

Homily – Do I Act As a Follower of Jesus?

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Today before we conclude this worship service we will have our annual business meeting. This meeting is an opportunity for us to examine the past year and an occasion for us to day dream about where we are going as a church in 2026. It is important for us to know where we have been so that we can chart a course that I pray is led by the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, Come.

A few weeks ago, I was visiting with my daughter and her family, and Katie asked me what I was looking forward to in 2026. 2025 had been a busy year for me, a three month sabbatical, walking the Camino in northern Spain, and standing for a bishop election. 2025 was chock full of life events. 2026 should be a quieter year, and there isn't anything in particular that I am looking forward to, except maybe a week at the seaside in Oregon with my daughter and her family. 2026 should be a quieter year and quiet can be good for reflecting and pondering. Where is God calling me? What should I be doing?

For a while, I thought I was being called to be a bishop. But that was not to be. I am one who thinks God is active in our world, often through other people. God is always opening doors and closing windows in our lives. Sometimes we go through the door and sometimes we turn our back to the door. In my own life, after wondering and maybe even hoping, my door has been closed on any call to be a bishop. For me there is a combined sense of relief and sadness and wonderment about the bishop stuff.

And I certainly don't feel called to leave St. Barnabas. But where is the Holy Spirit leading me? What am I supposed to be doing or being in 2026? And if I'm being honest, I am impatient to get to the answer. Two thousand years ago when Jesus called Peter and Andrew, and then called James and John, they seemed to answer the call pretty quickly. Had they been waiting and wondering about a call, so that they were ready when Jesus beckoned them. I hope my own next call is as obvious as that one, but in the meanwhile maybe the waiting and pondering is exactly the place I am supposed to be. Do you wonder about your own call from God? Everyone has one. Do you wonder and wait as well?

All human beings have the light of God and all human beings seem to possess desires for greater understanding, belonging, meaning, beauty and love. Humans were created by God in God's image and the desire for God was implanted in the structure of our humanity. In his book "Passions of the Soul," the former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes, "If we are growing in spiritual maturity and discernment, what we desire is always to go on growing and to go on desiring." Each

of us longs to grow, to become better versions of ourselves. In the day-to-day realities of life, each of us stumbles and falls, and hopefully we help one another along our parallel and intertwining pilgrimages toward a horizon that we will never reach — at least in this world. I pray for this depth of spirit in 2026 and beyond as we are firmly planted in a world that needs us. May we all answer God's call to us in 2026.

Now, it is not just individuals who get a call. Groups and organizations get a call as well. Last week someone asked me about my plans in 2026 for St. Barbabas. The Vestry will meet in February in its Winter Vestry Retreat and daydream about the new year. The Vestry will set goals for St. Barnabas that we will review several times during the year. Last year we were blessed both by new people who became part of our community and by the people who have been here a while. We were blessed by the gifts we received of time, talent, and treasure so that we can better be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world. Here at St. Barnabas we had excess income in 2025 of \$51,000 that we put into reserves. And at the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop we put another \$33,000 into reserves. We were blessed by Natalia and Pam and the way they work with our youth and kids. We were blessed by opportunities to move deeper in our spiritual journeys. We were blessed with life changing worship. Yes, I do believe that our worship of God is instrumental in my own spiritual journey through life and I hope it is for you as well. We get to sing and pray and learn, and then we remember what Jesus did for us as we share the bread and the wine. We use both new and old music, and we fall back into the ancient and timeless rhythm of our rituals. Through our worship of God our lives are changed. And, all of these blessings of 2025 continue on in 2026. God has been very good to us here at St. Barnabas while the world seems to be falling apart. My prayer for 2026 is that we can equip you, we can help gird your loins so that you are capable of shining the light of Christ back out into a world that sorely needs it. May we, as St. Barnabas, answer God's call. Are you ready to answer it?

Tomas Halik is a Czech sociologist, priest and philosopher, and I am almost done reading his book "The Afternoon of Christianity." This book is a profound reflection on Christianity's current crisis, in which so many Christians are doing things that are the exact opposite of Jesus. The book offers a path towards a deeper, more mature faith through self-reflection, dialogue, and embracing diversity. In this book Halik writes, "A person's way of being human is the most authentic expression of their belief or unbelief. A person's life speaks more about their faith than what they think or say about God." The way we live matters. Actions are more important than what we say or even think. Let me repeat the quote. "A person's way of being human is the most authentic expression of their belief or unbelief. A person's life speaks more about their faith than what they think or say about God." Here at St. Barnabas I hope we are equipping you to be the human being that God has created you to be. As I said earlier, I pray we are helping you shine the light of Christ out into a world that sorely

needs it. And to help you shine your light a bit more let me turn to another time in history when the world seemed out of control.

Reinhold Niebuhr is an American Christian theologian from the mid-twentieth century. In 1944 during turbulent days of World War 2, he wrote a book called "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness." The children of darkness, in his telling, are the moral cynics who believe life is all about power. The children of light are those driven by ideals to build a just civilization. This imagery of darkness and light is Biblical, isn't it, but we also see it in contemporary culture in movies like Star Wars.

Now, in Niebuhr's view, the children of darkness are brutal but realistic about human nature while the children of light are admirable but naïve about entrenched human selfishness: "The children of darkness are evil because they know no law beyond the self. They are wise, though evil, because they understand the power of self-interest. The children of light are virtuous because they have some conception of a higher law than their own will. They are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will."

The children of darkness have advantages in their struggle against the children of light. They know what they want and don't have to worry about nuance. It's easier to destroy a social order than to build one. They capitalize on an elemental human reality: Humans fear death and their own insignificance. They compensate for their fears of insignificance by asserting their pride, by seeking power and control, if only vicariously through some strongman.

Now, in his book Niebuhr is rooting for the children of light, but he wants them to be less naïve about human nature: He writes, "The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice." In this way social orders are rebuilt from the ground up, as decent people keep opening the door for one another.

The children of darkness embrace the exact opposite of what Jesus taught and the way that he lived and died. The children of light live in a way that reflects the light of Christ into the world. The question we must always be asking ourselves is "do my actions and deeds show that I am a follower of Jesus? Does the way I live line up with the teachings of Jesus and with the way that he lived and died? Remember, "A person's way of being human is the most authentic expression of their belief or unbelief. A person's life speaks more about their faith than what they think or say about God."

Meanwhile, in Minneapolis, a private army of masked anonymous men has been sent in — five times the size of the police force — to terrorize the populace and round up illegal immigrants. The Fourth Amendment has been effectively suspended. ICE claims the right to break into anyone's home at any time if they suspect an illegal alien with final deportation orders is inside. A judge's warrant is superfluous. What could go wrong? Using your skills of discernment are these actions of ICE of Jesus or the opposite of Jesus?

And last week there were a few days that I wore red and white in support of Denmark. The threats of invasion and economic bullying have nothing to do with Jesus. Instead, they have to do with power and greed.

Two weeks ago, Stephen Mills, a White House adviser, said the following in an interview. "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time." Do you recognize these words as darkness?

And on Friday, one hundred clergy people were arrested by the police at the Minneapolis airport as they trespassed and protested the estimated 2000 people who have been deported through that airport. The Rev. Mariah Tollgaard, senior pastor of Hamline Church United Methodist in St. Paul, Minnesota, was one of the people arrested. She said that she felt it was her religious duty as a Christian to stand up for her neighbors amidst what she described as a federal occupation of her state. This is the action of a child of the light.

Somehow the children of darkness have swept in and made us a frightened nation, stagnant, callous and backward. I don't think this alien cultural implant can last forever. Eventually Americans, restless as any people on earth, will want to replace threat with hope and resume our national pilgrimage. When that cultural and spiritual shift occurs, a lot will change in our religious and political life. And we can help bring that change and the light of Christ into the world.

Yesterday, in a letter to the clergy, Bishop Lucinda wrote the following, "Nowhere in the gospel did Jesus kill anyone. He got angry, he argued, but he did not react with violence. He modeled patience, he wrote in the sand, and he walked for miles to bring healing and love. He called people out for their unloving behaviors and their dehumanizing actions toward each other. Killing people is not gospel. Praying, standing firm, accompanying, challenging--all of that is gospel behavior.

Nowhere in our baptismal covenant do we find the words "helpless" or "hopeless." Instead we find these words: continue, persevere, proclaim, seek, serve, strive. Bishop Lucinda wrote, Minnesota, while at a distance geographically, is close to us personally. Episcopalians are there. Followers of Jesus are there. Grandparents, parents, children, people of all backgrounds, professions, people living their lives as we do.

In summary, God is calling us. God is calling us as individuals, and God is calling us as the community we call St. Barnabas. We are called to be the children of light. We are called to recognize and turn away from the children of darkness. We are called to do those things that are taught by Jesus. If our actions line up with the love of Jesus then we are each making the world a better place. That is my prayer for us here at St. Barnabas in 2026. That we keep embracing the many gifts we have from God, and we use the strength from those gifts to bring a little more of God's beauty into the world.

Parts of this sermon are based on or taken from essays by David Brooks in the New York Times.