

*"Person the Issue"*  
**Scripture - Acts 2:42-3:10**  
**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham**  
**August 4, 2019**  
**Rev. Scott Clark, preaching**

Good morning, First Presbyterian Birmingham! It's good to be home. Welcome to the More Light family! And, I think this is the first time I've been here with you AND Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore, and Sam - who are good friends. I'm grateful for all the ways that you have welcomed them.

I know in my bones what the welcome of this church is like. Twenty years ago, you welcomed Jeff and me - into community - into service - into life together. This was the first church that invited us to serve - I used to read Scripture over at that lectern - and you were the first church that affirmed us as a family. And then you sent me off to seminary. You affirmed that I was called to serve - long before the denomination was convinced. I am grateful for your welcome and your love.

As I was travelling here, I remembered one of my first trips back here - actually, I think it was the first time I preached here. I don't know if any of you remember - but not long after I started seminary - I traveled back here with the Rev. Dr. Janie Spahr. Now, just in case you don't know - Janie Spahr is an out, lesbian Presbyterian minister - who was insisting that the gospel of Jesus Christ was good news for all people - including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people - long before the denomination confessed that too.

For decades - for her whole life, Janie has preached God's expansive love - and she has done so at significant cost: In the 1990s, the denomination blocked the Downtown church in Rochester NY from calling her as pastor - and over the years, the denomination brought her up on disciplinary charges - again and again - for daring to celebrate the marriages and families of same-gender couples.

Now, I met Janie in my first year in seminary - and I don't think it was 10 minutes into our first conversation when she said, "Scott, I need you to go to Alabama with me." I was taken aback. I didn't know her. But you see, Janie had come to Alabama years before, and couldn't get anyone official to even talk with her. She went by the Presbytery office, but the presbytery executive wouldn't come out of his office even to say hello. So Janie said to the receptionist, "Oh, I understand he might be busy - I'll just wait until he has a moment." And she sat down in the reception area, and the receptionist got her some coffee - and Janie waited, and she waited, and she waited. Janie said that she and the receptionist got to know each other real well over the course of the afternoon. But the end of the day came, and they closed up the presbytery office together - no word from the Presbytery exec - Janie never knew if he was still in his office, or if he had left out the back door.

So -flashforward to 2005-06 - Janie told me this story - and she said, "You see, Scott, I'm getting ready to retire - and I need to go back to Alabama - and I need to go with someone who can speak the language." Now, again, I didn't know her. But she persisted. And I kept telling Jeff, "There's this woman - and she keeps calling me insisting that I go to Alabama with her." I

was just a first year seminarian – I wasn't ready to wade into the controversies of the church. As Jeff and I like to say, I'd really just come to seminary to study the Bible and to praise Jesus.

But she wore me down. And in June of 2007, I traveled to Alabama with Janie Spahr – met up with a few other fierce friends of hers – and we set out on a van tour of 5 progressive Presbyterian churches in Alabama. Now, that was only 12 years ago – but believe it or not – some of the churches couldn't even host us publicly. At those churches, we met with LGBTQ+ people and their families – but without any publicity. And I watched Janie – I watched her walk into the room – and listen to people's stories – and say to them, with deep and sincere conviction – *"God loves you. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for you too."* And it dawned on me, as I would watch people weep, that for some in that room, it was the first time anyone in the church had ever told them that God loved them – the first time anyone had said to them that *the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for us too.*

And we wrapped up our van tour here. Your new pastor then, Shannon Webster, invited us for the whole weekend – invited Janie to lead a conversation on Saturday, and me to preach on Sunday – so we got to spend quality time with y'all – to experience your welcome – and to have some, um, lively conversation.

And on the way back, as we settled into our seats on the plane, we were talking about our time here with you, and Janie said, "Scott, I don't know if I've ever seen anything like that. I mean, it was pretty clear that you all aren't unanimous – but folks are willing to stay together in the conversation – even when it's not easy." And then she said, "You know, I was talking to this one woman, and she said – she said to Janie, 'Now, Janie, I don't know what I think about all this – but I'll tell you one thing – Jeff and Scott – they're our boys.'" I can't tell you how many times I've heard Janie tell that story in the last 12 years.

I learned a lot on that trip with Janie, and one thing stands out. Even before we got to Alabama, on the way here, we were delayed in the Dallas airport – we were sitting at a BBQ place at the airport – doing a Bible study – because that is what queer people do when we are delayed at the airport. And Janie started telling me what to expect – and she said, "Scott, we are going to walk into these places – and we are going to **person the issue**. That's what we do – **we person the issue**. When we're face to face – we can't be abstract issues to each other – **we person the issue**." We walked into those churches – and we were gay people in a church – **personing the issue**.

And **you** – Janie returned to Alabama – where years ago she had been turned away – and you, you welcomed her in. You welcomed us in – you welcomed us in for real conversation -- not conversation that ignores the troubles of the world – but conversation that sits in the midst of it – and where we do our best. In the midst of all the mess of the church, and hopefully with a bit of the best of the church – together, **we personed the issue**. We experienced the sometimes uncomfortable – but always worthwhile – welcome of Jesus Christ in each other.

The early Christian community in our Scripture this morning – I think maybe they experienced something like that too. This story follows right after Resurrection and Pentecost. They live in a complicated world, a world of dislocation, and oppression, and disorientation, and they've just suffered a huge loss. The Jesus community has just lost Jesus. They know

Jesus. They have been following Jesus, and all of the sudden he's gone – and then they experience the Resurrected Christ – and then they experience the Spirit of Christ – at Pentecost – alive in them.

And – in this morning's story – right after Crucifixion, and Resurrection, and Pentecost – we get this glimpse of what life was like – in those next few days. It's the story they tell. They were all together, all the time; they broke bread together; they prayed and worshipped; they shared everything they had as anyone had need; they sold what they had so that everyone had enough; and day by day, more and more people gathered with them. Their life together – what they had experienced in Jesus, they are now experiencing in each other. They find themselves *personing the issue for each other* – and for the world – in the welcome of community.

And then Peter, Peter is walking along one day and discovers the healing power of Jesus in his own hands. He comes upon the man who sits by the City gate called Beautiful – sits there and begs because he cannot walk – and he asks them for money – expecting something from them. But they're a poor community – living under Roman occupation – remember, they have to sell what they have so everyone has enough – and Peter says to him, "Silver and gold, I do not have – but what I do have, I give to you. In the name of Jesus, get up and walk." And Peter reaches out his hand to him, and the man gets up, and walks – and then goes along with them – running, and jumping, and praising God – all the way to the temple. This man who could not walk – running and jumping. This man who would have been excluded from the life of the Temple – who had to sit out by the city gate – running and jumping – all the way into the temple. The healing power of Jesus – showing up in Peter's hands – healing in body and in spirit – healing in community. Those pushed out – now welcomed in.

And this is just the start – they will move out into the world – proclaiming and embodying God's love in Jesus Christ – welcoming in more and more and more people. The followers of Jesus find themselves bringing the Good News in their lives – teaching what Jesus taught – preaching the same Good News of God's love for all people – and bringing healing and resurrection and life. You might say *they person the issue*.

Now, I can't explain all this – all the healing – how they lived this remarkable life together – just after Resurrection, just after Pentecost. It's almost too good to be true. They were always together; they held everything in common; they sold what they had, and gave as anyone had need. I can't explain that to you – and I bet that they couldn't either.

So they told their stories – and these stories are true. These stories convey to us some powerful memory – some powerful memory of a powerful experience that these sisters and brothers – these siblings of ours – lived out – and clung to – and told again and again and again – about how they experienced Jesus in flesh and bone, and then about how they experienced Jesus in each other – and they wrote these stories down – and then sent them down to us, over the centuries. And we tell them now.

**These stories that they told – the stories that we tell –  
they are part memory – and part hope.  
They tell us something of who we once were,  
something of who we are, and**

**something of who we hope to be.**

We have stories like that.

This church is one of the churches to whom the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed his Letter from Birmingham City Jail. In the height of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, Dr. King was arrested as he protested segregation in Birmingham, and 8 progressive clergy wrote him a letter suggesting that the demonstrations were “unwise and untimely.” He wrote back in words that are now history: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

And what most people don’t know – the rest of the story – is that most of those clergy to whom he wrote said, ‘OK, I’m kinda done with this.’ They had identified as progressive, but his rebuke stung, so they backed away. But two clergy responded – including Dr. Ramage, the pastor here – and this congregation clung to those words of Dr. Ramage that I still hear you say today, “*We welcome all those whom Christ welcomes.*” And one of the things I love about you is that you don’t sugarcoat this story. When I’ve heard it told – when I heard it told by the folks who were here then – it is a sober story – of a heartbreaking time. It was messy and painful, and all that. And. “*We welcome all whom Christ welcomes.*” In all its complexity, you person the issue.

Holding that story in your bones, in the 1980s, you noticed – as a congregation – folks who were sleeping on your steps – folks who had no home – no shelter. And the story I heard, is that you took a few mattresses, and put them on a floor in the basement – and every night you would welcome women and children who had nowhere to go. You would feed them and give them a place to stay for the night – and two by two – you’d stay through the night too. And that evolved into cots in the basement. And then Eugenia Gamble with Bill Matthews at her side and so many of you – secured the funding for what is now First Light.

*“We welcome all those whom Christ welcomes.”*

When I arrived on your doorstep in November 1998 – these are the stories I heard – and because I heard and believed these stories of your welcome, I trusted that I might be able to experience that welcome too. And you sent me off to seminary – at a time, when the Presbyterian Church (USA) said that people like me couldn’t stand in pulpits like this – that people like me couldn’t serve at tables like that.

And here we are.

Our stories are not artifacts locked away in a distant yesterday. They hold for us powerful memories – memories of where and who we have been with God and with each other; they are alive for us now; and if we pay attention, they can propel us – by the power of the Holy Spirit into our future.

One of the miracles of Scripture and the Holy Spirit is this: We enter into these ancient stories from Scripture – and *what they experienced then resonates with what we experience now* – all the troubles of the world, all the stuff of being human – the constant presence of God

with us, God loving us in all that – everywhere and all the time – what they experienced then, we experience now. And then, and then the Holy Spirit invites us in our lives – to borrow a phrase from the musical *Hamilton* – the Holy Spirit invites us in our lives “to write ourselves into the narrative.”

In the story of God’s love for all God’s children, what is the next chapter that we will write in our bodies and in our lives?

You’ve just become a More Light Church – that phrase – More Light – It comes from an old hymn:

*We limit not the truth of God  
To our poor reach of mind,  
By notions of our day and sect,  
Crude, partial and confined.  
Now let a new and better hope  
Within our hearts be stirred:  
For God hath **yet more light and truth**  
To break forth from the Word.*

What More Light is breaking forth in you?

Today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and then the next,  
how will you person the issue?

We live in a world that still excludes people because of who they are.

We live in a world where racism and white supremacy are alive and on the move.

We live in a world where we are separating families and caging children at our borders.

We live in a world where we experience week by week, and now day by day, mass shooting after mass shooting, while our nation refuses to enact even the most reasonable gun regulation: Gilroy. El Paso. Dayton.

So I need to make something very clear: As I’ve been talking about “personing the issue,” it may have sounded like I was talking about personing the issue of WELCOME – or maybe that I was being even more specific about personing the issue of welcoming LGBTQIA+ people and our families. And. Well. Yes.

AND. AND. I want to be very clear about this. It’s so much more expansive and all-encompassing than that. ***When I say that we “person the issue” – the issue we person – is Jesus Christ.*** In the power of Resurrection, and Pentecost – ***the issue that we person is nothing less than the good news of God’s love for all people in Jesus Christ.***

When Jesus showed up on the scene, he stood up and said, “I’ve come to proclaim good news to the poor; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim release to the captive; and to let all the oppressed go free.” And he did. With his whole life Jesus proclaimed blessing for the poor,

and for the outcast, and “for all those whose backs are up against the wall.” In his hands, Jesus brought a healing touch, and he reached out and he welcomed the whole world in. And the world killed him for it – for embodying such radical love and such an expansive welcome. And on the third day – on the third day he rose from the dead. He walked again in the midst of us. And now, now, in the power of Resurrection and Pentecost , what we find alive in us  
is healing in our hands,  
and welcome for the whole world.

It is a great gift, and a great calling, and a great responsibility.

And, so, it is no small question:

In the story of God’s love for all God’s children,  
what is the next chapter that we will write with our lives?

What is the More Light you will bring?

Today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and then the next,  
how will we person the issue?