

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: February 5, 2023, Yr. A, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Title: The Light and the Lampstand

Focus: How can we heed and follow Jesus' wisdom when he teaches disciples to not hide the light, but to display it for God's glory and for healing in the world?

### **Gospel reading: Matthew 5:13-20**

<sup>13</sup>"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. <sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

<sup>17</sup>"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

### **The Light Has Come into the World**

When we gathered for worship on January 1, New Year's Day, we read from John chapter one about the coming of Jesus into the world:

- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .
- What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1, 3b-5)
- <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

We were invited to reflect on that affirmation with a poetic reading from *Sanctified Art*:

And so Jesus shined.  
Like a light in the dark, or a star in the sky,

Jesus walked into this world and opened our eyes,  
 shining a light on social divides and loving the scars we try to hide.  
 He lit up this world like it's never seen, the light of all people,  
 Emmanuel, King.

The light shines in the darkness, And the darkness did not overcome it.  
     Hatred did not overcome it.  
     Fear did not overcome it.  
     Greed did not overcome it.  
 A light shines in the darkness.  
     Envy did not overcome it.  
     Doubt did not overcome it.  
     Scarcity did not overcome it.  
 A light shines in the darkness.  
     Death did not overcome it.  
     Sickness did not overcome it.  
     Grief did not overcome it.

***Add to this refrain***

- Fear did not overcome light
- Racism did not overcome it
- Homophobia did not overcome it
- Transphobia did not overcome it

We hear the hope, assurance, and faith expressed in that affirmation: “<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”  
 And yet we also see plenty of darkness.

**Last Week: The Voice of the Prophet and the Call of God**

Last week with the reading from Micah and in the sermon we talked about “The Voice of the Prophet and the Call of God.” We talked about the role of the prophet, about how they are messengers for God. The intent of their message is to draw people back to God.

Though we might not use that term, *prophet*, in everyday speech, we recognize that those with the prophetic voice are still necessary to hold us accountable and call for the best in us. It's precisely because we see so much trying to overcome light and hope and love that we need persons to function like a prophet—to say “This is not right, not just, not fair. This is not what God intends.”

Last week we talked about how some people don't want to hear the message of the prophet. They don't want to hear truths that make them uncomfortable. And so the prophet, bearing the message of God, as Micah described, of "doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God," gets blamed for that message.

## **Fear and Hate Tried to Silence the Prophetic Voice of Good Shepherd**

Last Sunday morning, a week ago, I came to my desk at the church about 8 a.m. for my usual Sunday morning habits with time for quiet reflection and focus on worship and my sermon. Sometime after 8:30, I went to the printer in the front of the office to pick up the final copy of my sermon. That's when I saw the cardboard sign that had been discovered by our contracted cleaning crew. The cleaners left a note that they had discovered the sign during their rounds on Saturday night at about 5:30.

I am 20 minutes or so away from leading worship and this is what I read:

- **"Keep your rag away from the cross or else. American flag only."**

With my sermon on my mind—a sermon talking about attempts to silence the prophetic voice when it is too uncomfortable to hear that God is calling people to "do justice and love kindness/Hebrew *hesed*, and walk humbly with God—I read this note.

First of all, it got my heart beating faster as an expressed threat.

After reading that, I walked down the sidewalk from the church office toward the sanctuary and the Good Shepherd sign at the corner where I had posted our Pride flag on Monday. The Pride flag and flagstaff were stolen.

This very sign in my hands was another example of the truth of what I was saying in that day's sermon: that if the prophet is delivering God's message of justice and, as I described last week, holding up the metaphorical mirror to point out to people: "This is what I see in your behavior, in how you are living" and letting them see that gap between what God intends and how they are actually living, then some people are going to be upset. People who like the way things currently are and how they're benefiting from that are not going to like this message and so they're going to blame the messenger who delivers it.

## **What is Good Shepherd's prophetic message?**

- God is a God of love, who is revealed most fully in Jesus
- Jesus spent his life reaching out to the widow and orphan, the outsider, the outcast. By example and by explicit instruction, he taught his followers to do the same

- As I repeatedly point out at the Communion Table, Jesus washed the feet of all his disciples, telling them
  - <sup>14</sup>“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” and <sup>34</sup>“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:14, 34-35).
- At Good Shepherd, we express all of this in our Welcome Statement,
  - This is a place where you are welcome to celebrate and grieve, to rejoice and recover. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. This is a place where lives are made new. Come and see!”
- This Pride flag that we fly symbolizes or expresses all of this:
  - The love of God—this is a part of the character of God—of who God is.
  - The wideness of God’s grace in Jesus
  - God’s call to us to love in the same way

Experiencing this loss or breach or act of hate and fear—whatever you call it, is disappointing, but it’s not really surprising, is it? We have seen it before and we talked about it just last week.

But the encouraging thing is that we as a congregation are ever more determined to express who we understand God to be and who we understand Good Shepherd to be as a welcoming community. We will not be dissuaded from living out our mission as expressed in our Welcome Statement.

## **“Why Does Our Church Need a Welcome Statement?”**

*Reconciling Works*, the Lutheran agency which encourages congregations to become RIC congregations fully welcoming of others poses a question which may come up in churches which are having conversations about becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation:

- “We are already welcoming, why do we need to say so?”

There are many answers or responses. Here are a few:

- Because it’s good news; it’s good news we want to share: This is who we believe God to be and this is who we seek to be as a congregation. It is good news LGBTQ+ people need to hear. We want to be clear. We want there to be no doubt. Here’s how we explicitly say that in our Welcome Statement:

- “Welcome to people of every age and size, color and culture, marital status, ability and challenge, sexual orientation and gender identity. We want to be clear that we welcome lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender persons to participate in the life of the congregation.”
- Because incidents like this happens: Because shame and ostracism and blame and hatred and mistreatment are heaped on folks who are LGBTQ all the time and many of us/most of us may not even see it. Our Welcome Statement is a way to stand up and say, “Here’s how we want to treat all of God’s people.”

I was talking this week with the Rev. Sean Savoy, a Reno community leader who bridges faith and LGBTQ+ communities in our area. As I began to tell him what happened this week with the Pride flag being stolen and the hateful sign left, I was thinking of some of the things I mentioned last week that Martin Luther King experienced during his lifetime as a response to his prophetic voice:

- Rocks thrown through his living room window
- Bombs set off
- Stabbed with a letter opener to his chest, which nearly punctured his aorta.
- Investigated and with attempts to discredit him by the FBI
- Threatening letters and verbal threats, ugly names, labeled a Communist (attempt to discredit him and question his love for America)
- Beaten and thrown in jail
- Scolded by white establishment, including clergy men (See *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*)
- Of course, the final attack against him was his assassination, which was in Memphis in April 1968.

What I was thinking was, what we’ve experienced was a flag being stolen and an ugly message left. There was no rock thrown through the window. No one was physically hurt. It wasn’t anywhere near what others have experienced.

Sean heard what I was saying, but encouraged me not to minimize it, either. It is all a part of the same fear-based attempt to harm and exclude another.

## **“Let Your Light So Shine”**

I began today’s sermon with a reminder of John’s gospel: In Jesus, the light has come into the world . . .

- <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And in today’s text from Matthew, continuing in Matthew 5 with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself uses this metaphor of light.

A large crowd has gathered around him (Mt. 5:1), eager to hear what he has to say. He tells them,

- <sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth; (Matthew 5:13a). You are the thing that enhances the flavor and brings out the best in people and things. You are the thing that preserves. That is what salt does.
- <sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14a)

“You are the light of the world” is a principle that has specifically guided our response to what has happened as we have asked ourselves practical questions:

- “What shall we tell Good Shepherd folks?”
- “What shall we tell others?”
- “What shall we tell the media, if anything?”
- “What shall we tell folks who are LGBTQ+?”

Jesus explains,

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>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.

If our Pride flag was stolen and an ugly, hateful message left, we want to tell people about it because this is a place where light and love is needed.

- We want people who are LGBTQ+ to know that they are loved—that they are loved by God and that there is a safe and welcoming place with us at Good Shepherd.
- We want whoever took the flag and expressed those ugly words to know that God is a God of love.

This person said, “Keep your rag away from the cross.” Another thing I could say, on top of everything else, is that “Your theology is flawed.” The cross is where we expect Jesus to be. The cross is right where Jesus is. The cross is where Jesus *chooses* to be—demonstrating love and welcome and being beside people who are hurting.

<sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The “so that” is an important part of the clause: Let your light shine before others so *that* they may . . . give glory to God in heaven.

We have spread the news of what has happened far and wide not to say that Good Shepherd is great, but so that people may know that they are loved, that Good Shepherd seeks to be a place of welcome, and that God, who is loving and just, may be glorified. This is who God in Jesus is.

## Stand Up for Justice

Last week I closed the sermon with the image of the statue of 200-meter Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the campus of San Jose State University adapted from the iconic photo of them on the Olympic podium receiving their medals. I pointed out that the statue doesn't feature silver medalist Peter Norman of Australia and explained why—at the specific request of Peter Norman.

"The second platform is empty. Norman asked that it be left empty so that visitors to the statue could stand on his empty spot to feel as if they had joined Smith and Carlos in their protest."<sup>1</sup>

Tommie Smith: "The sad thing is I knew—I *knew*—that wearing the button [OPHR for Olympic Project for Human Rights, see p. 26] wasn't going to be a good thing for Peter that night. The way the world was then, a white guy standing up for two Black guys, two *scary* Black guys, wasn't going to turn out well. Right then and there, he did a lot to bridge the gap between Black and white. I wish there were more people in our country willing to stand up the same way Peter did" (Feinstein, p. 34)

This description by Tommie Smith is why we need to speak up here, too. We need to shine a light here. Because as "white guy" Peter Norman, as Tommie Smith called him, stood up because he knew that it was right, we need more than just black and brown people saying that racism is wrong, and we need more than just LGBTQ+ folks saying that discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation is wrong.

Dismantling racism and sexism and homophobia and transphobia and other kinds of unjust, ugly, and harmful behavior will not stop until straight, white, rich, well-educated, powerful, or whatever other status comes from being connected to the dominant culture stands up and says, "This is wrong."

To use the words of today's gospel, we need to shine a light on ugly behavior and say that it's not right and point to the love and justice which God intends.

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<sup>1</sup> John Feinstein, *Raise a Fist, Take a Knee: Race and the Illusion of Progress in Modern Sports* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2021), pp.32-33.

**“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”**

Thanks be to God for this message of love and light. May we live in such a way that we show it to be true.