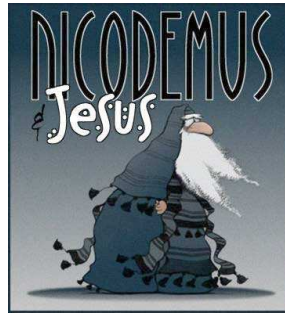


## No Matter What



(start by singing) *I, Nicodemus, went calling to see my Lord one night, I said, Master, something's wrong with me, my hearts not feeling right, You'd better change that feeling, son, the Master did exclaim, and you know the reason....*

Yeah, yeah, I know, bloom where you are planted and all that stuff – sometimes I think you don't listen to what I say – you don't understand ... I am a leader! In the synagogue! I know you are a teacher who has come from God otherwise you could not do what you do. But, I have to be careful ... associating with you would turn my peers against me. That's why I come to you at night ... it's not safe for me to be seen with you. (turn to congregation) You understand, don't you?

*Nicodemus, are you afraid of the light? The light ... what light? The light you offer that promises life eternal? No ... I'm not afraid of THAT light ... This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine ...* but I have to be careful where I shine. Where does your light shine, Nic? The place for the light is in the dark Jesus said. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

A story: There was this dark cave down in the ground, down under the earth. Obviously it had never seen light, and therefore wouldn't know what light was. And one day, the sun invited it to come up and visit. When the cave came up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted, because the cave had never seen light before. Naturally, the cave felt obligated and invited the sun to come down to visit some time, because the sun had never seen darkness. So the day came and the sun came down and was ushered into the cave and, as the sun came into the cave, it looked around and, rather puzzled, said, *'where is the darkness?'* because there wasn't any.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven. Note Jesus' words here: You are the light of the . . . church? What about: You are the light of your . . . home? What about: You are the light of your . . . family? What about: You are the light of the . . . light? No. Jesus said, "You are the light of the . . . world." The place for the light is in the world. The place for the light is in the dark. The truth, of course, is that we'd rather light the light. We'd rather shine our light where it's light rather than stick it out and stumble around in the dark. But true leaders are always working in the dark.

Jesus wouldn't give up ... he kept coming after me. A candle isn't there to illuminate itself. A candle is there to illuminate the world. The church isn't a refuge from the world. The church is a refuge for the world. The paradox of our being set in dark places is that the darker the place, the brighter the light. The darker it is, the more powerful the light. In deep darkness, you don't need a searchlight or a beacon. A simple candle will do.

Will we shine the light into the dark world of robotics, nanotechnology, genetic engineering? Will we shine the light into the dark rooms of Hollywood and movie-picture making? Will we shine the light into the darkness of pop culture and hip hop music? Will we shine the light into the dark corridors of higher

education itself? Hide It Under a Bushel . . . NO! When I was a youngster the second verse was a favorite. We believed it's the only song where you can swear in synagogue and get away with it. It's all a matter of where you pause in the word "Bushel NO." Unfortunately, all too often the meeting place has become the bushel under which I hide the light. A bonfire of insanities is being lit under my nose and my candle is hiding. Get your lights out from under the bushel. For God did not give us the spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline. Light cannot displace darkness by going under cover. Jesus emphasized that hiding not only frustrates the purpose of light, but also hiding a light in a dark place is pointless... and ridiculous.

He believes we hide the light when . . . we're afraid of the culture's racism, sexism, materialism, militarism; We hide the light when . . . we confine its glow inside church walls for a few hours a week; We hide the light when . . . we refuse to confront human wrongfulness; We hide the light when . . . we fail to help in understanding what's happening out there and face up to the world that's actually out there; We hide the light when . . . we ignore the "big, real world," thereby endangering our own little world; We hide the light when . . . we ourselves aren't on fire. Are you on fire? Is this church on fire? Are we leaders on fire? I believe our dream team is on fire! Vision 2020-They see a new future for us ... a new way of being who we are in this place ... and it scares some of us ... their fire burns us when it gets too close. Know anyone who's been fired for not being fired up and on fire? Is it contagious? Do I want that to feel that kind of fire *no matter what?*" Don't Let anyone Blow It Out . . . This third verse is the problem verse. (At this point light one of those magic candles and talk while holding it aloft.)

Don't let anyone blow it out, I'm gonna let it shine. If we do stick the light out there in the dark, we think that we've got to prevent others from blowing it out. After all, we're not supposed to let the light go out. In Leviticus, God reminded the people to take care of the altar fire: "It must not go out." So we think we need to protect our little light. We're afraid someone might blow it out. And there are people out there who want to blow it out. I overheard a conversation between six-year-old Angie and four-year-old Joel, while sitting in synagogue. Joel liked to giggle, sing, and talk out loud. Finally big sister had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in synagogue." "Why? Who's going to stop me?" Joel asked. Angie pointed to the back and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers."

There are huffers and puffers and hushers out there who would love to blow out your candle. In the interests of keeping it safe, we protect our little light by covering it up. We cove and cover the light, we shroud and shrine, protect and guard the light. We circle our light with people who think only like we do, and we take jobs where our light will never be blown on. But wait a minute. Isn't this where faith meets real life? Let anyone blow it out . . . (At this point blow out your "magic candle" and watch it come back.) Let the powers of oppression and hatred have their best shot at your candle (blow even harder). Can you trust the light of Christ? Sure, the flame wavers, flickers, dims, even appears to go out sometimes. But can you trust that the light is more powerful than any huffing and puffing? Maybe it's time to stop focusing on preserving the light and protecting the light from the dark and wind rather than lighting the darkness and blowing in the wind. Maybe what I'm really afraid of is the fact that the wind that's blowing may be the Spirit, and instead of blowing it out, the Spirit will blow my fire out of control. Maybe my image of the church is more of firefighter than fire starter. Am I spending more time trying to put out fires than start them? Perhaps I need to rethink, and *no matter what*, recommit.

Jesus bids us shine with a pure, clear light, like a little candle burning in the night, in this world of darkness so let us shine, you in your small corner, and I in mine. Let those who have ears, hear!



Rev. Dr. Ellen Redcliffe

John 3:14-21

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