Bring Good Things to Light

Epiphany Series “Confrontation at the Crossroads: Answering the Crucial Questions of Jesus”
(Luke 6:46-49), 2nd Sunday of Epiphany,
Question II: “Why do you call me 'Lord' and not do what I say?”

We have this lamp in our living room that I like to sit by and read. One early morning before daylight, I try to turn it on and nothing happens. I was convinced it simply needed a new bulb. We had not a single bulb in the house. I drove across town and bought a box of bulbs. Drove back home and put one of these in. Still nothing. I was sure the problem was obvious. Cheap bulbs. I get back in the car and drive further across town. This time I buy a more expensive box of bulbs. Drove back home and put one of these in. Still nothing. I was sure the problem was obvious. Cheap bulbs. I get back in the car and drive further across town. This time I buy the most expensive bulbs I can find. Drove back home and put one of these in. Still nothing. I was sure the problem was obvious. Cheap bulbs. Now it was time to up the ante. I searched online.

I found bulbs made in another part of the world that I could have imported. These were very expensive, but it was a worthy price to pay. By this time, I was man who would not be denied. The bulbs were shipped. I put one of these in and still nothing. I was sure the problem was obvious. Cheap bulbs. The answer was to research more. The answer was to put in more time in the search. The answer was to spend whatever it took to find the right solution. Let me say that after years of looking, much time invested, and even more money spent, I hadn't given up. One day, while cleaning the carpets, we moved the table and noticed something, the lamp cord had been unplugged.

Isn't this a parable of life? It was CS Lewis who observed all of history is an attempt to solve our search for satisfaction with wrong solutions. What a classic example of how the attempted solution becomes part of the problem. Something in my life is not igniting. There's no peace. There's no joy. There's no love. There's no hope. My approach is to run myself ragged. I convince myself if I can just invest more time. If I can just invest more money. If I can just invest more energy. One by one my attempts prove futile but it doesn't deter me from trying. This Epiphany season we are looking at the critical questions of Jesus. Today we come to the question Jesus raises in Luke 6, “What do you call me Lord and not do what I say?” We might translate this in a way to fit our parable. “How can you expect anything different in life when you don't follow my way?” We try to find ignition by avoiding the starting place, finding our connection.

In our mind, it's much easier to keep gritting our teeth and throwing more money at the problem.
It's much easier to keep rolling the stone uphill and throwing more energy at the problem. I tried the $10 bulb and it didn't work. I'm convinced I'll upgrade to the $100 bulb. It doesn't work either so I'm convinced I'll upgrade to the $1000 bulb. On and on it goes. From heaven's perspective, my search for what matters in life looks more outrageous than attempts to make the lamp work. As I search for what matters, I rush into more time, more money, more energy, more sweat, more tears. Jesus raises the question, “How can you expect to find anything when you don't follow my way?” The solutions we seek are draining, but this is history's story, a grueling misguided quest.

I have this longing for peace. I have this longing for joy. I have this longing for hope. I have this longing for fulfillment. I have this longing for purpose. Maybe I need to trade up. Maybe I need to change jobs. Maybe I need to change neighborhoods. Maybe I need to change pleasures. Maybe I need to change spouses. It's the chronic fascination with the latest and greatest. If I could just seize what chronically eludes my grasp. I just need a new look. I just need a new car. I just need a new ecstasy. And so the search gets more consuming. The search gets more expensive. I change everything I know to change and still no ignition. All of these changes won't bring about what we seek as long as life remains unconnected. Jesus insists for us to follow Him. His call is for us to listen to Him, honor Him, submit to Him. The temptation we have is to go about finding ignition while doing an end around what Jesus made an unavoidable call.

We back away surprised. Everything was done according to plan. Where did it go wrong? It would make sense if we pursued with less energy. It would make sense if we spared expense. It would make sense if we avoided the sacrifice. Isn't that the irony? We worked hard. We made sacrifices. We spent the money. At the end of the chase, our hands still turn up empty. The suspicion is that we need to work harder. We need to make more sacrifice. We need to spend more money. It's the treadmill to oblivion. All the motions are repeated and yet we end up not one step closer to what we seek. How can you expect anything when you don't follow my way? For Jesus, all of history is the repeated attempt to locate our needs in some achievement while avoiding a connection.

Jesus faced this over and again during His ministry. Remember the man who came to Jesus crying out for justice? If there was ever an opportunity for Jesus to give a speech on social justice then this was it. This younger brother had been deprived of any share in the family estate. In those days, all of the inheritance went to the oldest son. If anything else was distributed it was up to the one who received it. This didn't seem fair. Here is a jilted brother who comes to Jesus and expected to find a defender. Jesus answers with, “Let me tell you a story.” He then precedes to tell the story of the rich
man who looked over his property. He decided after examining the estate that he needed to upgrade. Something was igniting in life and the answer was to get bigger. It was time to spend more. It was time to trade in the $10 bulb for something in the $100 range.

Of all the words Jesus could have used to describe this behavior, Jesus chose just one, “Fool.” To attempt to gain an ignition by changing the bulb of an disconnected lamp is more than an honest mistake. After awhile the futility should provoke our attention. There's a simple definition for insanity. It's the practice of repeating the same counter productive behavior expecting different results. The young brother came looking for justice but Jesus gave him something bigger. Don't make life about changing bulbs. Make life about protecting the connection. So much of life is misspent, misdirected, and misguided over the attempt to succeed at something that doesn't really matter. If I'm not careful, when I think about the energy I devote to many of my prayers, what I am I really asking for? When honest, just a bulb, not connection.

How about the rich, young ruler who came to Jesus? This driven upstart had spent most of his life devoting his energy to changing bulbs and he was perceptive to notice that something wasn't working. What am I missing? He told Jesus he was very diligent about selecting the right bulbs. He was a man of high culture and elevated taste. If the Porsche didn't satisfy then he wouldn't hesitate to pursue the Ferrari. He was no slouch when it came to pursuing things like prestige or position. Jesus offered a solution. How can you expect anything if you don't follow what I say? The answer is connection. At the end of the story, the young man is leaving the scene grieved. Apparently, he picked up where he left off. He promptly left the scene and went looking for a more expensive light bulb. Somehow he would show the world that even though everyone else has failed, he would manage to find peace, joy, hope, meaning, and purpose through a bulb.

The seduction of temptation is that we continue to overlook our own futility. No matter how many times we fail, we will keep up the pursuit. Life becomes the pursuit of happiness and it ends up like the proverbial hamster in the wheel. We expend a lot of energy but we don't end up any closer. Pulled into an unproductive cycle of chasing elusive dreams that never deliver on the false promises. All that we end up with is weariness, fretfulness, restlessness, and fearfulness. St. Augustine observed that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. For some people the restlessness is endured. Life is defined by restlessness. We wear our restlessness like a badge of honor. We might not find satisfaction but we will spend a lifetime running treadmills.

The most famous example of changing bulbs in the Bible is King Solomon. At the beginning, he'd
asked God for wisdom. Later in life, about the only advice he was left to give, “Do as I say but don't do as I do.” Solomon chased fulfillment with wealth, pleasure, ecstasy. He seized every possession he get his hands on. He literally had women imported in from all over the world. No matter how many light bulbs he tried, nothing ever ignited. All that misspent time. All that misspent wealth. All that misspent energy. His final words were simply, “Learn to be content with what you have.” Here's a person who speaks from experience. The problem is that we can't take his word for it. He couldn't take someone's word for it. It's the temptation to become the exception to the world. It happened to him but it won't happen to me. All of history is an attempt to satisfy our needs with wrong solutions. And yet, every person tries to be the exception.

Take a look at Solomon's life and he didn't commit the sensational moral failures of his father, King David. Solomon never had an affair with any man's wife like David did. Solomon never attempted to cover up the affair with lies like David did. Solomon never conspired to have a person killed in order to conceal his tracks like David did. However, it's not David that all of history wonders about. Through the centuries, readers of Scripture are left wondering about Solomon. How could someone with his wisdom end up so spiritually distorted? Spending a life obsessing over bulbs doesn't seem that harmful. Scripture shows it's the picture of a misspent life. There's much we can recover from and gain a fresh start. Solomon's mistakes are less sensational but sadly more fatal.

Even the twelve disciples failed to grasp the lesson. For three entire years, Jesus kept repeating the message. Life is about connection with Him. Life is about the heart getting ignited from His heart connected with ours. After three years of hearing this, the disciples are still asking, “Who will sit on the left and right of the throne?” “Who is most important in the kingdom?” “Who gets the biggest room in the governor's mansion?” After all these years and they're still making life about chasing the bulbs. How often that becomes the obsession. We look back over our lives and we think, “If I had just gotten a different degree.” “If I had just had a different job.” “If I had just settled in a different neighborhood.” “If I had just married a different spouse.” “If I had just bought a different car.” “If I had just had a bigger house.” It's all about the bulbs.

If anything besides connection with Jesus is made primary then life becomes a flurry of options. We find ourselves swirling in a maze of possibilities. Energy gets misplaced. Money gets misused. Time gets misapplied. Priorities get misaligned. When connection with Jesus is made primary, the life becomes simpler. We don't look back on the past and wonder what might have been. We don't look ahead on the future and wonder what might be. We don't get anxious in the present and wonder
what should I do. Once we are connected to Jesus, it is now up to Him to use our lives to bring good things to light. The peace that I seek is up to Him. The joy that I seek is up to Him. The hope that I seek is up to Him. The meaning that I seek is up to Him. The purpose that I seek is up to Him. How it happens, when it happens is up to Jesus' will and way.

How can you expect anything when you don't follow my way? Our lives long for stability. Our lives long for security. Our lives long for what remains firm and not shifting. To remain connected with Jesus is like building a life on secure foundations. Rains come, waves come, and we find our lives stable and secure. It's the person who is disconnected who is tossed about like the sea. They shift with every drift that comes along. New fashions arise and we don't want to be left out. New fads arise and we don't want to seem out of step. New trends take hold and we don't want to appear out of touch. And so life becomes about keeping up. I'm afraid I might miss something. Everyone else is having pleasures that I'm excluded from. I don't want to feel deprived. Perhaps it's possible to have my spiritual cake and eat it too. On the one hand, I can continue to go through the motions and call Jesus “Lord.” I can say the right words, sing the right songs, recite the right creeds. Go through all the motions and still change bulbs.

With Jesus this will never work. We show what we truly think of Him not by the titles we confer upon Him but by the loyalty we demonstrate through our lives. Jesus wants us connected with Him. We listen to Him. We follow Him. We submit to Him. By our lives we demonstrate He is Lord. By our choices we demonstrate He is Lord. By our decisions we demonstrate He is Lord. Words without actions turn up empty. Those who attempt use right words might end up confused when the flood waters rise. Life ends up insecure. With every drift of fashion, fad, and trend that comes our way, we find the foundations slipping out from under. Not so for those connected with Jesus.

Through the ages, the proclamation of Solomon sends a warning cry. He reminds us, all the years, all the money, all the energy that went into seeking for fulfillment, it all proved futile in the end. He tried every bulb imaginable. He literally had them imported in from every corner of the world. Take it from someone who ran the gamut. At every turn was the same inescapable truth. It was just as true at the end as it was at the beginning. How we wished we could get a return if we're not fully satisfied. This is why the questions of Jesus are so critical. In other areas of life there's an offered promise, satisfaction or a full refund. With Jesus we are playing with high stakes. There's only one promise. You will remain unsatisfied and there is no return of what was given up. Valuable opportunities are never regained. Everything we insist on building on fragile foundations is eventually washed away and
nothing is left to show.

The rich young ruler came to Jesus and He used respectful titles. He never would have thought of disrespecting Jesus orally. Many live with the same mentality. We are selective over what we consider reverent. I would never take the Lord's name in vain. Jesus shows the respect that matters is what we demonstrate with our lives. Why do you call me “Lord” and yet do not do what I say? The consideration comes down to an urgent consideration. Is the life I'm living what Jesus sacrificed to make possible? His entire purpose in coming was to put us in a position in life to not arrive at the end with anything misspent. No one has to reach the end like Solomon with regrets, “All is vanity.” In the grand scheme, what has all my work and energy really amounted to?

We live in a world where the tides of fashion, fads, and trends are always changing. Our lives stand surrounded by waves of change what are continually pounding into the structures we've constructed for ourselves. Jesus' desire is to offer connection to us so that our lives are ignited and put on display. We become shining examples of what connection with Him can do. In a world content with superficial exchanges, we can demonstrate the light of genuine love. In a world content with shallow desires, we can demonstrate the light of genuine joy. In a world content with fleeting obsessions, we can demonstrate the light of genuine satisfaction. In a world content with transient pleasures, we can demonstrate the light of lasting purpose. There is no end around what we are designed for. No amount of formula or going through the motions, no matter how outwardly pious will compensate for the call to honor Jesus through our character.

It was Augustine who noted, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” The temptation is to think when the waves come and the foundations shake that God has abandoned us to our own devices. At some point the foundations begin to show the effect of weariness, fretfulness, fearfulness. Disappointment gives way to despair for those who think the past is lost and now the future is hopeless as God abandons us to the waves of consequence. If the foundations are proving unsteady, it's hardly a display of God's abandonment. Perhaps the first time, the opportunity for awakening has now come. Now is the time for salvation. Weariness has a way of leading us to the place of what we needed all along. Connection is within reach and new beginnings will abound.