

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 8, 2020
23rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 32/Proper /Year A

Reading: Philippians 2:1-18

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon Title: "Shine Like Stars in the World"

Theme

In recent years there has been renewed awareness and support for those who figuratively 'run into the fire' while common sense would dictate just the opposite. But aren't we all glad that there are those who selflessly put themselves in harm's way for the sake of others. George Hibbs is a registered nurse who volunteers on a FEMA emergency response team. Over the years he has used his medical training to help others in disaster sites all over the country and beyond. When we were told to stay in our homes and avoid other people, George was called upon to serve the Navajo Nation. He grabbed his go-bag and went, putting himself in harm's way. "Faithful Amid the Fray?" You decide.

Text

Philippians 2:1-18

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death —

even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you — ¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Sermon

Today I am continuing the four-week 2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I have entitled, "Faithful Amid the Fray." That title occurred to me months ago when I observed or, as in the case of today's featured members, heard about ministry being done despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Each week of this series there will be a sermon starter video featuring people from our fellowship, whom you probably know, who, in my opinion, did and continue to do ordinary ministry in this extraordinary time. And that makes them, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Video

If you weren't aware of it, I presided at the wedding of Lisa and George on July 15, 2017. It was since Zion opened back up in June that Lisa, not George, told me that George had just gotten back from the Navajo Nation where he had served that underserved population. I knew right then that I needed to do something with that information.

The thing that impresses me is that we see war-weary-like medical personnel in the news all the time. Because of their potential exposure, some of them don't even go home, or sleep in the garage, quarantining themselves from their families. Those who work in nursing homes like Lisa, have to be vigilant every day to make sure they don't take the virus into their places of work, or equally important, bring it home. As I travel around the community, there is hardly a nursing home that doesn't recognize the work that is being done inside by their health-care heroes.

George's regular job is nursing at St. E/Youngstown's surgical intensive care unit. Yea, no stress there. So why would he then volunteer to be on a FEMA Emergency Response Team and get called at a moment's notice and flown into disasters all over North America? Well, you heard him. It's exciting, sure, but when all is lost, as in the case of a hurricane or earthquake or wildfire, the one thing he fights for is the very physical well-being of affected people. It would be difficult for any of us to imagine, but by the time patients meet George, their very lives may be all that they have left.

But a pandemic is different. The affected person may still have a home and family and career and so on. But they also have this invisible deadly disease. You may

remember back in March and April, there was very little known about effective treatment. Care-givers were becoming infected and even dying.

A call from FEMA went out. The underserved Navajo Nation needed medical help. And despite all I've told you, George said, "yes," "yes, I'll go." In my opinion, that makes him "Faithful Amid the Fray."

During the four weeks of the campaign, the Gospel Readings will be the Gospel Readings prescribed for the day, however, most of my scriptural attention will be on the First Reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, and that is because Paul knew something about putting himself in harm's way. He too went to underserved places. As I told you last week, Paul's modus operandi was to go into a community and do his work of evangelism through the local synagogue. But there was no synagogue in Phillippi and yet he was not deterred. He went there anyway, plowing new ground, so to speak, earning his reputation as the evangelist to the Gentiles. He is a good example for us of being "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Also as I mentioned last week, Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians from his jail cell. And yet from this week's passage from the second chapter, Paul was all about encouragement. You see Paul and the Philippian Christians were both suffering persecution by non-Christians. But Paul wrote that the way the Christian responds is with love, compassion, and sympathy.

I am sure George Hibbs was aware of the cultural differences between himself and his patients in the Navajo Nation, but do you think it mattered to George or his patients? No, here are sick people and I have the skills to help. That's all George needed. Maybe there will be time to learn about the culture when the work is done.

Paul's exhortation continued in verses 3 and 4:

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Now reminding us that we are in a stewardship campaign, and that deals with the good use of our time, talent, and treasure, this passage deals with all three. Paul wrote to the Phillipian Christians about interacting with their polytheistic pagan

neighbors. Paul knew firsthand and reminded the Philippian Christians that Jesus Christ was God and he proved it by demonstrating his power over death. Paul also knew that the polytheistic pagan residents of Philippi were hopelessly lost if they continued in devoting themselves to some stone idol. And that just would not do, so he risked everything, to save them from themselves. Even imprisonment didn't keep him from preaching the Gospel.

Our non-Christian friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors, are probably more likely to not worship any divine being at all, instead, devoting their time and resources to their own interests. And while that seems harmless, it may also mean a sentence of hell's fire and that mattered a great deal to Paul, so much so that he was willing to endure all kinds of persecution and imprisonment for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul exhorted the Philippian fellowship to deny themselves and be concerned about the other. And not just concerned about the other, to think more highly of the other than themselves. So, you know, I'm encouraging you to do that too.

“But Pastor, I'm busy with the kids, and saving for a house, and a third car, and then there is college. I just don't have the time and resources to spare.” I know, I know, Carol and I have been there too. But I will tell you this, we have always been generous people, always giving the church a full tithe – ten percent before taxes – and more, and then giving to the other special causes that come up, like Zion's debt reduction campaign, and to the various interests and concerns we have, like the universities and seminaries we graduated from, and to the Youngstown Symphony and so on. And you know what? We've always had enough and more, even enough to save for retirement. It is as if, God blesses us when we have our priorities right.

A better example would be that of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the middle of the First Reading from Philipians 2, there is a beautiful hymn of the virtue of Jesus Christ our Lord. He left it all on the cross for us. Why? So that we could have everything. Everything, you ask? Well, not everything now. Everything in the age to come. You see the Christian puts his or her faith in the one who died and was raised again so that we too might live a new life. The prophets wrote about a place void of pain and suffering, thirst and hunger, where all the goodness of God flows without the need for money. There all faithful people will be restored to the

fullness of God's design for them. It sounds great, doesn't it? If you ask me why I've dedicated my life and my resources to his church, that is why – he gave everything for me, and he asks so little in return. It is my honor to serve him and to bring him glory by whatever I do in his name.

Funny thing I've noticed about Lutherans while shooting these videos: It is difficult to get us to simply say, "I do what I do because Christ first loved me and gave his life for me." We believe that it's true, but we just won't say it.

Then listen to this! Paul wrote that we are to do all these things so that we are

¹⁵blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine *like stars in the world*.

I took the sermon title, "Shining Like Stars in the World" from this verse. If I told you we were going to get shirts made up that said, "I am a shining star in the world" on the front and "Zion Lutheran Church" on the back, none of you would order them – that's just how we Lutherans are I guess.

But that *is* who we are when we are on our game, obediently using our spiritual gifts to serve our Lord and the creation he loves. When we are volunteering to do people's taxes, or handing out food, or giving blood, or volunteering to serve an underserved population, or whatever ministry you do, you are a shining star in the world. And even if you don't make a big deal out of your service, the world is watching. Maybe they are thinking, "Those Lutheran at Zion are really something. They are like shining stars in the world."

And since we are only two weekends past Reformation Sunday I feel I have to say, we do the good works we do in thankful response to the love and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ who saved us, not to save ourselves.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So personal stewardship has three aspects, time, talent, and treasure. It's a holy mix of what God has first given us.

Some of you have more time on your hands. You're retired and can finally do some of the volunteering that you always wanted to do. Or, this or that ministry is so

important to you that you will make time in your busy life to participate. You do that.

Some of you have a special talent that has never been mined because the urgency of making a living and providing for the needs of a family took precedence. Maybe it's time to mine that talent.

Most of us are blessed with more than enough financial means. That is an equally important gift in our society. You will be blessed in your ministry of sharing your treasure.

For all of us, there is a mix of all three. And for all of us, there is plenty of opportunities to share what we have been given, in thankful response for that what God has first given us, and for the unimaginable treasure that awaits us.

So I encourage you to live up to the expectation of the Lord and be ¹⁵blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

Prayer

Blessing God, in your wisdom you bless all you create with spiritual gifts. And out of your great love, you give us the opportunity to use those same gifts to love you back by loving all that you create. Thank you for the gifts of time, talent, and treasure that you have given each of us. Guide us in our serving so that in all we do we shine like stars in the world, bringing you glory. We pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen