Craddock goes on, “I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband had died. My children lived in another state but I stayed in that big empty house. Did you or did you not come?”

I was in prison, cut off from society for my misdeeds. A criminal, yes, but still a human being. Did you or did you not visit?

I was hungry, peering into a world of banquets and diets. I saw more food flushed down disposals than my entire family had eaten. Did you offer me anything to eat?

I was without clothing, looking into the shop windows, gazing at the wardrobes of the world. I waited for styles to change hoping for an old coat or dress. Did you offer me anything to wear?

I was a stranger, new at the job, new in the city, new on the street, new in the neighborhood, new in the apartment building. I did not know a soul. Did you introduce yourself to me?”³

³ Craddock, Fred B. *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 96-97.

That's the question above all the other questions being asked of you today. What will you do in response to the great needs of creation? What kind of shadow are you casting in Jesus' name?

Here at the church we work to do the best we can to offer our own answer to that question, but the church is more than the buildings or the staff. You are the church. I am the church. We are the church. Together. Which means it will be our collective witness that must shine in the world.

A close reading of Acts 5 doesn't tell us if it was Peter's shadow that healed anyone, but maybe that's not the point. Like Paul's handkerchief or Jesus' cloak, it is the proximity to goodness, to grace, to mercy that offers the promise of healing and hope. And that's what we do as a church when we are at our best.

We offer a promise: of a God who is light in our darkness, hope in our despair, health in our sickness, life in our death. We don't need to be Peter, or Ron. The world doesn't need Peter or Ron now, they've both gone on to their own glory. They need a you, and a me. They need us.

How did we respond when the world cried out? What kind of shadow did we cast? Did people experience the Christ of it?

Here we are this morning, encountering this transition text, moving from one sign of God to that which will follow. What happens next is up to us. Who will we be? What will we do?