

*Isa. 58:1-9a, Matt. 5:13-20*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

*February 5, 2023*

## Being The Church

Tension abounds. Inside the church and out. What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a community of faith? How do I, how do we, respond to issues of today? How should we be sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Information spreads like wildfire. What of it is true? How does one even define truth, facts? New and different can be frightening. How do we live our faith in this political environment?

Am I standing around the coffee hour table after worship here at Stone, discussing the latest headlines or posts on my Twitter and Facebook feeds or am I sitting around the dinner table with friends at my house church in Matthew's day? I found this week, as I studied this passage, that the now and the then seemed particularly close, and the text especially relevant. It is difficult to argue with the Sermon on the Mount.

These verses we read this morning are in the midst of one of the most familiar and often quoted portions of scripture, what has come to be known as Jesus' sermon on the Mount from the gospel of Matthew.

The suggested gospel readings for this year, 2023, have us journeying through Matthew for most of the year. (It will be different during Lent. We get a strong dose of the gospel of John.) But this year, overall, we will get a lot of Matthew. With this in mind, in addition to reflecting on this passage we read together this morning, I want to share just a bit about the context of the gospel of Matthew as a whole. For me, looking at the original context can make the gospel even more relevant in our context today.

As many of you I am sure know, our sacred text, the Bible, contains four gospels, really 4 different accounts of the same story; the Good News of Jesus Christ and what his coming into the world means for all of God's creation. Just as each of *us* is unique, each of the gospels is unique, told from slightly different perspectives

based on the passions, convictions, understandings and circumstances of the teller. This does not make any one more or less the word of God. All are the word of God for us, to take in and live out with the help of Holy Spirit and the church community.

It is broadly understood that the gospel of Mark was written first. It is the shortest and sparsest gospel. The others were written using Mark and other early Christian writings as foundational documents. It is also believed that Luke and John were probably written with more of a Gentile audience in mind. That is, they were written for people more outside the Jewish faith, not so familiar with the Jewish roots from which Jesus and the Christian faith came.

Matthew, on the other hand is seen as the ‘Jewish Gospel’. It was probably written in or around the community of Antioch around 80 A.D. when many Jews had fled Jerusalem. Most believe it was written for a specific community of early followers of Christ, most of whom had been Jews. It reads like it was written for people who share a common history. You know. They have their inside jokes and they can complete each other’s sentences when it comes to telling certain stories.

But not only was Matthew written *for* a particular Christian community. Many scholars agree that it was written *by* the community. This is the only Gospel to use the word *church* to describe the community of believers.<sup>1</sup> This gospel was written by and for a congregation. Maybe it was even written by a committee! We don’t know!

One commentator writes, “This Gospel is a community narrative, not an individualistic writing. The material for the story comes from the community tradition. The story itself is intended for reading aloud in the community worship and study, not for private, individual reading.”<sup>2</sup> I think the author, Peterson, captures this sense well in the Message paraphrase from which I read.

This perspective of a document for and by a *community* gives the gospel of Matthew a special feel. The emphasis in Matthew is not so much on professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That is already assumed in this community. The focus here instead is on what it means to live that faith. It is a gospel of Christian ethic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Boring, Eugene M., *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8, pg. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Boring, Eugene M., *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8, pg. 109.

Douglas Hare, former professor of New Testament at Pittsburg Seminary puts it this way: “Matthew can assume that the gospel will be proclaimed and that converts who undergo baptism will confess faith in Jesus, but what the writer can not take for granted is that they will take seriously Jesus’ moral imperatives. The purpose of this writing is to convince Christians that a genuine faith in Christ must be demonstrated in daily obedience to the way of life Christ proclaimed. Faith and ethics, Matthew insists, are two sides of the same coin, or the coin is counterfeit.”<sup>3</sup>

When I read the suggested text for today from Matthew in *The Message*, I knew I wanted to share it with you today. That first line, “Let me tell you why you are here...” caught me. I feel like I have been looking for an answer to that question many times over in my life. Especially in the face some of the issues in our community and our world just now. Gun violence. Homelessness. The challenge to reproductive rights. A sense of fear and distrust that seems to permeate our culture now. “What can I do?” “Why am I here?” “What is my calling just now, in light of the world around me, in light of my faith?”

Jesus says, “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of the earth. You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world.”

The Rev. Jim Wallace, founder of *Sojourner Magazine* said in a speech not long ago, “In this climate of anxiety and fear the church just needs to be the church.” A couple of good, solid scriptural examples of that might be from Micah, “what does the Lord require but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” From Matthew, “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ And from our own Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith, which we will say together in a few minutes:

In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in the Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of people long silence,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.

---

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Hare, *Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, pg. 1,2

Whether read in worship in Antioch in 80 A.D. or in San Jose in 2023, this text from Matthew reminds us of who we are and what we are about as a community of faith. “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” They are words for us. They are words of encouragement and words of hope. We do not know for sure what being salt and light for the world looked like in 80 A.D. in Antioch. We are still working out what it looks like right here, right now. But we know the words of Jesus. We know the words of scripture that shape and guide our community. We can not do nothing.

How will we be salt and light this day? By supporting the children and youth programs for Stone Church? By packing hygiene kits after worship? By helping to create safe, beautiful spaces for people to gather here on the church property? By educating ourselves on justice issues in our community and then choosing a course of action that helps move our world toward peace, justice, health and safety for all people?

I want to share something with you that I read this morning in a weekly email send I receive each Sunday morning from author, Diana Butler Bass. This is from a reflection on our text for this morning from Matthew written by religious journalist, Cathleen Falsani. Falsani writes:

Perhaps the simplest lesson amidst these many metaphors is that we should be generous with whatever light we can muster because everybody needs it and even the tiniest of sparks can be seen from farther away than we might imagine when someone is trying to feel their way through the dark.

The light of kindness. The light of generosity. The light of neighborliness. The light of anti-racism. The light of radical inclusion. The light of creating art. The light of making music. The light of listening without talking. The light of calling people by the name they choose. The light of holding space for people until they’re ready to move into it. The light of deep breaths. The light of being a non-anxious presence in the world. The light of hope. The light of courage.

The light of love.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> dianabutlerbass@substack.com, From The Cottage email send 2/5/2023

Let's keep talking as the church family of Stone Church. Let's keep praying. Let's keep being the community for one another so that we can be the body of Christ in the world this day - bringing out the God-flavors and the God-colors here and now.

*“Hide it under a bushel, no! I'm going to let it shine. Hide it under a bushel, no! I'm going to let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.”*

Amen.