

KEEP SHINING *Shooting Stars*

Philippians 2:12-18

November 16, 2025

You are peculiar people. Some of you more than others.
But collectively, together, you are strange. You are odd.
And I can prove it.

You show up on Sunday mornings when you could be sleeping in. You sing out loud, in public, together, in harmony...sometimes. You pass a plate and give your money away—your hard-earned, deserved money. Not for a product. Not for a service. You just give it away. And you call all of this worship.

You greet each other with ancient words of peace. You build friendships that span decades. You share the burdens that you cannot shoulder all by yourself. You show up for funerals of people you barely knew. You bring food to families in crisis and shoes for children who are not your children. You call all of this discipleship.

By any rational measure—comfort, convenience, conformity—you are wasting your time.

Unless...it's true.

Unless Jesus Christ really is Lord.

Unless death really has been defeated.

Unless this costly, inconvenient, irrational thing called grace is the strongest power in the universe.

If that's true, then what you do here carries weight beyond measure. But, will anyone notice?

Philippi was a Roman colony. In fact, it was a kind of showcase city for imperial power. Everywhere you looked in the city of Philippi, carved in stone, stamped on coins, proclaimed in public, these words: *Caesar is lord*. Worship. Obey. Bend the knee.

Now, the Apostle Paul writes this letter from prison. His body bears the scars of his resistance. And he says to the Philippians—and to us—here's what you must do:

Shine like stars in the night sky. Don't blend in. Don't play it safe. Don't keep your head down. Shine.

Where? In a crooked and perverse generation—Paul's words, not mine—you are called to be visibly, unmistakably, defiantly different.

Somewhere along the way, I think we forgot. I think the greatest threat to the Church today is not rejection. It is invisibility, that no one notices us at all because we sound, act, and are carved up just like everybody else.

In the beating heart of Roman rule, our ancestors dared to profess:

Christ is Lord.

Not Caesar.

Not empire.

Not wealth or nation or party.

Christ is Lord.

It was the earliest and most powerful Christian conviction. And if it is true, then everything changes. It starts here. It starts with us when we refuse to shrink the gospel, to confine it to one small part of our lives or our witness, when we refuse to blend into a broken age.

You start by seeing. Every person you encounter reflects the image of God. You know the ones I'm talking about. The neighbor whose uncut grass or obnoxious yard sign makes your blood boil. The stranger who crossed the border for work to feed his family. The friend whose Facebook posts offend you. The believer told their identity is unworthy or unholy. All of them. Each of us. The estranged family member you struggle to forgive.

You see, God's image is not yours to grant or deny. It is frustratingly and beautifully beyond our pay grade. And so, scripture must shape our faith, not endorse

our opinions. The Bible is not a weapon to wound our enemies, but a mirror that tells the truth about us.

If Christ is Lord, then we must refuse to excuse cruelty from our own side. We must stay at the table across deep disagreement. We must hold one another accountable to a standard higher than victory—and that's when we become strange. Peculiar. Odd. Hard to label. Impossible to co-opt.

The crisis we face isn't that people have rejected faith—it's that they've seen a Church that looks just like the world. Tribal. Fearful. Shallow. But we draw others not by force, but by radiance. We shine, not to be seen, but to be faithful. Jesus tells his disciples, "When you've been given a light so great that it lights up the whole world, you cannot hide it. You cannot blend in. You have a role to play. A mission to fulfill. A purpose."

Right now, in our city, that faithfulness takes shape in *Streets to Homes Indy*, where we partner to find permanent supportive homes for those who need them most. Let me tell you, this is patient work. It is relational work. It's the kind of work that doesn't produce quick victories. The kind of work that defies the math of efficiency and ROI. But for 47 souls in the last three months, who now have homes, it is lifechanging work.

A month ago, I received this note from a parent in our congregation. Her five-year-old, Ethan, had been listening carefully to the sermon that Sunday, and when the plates were passed for the offering, he turned to his dad and said, "Dad, the church needs money to help people. I need a thousand dollars." (I love this kid!)

She writes, "He settled for a twenty, and then proceeded to decorate the offering envelope in order to make people feel better." Five years old—learning right here what generosity means, what it looks like to be part of something bigger than yourself.

Three weeks ago, I was visiting with a member of our congregation, one of our saints. I had joined her for lunch at her new retirement community, and she insisted that after lunch we have a scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream. She said it was the best in

the city, and she was right. And as we enjoyed the ice cream, she told me how members of this congregation showed up for her this summer when she needed it the most, when it mattered the most. She said, "I don't know how they knew, but somehow they knew. Right when I needed a phone call, my phone would ring. Right when I needed a visit, somebody would show up. In the moment I needed a card, one would arrive in the mail." And then she said these words. She said, "Without my church, I would not have made it. You go tell them that."

That Sunday, right after the benediction, just over in this section, a guest sat in one of these pews. She was weeping. It was quiet, but heavy. The kind that comes when home has become unsafe but leaving it feels just as dangerous. And she was here in this sanctuary, safe for just a moment. And after the service, she lingered in that spot, and most of us were headed toward coffee, conversations, the Colts playing on TV.

But I noticed one of you change course. You walked across the aisle. Sat down. Placed a hand on her shoulder. And there, in the pew, you prayed. You saw the image of God, afraid and alone, and you stayed. That's a strange thing to do. A moment of grace.

Of course, when this church has been at its very best, we've always been strange. We've refused to bend the gospel to fit the times. Our founding pastor, Henry Ward Beecher, stood in Second's pulpit on May 28, 1843, and from that pulpit he called slavery a moral evil. He was just shy of thirty years old. It was risky. Indiana. Before the Civil War. In fact, the local papers covered the sermon and the fallout. It cost the church members. It cost the pastor friends. Even job security. In fact, he had waited to speak for those very reasons. But after four years as your pastor, he couldn't wait any longer. And so, he spoke.

Down in South Carolina, there was another Presbyterian pastor. His name was James Henley Thornwell. He was a brilliant scholar, a graduate of my alma mater seminary. Henry Ward Beecher called Thornwell the best debater in the General Assembly. And James Henley Thornwell had a clear message for

the Church and preachers like Beecher. *Stay in your lane.* Thornwell quoted Proverbs, "Put your hands upon your mouth." Slavery, he said, was a political matter, not a spiritual one. Not the Church's business.

Thornwell said the Church should stay silent.

Beecher determined silence was the sin.

And Beecher was right.

The argument echoes in our time:

Cuts to hunger programs and childcare vouchers for poor families.

Contempt for those from other lands.

Political issues. Not the Church's business.

But then pastors weaponize scripture against people whose stories they do not know, real people with names, and faces, and families, and souls. And leaders in our state defend dehumanizing policies on Christian grounds, fueling fires of suspicion and fear. And the voices repeat: put your hands upon your mouth. *Just blend in.*

But somewhere I read, "I was hungry and you fed me." Somewhere I read, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Somewhere I read, "Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing who lead the flocks astray."

Somewhere I read, "Woe to those who deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed."

Look, I know this is hard. Tough for me too. Part of me wants to hold back. Play prevent. But Beecher rings in my ears: the greater sin is silence. And the Church cannot be silent. The gospel is too beautiful to be reduced to a politics of fear. God's kingdom is too vast to fit within the narrow walls of nationalism. These are not party lines. They are gospel demands. We will differ on how to translate these convictions into policy, but together we must uphold the dignity granted every human soul by God.

Second Church—what will you choose? Comfort or costly faith? Narrow allegiance or the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Will we bow to lesser gods—or stand firm? Will we shine—or blend into the night?

After worship today, I'll have an hour to sit with our eighth-grade confirmands. Twenty kids. You know their faces. You made promises at their baptisms. Some of you taught them in Sunday school. You watched them run our halls, climb these pews. You saw them sit and sing on these stairs.

Now, they're asking the ancient questions: Who is God? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What place will the Church hold in my life?

They're asking, and they're watching. Will they see a church formed by scripture, even when it costs comfort? Or a church bending to power, blending in to avoid attack? What will we choose?

I'm asking you to commit generously to Second Church today. Your generosity sustains the pastoral care that holds us together—hospital visits and crisis counseling, the relationships that span decades. Your generosity sustains confirmation and worship and fellowship and formation.

Your generosity sustains our witness beyond these doors. And all of it, every bit, matters. All of it. It matters to a five-year-old in the pew decorating an offering envelope. It matters to a woman adjusting to life in a retirement home, and to our unhoused neighbors downtown, and to eighth graders on the second floor.

Not to keep the lights on. Not to pay the bills. But to sustain a church that chooses courage over comfort, the vulnerable over convenience, and Christ over every competing loyalty.

The world does not need Christians who blend in or build power. It needs Christians made strange by Jesus. Our city needs a church like that.

Fifty years from now, those twenty teenagers will tell this story. My sons will tell this story. I think about that a lot. I'll be ninety-three. Probably well past preaching. An old man wondering what difference it all made. Did I tell the truth or keep the congregation comfortable? Did we shine—or blend in? Were we bold in our witness or silent in fear?

I want them to remember that, in this church, we
refused to bow to lesser gods. Christ alone is Lord.

From his prison cell, Paul pleads across centuries: *Hold
fast to the word of life*. That word runs through the
story of this place. Christ's call. Beecher's courage.
Our legacy. The next chapter is yours to write. Hold
fast to faith. Hold fast to courage. Hold fast to the light.
Peculiar people, it is time to shine.