“Too Much Light?”

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Matthew 5: 13-16

Rev. John Suk

According to social scientists, many millennials—young adults in their twenties and thirties—are perfectionists. This is, apparently, not a good thing.

Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper reports*,* “Perfectionism is destroying the mental health of [the] millennial generation.” *INC*, the business magazine, says, “Millennials are suffering an epidemic of perfectionism.” The Canadian Press reports, “Study finds rise in millennial perfectionism; parents and social media blamed.”

According to these reports, millennial perfectionism is caused by the way social media like Facebook or Instagram pressures people into always showing off their best selfie or latest accomplishments, as if their lives really were, well, perfect. Millennial perfectionism is caused by over protective helicopter parents who raised their children for the gifted stream at school and to believe they can be anything they want to be. Millennial perfectionism is caused by snow plow parents who never let their children fail by always clearing away trials and troubles. And so on.

I visited my son, David, last week, in San Francisco. We were talking about what it was like to grow up in our family. And my son—a millennial—said that it was mostly okay. But, he added, there was always this emphasis from Irene and I on doing the right thing, on excelling at high-minded ideals, on being better than average when it came to being a citizen or a graduate student or a professional. And this emphasis, he thought, was sometimes a bit overwhelming, a bit too much. All work and not play. He thought we could have loosened up a bit, not take life so seriously.

You get the picture. In sum, social scientists believe that millennials and the millennially minded feel great pressure to get everything right, to rise above the crowd, to win, to be perfect at whatever they put their heart, body or mind to.

And since millennials are not perfect, they are much more prone than their parents to suffer from depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and low self-esteem.

Naturally, newspaper articles about this millennial crisis are therefore also full of advice for perfectionists. Millennials are told to make sure their kids spend less time on social media, have more outside playtime, put less emphasis on grades, do more reading, receive less stimulation, get more sleep, and so on and so on.

And, none of these articles suggest that going to church might be a cure for perfectionism and the anxiety that follows. Why not? Could it be that the church, like social media and the pushy parent, promotes perfectionism? My son, David, said that when he was growing up, our church membership contributed to his feeling that he always had to excel, at least morally, or else.

No wonder. In church it’s a steady stream of do this and do that. “Blessed are the peacemakers. Turn the other cheek. Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbour. Seek justice. Be merciful.” And, from our text this morning: “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and praise God.”

It’s a conundrum, for sure. I think church is great. I am inspired by Jesus. I love this community. I have friends here. I love grace, forgiveness, and the possibility of starting over. In church, I’m valued, known, embraced. Church is really, really special for me.

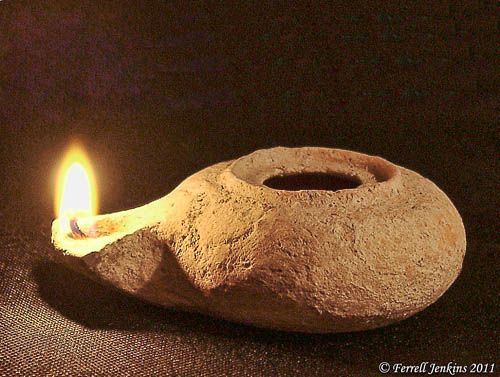
On the other hand, I cannot deny that the Bible—and therefore the church, too—is full of moral finger wagging. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” So, come on people. Get with it. Be real Christians. Just do it. Shine like the sun.

Well, what’s the fun in that? I love church . . . but.

Today is a good example of the conundrum I’m talking about. On the one hand we came to church to party, to have a great time, to laugh and sing and feast. This is, after all, Rev. Eric Bacon’s—and Marilyn’s—special day. We are here to celebrate their presence among us. We’re here to honor Eric with the title of Minister Emeritus now that he is retiring. We’re going to eat, drink and offer speeches. And why not? We love Eric and Marilyn, and we are happy that they are not leaving. They have been kind to us, laughed with us, wept with us, and healed us. Eric and Marilyn embody grace for us. They are exactly what all of us want out of church.

On the other hand, I was also scheduled to preach a sermon about stewardship this week. You all know, by now, that next week the church is going to ask for your written pledges of time and financial resources. And I promised the Stewardship Committee that I would prime the pump with a stewardship sermon this week. I would encourage you to take the stewardship campaign seriously, to be generous, to give of yourselves and your time, to seriously consider how much the church needs you and your resources, and to wrestle with how you can be a 100% steward, treating your whole life—your job, your family time, your fun time—treating your whole life as an opportunity to do things the way Jesus would do them. You know, put your financial and volunteer life on a stand and let it shine.

We love church, but it asks a lot of us. How does one fit the fun of church with the demands of church; the joy of faith with the burdens of faith? Well, one surprising way to think of this conundrum is to keep in mind the actual lamp of our text, the one we’re supposed to shine like.



Note this picture of an actual first century lamp of the sort Jesus was talking about. These lamps were made of clay and look a little bit like teapots. The lamp is fueled by olive oil, which goes into the pot. A wick leads from the oil to a spout. Since one end of the wick sits in oil, the entire wick becomes saturated with oil. The exposed end of the wick, sticking out from the spout, can be lit.

The light produced by this oil lamp is not very impressive. It is dim. If you put this light on a stand—away from the window, because a slight breeze would snuff it out—it would light the room just enough so that you wouldn’t trip over people or tables if you left. You could read by such a lamp only if you held a scroll right up to it. Meanwhile, as it burned, this lamp would sputter and smoke and stink so much that you would want to put it out.

We are called to shine like this poor excuse for a lamp shines.

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When we twenty-first century citizens think of lamps, we tend to think of 100-watt bulbs, high-beams, and stadium lights. When we think of lamps, we usually presume that there will be more than enough light, perfect light, glaring bright light.

But that is absolutely not the sort of light anyone in Jesus’ day could even have imagined. There was no perfect light, unless it was the sun in the middle of the day. There was only this humble, sputtering, olive oil lamp.

So, in the end, when Jesus asked us to shine like a lamp, Jesus was not asking us to be perfect paragons of virtue. Jesus was not asking us all to make like Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela.

What was Jesus asking us to be? Well, mere placeholders against the dark. Survival lights. Candle light. Unmagical muggle light. Muddle-along light. Not perfectionism, but just enough light to ensure we take heed of each other. Not perfect light, but night lights bright enough to help us find each other if we’re lost.

Churches ought to be antidotes to perfectionism. Both the church and Jesus are for people who know that are not perfect, but are willing to be loved by, and love others, who are also not perfect.

Jesus put it this way, once, using a different image than that of light. He said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

That’s it. Of course, I hope you will give time and resources to our stewardship campaign as you are able. Because, well, it costs money and takes time to be church and to do those things, together, that we want to do to make Toronto a better city than it already is.

But don’t stress about that. In fact, let’s party, first, with the Bacons. Just as we are. Because in the end, the church is not first about getting it perfect, but celebrating grace as embodied by each of us here.