

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
February 5, 2017

**“Keep the Salt Shaking,
the Lights On”**

“You are the salt of the earth ...
You are the light of the world.”
Matthew 5:13, 14

PRELUDE

Over the course of the past couple of months,
I note an increased frequency of people asking me,
**“How is it going with you
in your church work?”**

The inquiry is one of social courtesy;
it also reflects curiosity, an interest in our
human foibles; but more often, though, I sense
it is posed with real sincerity and a genuine
concern for well being.

**“How is it going
with you
in your church work?”**

I never go into detail.
Who has the time?
I confess I have on occasion
fallen into the temptation of listening
to gossip – I’m especially drawn to church
gossip. Listening, mind you, comparing
what confusion there may be here with what
may reign elsewhere.

**“Gossip is the art of saying nothing
in a way that leaves practically nothing unsaid”**
(Walter Winchell).

Though guilty as a bystander,
I have no need to magnify our own
internal fault lines.

One doesn't spend any significant time in
church without becoming very much aware:

all the corners are not dusted,
the doughnuts don't always satisfy,
the flowers, sooner or later, always wilt;
the saints who gather are perfect
only in their imperfection.

Rita Nakashima Brock, when here as a Parry lecturer,
speaking on her co-authored book, *Saving Paradise*,
reminded us: **“Remember – there is always
a snake in the garden.”**

Every church ought to have that as a disclaimer
in its fine print. It would save people
disappointment,
spare them grief, believers remorse.

**How is it going
with you
in your church work?**

My stock answer these days –
with a smile and knowing nod:
“we have no lack of material.”
The challenge is trying to stay
centered and focused –
as even keeled as we can be –
while the nation spins accommodating
a rule of impulsive, petulant
fearless leaders.

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Our lesson this morning comes to us from Matthew, Jesus with disciples, his teaching as found in the Sermon on the Mount. How important it is for us in this day to encounter, to re-enter this material, to remind ourselves - this sets the anchor for being Christian in the world; this is standard, the bar to which we are invited to rise. This is the material that reveals who we are and what purpose we serve.

We have two images to consider: salt (Matthew 5:13) and light (Matthew 5:14-16); and then a declaration of allegiance - not a break with culture defined by law and prophets, but a culmination and continuation of tradition shared with scribes and Pharisees, dating deep into our human history, indeed, even into the very beginning of life, far as we can conceive such a beginning.

Salt. An essential ingredient,
necessary for life.
A pinch of salt can work wonders
where there is dietary need for seasoning.
Jesus does not counsel disciples
withdraw from the world,
to save ourselves;
rather instruction is given for us
to be seasoning agents,
to act as curative agents.
A pinch of salt can make
a world of difference,
and a world of difference is
what we are called to make.
We don't need to be flashy

and conspicuous;
and we don't need to be overwhelmed by minority status.
We need to be humble enough to seek God's face,
and wise enough to work like the dickens -
salt shakers for good in the world.

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The second image - that of light -
is deeply embedded in our history,
as a religious people,
and as a nation.

Peggy Noonan is credited with writing Ronald Reagan's
eloquent plea that we remember - we are called to be a
city on the hill. Reagan invoked that image both on the
eve of his election, and at the end of term(s) as president
(1980, 1989).

She was invoking the words of John Winthrop,
before the Puritans disembarked from their
vessels in a new land of promise.
The eyes of the world are upon us,
God is with us; Winthrop invoked.
If we are to avoid "shipwreck," to bless and not curse
our posterity, we need heed the council of Micah;
yet if we deal falsely, if we serve our
own pleasure and seek our own profits,
then we forfeit the grace and shall surely
perish from the land.

Winthrop of course was quoting in part
from the sermon on the mount that we find in
Matthew; the challenging words of Jesus,
remarkable really, asserting we - disciples of Jesus -
we the light of the world, and together the
illumination is such that we serve like
a "city built on hill."

You can't help but wonder:
does it not seem that somebody
has turned out the light(s)?

You can't help but wonder:
not in the nation (although that is fair game),
but what has happened to the church
that such large portions have shown
support for building of walls
 along our border;
the banning of people based upon
 religious creed and country of origin.
Large portions have given a wink and a nod
 to the trivialization of prayer,
and have embraced
 the delusional assessment
that we - as Christians - have suffered
the muzzling of faith
 by a hostile government.

Let me be clear this morning -
no Christian pulpit in this country
has suffered a curbing of its passion,
 a loss of liberty;
and no church has been hindered in
promoting what teachings it values,
its voter guides, to any meaningful degree
at all. A false alarm has been raised in
the land, pandering to a sentiment
that is quite enthused by the power(s)
of government, and much less thrilled
 by the power of the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is clear:
there are resources within us;
and Jesus summons us to be luminaries,
to display them with courage and hope,
to do so with honesty of thought and
purity of heart.

James Baldwin once said:

**“Love does not begin and end the way
we seem to think it does.
Love is a battle; love is war;
love is a growing up.”**

In the Sermon on the Mount,
is Jesus urging us to grow up?
Jesus sets up a high standard.
And its pursuit is noble, holy work.
Aligned with the law and prophets,
equipped with Jesus love and wisdom,
the kin-dom will flourish in our midst!

This is where we need to be careful,
for the “Sermon” is not Bible pamphlet religion,
religion made easy. It is religion for seekers,
eager for excellence, it is material designed for us
that we might **“go deeper into our faith,”**
for our good and for good to prevail in the world
(*Sojourner's*, Jan. '17, p. 17).

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
You - we - the church -
we are a people growing up
in a contentious age;
we are growing up -
to keep shaking the salt;
to keep the lights on,
with our worship and service.

We can exalt and praise
the God of the living for the Table
where plenty is provided,
an extravagance of grace,
a profusion of mercy,
bread from heaven to feed all who
 hunger and thirst, such that
strangers and aliens are welcome,
and sojourners and pilgrims.
God's eye isn't upon the perfection
of recitation in a church's doctrine.
God's eye and mind are upon the broken heart,
and God's spirit is eager to nourish and sustain
all who warm to the love of Jesus.

In the words of an old Welsh hymn:
***Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me till I want no more;
Feed me till I want no more.***
(Wm. Williams, 1717-1791)

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*