



## Sermon

June 13, 2010  
The 3rd Sunday After Pentecost  
2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15 / Galatians 2:15-21 / Luke 7:36-8:3  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### From the Shadows

Did you like this children's poem like I did?

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,  
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.  
He is very, very like me from my heels up to my head;  
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.  
The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow –  
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow;  
For sometimes he shoots up taller like an India rubber ball,  
And he sometimes goes so little that there's none of him at all.  
He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,  
And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.  
He stays so close behind me, he's a coward you can see;  
I'd think shame to stick to nursie as the shadow sticks to me.  
One morning very early, before the sun was up,  
I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup;  
But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head  
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

*My Shadow* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Children's Garden of Verses*

Shadows can be both fun and frightening. Remember marveling at your shadow like Robert Louis Stevenson does in this poem? Or making shadow animals with your fingers, when you were supposed to be asleep. There was the scarier side of shadows too; the imposing figure coming up the steps, you tucked in bed, the hall light casting a shadow large as a giant. What we imagined about shadows! "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" the radio announcer said at the beginning of every week's installment of the famous detective program. "The Shadow does!"

The scripture readings today have a shadowy element to them. They tell about people coming to terms with shadows in their lives: David, Paul and an unnamed woman in the Gospel of Luke.

Here are people whose dark side got the best of them at one time or another, three genuine sinners who overcame the shadows of their past to know the light of God's forgiveness and love.

Besides shadows, one of the connecting threads between them is their authenticity.

In Paul's case, you hear it in his famous words: "For me to live is Christ..." (Philippians 1:21) And again from the letter to the Galatians today: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me..." (2:20) talking about how life and faith are more than exacting law, right doctrine and rituals.

The unnamed woman at Simon's house comes across as authentic too. She has no illusion about her checkered past, but that doesn't

prevent her from making a deep and direct encounter with Jesus -- pouring herself out at his feet.

And then there's David, who from the depths of his heart laments the lust that brought him to his knees, shaking his faith, embarrassing his kingship, and compromising his authority as God's anointed. "I have sinned." David repents and God's response is spoken almost immediately by the prophet Nathan: "God has put away your sin."

Sin. Now there's a subject we like to talk about. NOT! Sin. Wrongdoing. Error. Failure. Omission. Commission. Trespasses. Transgressions. Gone astray. Wandered from the straight and narrow. Call it what you will, name it how you will, sin is SIN and something we'd rather ignore as if it wasn't there, convince ourselves our peccadilloes are not that bad, so neither are we. But we have a little shadow..... and it isn't always as cute as Robert Louis Stevenson's poem.

One way to talk about "sin" in psychological terms is with words like "shadow" or "persona." Our word for person comes from the Greek word *persona* which means mask, like the masks worn by actors in ancient Greek drama. Modern psychology uses the word "persona" for the masks we wear when we face the world and other people. Nothing wrong with these masks. In psychology, *persona* has a useful function. You may be feeling absolutely rotten some day, but as you go about various tasks and encounter different people, you may not want to let how you're feeling deep down, you're vulnerability or bad feeling be seen.

Problems arise when a person identifies with their *persona* too much -- when a person gets to thinking they are the person they're putting-on. This leads us to artificiality, falseness and shallowness in personality. Thus Jesus' complains about the attitude of Pharisees like Simon in the Gospel today. The Pharisees seemed to think they were always on the straight and narrow, with sinless *persona*. So, Jesus called them "hypocrites," which, interestingly enough, is one of the Greek words "actors."

Psychologists say that when there is over-identification with the *persona*, our contact with the shadow side of personality gets lost. The shadow as a concept in psychology refers to the dark, feared, unwanted side of personality. Our conscious personality is shaped by ideals that come from society, home, school, church, peer group, etc. We get that we cannot steal, murder or engage in destructive behavior without being punished.

Most of us conform and therefore deny or repress the dark, shadowy side. Christian moral code goes even further telling us to become loving and forgiving -- the illumined, bright, full-of-light side of us. Like it says in so many of the epistles, "put-away" the self that is greedy, full of lust and vindictive and "put-on" the likeness of God's righteousness and holiness (e.g. Ephesians 4:20ff). So, to conform to that ideal, we reject the part of that is the darker side.

In the Gospel passage there is a contrast of two characters: Simon the Pharisee and a woman of the streets Luke calls a "sinner" (v.36). Simon, the public, religious *persona* is disturbed that Jesus would allow this woman to touch him, let alone allow himself to become an object of her extravagant devotion. Jesus says to Simon that the great affection she shows him is because she has had so many sins forgiven, telling a story about bankers and deepening degrees of debts being wiped clean. The punch line: "I'm telling you, her sins which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one who has been forgiven little (or thinks their lives don't have that much in need of forgiveness), likewise loves little." (7:47)

Jesus' implication is that Simon is a sinner who doesn't know it or want to. His love and devotion are expressed in his ordinary, perfunctory, ritual, nothing-special, routine hospitality. In terms *persona* and shadows, Simon has developed his morals and ideals to the point he can't see himself as being, perfectly and wonderfully religious, anything but on the straight and narrow, to the point of denying he could EVER possibly

sin. His relationship with God is all wrapped up in right doing and believing. Period.

The woman on the other hand realizes it isn't her morals that will get her right with God. Good thing because in the morals department she has a past that would make Lady Ga-Ga blush. All she can do is throw herself on God's mercy. And what has that done for her? Nothing short of begin a turn-around, a profound transformation. It has released the deep wells of love and devotion in her. Somehow, she feels the deep well of God's love, and will become a mirror for it to others.

The gospel has Jesus pointing to this woman saying, look here, this woman's extravagance is a picture of the extravagance of God's grace and love for people.

It is a similar story with David. David is able to face his sin – and it's pretty egregious sin; seeing to a man's death to satisfy his lust for the man's wife – and then admit it. Without equivocating. Not saying, "It all depends on what your definition of 'is,' is." How easy it is for us to excuse ourselves in the face of every wrongdoing with a good reason, extenuating circumstances. But to just admit to being wrong. Period. "I blew it." Or "I was wrong." Or "I did a bad thing." Not begrudging. Not playing the victim. No after the fact stuff. No excuses. Simply saying it out loud without hesitation. That's authenticity. And the way out of the shadows. In the face of the universal temptation to make excuses, David just says it: "I have sinned against God." No hedging.

So, I'm wondering for myself and all of us... are there things, are there sins (I hate that word, want to run from that word and use all the other ones) God might be inviting you and me to acknowledge. Perhaps that is the call and power of these stories for just this moment – to bring us to recognize something in ourselves that's not how it should be. And not just that alone, but also to recognize that whatever the sin, failure or shortfall may be, we can have the deeply felt experience of David or the woman with the alabaster jar – the abundance of God's love and hope for our better life poured out to us.

We say something like this in the response to the word, creed each week. "We believe God's desire is the fullness of life for all and that from the heights of heaven or the depths of hell, nothing or no one has fallen from the reach of God's mercy." Might you need to claim that faith today. And not just go through church-motions one more time.

Our sinfulness, our brokenness, our errors and falling short are as unique to us as our personalities. Usually we are working with a laundry list of deeds or thoughts we know are wrong. But maybe today is the day to get at the whole pattern, the tapestry of our sin. We know something isn't right. Maybe today is the day God wants to open you and me to that pattern and its recurrence.

If that be so, know this: NEVER does God stir us to any of that and leave us standing alone. The Bible's good news about Jesus Christ is by God, in Christ, Jesus stirs us to do what we cannot do for ourselves. It's why Paul called what Jesus brings "Good news." See, church and religion are not about just pointing to the bad news of shadows and sin, nor reminding us that we're hopeless screw-ups who don't have a chance to get things right.

We come to church, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, read the scriptures, listen to the sermon, say what we believe and come with open hands and hearts to the Lord's table not in order to get somewhere with God, but to receive again what God has already given, wants US to have, wants to give US again and again – even if you've taken it before and messed up and you need to take it again.

Here's what God wants to give you: a sense that things can be made right, relationships can be made right, the world can be made right. Not to mention the do-over you may need to get you there.

The only thing asked of you is to receive. Be open. Receive. (That's why it's so important that each week at communion we come with open hands to receive. Not "taking" communion but "receiving" communion.) Come with open hands.

Sometimes it is not easy, like with David. Sometimes it will mean change in attitude and actions.

Just remember that unnamed woman in Luke and her extravagance. Pouring out her tears, wiping them with her hair. God loves you like that, Jesus says. God loves you like that. YOU. Where you are. With extravagant grace. Calling you by name.

May such love, forgiveness and acceptance open up deep wells of love, forgiveness and new life with us.

■■■ Amen ■■■