

...Shine Bright

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Matthew 5:13–20, 43–48

My favorite book growing up was called, “[Keep the Lights Burning Abbie](#).” It was also featured on a [Reading Rainbow episode](#), which I watched again this week.

The book takes place off the coast of Maine in the 1850s, based on a true story of a lighthouse keeper and his three daughters, Abbie, Lydia, and Esther. Until I picked up the book on Thursday morning, I forgot there was a Lydia involved! I wrote book reports about it, I convinced my parents to take a detour on a vacation to Maine to visit one of her lighthouses, I was obsessed with Abbie Burgess.

The book covers the period of about a month. Abbie’s father had to sail to town to pick up supplies because the delivery had not arrived the previous month and they were running low on oil for the lighthouse. She got worried because her father was the one who always kept the light going in the lighthouse so that all the ships at sea and the people on land stayed safe. Concerned upon his announcement and the possibility he wouldn’t be home that night, she asked, “Who will keep the lights burning Papa?” He smiled and said, “you will, Abbie! Shine bright.”

As the story goes, he was away for nearly a month! The weather was awful—storms, high waves, snow, and a real fear took over the family. “Almost as soon as he had left, the wind shifted and a gale began. It blew for three days, with waves so high they overran the island with knee-deep water. The home intended for the family was completely washed away. Abbie and her sisters had to secure the windows of the lighthouse to keep the waves from breaking them in. The lower level flooded, and they were forced to seek refuge in the north lighthouse tower.^[2] Abbie even managed to rescue all but one of their chickens.^[5] Throughout this ordeal she kept the lighthouse light burning.^[4]¹

Abbie kept the light going every night while he was away for 21 days. Finally, the storm and the waves settled and her dad returned home. He said he knew they were ok because he could see the light burning every night. The legend goes that numerous ships were able to make it to port during the bad storms because of her faithfulness in keeping the light going, even in the midst of her fear and her initial unease about her own abilities.

In her own words she later said in a letter to a friend, “The new dwelling was flooded and the windows had to be secured to prevent the violence of the spray from breaking them in. As the tide came, the sea rose higher and higher, till the only endurable places were the light-towers. If they stood we were saved, otherwise our fate was only too certain. But for some reason, I know not why, I had no misgivings, and went on with my work as usual. For four weeks, owing to rough weather, no landing could be affected on the Rock. During this time we were without the assistance of any male member of our family. Though at times greatly exhausted with my labors, not once did the lights fail. Under God I was able to perform all my accustomed duties as well as my father's.”²

¹ Abbie Burgess, [Wikipedia](#).

² Abbie Burgess.

Probably not a surprise why this book meant so much to me. That month might have been the first time she took care of the lights, but it was not her last. Abbie Burgess went on to care for lighthouses her entire life always working as the assistant lighthouse keeper with her husband, making sure the lights were burning so that the people who depended on it were safe.

Abbie Burgess died June 16, 1892 in Portland, Maine. In her last letter she wrote, “I often dream of the old lamps at the Rock. I wonder if the care of the lighthouses would follow my soul after it left my worn-out body.”

Shining bright helped save her community, the people who relied on her in her work. And she learned that her shining was inherent to who she was.

Our passage today from the sermon on the mount is a selection that bookends chapter five and helps us move through this first playlist of Jesus’ greatest hits. And this section has some his most beloved sayings, and some of the most abused ones.

After the Beatitudes, Jesus spoke about being salt and light in the world. Remember the Beatitudes were identity statements of the possibilities of what could be in this other kind of world that God imagined. Jesus continued with identity statements with the salt and the light.

Light is all about shining bright and salt about giving a good flavor to the world with that witness of love and justice. It’s because the people already were salty and already were lights—they were created to be just that, that Jesus reminded them to be salty and to shine bright. It’s the basis of who they were and how they let others know during good and bad times to keep on keepin’ on.

After his talk on claiming the identities of salt and light and Jesus shared that he had no interest in abolishing the law and prophets, but instead that he was the fulfillment of them, we get to that spicy section where he gives about six case studies. You know the ones.

He disheeded out examples about anger, divorce, adultery, oaths, and finally loving enemies. We didn’t read them this morning because I think they’re hard for us to hear in a new way when we hear the words read aloud. So let’s talk about them abstractly for a minute.

Jesus wanted everyone to remember that he was describing his new way of living in this beloved community. This was his interpretation and his fulfillment, given that those listening already knew their identity as blessed, and salty, and full of light.

And as he was talking about fulfilling the law and the prophets with justice on his mind, he chose those six case studies.

Each case study began with, “you’ve heard it said”...and he described a law from the Torah or practice. Then he said, “but I say to you...” and Jesus offered an expansion on the topic. Jesus said the law is good and he wanted the people to know there was a next step to take, a way for it to permeate relationships and life in a further way.

“It is a next step sort of interpretation. Study the law. Determine its foundational intent. And ask, what is the next step of ethical behavior and attitude to which this leads us, especially

as we consider it as illumined by the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³

These case studies are about shining bright with a lens toward justice and a witness of love in human relationships.

And these case studies, which have been largely abused by churches and people in power for centuries, end with one in particular, which we've yet to master. Love your enemies, Jesus said. It's easy to love the ones who love you. But Jesus was working persistently to be salty and to shine bright at every turn.

If we are able to claim our identities in the beloved community, and work together, what persistence and faithfulness might we uncover?

No one would say or think that this kind of living is easy, simple, or without challenges. Living into these identities is hard for all kinds of reasons, but especially because we have to believe them for ourselves. And then when we do, have to live it out in a world that is more interested in power, and success, and whatever it takes to say on top. It takes a widow's persistence to move judges who consistently choose injustice.

Right now, we are in the midst of a presidential impeachment trial, a fake peace plan for Israel and Palestine, lies, a disruption in Iran, earthquakes in the Caribbean, and I am certain I am forgetting something else because the bandwidth it requires to keep up with all of it is overwhelming! Not to mention the day to day realities we are all living with.

It's hard right now to feel like our individual light might change anything, but it does. And our joint RBC light together offers a safe way home for people.

Take for example, our collective commitment to being a safe place for the LGBTQ community both here and with other churches in our partnership with the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB).

Or the way we learn from the Christian Women's Network in Cuba and how they offer care.

Then I think about our partnership with the Legal Aid Justice Center, who is working alongside immigrants to make sure they are safe. Most of us here don't know much about immigration law. But LAJC does and they are faithful and shine bright, lifting up people who need to know they are not alone. And we do the salty work of calling our representatives and teaching classes and volunteering with ACCA.

There's another story to share about shining bright and claiming your full identity that I want to share.

A. J. Muste, was best known as a peacemaker. He was a vibrant example of Christian nonviolence in the twentieth century. In 1909, he was ordained as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, and during the 1920s, he was a trade union activist.

He wrote, "The way of peace is a seamless garment that must cover the whole of life and must be applied in all its relationships." During the 1960s, Muste was a key organizer in a

³ O. Wesley Allen, *Matthew*. (67).

broad anti-war movement in response to the Vietnam War when it seemed there was no end in sight.

One night, he planned a vigil in front of the White House. No one came for the vigil, but a few reporters showed up to cover the story. Once out there, standing alone in the dark of a D.C. night, holding a candle with a flickering flame, one reporter asked him, "Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night in front of the White House with a candle?"

A.J. Muste replied softly: "Oh I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me."⁴

Of course his witness and the faithfulness of protestors changed the country, but was talking about his identity. He did not want to sway in the faithfulness of who he knew he was.

So, Shine bright with persistence in a witness to love and justice in the world.

Shine bright to let others know this is a safe place, a place to be welcomed home and told that you are beloved.

Shine bright for the ways we see injustice hurting the beloveds we know and do not know is the core of who we are called to be.

Shine bright.

Be salty.

Claim your beloved-ness.

It's who we already are and exactly who were created to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ AJ Muste, [A Life of Activism](#).