

A Faithful Flame  
Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1 and Luke 16:1-13  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached September 23, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

“I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” With those words, an unnamed, yet not unlabeled manager lives out the wisdom of the ages. The so-called dishonest manager, as selfish a scriptural character as they come, embarks on a plan which earns him accolades for the ages.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

“Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” With *these* words, reported to us by the prophet Jeremiah, the people of Judah once again demonstrate their ignorance and stubbornness in the face of God’s impending judgment. The so-called chosen people have chosen to ignore the wisdom of the ages, and continue down a path which earned them an exile for the ages.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

I once knew a woman named Phyllis, a remarkable woman whom God used

to provide me with not only personal inspiration but also sermon material. You see, Phyllis's graceful but persistent reminders in the year or so that I knew her that "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness," sunk in, and I am now a convert to that ancient Chinese proverb, or that pearl of wisdom from Eleanor Roosevelt, whichever source you prefer. I am sorry that none of you have had the pleasure of knowing Phyllis in person, but perhaps you are not yet beyond her reach.

But my purpose today is not to extol one woman's virtues, but rather to suggest that even though the source of that quote is not the Bible, it is a nugget of wisdom worth considering, especially in light of today's parable from Luke in which the main character finds himself in some trouble, and, after considering his options, decides to take Phyllis's advice and do what he can to make the best of a bad situation, even if it is one of his own making. And so our anti-hero does the earthly equivalent of laying up for himself treasures in heaven by using the means at his disposal, namely, his master's wealth, to win friends and influence people.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Hey, quit interrupting me. I was just about to start complaining about how easy it is to be disturbed by the parable of the dishonest manager because it seems that Jesus is saying that the ends justify the means, that he is favoring those who

do not play by the rules. I mean, the bad guy wins in this one. What a hypocrite! Who does he think he is? Wasting someone else's money so he can put himself in a better light! That guy ought to go to jail instead of the storybooks. And here is Jesus making him out to be some kind of hero. Parables like these make me begin to wonder if I can really recommend following this Jesus guy. He doesn't seem to have his moral bearings too straight.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Are you suggesting I should look a little deeper at this parable and see if I can find something redeeming to it? Well, I guess Jesus may have a good point that we should do whatever it takes to obtain the kingdom of heaven, even if it's not too popular or convenient or easy. And he may be on the right track to suggest that the disciples are not called to make friends *of* dishonest wealth but rather *by means of* it. He could be saying that we should seize the opportunities right in front of us and make the most of them, even if the circumstances are not ideal, and if we do that, things just might start multiplying. Maybe this is about stewardship? After all, "whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." I wonder what Phyllis would think?

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

What a good idea! After all, what good does it do a person to stumble around in the dark, when such a simple solution will do. Why didn't I think of that? Maybe it's because I too often think like the Judeans back in Jeremiah's time. You remember that Jeremiah was sent by God to be a thorn in the side of the religious establishment that believed that God's blessing had nothing to do with their own righteousness. "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," they cried, believing that if they laid claim to God's promises long enough and loud enough they could do whatever they wanted to as if God wasn't interested in the more basic elements of the covenant. In today's lesson, the people cry out, "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her? We are not saved," when they should be saying, "Forgive me for oppressing the poor. Forgive me for worshiping other gods. Forgive me for betraying justice and mercy for a pittance."

Phyllis: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Hmmm, maybe questioning God's presence when your own actions are to blame is like cursing the darkness. Better to light the candle of *repentance* than to curse the darkness of your own waywardness. I think I'm seeing a trend here. What more might there be to learn from this week's passages? Maybe that the idea

of taking risks, like the manager did, can be considered a candle, while time spent denying or lamenting the inevitable is cursing the darkness. Maybe that approaching change in my life, or my work, or my family, or my church can be done positively and productively rather than reactively or fearfully.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Some of you may have read the story in Saturday's New York Times about the Clarkston International Bible Church in Clarkston, Georgia, just outside Atlanta. The Clarkston International Bible Church used to be known as the Clarkston Baptist Church, and its members were fine upstanding citizens of that nice, white farming community. They sang hymns accompanied by the organ, they contributed to sending missionaries overseas, they were happy and content little Baptists. But the same globalization Costa Rica is experiencing caught up with Clarkston too, and the church found itself as a community in which more than one-third of its residents were born outside the US, and I don't mean Canada. It found itself with pews empty except for two handfuls of people, with one handful saying, "If you think black folks are going to come in here and take our church away from us, you've got another thing coming," and the other handful saying, "Reality is here. How can we minister to all these ethnic groups moving into the county?" It was a church in turmoil and chaos and facing an uncertain

future. However, after a thorough reading of Scripture and some prayerful discernment, in 2004, the Clarkston Baptist Church decided to light one candle instead of curse the darkness, and so it merged with the Filipino and Nigerian congregations to whom they had been renting space just to stay afloat, and the new candle in the eastern Atlanta suburbs was called the Clarkston International Baptist Church. A few people left to go and curse the darkness somewhere else but the church has grown from 100 members to 300 and church potlucks are a lot more interesting these days.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness

The folks in Clarkston faced a choice facing many churches, but the choice was not whether to worship with people with differing skin colors. The choice they faced, which is the same one we individually each face everyday, is whether we will view our God as a God of abundance or as a God of scarcity, to view the divine glass half full or half empty, to tell our God how big our storms are or to tell our storms how big our God is. In the more difficult times of our lives, often our first inclination is to lament our luck, to cry foul about our circumstances, to try to get back what we lost or protect ourselves from more hurt or pain by striking back. Our first response is usually to curse the darkness. But sometimes we are blessed, and sometimes we are able to remember some words we heard

somewhere before, words perhaps like “It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness,” and then we make sweet lemonade from the sour lemons placed in our laps. We remember that our God prefers to bless rather than curse and that the quickest way to exile, or the quickest way to the poorhouse, or the quickest way to the list of churches that have closed is by cursing the darkness. The candle that is never lit never provides light for travelers who will follow after. The candle that is never lit never helps us see the beautiful features in each other’s faces. The candle that is never lit never keeps us from bumping into one another. The candle that is never lit never lights any other candles.

The truth about candles is that they don’t light simply because we want them to. We have to strike a match and hold it to the wick. It is in our moments of doubt and despair that we need to reach out for and light the matches that have been left for us: the hope of the gospel, the promise of salvation, the testimony of countless faithful witnesses, our spiritual friendships, our songs and traditions, all of which are more than enough matches to light one Christian candle. Those who choose to strike those matches give testimony that Jesus Christ truly is the light of the world.

This is not to say that we never stumble around in the darkness, or find ourselves annoyed by it, or even question it. It does mean that it is unprofitable to spend the time cursing it when we could be a few lumens closer to being able to see. It is also not to say that lament, criticism, prophecy, and calls for justice are

not candlelighting acts, simply because they may not be cheerfully stated. They are. That was Jeremiah's role and we would do well to relearn his arts, for they are Biblical, and desperately needed in the world, and much more likely to produce the very results we seek than cursing the darkness.

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Twenty-two years ago this month, a group of people decided to light a candle on the west side of San Jose, rather than curse the darkness that there was not an English-speaking church on the east side. And so, Escazú Christian Fellowship was born. Since then, we have been, I hope and believe, lighting candles which have brought the light of Christ into Costa Rica's English-speaking community. To celebrate that choice, I want to invite each of you to come forward and light one of these candles, some of which represent the past 22 years, one of which represents tonight, and the rest of which represent our future together and the hopes and dreams of God's people in this place. And I invite you, as you put your match to the wick, to speak aloud the words Phyllis taught me, saying, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness," and to remember that as we each go about lighting our own candles, the result is greater than the sum of its parts. Our own little candle may not seem to light up much darkness but when it is joined with others, it gives off a useful and beautiful glow.

So come, and imagine what the world might be if all of us decided:

Lone Voice: It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. Amen.