

City on a Hill

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Thanksgiving Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 20, 2016

Texts: Matthew 5:13-16

[Sing “This Little Light of Mine” encouraging others to join in.] This little song is simply amazing! Anyone can sing it and you always feel better when you do. It’s based on the text we read from Matthew this morning, a tiny portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Specifically, v. 16 – “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” If we’re to take the song at its word, we let our light shine when we do good works for the glory of God. In other words, we show God we know God loves us by doing good works in God’s name. All this has got me to wondering, how exactly do we let our light shine? When have you let your light shine in the past few days? *(pause for responses)*

I think we can agree then, that light enables humans to see what’s going on around them. If there was no light, only darkness, you literally could not see what was happening. Looking at this from the Jesus perspective, light enables us to see when justice is being carried out and when it’s not. Light makes it possible for us to see when mercy is alive and well and when it’s not. Light reveals when kindness is abroad in the world and when it’s not. Darkness, on the other hand, obscures things, makes

them difficult to see. That's why vandalism so often happens in the dark of night – because no one is around to see it and stop it.

Of course before Jesus even gets to these comments about light, he talks about something even more mundane. He talks about salt. “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” Have you heard someone referred to as being “the salt of the earth?” It's a phrase perhaps more common in our grandparents' day, but it's still bandied about now and then. What do you think of when you hear someone described as the salt of the earth? (*pause for responses*) That's a little more difficult to describe, isn't it. Well, let's think about what salt was used for in the days before refrigeration. It was used to preserve things, right? So, perhaps Jesus meant that if someone was the salt of the earth, they were living their lives in such a way that they were preserving the love of God, the light of God, in their whole approach to living. In other words, God literally is preserved in that salty person, who knows and loves God, working at having a relationship with God, all the time. And it does take work, this loving God and living as God would have us do. It does not come naturally to us, this call to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as much as we love ourselves. My goodness no! That takes work and effort to do and it takes work and effort to maintain, and to preserve. Too much work sometimes so that we

slack off a bit. This is a very natural thing, a very human thing, to do when life gets way too busy or tough things happen and we feel like God has forgotten who we are. That, dear friends, is when we start to lose our saltiness, our grounding in God. And if we lose too much, it becomes ever more difficult to get it back.

One interesting salt fact here that is related to our conversation, I think. Did you know that salt can be tainted with impurities and that those impurities can actually cause the good salt to leach away from the impure salt leaving only a tasteless pile of glop? The good salt – the salty salt – can actually disappear if there is too much impurity in the salt as a whole! So, Jesus seems to be saying here that we need to put real effort into holding on to our saltiness, in holding on to our grounding in God, working hard to live our lives loving God and each other, no matter what. In other words, we can never take our faith for granted.

Salt and light. Two ordinary things encountered every day. Two ordinary things capable of teaching us extraordinary lessons about ourselves and God and the relationship between the two. And they have been doing these for two millennia, from the moment Jesus spoke these words on that long ago Palestinian hillside. These two ordinary things have inspired countless people to be more than they thought could be, to do more than they thought they could do as they stretched to be salty, light-radiating people in bland and dark situations. Probably the most famous

example of this is connected directly to the Thanksgiving Holiday we will celebrate here in the United States this week. Let me explain how.

So, basic US history for a moment. The first colony established here in the “New World” (which wasn’t really new but already home to the First Nations peoples) was established where? *Jamestown, Virginia* When? *1607* The second colony established here was what? *Plymouth, MA* When? *1620* It was settled by whom? *The Pilgrims!* And who are the modern day spiritual ancestors of the Pilgrims? *US!* The third colony established here was what? *The Massachusetts Bay Colony in Boston and Salem* When? *1630* Settled by whom? *The Puritans!* And who are the modern day spiritual ancestors of the Puritans, that fun-loving bunch? *That’s US too!!!* Why am I telling you this? Well, first of all because it is Thanksgiving and if anyone has a special reason for celebrating Thanksgiving it’s we Congregationalists in the United Church of Christ because these hearty adventurers were our people! Of course the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth via Holland from England while fleeing the Church of England weren’t the brightest bunch. They were actually heading for the Jamestown Colony in Virginia when they landed at Plymouth by mistake. We all know the stories of their struggles in that first year and how so many of them died. The Native Americans helped them out so that they did survive and

their colony eventually thrived. The Pilgrim Colony at Plymouth eventually merged with the Puritan Colony at Boston in 1630 and thus the Pilgrims and Puritans became forever mingled in our history and our minds.

As I said earlier, these folks were not a fun bunch. Both the Pilgrims and Puritans were stern people who believed in an angry vengeful God who decided before the beginning of time who would be saved for heaven and who would be condemned to hell. This doctrine of pre-destination resulted in their belief in what became known as the theology of the Elect. Simply put, they believed that if you were among those elected to be saved by God, this fact would be evident in your life. In other words if you were wealthy and successful and healthy, then obviously you were among God's Elect. And as one of God's Elect you were entitled to special privileges. Conversely, if your crops failed or your child died due to illness or accident or even if your farm animals were attacked and killed by predators, something was wrong between you and God. Chances were pretty good that you were not among the Elect so you weren't entitled to the same rights and benefits as the Elect. Interestingly, though, the Elect were still expected to take care of all those who weren't among the Elect because God expected them to take care of those less fortunate, whatever the reason. Christian charity was the highest virtue to the Puritans because it was how you showed God you reflected God's light to

all. Because you were among the Elect, you were literally intended to be a reflection of how God expected everyone to live their lives each day.

I'm talking about all this today because, as I said, Thanksgiving is our holiday in a unique way. But I also want us to reflect on another piece of our Puritan heritage which also comes from this same text in Matthew. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." *You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.* John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, made this the goal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop and all the Puritans who came with him on 14 ships, braving the stormy waters of the North Atlantic in ridiculously small, fragile wooden ships (have you seen the *Mayflower*?) believed with all their hearts that they were fulfilling God's vision of a shining city on a hill, revealing God's light to the whole world, as they prepared to disembark in the wilds of the New England coastline. They knew this was their destiny and they did everything they could to make it real. They believed they could make Jesus' description of that shining city on a hill more than words on a page. And they did.

Salt. Light. God's shining city built on a hill. Pretty words. Nice sentiment. Interesting history lesson. But what does that have to do with my life, right here and right now? What does it matter if I live a salty, faith preserved and light filled life? I'm not

even sure how to do that. I don't even know if I want to do that. What was Jesus thinking anyway? Was he really thinking about me when he said that all those years and miles ago? Yes. Yes, I think he was thinking about you all those years and miles ago. I think Jesus understood more than anyone else before or since that life was only going to get more difficult, more worrisome, more scary, more challenging, more overwhelming with each generation that passed. I think Jesus knew that people would also struggle with what it meant to love God and love other people in spite of all the reasons the world constantly offers not to. I think Jesus knew that holding on to our salty, faith-preserving, God-loving selves would be the work of a lifetime for everyone who ever attempted to do it. And I know Jesus knew it was always, always, always worth the effort.

So, dear friends, how can you be more salty in these days when fear and confusion and anxiety are so prevalent for so many? How can you bring more light to those who fear that a strange, unexpected darkness is about to swallow them up? Well, let me shine a little light on the question with a brief story about my trip to the grocery store yesterday. I had to run into Shaws for a few things and it was jammed. With my few things in the cart, I was shocked to find myself in a short line at the check-out. An African-American woman soon came in behind me with about the same number of things and then right behind her came a

Portuguese man with only a half gallon of milk. She urged the man to go in front of her and then I urged him to go in front of me. I had already put my things on the belt so he had to stand in front of me holding the milk. That meant I had to explain to the clerk that I was letting him go before me. She smiled. He smiled. The packer smiled. The African-American woman behind me smiled. The older man behind her smiled. We all wished each other a Happy Thanksgiving, and we really meant it. And as we did, in that brief encounter, another stone was placed in the foundation of God's city on a hill – right in the middle of the Shaws in East Providence.

Those foundation stones are all around us each day in the way we treat others as beloved of God. We just need to set them into place as God makes possible. God's city on the hill is built one stone at a time, one person at a time, one heart at a time. God's city on the hill is bright enough to illuminate the whole world and everyone in it. God's city on the hill is what the world needs now, what we need now more than ever and we have the power within us to make the city of God go from pretty words on a page to concrete actions in the lives of real people. Never has God's city on a hill been more needed in the world. Never has God needed us more to make it happen. So, the question for you is – will you help? Amen.

[Closing: God's City we will build, filled with love and light. (2 more times), Filled with love and filled with light.]