

How to Shine When You Feel Like Hiding

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Preaching on:
Matthew 5:13–20

It's strange to read about the salt and the light this morning. Jesus tells us you are the salt of the earth, but if salt loses its saltiness, what good is it? It's thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world, but no one lights a lamp and hides it under a bushel basket...

Salt losing its saltiness. Well, that just seems impossible. It's never happened to us. We've never gone to put salt on our food and discovered that it wasn't really salt and that it didn't have any flavor left. It seems impossible. And lighting a lamp and putting it under a bushel basket, well, that just seems like a joke as my three-year-old son, Romey, would say, you would have to be a dum-dum to do that. So it's not something we worry about. It just seems comical, improbable. It just seems like it must be easy to be the salt and the light. But I think that misses Jesus' point and his humor.

I think what Jesus wants us to take away from this—and he's poking at us; he's poking us in the ribs—

he's saying, you know it's impossible for salt to lose its saltiness, but with human beings, it's a different story. It's ridiculous to light a lamp and to hide it under a bushel basket, but with us, with people, oh, it's all too common. It should be impossible. It should be ridiculous. And yet we still manage to do it, don't we? And we've all seen it, right? Just when moral clarity is most needed in our time and in our culture, that is the moment when we and those we have elected and lifted up to lead us, begin to equivocate, swirly talk, both sides, what about, losing focus. It's just when action is required most in our world, when it's most critical, when those who are oppressed and excluded are feeling the most pain and they need us most, that's when we lose our nerve. We go into hiding. We say, well, of course, I agree on principle, but I don't want to put that sign up on my lawn. I'm not going to wave that flag. I'm not going to go to that protest or to that demonstration. It just doesn't seem safe. It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem prudent. What would my neighbors think of me? Suddenly, all the justice and the righteousness of the Bible and the values that we uphold gets replaced by these more mundane and very human and very practical concerns (and I don't mean to dismiss them entirely): Finances, safety, unity, politeness, propriety—they take precedence in our minds.

And I think that that is what Jesus is warning us about here in the second half of the Sermon on the Mount. We started on the first half of the Sermon on the Mount last week. And I was speaking to you about the rise of Christian Nationalism in our culture and in our country. And we also spoke about the book challenges at the Glen Ridge Public Library and Glen Ridge United Against Book Bans and becoming vocal supporters of that movement ourselves in town. And we discussed that tolerance is at minimum what is required of our faith because Jesus asks us—commands us—to love our neighbors and pray for our enemies. And that means, at a minimum, at a bare minimum, you have to tolerate people who are different than you, which is pretty much the definition, according to Jesus, of what a neighbor is—somebody who's different than you.

What we didn't know at the time that I was preaching that sermon is that very morning the staff and the congregation of Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield had showed up for religious education on Sunday morning and found the remains of a Molotov cocktail smashed on their front door. Someone had tried to fire bomb the synagogue. Surveillance footage showed a man with a mask on and with gloves on, approached the front of the synagogue in the night and light the Molotov cocktail and threw it at the front door of the synagogue in attempt to burn the synagogue down—an antisemitic arson. And then he ran away.

What we didn't know is how would Temple Ner Tamid react to such an act of hatred and antisemitism aimed at them, targeted at them. How would they handle it? What would they do? What we didn't know is the way that Temple Ner Tamid would handle that experience would be, I think, the epitome of what Jesus is asking us to do when Jesus asks us to be salty and bright and bold when it matters most.

First, I just want you to imagine what it must have felt like this week to be a congregant of Temple Ner Tamid, or to be a Jewish person living in Glen Ridge or Montclair or Bloomfield or anywhere in Essex

County who are especially feeling this attack on them. Can you imagine how afraid they must have been? Just imagine that somebody tried to commit an arson here at the church.

Imagine what your mind would do. And I know what my mind would do. I would say, well, well, well, what did we do? What did we do wrong? Is it because we made ourselves a target? We stood up too tall? We spoke too loudly? Is it because of that sign we put up on the lawn that says Glen Ridge United Against Book Bans? Is it because of some bold stand that we took on another issue? What was it that we did? How did we make ourselves a target? Are they going to come back? Are they going to get us again? What can we do to protect ourselves?

And I can imagine within myself a desire, and I've been through this before, to withdraw. I remember back in, oh, Lord, it must have been 2015 sometime, I think. We began at the church that I was serving in Somerville to get death threats and arson threats against the church. And I went on to my online presence, and I just started taking things down, taking things down, taking things down. I was terrified that somebody was going to find out where I lived, where Bonnie lived, that she was connected to me. Somehow I started to strip all that stuff away out of a fear that that violence was going to come and get me again.

You can imagine what it would've felt like, the desire that you would've had, that I would've had to roll up the welcome mat, to bolt the doors from the inside to pull down the shades, to turn off the lights and just to lay low. But that's not what Temple Ner Tamid did. Instead, they planned for Thursday night a rally. They knew that lot of people in the area were going to come out to support them, but they decided to double down. Not only were they going to stand up and be loud and visible at a time when their fear and anxiety was telling them to hide, but they were going to be bold about stating who they were, what they stood for, and what they would absolutely not stand for. And they had just a stroke of spiritual genius about how this rally should go. That while they were under attack, an anti-Semitic attack by somebody who hated them, in a time when antisemitic attacks are on the rise in this country, they decided that the issue was bigger than them—that it wasn't just about them, and that they were going to invite their friends and allies who were also feeling under attack in these times. And they said, we've had so many mass shootings lately. There's been Tyre Nichols beating death on the street, that we all saw the video of—police killings. There's been attacks against the LGBTQ community locally and nationally going on. There is so much to mourn and there is so much hate. And we're not going to focus just on the hate that is affecting us. We're going to bring everybody together and we're going to double down, and we're going to say exactly what it is that we stand for at a time when they must have felt that doing that was going to just paint a bigger target on their back. But that is who they are.

And as Jews, as people of faith, that is what they were called to do. And so at the rally that I went to on Thursday night, and this is a beautiful truth, one man decided to throw a Molotov cocktail at Temple Ner Tamid on Thursday night. We had more than a thousand people show up to that rally to show their

support. It was standing room only, people were outside on the lawn. There were all kinds of elected officials. And there were Jews, Christians, Muslims, from all over Essex County and beyond. It was a really beautiful show of support. But also there was a speaker, Ruth Roe from Asian American Pacific Islanders, Montclair, speaking about the struggles of their community. There was Roger Terry, who is from the NAACP president of Montclair, speaking about the struggles of Black people and African Americans in this country and beyond. There was Mary Valentine, who is one of the founders of Bloomfield Pride, speaking about how the synagogue had always supported them and the struggles that they are also continuing to go through. And there was Amy Tores from New Jersey Immigrant Justice, speaking about attacks against immigrants and legislation against immigrants and what it means to them.

At a time when they must have been feeling like they had stood up too much, been too bold, and been too bright, and that they just needed to withdraw a little bit, Temple Ner Tamid said, No, we're going to stand up. And while the national spotlight is on us, we are going to declare exactly who it is that we are, exactly what our values are, exactly what we believe, who we stand with and who we are. And we know that there are going to be people out there who don't like it, but we are going to be bright. We're going to let our light shine in front of us in this moment. And it was an absolute triumph, a stroke of spiritual genius in a time when they were under attack. They put their friends and allies ahead of them and said, this is bigger than us.

This is about us too. It can be hard as a Christian sometimes to define exactly what it is that we stand for, and sometimes it can be even harder to say what it is that we won't stand for. It can be intimidating to make bold and public claims about what we believe and what our values are, but that is exactly what Jesus is asking us to do. And he's not asking us to do it only when it's easy. He's asking us to do it even when it feels hard. He's asking us to let our light shine in front of us to be clear—not even bright—clear, unequivocal about who we are, what we believe, what we stand for. We don't have to be the boldest flavor on the block, but when people get a taste of us, they should taste that salt. It's there. You know who we are.