



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Faith Sharing II: Casting Shadows**

*Sermon by Matt Hook (with thoughts by Drs. Eddie Fox and George Morris)*

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*"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 lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16*

**Do you live in the shadows, or do you cast shadows?** Do people act differently around you, when they know your profession? For you finance folks – do people avoid money issues, or do they talk about them more with you? Teachers – do people share the woes of raising children today, or do they assume you're tired of them? Builders – do people assume you don't want to talk about the stuff you know how to do, or do people ask you more about it? Medical professionals around us – do they ask your advice, or skip the questions because you're not "on the clock?" How about you car guys?

Every time some one hears my profession, I get to learn either why they don't go to church more often, or what St. Peter said to the Rabbi, Catholic Priest, and Methodist minister at the pearly gates, or they ask me to "throw one up to the Big Guy for them." It seems like people feel like the spotlight's on them when I'm around. (Am I that scary and intimidating?) Or, if the spotlight's not on them, it's on me. It's amazing what people notice when they know that I'm a pastor: about choices I make, what I don't drink, and what my family does, all because I'm a pastor. I promise you, I think I'm normal! The number of stifled cigarettes, drinks and comments at parties we attend can really be funny. Chuck Swindoll tells a great story about this.

I will never forget the time I was walking down a long corridor, preparing to make a hospital call. As I approached the parishioner's room, her husband was just leaving. On his way out the door, he lit up a cigarette, then glanced down the hall and suddenly recognized me from a distance. I smiled and waved. He nervously waved back and was absolutely at a loss to know how to hide the cigarette from me. Still holding the lighted cigarette, he slid his hand into his pants' pocket! I decided to act as though I hadn't seen it...and engage him in a lengthy conversation. It became hilarious. The more we talked, the shorter that cigarette got in his hand and the more he looked like a chimney. There was smoke swirling out of his pants' pocket and curling up behind his collar. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I asked him why he didn't go ahead and finish his cigarette. Would you believe it? He denied even *having* a cigarette. Within seconds, he dashed to the elevator and fled, which was probably good. Had we talked much longer, the man would have become a living sacrifice. (*Rise and Shine*)

Everywhere we go, we cast shadows. Even though the Bible calls it a mystery, faith itself is not cloaked in shadows. 3 verses after the famous John 3:16, Jesus says this: "*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.*" (John 3:19-20). And in the midst of a lot of "shady characters," Jesus called us "*the light of the world.*" You must decide: Will you continue to live in the shadows, or will you cast shadows.

Today we continue our look at faith sharing. Let's get practical and begin with the tough questions: **Why should others be Christian? Why should we tell them about God? What right do we have to change them?**

We've all had images of self-righteous Christians who "shove" their religion down others' throats. It's downright rude. And if there's one thing we Methodists can't stand to be, it's rude. Yet, if we take the message of Christ in the Gospels seriously, there's no way we can separate faith sharing from how we live our lives. The first Christians didn't separate "evangelism" from who they were in Christ. Faith sharing was as natural as breathing. What's not natural is to think you're a Christian and never share your faith.

**Faith sharing is not a program of the church; it is the other way around!** The church is a program of faith sharing. The local church is the hope of the world, because we have been entrusted with the Gospel message. (I know what you are thinking – couldn't God have done better than that? After all the church is like Noah's ark – if it weren't for the storm on the outside, you wouldn't be able to stand the stench on the inside!) The church is God's program of faith sharing. Jesus called us the light of the world. A light cannot help but shine. So, if that is what we are, we cannot help but shine in the world. How are we doing, church?

**Why are we so reluctant?** After all, it is only through the ministry of faith sharing that people are introduced to the good news of Jesus Christ! Not one of us would be here today, were it not for someone sharing their faith with us and bringing us to this point.

**Why share faith?** First, because of Who God is. Last week we saw that from cover to cover the Bible is a missionary book about a missionary God seeking to call and create a missionary people. But there is another reason for sharing faith: to respond to the need of humanity. **People need the Lord.**

Why should we tell them about God, when they don't want to hear it? Because the Gospel is not a hammer; it's medicine. **Our world needs it, because of the reality of sin.** Sin separates us from God. Alienation. Isolation. It is a tragic consequence of our self-will and disobedience. Have you ever seen someone who believes their own lies? It's one of the saddest things, most pathetic things I see. We wind up captive to our own distorted vision of ourselves, others and the world. That's sin. It's as though we are born into a family with an enormous pile of overdue bills, and each one of us adds our own stack of debts to the heap.

It's not hard to see that the world is not the way God originally designed it. The reality of sin causes pain, death, brokenness, and injustice. It's people against people. You can see the need for raw human nature to be changed through Christian conversion. **We are called to share faith because of human need and human worth.** People need a fundamental change that Christ offers: a change that turns us from darkness to light. Like a health club, we offer the promise of life transformation that goes way down deep.

So, when it comes to faith sharing, we've got the why – because of God and because of humanity's great need for God. We've got the Who – God in us, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Now it's time for the what: **What is faith?** Faith is simply putting beliefs into action. It's not shadow, it's light. Christian faith is centered, personal, and relational.

**First, Christian faith is centered.** We have a particular object of our faith. Christian faith is not faith in general. I've heard people say "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something." It sounds nice. It just doesn't agree with the Bible. According to the Scriptures, the object of our faith is the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is Christ-centered. The object of our faith is not a philosophy of life, nor a system of ethical ideals, nor a doctrine. It is Jesus Christ and our faith is centered on Him.

**Second, Christian faith is personal,** for two reasons. Faith is personal because it is centered in a person; its object is a living person. Jesus is a living person because of the resurrection. It means Jesus Christ is alive right now! It is also personal because it requires a personal response. We have the *sacred right* to choose to reject or accept owning that faith for ourselves. That goes for those we love as well. They have the sacred right to own that faith for themselves. Even our children come to an age where they must choose for

themselves. I think about that with Hunter, Jillianne, Graham, and Joy. Their faith must become theirs, because by nature, faith is personal.

**Third, Christian faith is relational.** It makes possible a right relationship with God. *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Rom. 5:1). Like our computer’s features of right and left justification, we are now lined up with God. Christian faith not only properly relates us to God; it also properly relates us to our neighbor. Our relationship with God is bound up in the relationship with the neighbor, and the relationship we have with our neighbor is bound up with the relationship to God. We cannot claim to love God while we hate our brother or sister. (1 John 3:14-16). It also enables us to be in right relationship with our self. They say the greatest of all human wars are those civil wars within the human heart and mind. Our relational faith gives us an inner peace, an inner balance, God’s Holy Spirit in us, who guides us, based on relationship.

**I can tell you with confidence that God desires us to share this Christian faith.** It is a natural outflow of our Christian experience. And God has given you a sphere of influence with which to share your faith. Will you live in the shadows or will you cast shadows?

**All of us cast shadows.** G. Ernest Thomas tells a story of when he was a boy he and his father were out one night at a place where their shadows were distinct and clear. One step and there was a long shadow. With every step the boy’s shadow lengthened. He asked his father “How long can a shadow be?” His dad replied, “It depends upon the man.” Dr. Thomas said he never forgot that. The shadow we cast depends upon how tall we are – spiritually and in dedication. Our shadow is the influence we cast for good or for evil.

A boy was getting ready to go to church, when he went into the family room and saw his father was not dressed. He was reading the paper. The boy said “I guess I won’t go to Sunday school today.” His father replied, “You will – you get ready.” The boy replied, “No, not today.” The father said, “You’ve got to go to Sunday school.” “Why?” The father replied, “It will do you good. When I was your age, I had to go.” The boy resentfully turned away. “Well, I will go,” he said, “but I’ll tell you this, it won’t do me any good either.” How about that shadow?

Jesus Himself said it: *“You are the light of the world.”* Notice He mentioned no one else, but “you.” We aren’t just supposed to point at the light. We aren’t just supposed to talk about the light. We are to *be* light – the light of the world. We are light. Light refers to purity, as opposed to filth. Light refers to truth and knowledge as opposed to lying or error or ignorance, no matter what the circumstances. Light refers to God’s presence as opposed to abandonment by God, even when the going gets tough. *“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

**Jesus’ words here settle once and for all the notion that faith is just personal.** You can’t keep light to yourself. Jesus tells us to live it and share it for all to see. No matter what you face, cast your shadow. Point people to God. Live it out in the world. Let it shine.

A legend recounts Jesus’ return to heaven after His time on earth. He returned bearing the marks of His earthly pilgrimage with its cruel cross and shameful death. The angel Gabriel approached Him and said, “Master, You must have suffered terribly for the people down there.”

“I did,” said Jesus.

“And,” continued Gabriel, “do they now know all about how You loved them and what You did for them?”

“Oh, no,” said Jesus. “Not yet. Right now, only a handful of people in Palestine know.”

Gabriel was perplexed. “Then what have You done to let all people know about Your love for them?”

“Well, I’ve asked Peter, James, John, Mary, Martha, and a few others to tell people about Me. Those who are told will in turn tell others, and the Gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of humanity will hear about Me and what I have done on their behalf.”

Gabriel frowned and looked skeptical. He knew that people weren’t dependable. “Yes,” he said, “but what if Peter and James and John grow weary? What if people who come after them forget? And what if, way down in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, people get *too busy* to bother telling others about You? Haven’t You made any other plans?”

“No, I’ve made no other plans, Gabriel,” Jesus answered. “I’m counting on them.”

Will you continue to live in the shadows, or will you cast shadows as the light of the world?