

A beacon of hope

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 5, 2017.

You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world. Matthew 5:13-14

It takes two types of people to accomplish a task. There are those who are visionaries who inspire an idea and may even envision a plan of how to make it happen. Then there are those who follow through with making the vision a reality. If such qualities can be found in the same person, it is all the better. During World War II General Douglas MacArthur and General George Patton were brilliant general officers and military strategists who inspired the troops under their command. They both were also vain, arrogant and pompous personalities who believed in their invincibility and gloried in their adulation.

By contrast, General Omar Bradley, a farm boy from Missouri and General Dwight Eisenhower from rural Kansas went about their awesome responsibilities in an unassuming way to win the victory to free Europe from Nazi tyranny. Bradley and Eisenhower had no need for fame and adulation nor were they flashy or flamboyant. They were possessed of a genuine authenticity of character and bore no pretense about themselves. In the end, the long struggle was accomplished with the gifts and qualities of all those who fought through to win the peace.

There have been studies made that have indicated that Jesus was a good model for leadership in today's business world. When you think about it, he had the vision to plan a strategy and gathered those around him with the talents and skill sets to accomplish his mission. When the crowds gathered to hear his meditations on the mount, Jesus used word pictures to describe his plan for a mission to guide us toward our ultimate destiny: the kingdom of God.

Jesus uses the imagery of salt and light to illustrate what is required to bring a broken and sinful world into reconciliation. We refer to someone as "salt of the earth" who is genuine, wholesome and without pretense. Though nutritionists caution against using too much salt in our diet, it was a necessary ingredient in ancient Palestinian life to use it both as a preservative and for seasoning. Jesus uses the further metaphor of when salt loses its savor it is rendered useless. He uses this to illustrate that if we lose our core purpose, we lose our usefulness.

To maintain our integrity as people of God, we must protect and preserve our core beliefs and standards. We live in a time of changing moral standards, making it all the more important to guard against reaching for the lowest common denominator as a standard for moral decision making. As salt acts as a preservative, we have to preserve what we believe is right and true against all that is wrong and false. We strive to bring out the best in each other while guarding against the worst in ourselves.

Another metaphor that Jesus uses is light. We are the light of the world. Rather than keep our light hidden, we focus it on the path to righteousness. The classic renaissance artists used their skill to focus light on and from their subjects. A masterpiece by the 16th century Flemish artist Jan Joest in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the Nativity with the Annunciation to the Shepherds. The light appears to originate from the Christ child and is reflected in the faces of his parents and the shepherds who came to see him. Rembrandt van Rijn's classic 17th century painting in the National Gallery of Art, The Descent from the Cross reveals a soft light that directs our attention on the lifeless body of Jesus being removed from the cross. Another light is directed on the face of Mary, his grieving mother. The brilliant artistry of both these classic paintings reminds us that God has a way of focusing on particular subjects who form the cast of characters in the great drama of redemption.

Salt and light remind us that our task as Christians is to preserve and generate the power of the light of Christ from within. In ancient times, an oil lamp was placed on a special stand to allow maximum light in the room. Salt is of no use if spoiled and light is of no use if kept hidden away. The light of Christ works in and through us to lead the way to the realization of God's kingdom that lies within us.

Jesus also uses the imagery of us as a city upon a hill. I recall that on a visit to the Holy Land, the day was overcast as we traveled outside the city of Jerusalem to a nearby hill. When I looked back, the clouds had parted to reveal a ray of sunshine shining brightly upon that ancient holy city. Jerusalem is sacred to Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions and serves as an inspiration in a conflicted world. If we are doing our job, we light the way for those who have lost their faith or who never had one. We light the way for those who yearn for more meaning in their lives.

During times of persecution, it was necessary for the early church to be a secret society in hiding. Much of the history of our nation involved those who fled religious persecution. We are a nation that guarantees religious freedom while maintaining strict separation of church and state. One of our great privileges is our freedom to practice our religious faith without interference. We are free to let our inner light shine that leads others to what has meaning in life. If we are effective servants and instruments of God's peace, we lift high the torch of Christ's light to be visible beyond our church doors and beyond Sunday morning. The light of Christ must be a beacon for the whole world.

The world also needs warning lights. We must stand against prejudice based on religion, nationality, color or gender. If you hear someone being run down and maligned for any reason, don't keep silent; don't hesitate to speak up, lest your silence implies agreement.

With the light of Christ within, we can be channels of God's grace for the weary and discouraged. I try to make a difference in a person's day by offering an encouraging word for the clerk behind the counter or the waiter at the table or the custodian working long hours for a bare minimum wage. The light of God's grace can be just as evident on the sports field as in the classroom or behind the wheel. It must also be evident in the language we use in everyday life. Letting Christ's light shine from within sets the pace and standard for others to follow.

Together, we can and must be a strong witness as a beacon of both warning and hope for the world. There are a myriad of ways that we can let Christ's light shine from within to let the world know that God's grace is alive and well. Let it also be a warning to all to preserve our fragile earth from rampant consumerism. Let it be a warning against all forms of prejudice and discrimination based on racial and gender supremacy. May our inner light shine brightly to illuminate the way for us to be a more just and compassionate people.