

January 17, 2016    “A City On A Hill”    Matthew 5:13-16

I am surprised...ought not to be, but I am...I am surprised that in quiet moments I still find myself reflecting on the the trip to Israel, just about a year ago. In a couple of week it will be a year ago! I remember we were on the tour bus, travelling south toward Jerusalem. Our time in the area around the Sea of Galilee was over. And something went click in my brain, and I suddenly got it. We were going up to Jerusalem. Not north...in fact we were going south. But we were going up hill almost continually, to Jerusalem.

And every now and then we would pass off ramps to smaller cities. Recognizeable because they were all Biblical names. And in the distance you would see a city, about the size of Belleville or maybe a little bigger. But the distinctive reality was the city crowned a hill top. It was obvious in the surrounding geography. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No way. There it is obvious. The neighbourhoods covering the the knoll in the distance. Homes seeming to flow down the gentle hillsides. You could see them for miles. Standing out and obvious.

True even in the times of Jesus. As a caravan approached one of these cities, the traders and merchants riding their camels would see them for miles. We are almost to Bethany. Soon we will be in Jerusalem. From here we can see Bethany. A city built on a hill. Except Jesus was not talking about the landscape. He was not engaging the disciples in a discussion about the geography of his home and native land. He was talking about lifestyle. How we live and conduct our lives in the context of culture in general. You can't hide a city built on a hill!

Jesus used 3 metaphors in this small bit of teaching. He

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talked about salt. He talked about light. He talked about a city built on a hill. What do they have in common? They are obvious. They stand out. You can see them at a distance. You cannot miss the comparison. The contrast. Why? They are so different to what surrounds in general, the surrounding cultural landscape. Salt. Light. A city built on a hill. No way you can hide what is going on.

They tell us that one thing we can do to take care of ourselves is to be careful, perhaps the best word is mindful, of the amount of salt we consume. Fact is we like the taste of salt. Like sugar, we tend to take far more than is necessary. Simple reason we like the taste. I mean can you image eating french fries with your hamburger and not sprinkling them with salt. I know people who really like to put vinegar on their french fries. I asked, why do you do that. Simple answer, the salt clings to the vinegar on the french fries. You get more taste of the salt per sliver of potato. In fact we like salted potato over plain no matter how you cook them. I like butter on my mashed potatoes...of course what I mean is salted butter. Getting hungry? I like the taste. It stands out as a favourite. To me, its attractive.

Salt. Light. A city on a hill. Which do you prefer: going for a walk in the dark at 7:30 pm or going for a walk in the brilliant sunshine of early afternoon with blue cloudless skies? Most of us would pick the afternoon walk...especially on a sunny day. In the winter...this time of year... when you are walking north you can feel the heat of the sun on your back...that feels good. Real good even if it is below zero! And you can see so much more. A squirrel up a tree. The cardinal at the feeder in the neighbour's yard. The leaves bursting from their buds in Spring time. The colours of the leaves in the Fall. In summer? The green of the grass, the riot of colour in a

well tended flour bed. The deer in the distant meadow out in the countryside. For some of you that's the scene in the backyard. A lot easier to see in the light. Light as opposed to darkness. You can get lost in the dark. Even on a familiar landscape. That's obvious isn't it. In the dark you can lose track of where you are...woops, missed my turn, heading for home.

And of course the city built on a hill. It almost becomes a landmark, a signpost no matter where it is you are going. I remember a song lyric, the late "Gentleman, Jim Reeves, a country singer back when I was in my teens. "And it's only 5 more miles to Marianne's." One thing you can count on. There was a landmark at that point...not one of those modern green or blue signs that tells you the mileage to the next town, but a recognizable tree. A farm. A field. A clearing. Maybe a river or a creek. A village..."And it's only 5 more miles, to Marianne's." Obvious, noticeable, remarkable really.

But as I said, Jesus was not talking about cooking or spices. HE was not talking about the time of day, or the season, and he was not talking about map reading or geography. He was talking about how people live. He was specifically talking about how God's children live. How he wanted the disciples to live. And please remember that word disciples is not a reference to the twelve, although it includes them. Here in the sermon on the mount Jesus is talking to a crowd.

The incident takes place in the Galilee region. As a matter of fact there is a sloping hillside that runs for a couple of miles cross country down to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. On that hillside it was almost like a natural amphitheater. Jesus is speaking to a crowd seated on the rising land. All of these people had come to

hear Him. To some degree they are followers. Disciples. They want to hear what Jesus has to say. They are committed enough to come to this hillside to hear Him. And they know what it is that He talks about...the Kingdom of God. How to participate in it, how to be included and how to live as a citizen of God's Kingdom, as God's child.

Salt. Light. A city on a hill. What's Jesus really saying? He's not talking about the culture of Israel, even though it is related. He's not talking about Gentile culture, the lifestyle of Samaritans, Romans or Greeks. He is talking about the chief quality of being a child of God. Knowing you are a child of God, believing it. I bought into this very thing as a teenager. I was trying to figure out who I was and what I was supposed to do with my life. I caught on real quick. Following Jesus means being different from being a member of the pack, even when it involves being a member of His pack, his flock. It is a counter culture thing. Has to do with swimming upstream.

You have probably seen film or video of the Salmon when they are swimming upstream to spawn. They have to work at it. In fact they have to work at it to the extent that some die of pure exhaustion from the effort. Following Jesus is not mashed potatoes. It's potatoes with salt, spiced, It is the difference between walking in the dark, as opposed to walking in the light. It's like being a city built on a hill...obvious, recognizeable, and as a result exposed too. No place to hide. Vulnerable. Definitely different.

You see, Jesus followers were going to be all those things. Easily recognized. Exposed to the animosity not only of the Roman invaders, but of leaders in their own racial group, people like the

pharisees. People like Saul who persecuted the church until Jesus got a hold of his life and he became one of those easy to recognize disciples of Jesus, exposed with no place to hide, which is why he wound up in prison and finally on trial in Rome where they killed him for his “Christian” faith. Paul did not pursue a “safe” lifestyle. He ran neither silent nor deep.

He talked to anyone who would listen about Jesus and being a disciple. He tried to raise funds to send help back to the persecuted faith community in Jerusalem, we would call it the church. He knew they were taking care of sick people, orphans and widows. All kinds of outcasts not accepted by society. And if anyone said to him, you know Paul, you need to tone it down. Be a little less obvious. People are listening and watching what you are saying and doing. And it is not just your safety that's involved, we who support you and travel with you, you're exposing us. I believe I know what Paul would have replied. He probably would have said something like Jesus did. Salt that has lost its saltiness, its distinctive taste, is good for nothing. No one takes a lamp and puts it under a basket or under the bed. You put it up where it can shine on the whole room, which in his time was probably the whole house. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. It becomes a landmark among other things. A pursued destination for another. It is reachable, attainable, only one more mile to Marianne's.

As disciples of Jesus we are not here to tone our message down. The goal is not to be the same colour of grey as the rest of our culture. We would do well to be like the city built on a hill. Make it obvious who are and what we are and what we stand for. I was listening to Terry O Reily on CBC radio. He has a programme just around lunch time called “In the age of influence.”

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It is about marketing. Yesterday he sounded like a t.v. Evangelist. He said there are companies out there who have by passed being known for a 1,000 things to be known for one thing. Companies like Coca-Cola. He said being singleminded, known for one thing, can be good for business, in the age of influence.

What came to mind was a lifestyle of faithfulness. Being Biblical. Following Jesus no matter what anyone says. Like a city built on a hill, incapable of hiding. To some extent definitely vulnerable. And I thought, God help us to be singleminded.

Let us pray;

Lord we know there are times in which we need to put our best foot forward. And yet some of what you teach us seems to go in a counter culture direction. The way of the cross is so different from the way of “fitting in” and being like everyone else. Develop our hunger to be pleasing in your sight. Lead us in the way you would have us go, knowing that we have already decided we want to be pleasing in your sight. Grow our faith. Strengthen our resolve. Help us to retain our saltiness. To live in the light. To be like a city on a hill. Amen