

“Shine On”  
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

1 John 3:1-7 Homily  
April 22, 2012  
For Private Distribution Only

I’m guessing I’m not alone in this, but, when I was young, I saw the world in a whole different way than I do today, as if through a lens at once totally literal, yet completely magical. For instance, when our car broke down during a Sunday drive and a man from the service station came to our rescue, I forever after remembered with awe the day Superman valiantly assisted my family in distress. Cape or no cape, no one could tell me that muscular man had been anyone but a superhero... Another time, when my mother announced she’d be taking me with her to a bible study meeting in a motel lobby and I knew only one word that sounded the least bit like “motel,” I dreamt for days about how wonderful it was going to be to play with all those awesome Mattel toys while the grown-ups pored over their bibles. (Mom wisely wound up sending me to a babysitter instead.)

Much later, when I despaired at apparently being the only born again Christian at my high school, arrangements were made for yet another dream come true: I was enrolled in the youth group of a well known mega-church half an hour away. I could hardly wait to be amongst my peers—“real Christian” teens! I had no doubt that they would be super friendly and nice, pure of heart, and all the other wonderful things I’d read about believers in my bible. Imagine my surprise when the youth group kids were just as cliquy as the kids at school and didn’t go out of their way to welcome a newcomer; when they were materialistic because theirs was an affluent community; or, perhaps most shocking of all, when I witnessed a group of them playing records backwards in hopes of hearing some encoded satanic messages... Disappointed doesn’t begin to describe how I felt as it sunk in that these were not the saint-like mini-Jesuses I’d so eagerly

anticipated encountering. Conversion or no conversion, like me, they were still imperfectly human. Drat.

Passages like today's scripture readings led me to believe there would be clear, dramatic distinctions between Christians and the rest of the world. They reinforced my already wishful, black-and-white thinking. On TV, in movies, story books, and in play; it was always so obvious, so easy to identify princesses and wicked witches, heroes and villains, cops and robbers.

Why should the bible or real life be any different?

...As much as we might wish it were so, simplistic dualistic thinking is not just for children.

At any age, nuance, shades of gray, can seem a little too difficult to parse. How much easier it is to have just a few boxes into which virtually everyone and thing can be neatly deposited:

Naughty/Nice, Liberal/Conservative, Body/Spirit, Heaven/Earth, Good/Evil, Saint/Sinner; to name just a few. In truth, depending upon the day or even the hour, the lines are far blurrier. In fact, sometimes there are no lines at all! We know that. We do! ...So why would the author of I John so handily reduce people to just two categories: righteous do-gooders who abide in Christ and lawless sinners who have obviously neither seen nor known Jesus?

Well, for one thing, dualism does appear to have been the overarching worldview of the community to which this letter was written. They subscribed to the gospel of John, a narrative packed with images of light and darkness, which clearly, almost bluntly, represent good and evil.

But it was also about timing. Writing from a place of urgency, the author was certain Christ would return any day. And concerned that, were it to happen immediately, many would fall on the wrong side of the divide. It appears that this congregation had already experienced a fair

amount of dissension, including a theological schism that had driven some away from the community. Those who remained retained what the writer believed to be right faith. Those who departed had apparently denied the human side of Jesus' nature, focusing only on his divinity. Somehow, in their estimation, leaving Jesus' humanity out of the equation also left them free to actively pursue the pleasures of the flesh. And so, although they regarded themselves as spiritually pure, they had resumed their pre-conversion lifestyles and, were now deemed by the author false prophets who served the antichrist. Yikes.

Those are fighting words! But isn't that what we resort to when we desperately want to get someone's attention, to make an important point? Turn up the volume? Turn up the rhetoric? Certainly we hear this happening in the political discourse all the time. But we also experience such heightened language from what politicians love to call "special interest groups," and perhaps most especially from environmentalists. No coincidence there. Like the author of John, many activists are also speaking of approaching end times and offering us one last chance to do the right thing, to choose righteousness and preservation over lawlessness and destruction.

Fear can be a very powerful motivator. And yet some have tallied 366 instances in which, one way or another, the bible tells us to fear not. Whatever our author's intentions or when Christ is destined to return, God does not will us to be anxious or to act from places of fear. Surely history has shown us how destructive that can be. So, rather than getting hooked by the extremes in the second half of this passage, let's go back to its beginning:

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are ...Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*

*And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”*

We are all God’s children, we are all beloved, we are all works in progress, and we all have reason for hope.

As children in the chronological sense, we didn’t always have a lot of say in the matter, but as adults, we have choices to make, including what primary influences we will allow to shape us and what our day to day focus will be. Will we pursue the latest toys and far flung dreams? Will we spend our time looking outside ourselves to see what everyone else is doing and being and critique it accordingly? Or will we let the light of God’s face shine upon us? Will we let Jesus’ character imprint itself on our own? And, ever so slowly, ever so humbly, will we let the quality of our own lights be revealed in the world?

Not to compete or convince ourselves that we are suddenly flawless superheroes. Not to beat ourselves or others up when we fall short. But to steadily walk the walk and, to the best of our abilities, reflect back the light of Christ to our sisters and brothers, young and old.

Amen