



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Hide It Under A Bushel? No!

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, February 9, 2014*

*The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on Matthew 5:13-20*

I went to an Episcopal Day School for my first ten years of education. And one of the first hymns they taught us to sing at Morning Prayer was “This little light of mine.” During the hymn, we would hold our fingers up and imagine that they were a candle, or perhaps like E.T.’s glowing finger, and proclaim to the rafters that we were going to let this little light of ours shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Everywhere we’d go. “Hide it under a bushel? No!” We didn’t know it at the time, but we weren’t singing an anthem of self-esteem, although many of us took it that way. We were singing an adaption of a discourse of Jesus, one that we read together, where the light isn’t the light of a precocious star student; it isn’t just *my* light. It is so much bigger than that.

The light is the light of the world. Somehow, the light is able to illumine the world, to reveal the world. And there is something about this light that is absurd to try to hide. For Jesus, this light is on a massive scale. At least the size of a city. Jesus laughs with the crowd, imagining the comedy of one person trying to hide an entire city. Not only an entire city, but a city on a hill. What slapstick! And then he conjures up another clownish image: that of a person lighting a candle and for some reason not wanting anyone to see it, and so he covers it with a bushel basket. And while he thinks it is hidden, what happens? The whole basket goes up, brighter than ever. In Mark’s gospel, the clown then places the light under the bed to hide the light. And you can see where this is going: the whole bed, the whole bedroom, the whole house, light up, for the entire city to see. Jesus asks the crowd, who would do this? Do you see how much worse it is to hide the light? Just put the candle on the bedside table and live with what it shows you about what is happening in your room.

Jesus in Matthew’s gospel explains that letting this light shine means that each of us is to do good works and have them inspire others. This makes sense. Few people could quarrel with this. “Be Good.” But if you look at the earlier explanation of this image, written in Mark’s gospel, then it gets a bit more disturbing. Here it is: “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Here the light, for Jesus, is about revealing things, not just what people want to see, but what people want to keep hidden. And the most troubling aspect of this train of thought is that the purpose, the trajectory, of hidden things is that they are disclosed. It seems to be a principle of our world that people seem to forget. Coming into the light is just what secrets do.

Our conviction is that God knows our secrets. We pray this every Sunday as we begin our worship: “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.” I believe it is extraordinarily helpful to have this kind of resignation to our secrets being known by God. That God knows our secrets, and that, at least in prayer, we can wrestle with them. But I don’t think we really know in our bones that it isn’t just God who will know our secrets. People around us will, too. That our secrets will be known on earth as they are in heaven, no matter how hard we might try to hide them. We may be successful for a little while. But before long, like that clown who hides his candles under his baskets and under his bed, the light of our truth will shine for all to see, out of our control.

Take these secrets, ones that just happened to have happened two blocks away. 601 Lexington Avenue. The former Citigroup Center. Built in 1977, the skyscraper was cleverly perched over the new St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. A marvel of engineering, so they thought. The architect, William LeMessurier, discovered soon after it was built that insufficient oversight had led to its being constructed incorrectly. The building was half as strong as it should have been, and to his horror he knew that a moderate storm could blow the 59-floor building down. Upon the discovery

of that truth, he agonized over what to do next. If he told the truth, his career would be ruined. If he didn't, thousands could die. He chose to secretly approach Citicorp and urge them to fix the building, a process that happened quietly, with welders coming in during the nights for three months to weld steel plates over bolted joints. The city dodged a hurricane halfway through the project, but it was completed in time. Because nothing happened as a result of the engineering mistake, it was kept secret for twenty years, until the *New Yorker* reported on the crisis, criticizing the architect and the company for keeping the secret from the public, and keeping the neighborhood in mortal danger to protect their reputation.

I think on one level we really think we can get away with it, whatever it is. But in the grand scheme of things, the steady march of time and inquiry leave few stones unturned. We can witness this process in public figures, whether a politician or a bishop or a celebrity. People talk. Tell-all memoirs and investigative journalism shine more light on a person's legacy. We can see this in corporations and households that try to hide a financial life that is clearly unsustainable. In the end, the light shines on that. We can see this in nations that hide abuses of the law and hide the injustices of poorly fashioned laws. Soon enough, the light shines on it. We can see this in personal relationships that are propped up by secrets. As much as one wouldn't like it, the light will shine on it.

And today we are in a situation where the steady work of time is much less a factor. Thank to our porous communications networks, nearly every secret typed online or said on the phone is available to a variety of governments and institutions. And thanks to a variety of whistleblowers, the secret of their knowing our secrets is much less secret. And as our cameras and microphones proliferate, the realm of the secret things will get ever smaller, instantly. But this is nothing new. This is what secrets do. This is how they work. As Jesus said, "Nothing is secret, except to come to light."

For we would see that the power of secrets is only temporary. The light of truth will come, whether we want it to or not; and if we don't choose the time, something else will. And this potential for unpredictable revelation just makes our lives treacherous, volatile, precipitous, open to blackmail, and dreadful, literally full of dread. And those things in our lives built on lies, whether it be reputations, corporations, households, nations, or relationships: the higher they fly, the harder they fall. If we could know this principle of our world, know it in our bones, I think that our lives would be the better for it. Better in telling the truth from the beginning, planting our light on the lampstand for all to see. For if we are children in the light—if we seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will—it may cost us quite a bit. We may not fly as high. We might have a smaller house than the others, but it would be a house built on bedrock, not quicksand.

But I am not going to sugarcoat this. The fear of telling the truth is often warranted, especially for those who have hidden their light under the flammable bushel for so long. No one wants to experience the collapses that can come in the scouring light of the truth, damaging ourselves and others. Some of this is unavoidable, like gravity. But some of us are given the shot at slowly undoing a broken way of life, saying what had been unsaid, doing what had been deferred, in stages, with care. And in so doing we might save more than we would have otherwise, if we had just let things go on toward their inevitable collapse.

Only the truth will last in the end, in our institutions, in our economy, and in our relationships. But sometimes we are given enough time to salvage something from what we have built over our secrets and lies, and sometimes we can salvage much more than we think. Especially if we start sooner rather than later.

So, for lack of a better term, repent. Start turning that ship around. There's no time like this morning. For we are the light of the world. There's no hiding it.