



A CITY ON A HILL

Matthew 5:14-16

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Today's message began with a list and a head-cold. Last Sunday evening was our March Bi-Annual Business Meeting as a church, and I was supposed to deliver this message at that point to the folks gathered there. But, as most of you know, I was at home, in bed, sick (so much so that by Sunday evening Ezra was wondering whether I was trying to grow a mustache; I hadn't shaved for several days!). So I was unable to deliver this message then, and decided to deliver it to the whole congregation this morning instead – which I trust, indeed, I believe, is God's good Providence.

Today's message also began as a list. Let me explain. For the past several months, I'd been developing a list of things I might address at our March Bi-Annual Meeting. By the time the meeting had arrived, the list had grown to over eighteen different items, with a number of headings and subheadings! So, as you can tell, there were, and are, lots of things on my mind related to the life and ministry of this church – and a lot of things I would like to say to you!

But as I began thinking and praying about how to bring this together into a single message, I decided it wouldn't do to simply dump on you my grocery list of interesting ministry ideas. Nor did I think it made sense to take this opportunity to explain some of the recent organizational changes that have taken place. Nor, furthermore, did I think this was the time to attempt to roll out some new strategic plan or five year goals. Rest assured, such things have definitely been on my mind! But, as my dad is fond of saying: "Todd, timing is everything in life." And today is not the right time to unfold new ministry strategies or goals.

Instead, what I would like to do in this message is something both simpler and more profound than doing any of the things just mentioned. What I would like to do is make one simple observation about this church, and then draw out one implication. That's all: one single observation. Yet I believe this one observation is singularly important for the life and ministry of this church.

The observation is this: *Calvary Memorial Church is a city on a hill.*

What is a City on a Hill?

We, as a church, are a city on a hill. As many will recognize, in calling us a city on a hill I am alluding to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where in that well-known portion of Matthew's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples: "You are the light of the world. *A city on a hill* cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house" (Matt. 5:14-15).

It's of course worth pointing out that Jesus spoke these words to his disciples. They were intended to provide not only the motivation, but a sense of identity to all who would follow after this King who had come in the flesh. So these words apply to every one of you who have taken up your cross and are seeking to live your life in obedience to King Jesus. You are the light of the world; you are a city on a hill. That's who you are by virtue of your allegiance to Jesus; that's your identity.

But I also think these words of Jesus can apply to whole *groups* of followers of Jesus. Not just an individual believer, but a whole group of believers – a church – can be a city on a hill. Jonathan Edwards, the great American pastor and theologian, helped me understand this. Over two-hundred and fifty years ago, at the onset of the First Great Awakening, a time of remarkable spiritual revival in America, Edwards preached a sermon from Matthew 5:14 to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, entitled, “A City on a Hill.” In that sermon, he describes the marks of a church that is a city on a hill. How do you know if a church, a particular group of followers of Jesus, is a city on a hill? Edwards identifies three marks of a city on a hill:

1. *A church is a city on a hill if it has a distinct faith.* And this in one of two ways. A church can have a distinct faith because of *what* it teaches; and a church can have a distinct faith because of *how* it teaches what it teaches. The first has to do with the doctrine: What does the church believe? What does it teach? What its doctrine? The second has to do with devotion: How intensely or fervently does it hold onto its beliefs? Of course, a church stands out as a city on a hill when it either preaches and teaches what other churches don't or when it's willing to stake its life on its teaching in a way other churches won't – or both!
2. *A church is a city on a hill if God has done something distinct in it.* Here Edwards is asking whether God has been at work in an unusual way within the life of the church. Is there evidence of God's hand of blessing in the life of the church? Do we have reason to think that God has poured out his grace in special measure upon a church? A church is a city on a hill, in Edwards' words, “when God appears in any very remarkable and very wonderful works amongst a people” (p. 543).
3. *A church is a city on a hill if it, or any of its members, has a distinct influence on others.* “A professing society,” writes Edwards, “is sometimes a city set on a hill on that account, by reason of the great and extensive influence that they have, or what is seen in them or heard of them has, on others” (p. 544). In a word: *impact*. Has the church, or its members, had a significant impact on others? If so, it is a city on a hill, a church with a distinct impact on those around it.

IS CALVARY MEMORIAL CHURCH A CITY ON A HILL?

So these are the three marks of a church that is a city on a hill, at least according to Edwards. And perhaps it goes without saying that I agree with him on this point – naturally, otherwise I wouldn't be taking you down this path!

But if this is a valid definition of a city on a hill, then the question becomes, in my mind, and I trust in yours as well: Are *we* a city on a hill? Is *Calvary Memorial Church* a city on a hill? And, if so, then *so what*?

The First Mark: A Distinct Faith

Let's take the first mark: a distinct faith. Do we have a distinct faith? Does our doctrine or our devotion to our doctrine cause us to stand out within this community and, in that sense, serve as a city on a hill?

Of the three marks of a city on a hill, I suspect this first mark will take the least amount of persuading. I think we all recognize the broader cultural shift that has taken place in the West in general, and in the United States in particular, over the last thirty years: a seemingly ever-increasing secularization, only compounded and somewhat confused with the onset of a postmodern outlook on life and society. Perhaps many of you are also aware of the related doctrinal or theological *drift* of many of the Christian churches around us, not just in Oak Park, but throughout the United States. Fifty years ago, Calvary would have been one of a number of solid, evangelical, Bible-believing and Bible-teaching churches in Oak Park and the near Western suburbs. But you will not be surprised to hear that things have changed rather dramatically over the past half-century. So, today, there are roughly 55 churches in Oak Park, and only two or three churches that could be described as solid Bible-believing and Bible-teaching churches. And if you were to expand the geographic radius, I think you would find you don't increase the percentage of churches with similar doctrinal commitments. In fact, that's why a number of you are here – because there *isn't* a Bible-believing and Bible-teaching church in your community. So you make the commute to Oak Park!

But let me illustrate this point with a concrete example. In January, I received the monthly newsletter from the Community of Congregations of Oak Park and River Forest, an ecumenical network of churches, synagogues and other faith communities committed to social action and social service. This particular issue described their 2008 Thanksgiving Interfaith Service. It illustrates well, I think, what I mean by the doctrinal and theological drift of so much of American Christianity over the past fifty years, drift in the direction of deemphasizing, if not simply denying, the core of historic Christian orthodoxy in order to be more ecumenical and pluralistic.

The theme for the Thanksgiving service was, "Grateful Hearts Giving Praise," and it was hosted at St. Edmund Parish. The service was then introduced by a United Methodist minister, and was followed by prayers from a Jewish rabbi, a Unitarian universalist, and a member of the Baha'i community. A Catholic priest then led those gathered in prayers from the Native American and animistic tradition. Finally, a Lutheran minister offered some words of reflection, and the service then closed.

I use this illustration not to mock what the Community of Congregations is trying to do; many good things for this community, no doubt. I use it as a way simply to demonstrate the point that if a church in this area boldly affirms that "there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" other than the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12), then this church would find itself – how shall we say it? – standing out because of its distinct faith.

The Second Mark: God Has Done Something Distinct in Our Midst

But how about the second mark. Here the question is: Has God done something distinct in Calvary Memorial Church? Is there evidence of God's hand of blessing in the life of the church?

Let me respond to this by taking a line or two from my predecessor, Dr. Ray Pritchard. At the March Bi-Annual of 1998, eleven years ago, he gave his “State of the Church” message entitled, “This Must Be the Place!” At that point, he’d been the pastor of Calvary for nine years. This is how he began that message:

Over these nine years together we have seen God do some amazing things in our midst. The church has expanded in almost every direction possible. We could talk about numbers or dollars or new ministries and in every case the report would show positive growth. Or we could talk about what really matters – changed lives – and there we would discover thousands of people touched by Jesus Christ through the local, national and worldwide outreach of this congregation.

Now some may find all this very interesting, but perhaps a bit too subjective to be very persuasive. Besides, wouldn’t ever church argue that God’s hand is distinctly at work in their midst? If you’re asking that question, you may be interested to know of an extensive study conducted by Thom Rainer of churches that had gone through periods of struggle and then sustained periods of remarkable growth and flourishing in ministry. The results of his study were published in his book, *Breakout Churches*, published in 2005. They began with a few key criteria for what constitutes a “breakout church,” a church where God seems to be significantly at work, then after surveying some 50,000 churches, they narrowed down the list to only thirteen that qualified. Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park was one of the thirteen that made the cut.

God has indeed been doing some amazing things in our midst – even, may I candidly say, after a three year interim, where admittedly there was some sense of a loss of momentum. But may I simply say, as still something of a newcomer, that God *continues* to do amazing things in our midst. And, I believe, God has in store many more amazing things for this church in the months and years ahead!

The Third Mark: We as a Church Have a Distinct Impact

Finally, the third mark of a city on a hill: *impact*. Does Calvary Memorial Church, or its members, have a significant impact in the lives of others?

Here, let me just point to a few very encouraging facts.

1. First, this church continues to draw not just from Oak Park, but from the entire near western suburbs: River Forest, Forest Park, Maywood, River Grove, Berwyn, Cicero, Elmwood Park, Melrose Park, Riverside, Lagrange Park, Oak Brook, even Wheaton!
2. Second, the church continues to attract diverse kinds of people. Not all are from one particular church background; we have Lutheran, Baptist, Brethren, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Catholic. Not all are Christian; some of you are seekers. Not all are middle class. Not all are upwardly-mobile middle class. Not all are white collar. Not all are blue collar. Not all are white. Not all are black or Asian or Hispanic. This is not an urban church, yet this is not a suburban church either. This is a church that is not easily pigeonholed or categorized. Could we be more diverse? Yes, of course. But are we as a church having an impact across the various divides of the American population? Yes, we are.

3. Third, the church continues getting younger and thus is reaching one of the least churched demographics in the country: those between the ages of 25-39. Did you know that of our registered visitors, over 60% are between the ages of 25-39?

These are just a few simple observations; others could be added. We would be remiss if we failed to mention the impact we are having not only in Chicago, but around the world. Just this week Pastor Howard Duncan, our pastoral liaison to our Missions Committee, copied me on a email response he sent to an individual asking about whether we might be able to partner with him and his family in their work in central Europe. Listen to what Pastor Howard said:

Thank you for your request concerning the possibility of creating a partnership with you. I want you to know that God has allowed Calvary Memorial Church to faithfully support missions from its beginning 93 years ago. Currently we are giving about 20% of our budget to missions. Last year the budget was \$332,000.00 that supports 43 different missionaries. We currently have missionaries in the pipe line for support.

Friends, these are promising indications of the impact we have had – and *continue* to have – as a church; not just locally in many hearts and homes and communities around the Chicago area, but literally around the globe.

So I trust that with these three marks, I have said enough to make the case that we as a church are a city on a hill. More importantly, I trust you yourself have seen enough in your time here at Calvary, whether that be long or short, to be convinced that this church is indeed a city on a hill.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CALVARY MEMORIAL CHURCH BEING A CITY ON A HILL?

At this point, however, you may be wondering about the significance of all of this. If we are a city on a hill, then *so what?* So let's move from the one observation, to the one implication of being a city on a hill.

But let me begin by stating the implication negatively. To be a city on a hill is not *a privilege to be enjoyed*. This is not some feather in our cap, something to take pride in or boast about. Much less is it something to begin advertising to the community with an ad, for example, in the Wednesday Journal: "Visit the only city on a hill in near western suburbs this Sunday." No, to be a city on a hill is not some status symbol to revel in or a privilege to enjoy.

To be a city on a hill is also not *a decision to be made*. It's not something we resolve in our own minds to become or strive after, even though it's often thought of in that way. It's not a resolution to pass at a Bi-Annual meeting or a new ministry strategy to implement or a strategic goal.

Do you know the children's song, "This Little Light of Mine"?

This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
Oh, this little light of mine

I'm going to let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
Let it shine, all the time, let it shine

And then the rousing and response stanza we all no doubt love to sing:

Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm going to let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm going to let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No!
I'm going to let it shine
Let it shine, all the time, let it shine.

That's a great, peppy song, isn't it? The only problem is that it misses the point of the passage. Jesus is quite emphatic about the fact that as a follower of him, you *are* the light of the world; you *are* a city on a hill. And, as he says, "A city on a hill *cannot* be hidden" (5:14). There's no hiding your light under a bushel, as though you can be a follower of Jesus and not let your light shine. Instead, the only two options are this: you either follow Jesus as a city on a hill and let your light shine, or you fail to follow Jesus.

To be a city on a hill as a church, then, is not a privilege to enjoy or a decision to be made. Rather, to put it positively, to be a city on a hill is *a calling to embrace* and *a responsibility to steward*. This is something *God does*, not us, and something God does *to us* and *through us*, not something we strive to be or do for ourselves. It is a reality by virtue of the sovereign call of God upon the life of this community and the sovereign work of God within this community. We simply are a city on a hill. And this means, as Jesus says, it is our responsibility, by virtue of this calling upon our life together as a church, "to let our light shine before men that they may see our good deeds and glorify our father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

CONCLUSION

A city on a hill. That's our calling as a church. And to let the light of our lives, as individuals and as a body, shine before others that they may see our good deeds and glorify God. That's our responsibility as a church.

How do we steward this calling and discharge this responsibility to the best of our ability? That's a great question. But that's a question we're not going to hit head-on in this message. Instead, my aim, as you'll remember, was to set before you this one simple observation, a simple observation that is, I believe, singularly important.

As many of you know, we as a church have not always been in this location and with this name, Calvary Memorial Church. No, our congregation used to be located south of here, on Madison Street, and went by the name Madison Street Bible Church. We were there until the building burnt down on July 10, 1977, leaving the church without a facility. What a tragic loss!

Or was it so tragic after all? Rather, was it perhaps, in the words of the great hymn by William Cowper, a "frowning providence that hides a smiling face." For little over a year later, Madison Street Bible Church found itself in negotiations to buy a beautiful

and strategically located building occupied for over three-quarters of a century by the First Presbyterian Church of Oak Park, located here at 931 Lake Street, not only on the highest point in Oak Park – and, in fact, on the Continental Divide itself – but also in the very center of Oak Park, which is in the center of Chicago, which is in the center of the United States!

A city on a hill cannot be hidden!

So, Calvary Memorial Church, let us hear the call of the Lord Jesus Christ:

You are the light of the world. We are a city on a hill. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they – that is, God - puts it on its stand, here in this beautiful facility, in this strategic location, in the center of Oak Park, in the center of Chicago, in the center of the United States. And this lamp gives light to everyone in Oak Park and beyond. In the same way, then, Calvary Memorial Church, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Amen.