

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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Text: Matthew 10:24-39

Title: So Do Not Be Afraid . . .

Focus: Jesus cautioned his followers that they would face opposition. Preachers and other disciples of Jesus should not let fear dissuade them from standing up for justice as they follow the commission Jesus has given them.

Gospel reading: Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! ²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Karl Barth and Response to Manipulation of the Church

Swiss Reformed theologian **Karl Barth** was perhaps the most influential theologian of the 20th century. His father was a pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church and later a professor in New Testament and church history. Beginning at age 18, Karl followed in his father's footsteps to become a pastor: He studied in Switzerland and

later at different universities and seminaries in Germany. Upon being ordained, he served as a pastor to two different congregations in Switzerland and later was called to be a theology professor in Germany.

When Hitler rose to power in Germany during an unsettled time following WWI, he sought to use the established German Church to legitimize his agenda. This was appealing and persuasive to many--Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth.

Barth was among the first to speak up against Hitler and the way he co-opted the Church.¹ Later, in 1934, Barth was the primary author, along with input from Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, of ***The Barmen Declaration***, a confession of faith which begins by identifying Jesus Christ is the one Word of God in whom we place our trust.

The declaration is centered around six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, then stating the implications of that scripture for the present day, and then directly rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians.

So Barth was a bold leader during a time of uncertainty and change in which forces were at work to manipulate the Church to gain support for positions which were contrary to the grace of God and the recognition of people's full humanity as made in the image of God.

To borrow language from the declaration itself to describe the call of the Church:

"The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and Sacrament." (Barmen, proposition #6)

So, Barth sought to lead in this way:

- to clarify for the Church or for preachers or for disciples/followers of Jesus what their task or mission was,
- to recognize the appealing forces which could dissuade them from this mission,

¹ His opposition was expressed through a pamphlet published in June of 1933 called *Theological Existence Today!* Info in this section was summarized from a number of sources, including this summary of the *Barmen Declaration*: <http://www.westpresa2.org/docs/adulted/Barmen.pdf> and this biography from *The Center for Barth Studies* at Princeton Theological Seminary: <http://barth.ptsem.edu/karl-barth/biography>

- In the Church, we use the term *idolatry* to describe having one's allegiance and mission misdirected in this way—of putting something else as more important than our worship of God
- to offer their trust and obedience to Jesus above all other sources and powers.

There's a quote attributed to Karl Barth when he was speaking with young preachers. He advised them "to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

He may not have said it exactly in that way (He likely first said it in German), but in a cover story from *Time* magazine he described what he meant . . .

"[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'"²

- Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.
 - Good preaching should engage both the text of the Bible and the context of our lives.
 - Good theological reflection should help people use the Bible to grapple with the events they read about in their newspaper.

What Are Preachers Talking About?

In a letter to the congregation two weeks ago (following the death of George Floyd), I described how more than once in recent years I have metaphorically balled up a perfectly good half-written sermon and thrown it in the trash when the events of the week required a direct response and therefore a new focus for the sermon. There are times when you veer from a plan in order to address what's going on that week in the world.

Over the last week, I have wondered what other preachers are talking about. I sent a note to a colleague to ask if he'd been viewing other worship services to see what others are talking about in their sermons. I myself viewed the online worship services and sermons of some colleagues

I wondered. . .

- Are they talking about race and racism?

² Perhaps the most clear statement on the record from Barth concerning these matters comes from a *Time* Magazine piece on Barth published on Friday, May 31, 1963. (This was noted on the website of *The Center for Barth Studies* noted above.)

- Are they acknowledging and talking about
 - Chronic injustice
 - violence
 - Dehumanization
 - Use of force
 - Ugly parts of American history and culture

If a preacher isn't talking with the congregation about race and racism and injustice, then, to use Barth's metaphor, "What newspaper is he or she reading?" or "Are they reading at all? How can they ignore what's going on?"

Every preacher has the call and responsibility to undertake this task on behalf of the congregation they serve. They are the ones who know the congregation they serve and who have been entrusted with this task. They should have the freedom to determine how they hear the voice of the Spirit and how they draw together and interpret both the Bible and the setting in life distinct to that congregation.

So it's not up to one person to dictate to another what they should preach about and how they should do it, but if, over a period of time and over recent weeks, they haven't been "reading their newspaper," then I'd want to ask them some questions:

- Have you preached about racial justice?
- Have you at least mentioned the events of recent weeks in your opening remarks? Have you acknowledged it in any way?
- Have you acknowledged the sin of racism in a confessional prayer?
- In your prayers, have you included prayers of lament, intercession for the pain of others, a plea for wisdom, courage, and justice?
- Have you had the courage to say that something is *just plain wrong*?
- Have you talked about the issues of the day? Have you talked with your children about them?
- Have you sought to comfort people, to challenge people, to call them back to God's way in the voice of the prophet?

And, if not, then **"What newspaper are you reading?"** Or maybe, **"Are you reading the newspaper at all?"** **What connection does your preaching have to events in the community and world? How can you ignore them or what is more important?**

Dr. King's Disappointment with the White Church

Last week I mentioned Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which he wrote as a response to the public letter of 8 white clergymen called "A Call to

Unity.” In that letter, without directly naming Dr King, they accused him of being an outsider. They called demonstrations “unwise and untimely.” They proposed that people wait and be patient and pursue matters “in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders.”

Dr King replied . . .

I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.³

Dr. King also talked about his disappointment with the established white church:

I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue.

. . . and he mentions some actions that particular leaders had taken. He continues. . .

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church. . .

In the midst of blatant injustices, I have watched white church [leaders] stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.

In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

Dr. King is saying that the established white church has been an impediment to justice.

³ This and other indented portions are from “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Posted at https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

A Contemporary Letter to the Church

You all know that I am an ordained Presbyterian pastor serving a Lutheran congregation. Good Shepherd is the 3rd ELCA-affiliated congregation I have served. So I am connected in both Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations and have ongoing conversations with pastors in both denominations.

I recently viewed a video from Pastor Carlton Rhoden who serves Westminster Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles in Southern California, which is about a ½ hour drive from where I grew up. His video is a very personal address in which he looks into the camera and speaks directly to his white clergy colleagues serving in the region known as the Presbytery of the Pacific. He essentially tells them, like Dr. King in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “I love you and I expect more from you.”

- “I am a bit shocked that I have not heard anything from my white colleagues.”⁴
- Racism and institutional racism and the structures that continue to support it must be torn down.
- How many times do we have to come together to teach people that racism is a sin?
- I’m asking you, “What are you doing? Are you preaching? Are you talking? What is exactly that you are doing to help stop racism? Because if you’re not doing anything, your knee is on my neck and I can’t breathe.”
- What are you doing?
- Are you speaking out? Because if you’re not, then your knee is on my neck and I can’t breathe.
- I’m talking to you as a fellow clergy person. As a white man, or a white woman, you are invited into conversations that I am not. You are invited into places I am not. That’s where we need your help.
- If you’re unwilling to help, then your knee is pushing down on my neck.
- All those times you had an opportunity to speak out and say something—what did you do?
- Perhaps you’re stunned and you’re not quite certain how to react or respond. Well, let me help you out. Preach about it. Talk about justice and the injustices that are prevalent in this society.

He’s directly addressing pastors, but he includes others as well:

- In the board rooms, in the conference rooms, help take the knee off of our necks.

⁴ All of the following bullet points are quotes from the video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4FDhBNX0_c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1k-TwGDyIiCZhw897Oq-dVpjNhw4HpPmNzdehhDTY8a1FFRwr0BonQWZc

- Racism is a system that is perpetuated by ignorance and silence.
- I expect--we expect--a whole lot more from our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- And not hearing from you, not seeing you, not witnessing you raises a lot of questions. Speak out, preach out, call out. . .

Side Note⁵

Jesus' Call to the Disciples and Warning in Matthew 10

Let's turn to today's designated Lectionary text from Matthew. The context or setting for today's gospel reading from chapter 10 of Matthew is the same as the reading from chapters 9 and 10 from last week. The readings are back-to-back—they are not so much separate, distinct passages, but today's reading is a continuation of last week's.

The setting is the same; Jesus is speaking with the 12 disciples. Last week's reading began with a narration about what Jesus was doing:

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. . .
(Matthew 9:35-36)

We talked last week also about the key verb or key action of Jesus in which he saw the crowd and had compassion on them. We talked about how we are prone to overlook people, to not see their perspective when we assume that our own personal experience is the universal experience and our tendency, therefore, to discount or deny the perspective of others or invalidate it in some way.

Last week we talked about how Jesus called the disciples and commissioned them to serve in the same way that they saw Jesus serve, teaching, proclaiming, seeking healing and wholeness. He commissioned them or authorized them to serve in that same way.

If the focus of last week's reading was the ministry of Jesus and then commissioning the twelve for service in the same way and some instruction about that

⁵ Side Note: I thought I might include another example here about ways for white people to speak up. I'm choosing not to include it due to length, but readers may wish to check it out. "My 11-Year-Old Got Called The N-Word. White Parents, Talk To Your Kids About Racism" https://www.huffpost.com/entry/white-parents-talk-about-racism_n_5ee4e1fec5b6afc128317d17?ncid=engmodushpmg00000006

commission (He tells them, for instance, not to take an abundance of supplies, but to depend on the hospitality of those who would receive them), then this week's focus or Jesus' instruction to the twelve in this passage is about **what to expect when they themselves go out and carry out this task or mission.**

- What should they expect to encounter when they carry out this mission of teaching, proclaiming, and seeking healing and wholeness?
 - The first warning or caution or "heads up" Jesus gives: Expect that people will talk badly about you: If people call the master ugly names like Beelzebul, which is like calling someone the Devil, then expect them to call you names.
 - Be ready for people to oppose you. Be ready for people to malign you

In Bible study or sometimes in a sermon, I'll ask people to look for repetition of words or themes in what we're reading. Repetition is a clue to what's most important. One of the repetitions in this passage noted during our Tuesday Bible study of this passage is Jesus' reassurance and instruction, "Do not fear." It's there 3 times in vv. 26, 28a, 28b, and a 4th time with a variation: "Do not be afraid," v. 31.

Jesus' mention of fear is not to acknowledge *others'* fear as a response to the message of the disciples, but an encouragement to the disciples themselves. Jesus is saying. . .

- I am commissioning you to teach, to proclaim, to seeking healing and wholeness, and to see others and have compassion on them.
- Do not let fear dissuade you from this mission to which I have commissioned you.
- You are to follow in service in the same way I have served, for 'A servant is not greater than one's master' (v. 24).

To use Barth's metaphor again: What newspaper are we reading as we read the Bible and seek to make sense of a troubled and complicated world? How are we addressing the concerns of the world? How are we seeking healing and wholeness?

Jesus would say to us,

- I have given you this mission of teaching, proclaiming, and seeking healing and wholeness
- You should expect some opposition. You should expect that some people might get upset. They may call you names.
- Do not be afraid. Do not let fear prevent you from speaking up, speaking out, and standing up for justice.

May it be so with us. May we speak and act with courage and boldness.