

# Stewards of Good News

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2011

Rev. Tom Ott

First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
145 Capital Ave., NE  
Battle Creek, MI 49017  
269-965-1225  
[www.fccb.org](http://www.fccb.org)

## **Stewards of the Good News**

### **Matthew 5: 13-16**

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...” Those words of the Old Testament prophet Joel were quoted in the New Testament book of Acts to make sense out of the Pentecost experience. Luke closed his gospel with a promise from the resurrected Jesus who appeared to his disciples and said: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).”

And then fifty days after Passover during the feast of Pentecost, a sound like the rush of a mighty wind filled the room where the disciples were staying, and tongues as of fire appeared and alighted on each of them and they began to speak as the spirit gave them ability, proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. And even though Jerusalem was filled with faithful people of every nation, everyone heard the apostles speaking in their own native languages about God’s deeds of power.

Our faith tradition tells us that the power of God’s Holy Spirit was set loose in the world on that day when the church was born, and the ancient words of the prophet Joel helped the first century Christians make sense of it all: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh...”

All flesh: your flesh and my flesh, young flesh and old flesh, male flesh and female flesh, gay flesh and straight flesh. The spirit of God is alive in the bodies of everyone here in this room today and everyone who is not. “I will pour out my spirit on *all* flesh.”

Why do we feel so powerless? Or, better yet, why does God seem so powerless? Why is it that when we read the paper

or log on to the internet for latest news update, God seems so absent and so impotent? This week in the news we were treated to the typical barrage of political candidates tearing down their opponents. Accusations of sexual harassment were made against Herman Cain, who denied it and blamed the people on Rick Perry's campaign staff for spreading false rumors. The Prime Minister of Greece called for a special vote of confidence from the general electorate because the country's severe recession has necessitated politically unpopular austerity measures in exchange for IMF loans which have triggered riots and protests and sent ripples of panic throughout the Eurozone. Another priest in the Detroit Archdiocese is under investigation for sexually molesting a boy, family members are killing each other, gang bangers are terrorizing neighborhoods, corrupt public officials are stealing from the public treasury while vital programs and services are being cut for lack of revenue...

People don't see much evidence that the power of God's Holy Spirit has been unleashed in the world today. They see a lot of fear, corruption, violence and neglect. Did our spiritual ancestors get it wrong? Was the gift of the Holy Spirit just a dream that an old man dreamt up in ancient Israel? Was Pentecost just a drunken party as some people suggested? Has God withdrawn the power of the Holy Spirit from all flesh and given up on us?

This morning in our text from the opening chapter of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, we heard Jesus say, "You are the light of the world...no one lights a lamp to hide it under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Let your light so shine before others that they may they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Today there are a lot of people who seem to spend a lot of time and a lot of energy trying to put bushel baskets over the light of God that dwells in every human being. They seem determined to humiliate, ridicule, tear down and

dehumanize people.

And yet, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the founding story of the church dares to proclaim that God's Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. That is the Good News that we have been entrusted to steward. Today is the third week of our focus on stewardship. We've said that a steward is someone who is entrusted with responsibility for managing what belongs to another. Today we remember that we are entrusted with responsibility for stewarding the light of God that dwells within every human being. We're supposed to make sure that everyone's light is shining from a lamp stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Our work is to remove the bushel baskets that are dimming and diminishing the light of God from shining in everyone...everyone.

So how do we do that? Let's begin by thinking about our own experiences. Take a moment to think about the people and experiences that have helped you shine your light.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately and what I realized is that the church has been lifting bushel baskets off of me my whole life. All my life the church has been inspiring me with stories of those whose lights have shined brightly: stories in sacred scripture, stories held in the collective memories of the community, stories enacted in ritual and sacrament. The church has surrounded me with living bodies radiant with the light of God: flesh and blood people whose good works have inspired me give glory to God, people who continue to show up in my life week after week and restore my faith, and give me hope, and inspire me to shine my light as brightly as I can.

The church gets a lot of bad press today. America has been in a church recession since the late 1950's. More and more people seem to have contempt for the church and not

without reason. At our worst we are judgmental, hypocritical and homophobic. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own traditions and practices that we become irrelevant to the changing needs and challenges of our culture. We can get so preoccupied with each other that we become like a private club and close ourselves off to anyone outside the circle of our fellowship. The church is not perfect by any means.

But at our best, the church can do things for people that no other organization can do. We remove bushel baskets so that the light of God can shine in every human being. That is what we do in the church. From the day of our baptism we are told that we are cherished, gifted, called, and sent. Church is a place where everyone gets to shine in their own special way: “No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” Not only are you welcome here, you are expected to shine here, to put your gifts to good use so that the power of God can find expression in your life so that others may see your good works and give glory to God in Heaven.

It isn’t a program or a curriculum or a ritual that we perform here in Christ’s church. It is our sacred calling. It is the heart of our mission. It is what we must do in order to convince the world that our founding story is true: that the power of God’s Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. As stewards of that Good News, we are called to remove bushel baskets.

But here is the thing: the world doesn’t believe us. People outside of the faith community don’t see any evidence that the power of God’s Holy Spirit has been set loose in the world. They don’t read about it in the headlines. They don’t see evidence of it in their own lives. Instead of light, they see a lot of darkness, despair and hopelessness.

We have a lot of bushel baskets to remove. Not just here in the church, but in the world: at the office where a

colleague's gifts are being overlooked and underutilized and she needs someone to recognize what she is capable of contributing, in the classroom where a student is getting lots of red marks for everything he does wrong but needs someone to affirm what he is uniquely outstanding at doing, in this neighborhood where a single mom is struggling to make ends meet while raising her children in poverty and needs someone to tell her how much they admire her courage and perseverance instead of condemning her as a welfare freeloader, in the home of a retiree who has become isolated and exhausted caring for his disabled wife and needs some one to stop in and ask how he's doing.

If the public is unable to see the light of God shining in the life of every human being, it is because we still have a lot of bushel baskets to remove. Darkness is evidence, not of the absence of God, but of the places where we must go in order to be good and faithful stewards of the Good News.

“In the last days it shall be, says the Lord, that I will pour out my flesh upon all people...no one lights a lamp to put it under a bushel basket, but on a lamp stand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Amen.



