

In the Same Shadow
Luke 13:31-35
February 28, 2010

When I was a freshman in high school, I served as a page in the state legislature in Raleigh. They worked us so hard that when I finally got an easy assignment- to cover someone's phones when they were in a meeting- that I feel asleep at their desk. It was a good work and it gave me a profound appreciation of state legislators who have to work so hard when they're in Raleigh, but who have full-time jobs back home.

On Friday all of the pages went home. I joyfully met my Mother who must've taken the day off of school to come pick me up for some quality Mother/daughter time. We stopped by Durham to visit Duke University. That was my first ever visit to Duke and I loved it. At that time in my life I liked matchy-matchy campuses such as Wake Forest and Duke. Duke's main campus is totally matchy-matchy in what is called a neo-Gothic architectural style. Maybe some of you, especially those of you who are sports fans, have seen pictures of Duke's campus or at least of their chapel. Duke Chapel is situated on the highest point of the campus. It has a huge bell tower that dominates the landscape of the campus. Back then I loved it. I loved the matchy-matchiness of the campus. I loved how orderly it seemed. I loved the beauty of the chapel and I especially loved their stained glass windows. They have a rose window that is dominated by that deep blue like Chagall used. It's not a Chagall stained glass, but that's the color of blue.

I still love the stained glass of Duke Chapel, but I'm not so much impressed any more with much of anything about Duke's campus. First of all that whole orderly, matchy-matchiness is not orderly. It is a lovely edifice which disguises old buildings with inexplicably bizarre floor plans and crowded floors. Duke Divinity School has since been completely redone, but when I was there the Div School had floors 1,2, and 3 but they also had floors 001, 002, and 003. Furthermore they designated their two buildings something memorable like "old school" and "new school." Although I knew some parts of the old part and some parts of the new part, I never knew whether the stuff in between was old or new. By my third and fourth years in school at the beginning of each semester, I either walked with a friend to our class on the first day or I just wandered around a while to figure out which one of the most probable rooms I should check first. So the Divinity School was nuts, but it was nothing compared to Duke's undergraduate library which is the most horrible, cramped, chaotic place. Every floor except the main floor looks identical to each other. When you go up the main steps in the library it has floors and half floors so it's possible to go on the craziest wild goose chases that you can ever imagine to look for the books you need. Although I think that I finally learned to skip all that running around and go to the floor where all of the unshelved books were. That's where I usually found what I needed. The final example I'll offer is- in order to cut to Duke Hospital from the main campus, you have to go through the old Duke Hospital. It's one of those deals where you have to decide if you're going to take the right corridor or the left corridor to come out at the same place on the other side so you can access the side walk to the new Duke Hospital. Trouble was, both the left way and the right way weren't straight pathways. Each corridor twisted and turned so that it was possible to take a wrong hallway. If you were lucky enough to find yourself in the little cafe where both corridors ended, then you could finish walking the country mile over to Duke Hospital. In all fairness I will say that Duke Hospital is probably the most user friendly

hospital I've ever entered. Whoever designed it showed an incredible amount of sense with the modern architecture as well as common sense with the floor plans, the proximity of the elevators to everything, with sinks everywhere to wash your hands, and a great great system of communicating how to get from place to place. It's a marvelously laid out hospital. All right, back to crazy old Duke's campus.

If you stand on the quad and face Duke Chapel, the Divinity School is located immediately on the right. The chapel and the divinity school are joined by a neo-Gothic walkway which is the background for many films, Dawson's Creek the college years, and extra shots of the campus during televised games. Divinity School students tend to sit next to the chapel during their lunch break. My friend Lisa and I moved from this typical lunch spot to sit on the steps just a little farther down the quad. Knowing us, we might have been doing that to escape the general vapidness of our fellow students. But what I remember is that Lisa and I were both cold all the time so we didn't want to be sitting in the shadow of the Duke Chapel. All of that neo-Gothic stuff is theoretically beautiful, but it's cold. It obstructs the sun and it obstructs the sky and it cast shadows everywhere and it's cold. It's like the cold stone somehow rubs off on the temperature of the campus. There were mornings where I would walk the freakin' mile from the commuter parking lot to the Divinity School. I'd be OK warm, then I'd come into one of the dorm quads with neo-Gothic stone surrounding me and with wind tunnels greeting me and I'd start to quiver, quake, and tear up from the big chill. By year 4 at Duke I was ready to leave that cold place behind me. I was sure that I wanted to serve in the sun, not in the shadows.

Most of the year, most of the church calendar, we serve in the sun. Or, more precisely, we serve in the radiance of the Risen Christ. Advent- we wait for the birth. Although there's some awe and apprehension in that waiting, mostly we wait with joy for the new life. In Eastertide we revel in the blinding brightness of the empty tomb. That brightness changes to red, the color of passion, at Pentecost. The Spirit runs amok igniting us from the spiritual experience of the resurrection of the Christ to the spark held by the church. Pentecost red stokes up the fires so that we learn that our faith requires reverence, but also service. The Pentecostal fires never die, but they transition from flames to embers as the green of ordinary time prevails. It's time to grow. It's time to share. It's time to make progress in such a way that we don't flame out or peter out. We grow constantly, consistently in that warm, nurturing environment. But Lent, Lent is different. It's the one time of the year that we embrace the spirituality of the shadow of the cross. It looms over everything that we do. It looms over everything that we read. It looms over the way we pray. Lent is not so much a pessimistic time nor is it about mindless self-deprivation. It is an austere time. It is the tactile memory of the cold marble of a grave. It is a time of preparation for what's ahead. Ultimately Easter awaits us and that's a good thing, a shining moment. But before Easter- during Lent, it's a different story. The cross awaits us and we are under its long shadow.

That long shadow stretches across today's scripture. Can you feel the chill? Herod wanted Jesus dead and some Pharisees came to warn Jesus. I just want you to note that, although we usually assume that all the Pharisees were enemies of Jesus, this scripture proves that history (like everything else) most likely falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum and not along the extreme poles. Some Pharisees opposed Jesus; some didn't. A few even warned him to flee for his life. Then Jesus replied with a complicated sounding answer. This is definitely not a warm, fuzzy answer. Jesus first asserted the

rightness of his current work- his exorcisms and his healings. Then he acknowledged that, in time, he would continue his work. Here his message alters dramatically. His work transformed from exorcism and healing to the work of death. Jesus labored under no delusions; he was born a marked man. Although the disciples only understood it retrospectively, death was his gift. Instead of Jesus resenting it all, instead of Jesus kicking and screaming his fate, instead of running away from his responsibilities as the Son of God, Jesus embraced his future. He embraced his death. He embraced his ultimate work. He embraced the place that would kill him. And, until the very end, he kept working the work of his ministry. That's very admirable, but it's also very chilling.

Like Jesus we labor under shadows. Like Jesus we labor under in the same shadow, the shadow of death. I read an interview with Charlize Theron one time. She was a teenager when she witnessed her drunken Dad attack her Mother one too many times. Her Mother killed her father. It was ruled a justifiable homicide due to self-defense. When the interviewer asked her what was the one thing that she knew for sure, she replied "That I will die." All of us know that we will die. Almost all of us don't use that knowledge to our advantage. We push that knowledge away, figuring that such sober contemplation can wait. We don't like bad feelings. We don't like death. We don't like the uncertainty about how we'll die. So we don't deal. We close our minds to our mortality. Here's the thing. By closing our minds to our mortality I think that we're closing our minds to the purpose of life. Jesus knew that the shadow of the cross loomed large because he knew his death gave meaning to his life's work. But he also knew that his life's work gave meaning to his death. We're missing out on that if we skip the uncomfortable existential thoughts and if we ignore the larger trajectories of our lives. What gives our work meaning and purpose? Do we spend our time wisely or do we squander it? Does our own comfort matter more than the comfort of others? Where do we make our largest investments?

I have two big things rolling around in my head at once. Although this may not seem obvious to you, I'm actually looking at these as two sides of the same coin. The first big thing flopping around in my head is that Immanuel needs some help, some professional help, insofar as the evangelistic arm of the church. Our committee is small. We've worked extremely hard for almost seven years. Three years ago we lost two very valuable members. We have someone about to come onto the committee and she will add new energy, but that's still a big burden for four people. Especially when three of us have done this whole endeavor feeling like it wasn't our strong suit. Especially when the three of us are a little overcommitted in the church. Especially since we can't seem to solve the puzzle of how to keep the new folks that we attract. So we're thinking that we need to hire a professional consultant to steer us in the right direction. As I said last week John Deckenback and I had a pretty long discussion about possible consultants. I'm reading one of the books that he recommended. I don't like this approach. It's not me. I don't think that it's us. John praised the guy who wrote it. So I'm just shaking my head and wondering how to make this thing work. This evangelism stuff is what I'm weighing on one hand.

On the other is the social justice stuff. I'm doing something crazy, but that's just the wall the ball bounces. Last winter when I was organizing the Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, I was completely seized by the irony that I could plan a city-wide event easier than I could find resources for one individual. My pastor friend, Cathy Oatman, who is a seriously gifted individual was also scrambling to find resources for a

community member who was homeless and who needed mental health intervention. I was in my office one day and I said outloud “This is ridiculous. Cathy and I smart people. We have an M.Div. We’re in the middle of our careers. We have tons of life experience. Here we are. We are unqualified to help one person.” I was disgusted. Ministers are generalists. We constantly need to increase our practical skills. I’ve been in the ministry almost fourteen years and associations and conferences aren’t stepping up to help us in this regard. That’s why I’m coordinating the mininsteriums. That’s why I’m inviting pastors and lay people to help with something that’s being called the Clergy/Homeless. We’re going to invite all faith communities in Baltimore City and Baltimore County to come to some kind of seminar so that people of faith can learn basic information from homeless service providers. Everything about what to do when someone knocks on your door to what services are offered. It’s going to be very interactive and it’s going to be pragmatic. Also, I hope that it’s going to be an important social event. People should be lining up to put together that Memorial Service. That’s great exposure doing the right thing for faith communities. We’re just not players in some of these ministries. Occasionally reserved Sheila Helgerson talks frankly about the UCC churches who don’t support Earl’s Place. There’s a disconnect between many houses of worship and the primary service providers in our community. So this seminar thing should theoretically provide a spark to begin those relationships and to get some more dollars rolling in the right direction.

I don’t know how to work this out, but now more than ever I am completely convinced of the necessity of the union of evangelism and social justice. I’m completely convinced that serving the marginalized in our communities is not only the right thing to do in God’s eyes, but it’s the right thing to do in the eyes of many people. We do labor in shadows. We do feel the chill of the fragility of life. We do seek to labor all our days with meaning and purpose. I also fully believe that there’s no splintering of spirituality between the stuff that you do in church and the stuff that you do with the poor. This stuff I do decorating the church, I know some of you view it as frivolous. But when I first entered Immanuel seven years ago I found it to be so drab. It’s like somebody didn’t love the building. I want this place to be dynamic and engaging when people walk in. Whether it’s for first time or 1001 time, I don’t care. I want you to think that somebody loves this building. Somebody loves this church. When you help with fellowship after service or you bring food to CEFM, or whether you spend all of Saturday putting up an arbor or you take the deposit of the church tithes to the bank, I think that it’s like Paul says in Romans 8:28 “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” So I’m not bothered that I’m trying to do two very different things during the same year. I think that it’s a necessary dependence between social justice and proclamation. They’re just two different ways to let others know that God loves them and that there’s a church, a small church with a mighty big heart, where they belong.

So, yes, we labor under the same shadow of Jesus. We labor under the shadow of the cross. Sometimes it is a cold and colorless place. But when we linger there long enough we begin to understand that our sense of purpose, as Christians and as humans, is stoked because we know what’s coming. What’s coming is death and certainly life after death. But before all that we know that death is coming and that life is a series of precious opportunities to make your given time count. Amen.

