

“Standing Out”
Matthew 5:13-16
6th Sunday after Epiphany

February 15, 2026
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Last year, ESPN produced a documentary about the former Major League baseball player, Jim Abbott. Do any of you remember Jim Abbott?

He played for a few different teams through the years, including my beloved NY Yankees. My strongest memory of Jim Abbott goes back to the first weekend in September, of 1993.

I was with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, first year out of college, living in Hartford, Connecticut with a handful of other volunteers. It was a Friday night, and my housemates and I decided that we wanted to see a baseball game the next day.

Do we go up to Boston, to Fenway Park, a couple hours north?
Or do we go down to Yankee Stadium, a couple hours south?

You know which one I voted for.
But, alas, I got outvoted.
We ended up in Boston.
It was still great fun, my first time in Fenway Park.

And yet, the reason I remember that day so well is not what happened in Fenway Park, but what happened in Yankee Stadium, at the game we decided not to attend. You see, Jim Abbott pitched a no-hitter for the Yankees that day—and I missed it! You can tell from the tone of my voice that I **STILL** can’t believe I missed it!

And it was all the more remarkable because it’s the only no-hitter in Major League history pitched by someone who was born with only one hand.

Now back then, I thought Jim Abbott was simply a remarkable athlete, but as the ESPN documentary makes clear, Abbott was much more than that.

For countless kids who were born like he was—without a hand, without a limb, but they still wanted to play sports—they watched what he did, and he was an inspiration for them. In the documentary, those kids who are now adults speak about the hope that he gave them, the courage he instilled in them.

For all those kids, Jim Abbott was a light.

It's a terrific story, and yet one of my favorite parts of the story is what it was like for Jim when HE was a young kid. Do you know what he would do when he had his picture taken as a kid?

He didn't wear a shirt that said: One day I'm going to pitch a no-hitter in the Major Leagues! No...he'd take the arm that had no hand, and he would put it in his pocket.¹

He didn't want people to notice that he was different.
As a kid, he wanted to blend in.
He did not want to STAND OUT.

Now...why am I sharing all this with you?

Not just because a new baseball season is right around the corner, and the Yankees have yet another chance to end their 17-year drought without a championship...HARD TIMES for us Yankees fans...

I can feel the sympathy just emanating from the pews right now.

¹ The detail about the photo comes from Jim Abbott and Tim Brown, *Imperfect: An Improbable Life*, New York: Random House, 2012.

No, I mention it because you do not have to be a fan of major league baseball to understand the tension here.

The tension between blending in...and standing out.

Do you know anything about this?

I think everyone in this room has had some experience with this.
The tension between blending in...and standing out.

You know it every time you come to church.

How many of you have a favorite pew?

Yeah...for most everyone, your favorite place to sit is somewhere in the middle...somewhere in the back...funny how almost no one ever says that their favorite pew is right up front underneath the pulpit.

What's that about?

It's about not standing out.

You know what the hardest thing to do is in church?

It's asking someone to pray, on the spur of the moment, at a gathering of other church members.

Why? No one wants to stand out.

How do you feel about standing out?

In our text for today, Jesus says:

"You are the salt of the earth."

"You are the light of the world."

*“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”*

Now, I want to pause right here. Because I know I just said that there’s reluctance to stand out...but I look around this room, and I see followers of Jesus who are, at this moment, living this text out every day.

You may not be trying to stand out.
But you do.

Volunteering your time to teach our children at It’s Elementary.
Setting Sunday evenings aside to be a sponsor for WPCYG.
Serving as a tutor at Pleasant Valley.
Sharing a meal at the Soteria House for Women.

Or maybe by taking care of your aging parent, because they once took care of you.

Or perhaps by taking care of your spouse, whose health is declining, and they will never be the person they once were, but every day that you get up, and walk through your day with them, you are God’s light to them.

You don’t do any of this to call attention to yourself.
You do it because it’s the right thing to do.

How far do we go when it comes to standing out?
It’s not always an easy question.
But it’s a faithful question.

The Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis knew about this question.

And he wrote a story about it.
It's story that I've never been able to get out of my mind.

The story is about a priest who had a dream.

This old priest, he dreamed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was coming to see him. She had some concerns about her boy, who was 12 years old at the time.

So the priest spoke with her son.

“What’s the matter?” asked the priest.
“I don’t know,” said the boy.
“I seem to roam the streets, wrestling.”

“Whom are you wrestling with?” asked the priest.
“With God,” said the boy.

So, in the dream, the priest goes for walks with Jesus, encourages his gift for carpentry, and talks to the boy about God. The priest reminds Jesus that God knows him well, and wants the best for him.

After about a month, the boy feels better.
He goes home.
He stops roaming and wrestling.

Many years later, the priest hears that the boy Jesus has grown up, and is doing fine. He’s now in his 40’s, and has become a very respected carpenter in the town of Nazareth.

He is liked, he is accepted, he is successful.
And then the priest wakes up from his dream.²

² This story appears in “Born to Set Thy People Free,” a sermon by William Sloane Coffin, appearing in *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Coffin believes the story appeared in a book by Nikos Kazantzakis.

I heard that story years ago, but like I said, it stuck with me.
Why did it stick with me?
You know why.

Because which one of us wants to imagine Jesus spending his entire life blending in with all the other carpenters in town?

Burying his light.
Never risking his love.
Never becoming the person God created him to be.

Where do we draw the line, when it comes to blending in...and standing out?

I recall what Sue Inman wrote in her marvelous history of Westminster.

“During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing throughout the country. Under Dr. [John] Haley’s leadership, the Session passed a resolution to seat anyone of any race who came to worship at Westminster. Further, Dr. Haley met with Arthur Magill and said, ‘We can’t let Greenville burn as Selma, Alabama has done.

“Arthur Magill agreed, so he and [Dr. Haley] took a group of Greenvillians to Atlanta to talk with...the city’s mayor and other civic leaders...As a result, the Chamber of Commerce Interracial Committee was formed.”

As Sue makes clear, this was not a universally accepted thing for a church to do at this time.

“The controversial stand John Haley and others had taken brought threats. One night, when Dr. Haley was returning by train from a meeting in Atlanta, Westminster elders Tom Gower and Dave Norris (who were often on opposite sides in politics) joined forces, went to the depot, and escorted Dr. Haley home. They had gotten word that a cross might be burning in his front yard upon his return.”³

You know what that was, right?

Not just the right to do, or a courageous thing to do.

It was Westminster being the church God created us to be.

You see, Westminster has a marvelous history of being God’s light.

The question before us today is what new ways will we let God’s light shine through us? What risks will we take, as followers of Jesus, when it comes to standing out?

For example, as I hope you’ve heard by now, our church is considering a capital campaign this year. This spring, we’re in a period of prayerful discussion and discernment. There will be focus groups, town hall gatherings in the coming weeks, all with the purpose of helping our church leadership decide the most faithful way to go.

Now it’s been 17, 18 years—a full generation since Westminster last embarked on a capital campaign. My unscientific guess is that half of our church remembers going through a capital campaign or two at Westminster...and half of us have no memory of such an experience at Westminster.

I believe it’s a tremendously exciting opportunity for our church.

³ Sue Lile Inman, “Growing in Faith: A History of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, 1947-2007,” copyright by Westminster Presbyterian Church, 2007.

For starters, there's the possibility of expanding the Weekday School. We can't get everyone off the waitlist, but by adding 7 additional classrooms, we would have the necessary space for 60 more children to attend the school.

It means enrollment could increase by 25%!

And I wonder if some portion of that 25% increase in attendance could be reserved for families who would not normally have the means to pay for WWS. Maybe we could set a few scholarships aside for some of our neighbors. Make WWS available for kids who would not otherwise be able to attend.

And we could build a chapel.

Many of you who have been here for much longer than me will recall that Westminster has always considered the idea of building a chapel...there's just always been something more important for us to build.

The Fellowship Hall.
The new gym.
Expanding our sanctuary.

These were all very wise and faithful decisions that our church made in the past 25 years.

I wonder if now is the time to build that chapel.

A chapel would not be for Sunday morning worship.
We're not going to start an alternative worship service.
That's not it at all.

It **WOULD** be a place for the small funeral, the small wedding.

Or even a sacred space for our kids and teenagers, when they're in the Weekday School, or when they're attending It's Elementary on Wednesdays, or when they're here for WPCYG on Sunday evenings, they could use that chapel for worship, for teaching, for prayer...

God might speak to your child or grandchild in that chapel.

What will God say?

I don't know.

You don't know.

But that's the point.

When we take a risk with our faith, to be God's light for others, we never know what God might do.

And besides a chapel, besides expanding the Weekday School, we could build new office space for our growing staff. We could renovate the youth suite, which is now over 20 years old. We could even refurbish our restrooms.

Any chance I could get an "Amen" to refurbishing a few restrooms around here?

And then...I picture the TITHE that we could give through a campaign. Hundreds of thousands of dollars that could really have a transformative impact for neighbors out there who need it most.

You know what that's called?

That's called being God's light.

Not so people can see US clearly.

But so our neighbors might see God clearly.

Being God's light for our neighbors, for future generations who come to Westminster by taking new risks with our faith...that's not just the call of the saints from 1947 who started our church, or the saints of 1967.

It's the call for the saints of 2026 & 2027.
I think this is precisely who God has created us to be.

Amen.