

CITY SET ON A HILL
August 17, 2014 –Matthew 5: 13-20
The Church of the Covenant

In rapid succession, Jesus in his seminal teaching in the Sermon on the Mount says –“*You are the salt of the earth*”. –“*You are the light of the world*.” --“(You are) a city set on a hill...” (Matthew 5: 13, 14) He’s speaking about us; He’s talking about the church; He’s speaking about The Church of the Covenant. We are a city set on a hill, an outpost of the New Jerusalem someday come down from heaven, a representation of the Kingdom of God here on earth, an expression of what Jesus lived and died and was resurrected to bring into being. “*A city set on a hill cannot be hid*”, says Jesus.

I remember when I was Chair of Council in Pittsburgh Presbytery and there were churches leaving, and disagreement and controversy. I stood up on the floor of a presbytery meeting and said, There will only be one headline in the Post=Gazette and that headline is “*See how these Christians love one another*”. But there are two photo captions; the one is angry Presbyterians protesting outside closed churches and the other is Presbyterians praying together, studying together and speaking together, resolving their differences as the Lord would have us do. There is only one headline –“*See, how these Christians love one another*” –but the picture underneath is what we choose to have printed there. Because indeed we are a city set on a hill and the world is watching. People are looking to us to see if we really believe all this “*God is love*” stuff. Or whether we are just like the world –wanting our own way, pushy, uncompromising, full of ourselves, angry, divisive, prone to hurt with words and deeds. When you live in a city set on a hill the whole world can see you and decide whether you do or do not follow Jesus...

My hope is that we will follow Jesus.

The next section in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets*”. (v. 17) Not one “jot”, not one “tittle” will pass away from the law, says Jesus. These jots and tittles are the tiny vowel pointings in the Hebrew that look like commas and periods. Jesus hasn’t come, as some people put forward, to undermine the Old Testament Law. As if Jesus somehow replaces the law. Nope –not one comma, not one period in the law will change because of Jesus. Indeed, HE requires that our “*righteousness*” must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. (v. 20) Elsewhere, HE demands we must be perfect. Jesus has not come to relax the law; HE has come to fulfill it. He points to love being the fulfillment of the law. If we truly love someone then even if we have Christian freedom we might abstain from doing something, not because we must, but only because we would not want to harm someone else. “*You shall love the Lord your God*”, says Jesus, “*with all your heart*” But then HE adds, but “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*.” Jesus gives us the greatest commandment, which is the fulfillment of the law –“*That (we) shall love one another even as HE (Jesus) has loved us*.” And how has Jesus loved us? He has sacrificed Himself on a cross for us; HE humbled Himself; HE emptied Himself; HE took on the form of a servant. HE died to self, to what HE wanted; that we might rise to new life in HIM. This is the new commandment in Christ Jesus –not only following the Old Testament law but also choosing to love one another, even as Jesus has loved us.

This higher righteousness is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This higher righteousness, this highest of all standards, loving one another as Jesus has loved us, is to be the CITY SET UPON A HILL. The world is watching our city set upon a hill and my hope is that we choose to follow Jesus.

It is interesting that the human brain has multiple parts to it. The most primitive part is the liminal part of the brain. It is the same type of brain that a crocodile has. It is the place where the “fight or flee”

response is housed. When we experience some negative outside stimulus the most primitive part of the brain kicks in and we are propelled by a most primitive instinct either to get out of there or to put up our dukes and fight –our most primitive response is to either fight or flee. And in church differences as in fights in East Washington Boro fights as in fights in our condo associations as in fights in school board meetings our first temptation is to fight or flee –to get angry and vituperative or to run away and resign. Church fights can be nasty and they can create new denominations filled with people who flee. But I believe there is a higher part of the brain. This is the part where reason is lodged. And this is the part of the brain where our faith is lodged as well. We can choose to fight or flee...or we can choose to respond in faith. We can be as the world is...or we can trust in Jesus and have faith in Him. We can respond with a higher righteousness. We can choose to live out of the new commandment of Jesus. We can choose to love one another even as Jesus has loved us. We can respond as a crocodile does or we can respond as a Christian does. We can be “Church of the Controversy” or we can be “Church of the Covenant”. We can choose to be salt and light. We can choose to be a city set upon a hill. It is our ability to do so, compelled as we are by the love of Christ...

As you know, from time to time I go up into Washington Cemetery on a high hill, sort of close to where Judge McCune’s gravesite is, to pray over the city. It is beautiful. You can see everything up there –the courthouse, the hospital, the schools, W&J, the tower of The Church of the Covenant. I pray, surrounded by the saints. Mostly of late, I have been praying for our church. We could be tempted, you know, to get blown apart; moderates getting hurt on one side, conservatives getting hurt on the other. That would kill me. Mostly, my prayer for us is that we will choose to love one another as Jesus has loved us. That we would understand as a church that indeed we are a city set upon a hill, we are a church others look up to, we can set a standard, a higher standard, the highest righteousness there is, may I say; we can model something for our church and community; we can be a place that models for others what the love of Jesus looks like when times of disagreement come. I suppose we could respond as crocodiles and fight or flee. Or we could respond as Christians and choose to love one another. But regardless of what we choose we are that city set upon a hill that cannot be hid. And the world is **watching**. And the world is **waiting**. And the world is **wanting** to see something in us that is utterly, completely and totally unlike the world. There will only be one caption in the Observer-Reporter, “See How these Christians Love One another” and we get to choose the picture. We cannot hide for the world is watching.

Because as Jesus says, A CITY SET ON A HILL CANNOT BE HID. And neither can His love. Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*