

A City on a Hill

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 6) 2011

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Jesus begins today with as direct a statement as we could imagine: “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are a city on a hill.”

He’s speaking to you and me; to Austin Heights Baptist Church; to the Church of Jesus Christ.

We are the salt of the earth – to savor and preserve and heal and to make a difference. We are the light of the world. We are a city on a hill. We dare not shrink back. We are visible to the wider world as a beacon of hope, giving direction and guidance, and enlightenment.

I don’t know about you but that seems to me to be a pretty tall order. Not me. Not you. Not little ol’ Austin Heights.

But the truth of what Jesus tells us is not based on how we feel about ourselves or the church. The truth is that it comes from Jesus. Our job is to trust him. Our job is to live into what he says.

So if what he says is true perhaps we should have a higher opinion of who we are in Christ. I love the words of Nelson Mandela spoke in his 1994 Inauguration as President of South Africa, after spending 27 years in prison because of his opposition to apartheid. He said:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens

us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. And as we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Austin Heights, lesson #1: Let our light shine. You – let your light shine. You young people, quit shrinking back. Shine! It is God shining through you. You dare not cover it up!

Lesson #2: The light comes from God. Part of what this means is that we can relax about receiving new light. If all light is of God, then we have much more to learn. As the Puritans used to say, "There is yet more light to break forth from Scripture." Furthermore, as we learn to look for the light, we can discern light coming from other places and other traditions. We learn to watch and listen to others who might have been perceived as different. What might God teach us through someone else or from some other faith tradition?

Part of the explosion of learning in twelfth century Europe was because of the contact with Muslim scholars who had recovered and retained many of the great works of the ancient world that the Christian west had lost: Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy,... Christian Europe came out of the dark ages because of the enlightenment from Muslims and the classical world. Christian scholars like Thomas Aquinas were open because all light and all truth is of God.

My hero Carlyle Marney used to say, “Follow the light wherever it comes from.”

Lesson 3: We can have zeal without becoming fanatics. We are a church that tends to draw back from religious zeal because we see the dangers of fanaticism. But we can have conviction without spiritual arrogance. In fact, part of the reason we can be humble in our zeal, is because we have seen and know too much to be arrogant about the truth we’ve received. We’ve seen light break forth from other traditions; we’ve seen light shine forth from those who are not even believers. And we’ve seen too much darkness among our own, therefore we are humble.

But there is no light without being grasped by God! We are to live in such a way that God gets a hold of us, and we know that the truth has found us. As followers of Jesus, we are not interested in Annie Dillard’s image, “tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute,” visiting one religion after another. Instead we’re with Mother Teresa who said, “I love all religions, but I am in love with my own.”

We are, what the great biblical scholar Walter Harrelson said, “those who have been grasped by utter truth, without claiming that we have exclusive truth.” The truth of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is utter truth, but we do not claim sole ownership of that truth. God’s light shines where it shines. We are responsible for the light given us.

It’s not hard to see zeal and passion run amuck and religious arrogance in the world around us. But the answer is not for us to withdraw and hide the light of Christ under a bushel. We want to shine forth Christ’s light. It’s his light that makes the difference. He shines the light of love and mercy, of peace and justice, of humility and goodness. This kind of light the world has much too little of.

So let us be willing to get close enough to God's light and truth that we burst into flame.

St. Francis of Assisi was willing to live close enough to God's light that he might burst into flame and show the warring world the light of Christ. In the summer of 1219, Francis was in northern Egypt with the Christian army besieging the city of Damietta during the Fifth Crusade. Long committed to the Way of Peace because he was a follower of Jesus, Francis found a way through the Christian lines and made his way to the Muslim lines. He and one friar who was his companion, were captured by Muslim soldiers and taken to the Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil. Most of Western Europe believed that the Muslims were monsters, devils, the epitome of evil, and all knew well what both armies would do to anyone caught spying.

But Francis and his companion made it to the tent of the Sultan and Francis said, "May the Lord give you peace!" which in itself was no small thing. In that day and time, giving the blessing of peace was only done by monks in monasteries and here Francis was giving the blessing of peace to the leader of evil, the Sultan.

The Sultan was well educated and knew about Christians, asked why he was here. Francis said, "We are ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ." The Sultan caught the distinction; Francis did not say he was an ambassador of the pope; he said he was representing God. With that the Sultan gave Francis permission to speak and for the next few days, the Sultan and Francis spoke to each other, listened to each other, and learned of each other's faith, and of their hopes for peace.

After several days, Francis and his companion returned to the European army and tried to make peace. It was of no avail. And even though this story of

St. Francis is not well known, and has been intentionally kept quiet for centuries, it is known and repeated in Egypt – not by many but by a few. And Francis is remembered as a true representative of Christ.

This past week, like many of you I have followed the events in Cairo. Since I don't watch TV, I've followed the news on the internet and by way of the various social networking sites. I was struck by a photograph taken by a young Egyptian woman with her cell phone. Perhaps you've seen it. This photo is of thousands of Muslims in Tahrir Square all lined up and all facing the same direction kneeling in prayer.

And surrounding them in a circle, arms and hands linked, are hundreds of Egyptian Christians protecting the Muslims from the attacking pro-government mobs, so the Muslims can pray in peace.

St. Francis would have understood. Perhaps he would have blessed them with, "May the Lord give you peace."

From the fourth century desert tradition comes the story of the monk, who came to the great desert father, Abba Joseph, unsatisfied with his spiritual life. He said, "I've done my prayers, kept the commandments. I try to live at peace and purify my thoughts. What else can I do?"

Abba Joseph answered, "You could become flame."

May it be so with us. Amen and amen.