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White Bear Lake UMC :: You Are the Light of the World

I didn't want to be a pastor. Not at first, anyway. When people suggested it to me during my college years, I repulsed at the idea. No way, I thought. Not a chance. Being a pastor is for dorks, and I was not a dork, or so I thought. Being a pastor was for serious, quiet, humble people. I laughed a lot, and was loud and confident, maybe too much so. I wanted to do something impressive with my life, like go into engineering or medicine or science. I've never impressed anyone at a party or on an airplane by telling them my profession, I can tell you that. I worried about ever finding someone to marry me/dampen the dating scene. (1st dating Jeremy and told him what I do, he said, "well, it's better than being a stripper." I worried for my future children—I knew what were the odds they would ever turn out normal?

Those were the reasons I said I didn't want to be a pastor. But the real reason, deep down, that scared me about being a pastor was that I worried that I wasn't the right kind of person to be a pastor. If you know me at all, you know I'm not the most traditional of theologians. I was never as certain about my beliefs as my Christian friends were. I wasn't worried an ounce about anyone going to hell. I didn't wake up at dawn to read the Bible (I have never woken up at dawn a single day in my life). I didn't feel comfortable praying out loud. I never wanted to sing hymns in my free time. I didn't swear, but I wanted to reserve my right to do so at any time.

I worried that I would have to hide parts of myself or pretend to be someone I wasn't if I was ever going to lead a church. Even as I decided to go to seminary and knew I would be a pastor, a little voice in the back of my head still doubted if I was right for the job.

A group of about 15 of us in seminary, gave each other a superlative before graduation—most likely to become bishop, most likely to be a professor, most likely to preach in a costume, most likely to get married. I was voted as "most heretical" in my group of friends. I only admit this to you now, on my way out the door, so you don't suspect anything from the beginning. Please don't tell Excelsior. I'll come clean on my last Sunday there too, I promise.

I really wish I could go back in time and tell younger Brooke about a church I know called White Bear Lake United Methodist Church. I wish I could tell her that she need not worry—she would indeed find freedom to be herself, to preach from her heart, to ask heretical questions and no one (well mostly no one) would blink an eye. I wish I could tell her how much fun she would have teaching the confirmation students what eunuchs and harlots were on the same night. I wish I could tell her that a church community that welcomed questions and embraced creativity, inclusivity, and progressive thinking really did exist. I wish I could tell her that not all churches seek to mold you into a certain type of person. Some churches do exist that welcome your whole self—however goofy, opinionated, fast-talking, irreverent, or different you may be.

Everyone—quiet or loud, serious or goofy, humble or arrogant, conservative or liberal, short or tall, slow or quick, young or old, single or coupled, religious or spiritual—wonders at

some point if they will fit in, if they can be themselves, if they can truly let their light shine or if they have to dim it a little bit to fit in.

I recently watched the film, *The Greatest Showman*, a musical that came out last year. Hugh Jackman plays P.T. Barnum, the creator of the Barnum Circus. The cast he recruits for his circus are the unusual, the odd, the outcasts—a little person, the heaviest man on earth, albino twins, a 3-legged man, trapeze brother and sister, etc. All people who have been hidden before this circus from the rest of the world; even their parents wanted to hide them from the outside world because they were so different.

The music from the film has been hugely successful, and it has held the spot of the #1 album for the past 16 weeks. A particular favorite of the movie is the song called, *This is Me*, which is sung by Keala Settle, who plays the role of a bearded lady in the film. In the movie, the door is slammed on the troupe of performers because Barnum wants to focus on impressing the aristocrats and is embarrassed to be seen with them. Dejected and cast out by the person they thought they could count on, they band together and sing this anthem as they come breaking through the crowd and come face to face to the protesters who despise them. It's a powerful moment for the characters in the film and a turning point for many of the characters.

But the power of the song is not limited to the film. The song went on to win a Golden Globe, and was nominated for an Academy Award for best song. In an interview, Keala said that,

Singing that song scared the living daylight out of me because of how well it was written and where it was within the sequence of the film and what I knew it would mean for not only those that were involved on set but for the rest of the world once they saw it.

Keala said that for a long time, she hid from the spotlight. "It still really is hard for me to sing this song because I relate to it every day. I wake up in the morning and I look in a mirror and I go, 'Is this really all I got? Is this all the universe has given me?'"

She adds, "We're all feeling that way, every single one of us. It doesn't matter if you're a Victoria's Secret model or you're someone's 90-year-old grandma or you're a little kid who's getting bullied or you're that kid's bully." Everyone feels this way at times.

Lyrics of the song:

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me*

The first time they cast sang the song together they had flown in from around the world and were getting the project greenlighted. The director wanted Keala to sing the song away from the music stand because this was the moment her character claimed her light in the movie. She had been too nervous, too scared in the rehearsals leading up to this point to do that.

**watch the film: https://youtu.be/XLFEvHWD_NE

Jesus' ministry was about shining his light in places where the world was trying to shut it out. In the dark and damp corners, he showed up, and revealed the light of God. He preached hope and served meals of love and walked alongside others in peace. He offered living water to a dejected woman, he sent angry mobs away unarmed, he went into the homes of the hated and distrusted. If he sensed shame or darkness or despair or division, he showed up to shine his light.

But he didn't stop with his own light. No, he knew that light could not be contained, could not be limited. He knew that his light would spread to others, would captivate others, would live and grow in others. So he challenged his disciples to let their light shine too—to go to the dark and damp corners and reveal the light of God that was within them. That anywhere they could smell shame, or sense grief, or see even a flicker of oppression or injustice, they should show up and let their light shine and fill the house, fill the city, fill the world with the glow and warmth of Christ's light.

You don't have to be a bearded woman or a three-legged man to know that life will bruise or break you along the way. Being your pastor has often meant that I saw how painful the bruises and heartbreaks were for you.

There's no hiding the bruises of cancer, or strokes, or dementia or Parkinson's. There's no hiding the pain of losing your partner, your best friend, your child, your parent. I've watched some of you in your teens deal with the reality of suicide among your peers. I've watched many of you in your 80s and 90s deal with the reality of the death of multiple friends each year. I've watched as you painfully let go of dreams that you had wanted so desperately when you went through divorces and miscarriages. I've seen you struggle with anxiety and depression. I've seen your tired eyes after sleepless nights as you worried about your jobs, your kids, your parents, your health, your future.

And yet, you chose to let your light shine. You didn't give in to the darkness, to the bullets of agony or pain that came at you. Instead, you showed up, you flooded the world with your positivity, your presence, your love.

I watched a 93-year-old woman whose spine was collapsing live with grace and gratitude. Doctors once described her spine by saying "it was turning into oatmeal." They had done what they could to prop it up, including putting cement under it, but nothing more would work. Her days are marked by pain more often than not. But still, she is a hopeful, happy, generous person. She spends her days trying to figure out anything she could do for others.

A few years ago she invited me over, brewed me hot tea, and buttered my apple bread for me, and we talked about what gave us hope in the world. She prays for every name on a 12

page prayer list. She writes encouraging emails and cards as often as she can, which is a lot, and thanks people with her every breath for who they are and what they are doing.

A fierce light pierces through the darkness.

I got to watch a married couple toward the end of his life, when his health was quickly deteriorating and they couldn't take long walks or ski together like they used to. She told me the secret to their happiness as he faced death: the secret was to enjoy each other in the moment—not even to reminiscence about past good memories, but to enjoy the mundane parts of life spent together—eating breakfast, washing his face with a hot wash rag and shampooing his hair when he couldn't do it himself, going to the park and just sitting there together.

And, she told me, they made the decision that they would still have fun with the changes of life that came their way. So they laughed about constipation and joked about having to wear Depends. The last year or two of his life was exceptionally peaceful and beautiful for both of them, despite what others had told them about dying and loss.

A fierce light pierces through the darkness.

I watched too many of you sit at the bedside of a loved one, not knowing what the next hours or days would involve. Some of you would go home with your loved one, at least eventually, and some of you never did. But all of you spent that time speaking loving words and playing comforting music and telling funny stories. You rubbed feet and scratched arms and embraced your loved ones while their eyes were closed and they breathed through tubes.

A fierce light pierces through the darkness.

You attended AA meetings for years and mentored others struggling with addiction. You sold Aveda to the nurses as you were losing your hair from chemo and you cooked meals for families just back from the hospital. You came into the office to type up attendance with a broken arm, fitting in your volunteer time between physical therapy sessions. You spent hours pulling weeds in the church garden before pulling the weeds in your own. You mentored our young people as you waited to have children of your own.

A fierce light pierces through the darkness.

When you read about poverty in our country and the possibilities that could make a difference, you started a book drive and sponsored a book fair and eventually involved a whole community in partnering with our community's children and schools.

You fed hundreds of slices of free pizza to our neighbors, baked bread for charities, and equipped formerly homeless individuals with baking skills.

You didn't shy away from learning, speaking, and acting on issues and topics that mattered. You took your concerns for our city, our state, our country, our world and you looked them head on. You wrote your legislators and held seminars and read books. You discussed

with our community members, learned from different viewpoints, and joined the boards of groups that work to eliminate racism and sexism, to fully include all sexualities, to embrace other religions, to reduce violence.

When you heard about the plight of refugees, you cleaned their apartment, shopped for furniture, filled their cupboards with food, stocked their drawers with clothes, drove them to the library and Social Security office, and prayed with all your might they would feel at home.

A fierce light pierces the darkness.

Long after today, there will be more people in pain. More churches that shame and judge others. Outcasts who are excluded and hidden. There will be more cancer, more strokes, more death. More wars, more poverty, more refugees, more division.

But you have a light inside you—a light with the power to pierce the darkness, to overcome the brokenness in life, to flood the world with hope and peace.

You are led by a staff that shines their light each and every day they work. They are a huge reason why I have loved my job from the very beginning. All of them, with their different gifts and personalities, make this place a brighter and more hopeful environment.

I have gotten to witness your bravery, your openness, your faithfulness, your joy, your resilience. I've seen you bring healing through your very presence. I've seen you give hope in times of despair. I've seen you laugh when you wanted to cry or shout. I've seen you overcome barriers and jump over hurdles.

That's because you have a fierce light--the light of Christ--within you.
You are the light of the world.

May you shine your light boldly in this world for all to see.
May you march on to the beat that you, and you alone, can drum.
May you claim who you are with no apologies.

May you continue to pierce the darkness with your light,
so that all of God's children will know the warmth of God's love.

That is what you've always done. May it be what you always do.
May this be so. Amen.