

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, October 15, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Peter 2:4-12 & Matthew 5:13-16

Theme: Love Where You Live: Let Your Light Shine

[prayer]

Let's begin with a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>1</sup>, an Austrian poet in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries who wrote rather mystically about God. This is an excerpt from his poem, "Go to the Limits of Your Longing."<sup>2</sup>

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

*These are the words we dimly hear:*

*You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.*

*Flare up like a flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.*

All light casts a shadow. Shadow normally has a negative connotation because it implies darkness. But Rilke subverts that notion. He points out that behind every shadow is a light. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven" (v. 16 CEB) Or in the words of Rilke's poem: "Embody me...Flare up like a flame / and make big shadows I can move in." When we embody Christ, we are filled with the bright light of God. And bright lights cast long shadows – shadows long enough to reach our neighbor – a space where they might encounter God.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer\\_Maria\\_Rilke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer_Maria_Rilke)

<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/poetry/go-to-the-limits-of-your-longing/>

The metaphor breaks down eventually, but it is a poetic way of thinking about how God uses our lives to witness to our neighbors. We have spent the last month in Peter's ancient letter to a group of outcast Christians who were struggling to love their neighbors. Through their example, we have remembered that God calls us to love the places where we live and be the Church in our neighborhood(s). This looks like taking care of the land on which we are planted. It looks like being passionate about pursuing the common good of our community. It looks like listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and relying on God's strength to help us love our neighbors when we feel angry, afraid, or judgmental.

But is love enough? Doesn't Scripture also command us to share our faith with our neighbors? To tell our neighbors about who Jesus is and what he has done?

Jesus has commissioned us as missionaries in our neighborhood(s). He commands us to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). Historically the church has put a lot of emphasis on the word "teaching." We make disciples through the verbal proclamation of our doctrines. We preach sermons, we teach Bible studies, we read and discuss books on faith, and we try to use words to convince people of the rightness of our beliefs. Peter exhorts the Christians in Asia Minor to "proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). Proclaim implies a verbal witness. In other words, *Talk about God with your neighbors.*

Depending on our personalities, some of us might feel excited to do that and eager to be missionaries in our neighborhoods. Others of us may feel more reluctant. If you are in that camp, I say, *Me too, friend.* While I have grown accustomed to speaking with confidence on matters of faith on Sunday mornings, the rest of the week I often feel differently. The loud and aggressive behavior of some of our neighbors frequently makes me feel small and lonely. It is tempting to hide my convictions to avoid conflict and protect myself.

But I have preached before that peace is not passivity. Peace is an active discipline. And it does not emanate from a fear of conflict. It emanates from a love for one another. The discipline of peace confronts conflict and says, *Hey neighbor,*

*there is a different way!* Do we love our neighbors enough to speak this truth boldly? Do we love our neighbors enough to share the courage of our convictions?

We should share the convictions of our faith courageously, but to also share them wisely and with humility. Do not share out of anger, self-righteousness, or a desire to one-up or control your neighbor. These are some of the “desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (v. 11). Instead, we must share our faith out of genuine love. If love is not the basis for our words, then it is better to keep silent until we possess the right motivation for sharing our convictions. This restraint is a form of love, too – love demonstrating self-control.

To train ourselves to resist the temptation of speaking from the wrong motivations, Scripture encourages us to practice leading our words with actions. This is because what lives first in our bodies will ultimately manifest in the way we think and speak. Peter wrote to those early Christians, “Live honorably among the unbelievers. Today, they defame you, as if you were doing evil. But in the day when God visits to judge they will glorify him, because they have observed your honorable deeds” (1 Pet 2:12). In other words, *Your actions also speak the truth about God. And your loving deeds will result in people encountering Jesus.*

This teaching is based in one of our foundational beliefs as Christians. We believe God has been present in human history in word, yes, but also in deed. God has spoken out of love *and* acted out of love. The greatest example of this combination of word and deed is Jesus Christ, God’s Word made flesh – a walking, talking, living example of Love.

We call this miracle the Incarnation, from the Latin *carn*, meaning flesh. Incarnation literally means *God in a body*. God’s love was physically embodied in Jesus. When Jesus gave the Great Commission and ascended into heaven, we his followers, the Church, became his body on earth. Which means God’s love is now incarnated and embodied in *us*. Our mission as Christians is therefore *incarnational*.

So, to say that we are called as missionaries in our neighborhood(s) is to say that we are called to embody God’s love in our neighborhood(s). We do this through our words and our actions. For as Jesus taught,

*“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matt 22:37-39).*

Jesus reminds us that we love God with our whole selves. And if the second commandment – to love our neighbors – is like the first, then we are also commanded to love our neighbors with our whole selves. Not just with our words, and not just with our actions, but both integrated as one. Love your neighbor with all your heart and with all your being and with all your mind. Love your neighbor in holiness of thought and speech and action.

Peter uses the metaphor of a priest to describe this integrated way of loving our neighbors. The role of the priest in ancient Israel and historically in Christianity was to demonstrate holiness – to be a living example of what it looks like to live a life set apart for God. When Jesus commands us to be like salt, he is speaking of this set apart life; salt is used to purify and preserve (Matt 5:13). Likewise, our words and actions should demonstrate the purity of the Gospel and preserve a Christian witness in our neighborhood(s).

In ancient Israel the priest was also an intermediary for God. He stood in the Temple and made ritual sacrifices for the sins of the people. And after the sacrifice was made, he spoke God’s forgiveness over the people. In Christianity, particularly Catholic tradition, the priest serves a similar function, presiding over the sacrifice of Christ’s body in the Eucharist and proclaiming God’s forgiveness over the congregation. In our Protestant tradition, while we have ministers who perform this ritual in worship, we also believe in the priesthood of all believers, a doctrine we derive directly from 1 Peter 2:9: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.”

Every Christian is a priest in God’s kingdom. And if every Christian is a priest, then every Christian does the work of interceding for their neighbors by offering spiritual sacrifices of love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and justice (v. 5). We are called to embody Jesus. He is our high priest in heaven (Heb 4:14-16) and the cornerstone of God’s kingdom (1 Peter 2:6). And like the cornerstone, Peter

commands us to be the living stones that God will use to build a new temple – not a physical building, but a spiritual house where God’s presence dwells.

This metaphor of being built up as a spiritual house is appropriate given all the construction happening around us. As our neighborhood(s) grow and expand and new people move in, are our lives set apart and built up so God can live inside us, and our neighbors will see Jesus? If we are allowing God to live inside of us, will not the light of God spill out of us, like light through the windows of a house?

Jesus says, *Be salt. Be light.* Peter says, *Be a priest. Be a spiritual house.* All these images are ways of thinking about embodying the love of God in our neighborhood(s). Through the holiness of our words and deeds God will use the love our lives become to fulfill the Great Commission.

*Embody me.*

*Flare up like a flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.*

Let us pray.

[End by praying that God will build us up just as He did the exiles in Asia Minor, so that we might be involved in the neighborhoods He has placed us, shining His light to the world.]