

Name Tag
“Shine your light.”
Ephesians 4:1-6

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Under the Radar

Sometimes I look for churches – just to see what they look like. I wonder what buildings say about the character of the people who use them. In the cases of churches, I’m fascinated by the choice of architecture: what it says about the theology and self understanding of the church communities that built them.

Do they have a high steeple, suggesting a lofty and traditional understanding of God and a congregation’s mission? Are they more modern, with auditoriums rather than traditional sanctuaries, reflecting a come-as-you are expectation?

A Methodist theologian of the Twentieth Century suggested that you could tell what a church was like by its steeple. He said that Roman Catholic churches often have a budded cross on the peak, emphasizing Jesus’ crucifixion. He said Congregationalists have weather vanes celebrating the congregation’s love for democracy. He said that on top of many United Methodist churches lightning rods in commemoration of once having been struck and in fear that we might be struck again.

Long ago I looked for churches as we traveled through Oregon and Washington; and decided that my most surprising discovery was that I had a hard time finding any at all. Later that year I met a denominational leader who was from the Northwest and I asked him why I had such a hard time finding churches in his corner of the country.

He wasn’t surprised at all about my observation. He said it was true that throughout that part of the country it is hard to find a church. That, he said, was consistent with the way people treated the faith. He said that people there place a high value on not being intrusive. They are very cautious about talking to each other about faith. They are reticent about even admitting that they might belong to a church, let alone sharing what church is theirs.

They don’t want to offend.

So they don't say it. And in keeping with this spiritual shyness, they even take lengths to hide their churches.

Jesus said a city on a hill can't be hid. If you've got a lamp, you don't hide it; it's for putting on a lamp stand. You are the light of the world.

OK. But is being the light of the world for threatening and intimidating people who don't believe like you believe? Is that what Jesus meant about being witnesses of a God who blesses and heralds of a new age of peace?

Sincere Christians get alarmed over loud people who step constantly into the camera light: often so alarmed that they don't want any part of being witnesses. They hear others telling people they're wrong, and since they don't have it right, they're never getting into heaven: and they think, "If that's what witness is, who wants to do that? Who wants to be associated with someone who does that?"

How is that being the light of the world? That's not me. That's not our church. That's not our faith. So I understand when people don't want to be associated with that, they hear it and want to run for cover. I understand not wanting to offend.

I understand it when some people don't want to be associated with the word *evangelism*: even when I say that the translation of *evangelist* is *good messenger*. Better to *not* be a messenger than to have people think you're bringing a message of hate or superiority.

I understand it when people would rather even hide their church building than be like that.

Appearing

I understand it; but I can't settle for it. When there's a church with a mean streak that demonstrates at a funeral or puts on a show for truth in front of a mosque, there is reason to *not* run for cover. This season of greed and political deadlock needs to see the contrast between the way the world is and the way it ought to be.

Live lives worthy of the calling: with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

That's church: the writer of Ephesians makes it sound like a description of Jesus. And I suppose it is: the character of Jesus is the character of the church for that time as well as for this time.

It's a description of us.

Lives worthy of the calling: humble, gentle, patient, bearing others in love, maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...

This is good stuff! If people could be like that, who wouldn't want to see an obvious dose of them in this world? Who wouldn't want to be a part of a church that was like that? Who wouldn't want to be an obvious person like that?

One night during last summer's Choir Camp the boys in my cabin were quiet and asleep. I was in my bunk, just finishing some work under an LCD flashlight I'd hung from the bunk above. I had my new smart phone out, checking the baseball scores before I called it a night, and started playing with it: checking out some of the apps I hadn't explored.

I found an icon that looked like a flashlight. "I wonder what this one does," I thought. So I tapped the icon and suddenly a bright light shone from the back side of my phone. I tapped it again: it got brighter, still. I tapped it once more: even brighter! "Huh," I thought, "the flashlight app makes the phone into...a flashlight!"

And until then, I didn't even know it was there. I didn't know the phone was a flashlight. Not until I tapped the button.

"We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our...witness: another church membership promise that's actually about something you get if you do it.

When Jesus tells you to be a witness, he isn't laying on a demand that you do something that isn't you.

He's really telling you to not hold back, but be yourself – as you are in relationship with God. You've got an app: he wants you to use it.

And then it's amazing what happens when you let yourself be the light: even saying something about the relationship that makes you whole, relieves you of guilt and hurt, saves you, gives you life.

You become hope for the world around you. You've got the app.

Wearing the Label

I'll say it one more way. When you go to a meeting where there's a bunch of people from different places, there's often a little table that you're supposed to stop at. Usually there's someone sitting behind it like a hall monitor, not letting you pass until you stop, pick up a name tag, write your name and apply it to your chest. You don't get your handouts until you wear a name tag.

I admit that I believe name tags are a great idea...for other people to wear. I don't relish the idea of wearing them, myself. I've never figured out the right place to put them without having them curl off my sport coat, winding up stuck on my arm or on the bottom of someone's shoe. Don't like them. My impulse is to avoid them.

But if I don't wear one, who's ever going to know my name?

Unless I say what I stand for, who will ever know? What difference to the world will it ever make?

Unless the church building is visible, complete with a sign, who will ever know it's there? How's it ever going to be a city on the hill?

And unless the people of the church are out there turning on their apps: being the *people worthy of the calling, humble, gentle, patient, bearing others in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*: and letting the world know why they are: how are they ever going to give it hope?

You belong to Jesus.

Wear your nametag. Turn on your app.

They'll never know who you are unless you let them **know**.