

# Called Out

## February 5, 2017

### Matthew 5:13-20

*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid”* (Matthew 5:14). **We are made for turning out.** When we turn inward, we collapse and die.

For nearly twenty years I worked with churches having fights. I was trained to look for a specific moment in a congregation’s history. Every conflicted church makes a decisive turn inward in the three years before the fight begins. The church focus moves from serving to surviving. Church leaders focus on mollifying members rather than sharing the gospel. Outsiders are seen as threat rather than opportunity.

**Turning in means turning down.** That decisive turn inward is the first step toward the death of a congregation. That decisive turn inward always encourages leaders who used fear and falsehood, innuendo and intimidation, gossip and greed to keep people in line. Some outside agency—the pastor, the synod, the ELCA—is always blamed for the internal troubles.

**Turning in means turning down.** That is true for individuals as well. Fear and anger make us withdraw from others. Loss and grief drive us into ourselves. We close the blinds, draw the curtains, and turn off the lights. In my pastoral care training I was taught a basic principle. Self-absorption is the root of all pathology. Turning in means turning down. Turning in is the first step toward a living death.

The same can be said for a nation. **Turning in means turning down.** My college freshman roommate was an Austrian named Hans Eder. We had lost touch after college. We have reconnected in the last few years through Facebook.

Hans loved his time in our great country, although he did hilarious imitations of our American accents. On Wednesday he sent me a sorrowful note. “What has happened,” my Austrian friend asked, “What has happened to my America?”

Hans, we have turned inward. We have turned inward because of fear and anger. The decisive moment for that turn was September 11, 2001. In fear and anger we began the turn away from the world and in on ourselves. Two Lutheran writers have put it this way. “In the ripple effects of September 11, 2001, something ugly has emerged, slouching from Ground Zero: a hardening of the heart toward the immigrant stranger among us.”<sup>i</sup>

Events of the last few years are simply the latest victories achieved by the 9/11 terrorists. Each time we turn further inward, each time we surrender to fear and anger, the terrorists win again. Hans, *mein freund*, that is what has happened to your America.

*“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket,”* Jesus says, *“but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house”* (Matthew 5:15). We are made for turning out. **Turning out means turning up.**

We know that is true here at Emanuel. A decisive turn inward is the prelude to destruction and death. A decisive turn outward is a step toward the future—toward vitality and growth. We have been stepping out here at Emanuel for the last three years. Now, with our Daycare mission project, we have made a decisive turn out. The results here are obvious.

**Turning out means turning up.** In the grip of loss and grief, the healing move is to go toward people, not away from them. In the midst of anxiety and depression, the healing move is to find someone you can help. In the midst of fear and anger, the healing move is to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

**Turning out means turning up.** At its best, America has been a beacon of hope for the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” At its best, American has been that shining city on a hill that President Reagan once described. Of course, he lifted those lines from Jesus, but you can’t go wrong with good material. Will this great country halt its decisive turn inward before it is too late? That is my fervent and daily prayer.

Today’s gospel gives us our baptismal marching orders. They are the words we say as we pass the baptismal candle to the baptized person. “*Let your light so shine before others,*” Jesus says, “*that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:16). Turning out, shining our lights—that is what it means to have a righteousness that exceeds the turned-in worldview of the scribes and Pharisees.

We are made for turning out and for turning up. When we turn out, the world sees what our God is really like. We worship the God who turns out rather than in. Jesus is the face of the God who turns out to redeem this dark and broken world. We are the body of Christ, the church. We are the people “called out” for the sake of that world.

In his book, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, Scott Bader-Saye puts it this way: “Christian discipleship, that is, following Jesus, will mean surrendering the power that masquerades as security in order to love the neighbor and welcome the stranger. It will mean avoiding the safe path in order to pursue the good.”<sup>ii</sup>

We are made for turning out and for turning up. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will make it so among us...

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<sup>i</sup> Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh, *They are Us: Lutherans and Immigration*, Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009, page 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2007, page 22.