

# “The Shadow of a Person”

a sermon by

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**Text: “.....so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by” (Acts 5:15).**

Several years ago, Doris Kearns Goodwin published a book entitled *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, in which she pointed out one of the most remarkable aspects of Lincoln’s political skill, the capacity to bring very divergent personalities together to form one of the most unusual Presidential cabinets in American history.

In May of 1860, Lincoln had defeated three of his most formidable political rivals at the Republican National Convention: William H. Seward, Edward Bates, and Salmon P. Chase. In many ways each of these men was more qualified and competent than Lincoln to lead our nation in its struggle to end slavery and to preserve the Union. Lincoln, however, had one gift the others lacked. He had the remarkable capacity to understand other people and to win their confidence so that these men, once Lincoln’s greatest enemies, became his most trusted advisors.

## I.

There is a passage in the Book of Acts that speaks in a remarkable way to the power that a person has to affect others. In Acts, Chapter 5, we read of a great day in the life of the early church. A large crowd of people had gathered at Solomon’s Porch to hear and to see what the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were doing. We are told that it was a great day of preaching and healing, and that on that day many people were added to the Christian movement. We read that “they even carried the sick into the streets so that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. And that is where I want to pause for a moment, in order that we might consider the practical implications of the “shadow of a person.”

Now, at its lowest level, this notion of the power of the shadow of a person is rank superstition. There was a belief in the ancient Near East that the shadow of a great person had a healing power to it. That superstition is certainly present in our text. The presumption was that if a helpless or ill person could be brought under the influence of a man such as Peter, that person would be made well again.

There are many places today where this is still true. In India, a Brahman may throw away his food if the shadow of an outcast has passed over it. On the other hand, witnesses have told of how vast throngs of people would maneuver into position in the streets of New Delhi so that Mahatma Gandhi's shadow might pass over them and bless them.

But there is a sense in which all of us know that this is true. On a number of occasions I have been present in a hospital room when a physician comes into the room and immediately radiated a sense of confidence that made a difference. There are other people, who in a time of trouble can make us feel better by their presence. There are other people in whose presence it is impossible to be crude or vulgar.

Sometimes we look out at the world around us and the problems seem so overwhelming. We wonder if any of us can make a difference. Our text, however, reminds us of the difference that one person can make. In our thinking these days, we need to emphasize again the place of an ordinary person in the healing of a broken and battered world.

## II.

For one thing, God has made us in such a way that we have the power to influence each other and be influenced by other people. Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics* has a section where he addresses the mission of the church. Barth goes on to list fourteen essential tasks of the church: worship, preaching, world mission, prayer, pastoral care, outreach to the poor, and the Christian life. There was one, however, that I have never considered: "the production and existence of definite personal examples of Christian life and action." Barth was really talking about what the Catholic Church would call "saints"—persons of extraordinary ability whom the church points to as examples. There are people who have had an enormous influence on our lives.

That is certainly true in our personal lives. I think of the teachers who I had along the way who had an enormous influence on my life in high school, in college, in seminary, and graduate school. I think of the people I know in this church who day after day in quiet and often unrecognized ways serve the cause of Christ in this city: sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, singing in the choir, teaching in the church school—silent saints who day after day, year after year, are what makes the church go.

I think of my own family: Christian parents, a minister father and great-uncle who encouraged me to consider the ministry. The two most influential male figures in my life as a boy were my father and my great-uncle, both of whom were Presbyterian ministers. My great-uncle was Dr. James Fowle, who was for many years the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He was really more of a grandfather figure. The thing I

remember about my Uncle Jamie was his size. He had a towering presence. He was tall. He was over six feet tall and he must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds. He once told me that he had buried three doctors who had told him he needed to lose weight. He loved dogs and told his doctor that God had made different types of dogs. There was the graceful, slim greyhound and there was the portly St. Bernard. He often accused his doctors of trying to make a greyhound out of a St. Bernard. He had a booming voice that sounded like Moses on Mt. Sinai. I remember on one occasion, when I was a student at Davidson College, my Uncle Jamie pulled me aside and asked me what I wanted to be. I told him that I was considering medicine or law. He said to me, "Bill, you need to be a minister. Medicine," he went on to say, "is fine for people that cannot be a minister. But you can be a minister and that is what you ought to do." I never forgot those words. I never forgot that word of encouragement from someone who saw something in me that I was not sure I saw in myself.

We are living in a time of celebrity religion, when people tend to be focused on the lives of those who are most visible through television and other media. But if I had to name the most influential Christians of the last century, high on my list would be such names as Albert Schweitzer, Toyohito Kagawa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

### III.

There is, however, a disturbing dimension to this notion of the "shadow of a person" and some sobering truths that must be faced. One is that our influence on one another is seldom neutral. It tends to be bad or good, constructive or destructive, creative or stifling. The shadow of a person builds up or tears down, blesses or curses.

In Robert McAfee Brown's book *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to Humanity*, Brown notes that in Wiesel's novels there are three major types of characters. One is the victim, who is usually the Jew. Then there is the executioner, the Nazi soldier. But Wiesel sees a third character that Brown calls "the spectator." In his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Wiesel describes this character. He tells of a young man, Michael, who returns after the war to the town where he had lived in Poland. He goes back to the center of the town where the Nazis had rounded up the Jews and placed them in box cars and sent them to the concentration camps. As he looks up at the buildings around him, he remembers the day that he and his family were rounded up with the others. There was a face in the window, the nameless face of a man who stood by and watched and had done nothing to stop the evil. Wiesel goes on to say he can feel pity for the victim, hatred for the executioner, but for the spectator—only contempt.

You see, the great temptation of our time is indifference. We don't want to get involved. But there are many things in life about which you cannot be neutral. Jesus understood that. So often we think that life is so complicated, but Jesus had the remarkable capacity to reduce it to its simplest alternatives. You cannot serve God and Mammon. You cannot enter both the narrow gate and the wide gate. So often he reminded his disciples that following him meant leaving things behind.

Surely on this communion Sunday we are reminded of this. “When Christ calls a person,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “he calls that person to die.”

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!