

A City on a Hill

Matthew 5.1-2, 13-16

All Saints Sunday
November 1, 2009

What is to give light must endure the burning.
- Viktor Frankl

The Reading

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said... "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage." Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. (*The Message*)

You may have noted that we read today from *The Message*, a modern vernacular paraphrase of the bible. I chose this version to make a point. Too often we read this familiar passage as a threat. Be light, or else! we hear God saying; a surly God, scowling over our shoulders, waiting for an occasion to punish the slightest misstep. This, however, is not Jesus' intent, which I think is captured in the relaxed, intimate, and even whimsical manner of his speech in *The Message*. His intent, that is to say, is not to threaten, but to invite. His intent is not to hold punishment over our heads, but to entice us out into the open with the promise of light and joy, and the opportunity to share them with others. What a difference!

Can you hear the celebrative, playful mood of Jesus' speech? God is all light, wonder, and joy, Jesus implies, and God has woven all these savory God flavors and God colors into the very fabric of creation. You can be light! Jesus says. Just open your eyes, walk in the light to

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absorb its colors, and you too can be a light for others. Make no mistake, this passage presents us with a wonderful, joyous invitation to shine, and that is what I want to celebrate today. On this All Saints Sunday I want to celebrate the Christian Community, sometimes called church, as a city on a hill, poised and ready to bring out all the God flavors and God colors in the world. At least that was my intent until I came across the citation from Victor Frankl that graces our bulletin today. What is to give light must endure the burning. Boy, did he ever rain on my parade! What is this burning we must endure before we can shine? What is the painful prelude to joy and celebration that we must endure? It seems to me that we have to answer these questions before we can proceed to the celebration.

I would dare wager that whatever burning we must endure - whatever initiation, preparation, testing, or rite of passage we must endure before we can shine – will be meager in comparison to the burning Frankl endured. I don't know how much you know about Viktor Frankl. He was a European Jew, one among millions incarcerated by the Third Reich and sent to a death camp where he was beaten, threatened, and tortured to within an inch of his life. He managed to survive by learning the only lesson possible in such a grim situation. At some point he realized that despite their efforts to strip away his humanity, to reduce him to a brut ripe for slaughter, they would not, they could not succeed. If nothing else, Frankl realized, his suffering or even his death would be his and his alone. Try as they may, they could not strip away his suffering, and he realized that if this is so, they could not ultimately strip away his humanity.

Frankl survived on the strength of this realization, and went on to a noted career in the psychological sciences, and I sincerely hope that the burning we must endure as a prelude to light will be nothing compared to his suffering at the hands of the Nazis. He almost became a holy martyr. Had he done so, perhaps we would add his name to the list of honored deceased we recognize on this day. Originally a celebration of martyrs for the faith, All Saints has been expanded several times; firstly to include all the Saints of the church – both named and unnamed – and, secondly, in our day to include all deceased Christians; those who have gone before us, yet are still a part of God's church. We are here because of them. We stand on their broad, strong shoulders. They molded us in faith, they modeled lives of courage and joy; so we remember them in gratitude on this day, and commend them into the loving embrace of God.

We remember them on this day, sometimes through tears, because we miss them so. I love All Saints because it gives me an opportunity to remember my mama and daddy. I still love and miss them so, and it is a comfort to ask God to bless 'em, hug 'em, love 'em; and to remind them of my love.

All Saints is a day to envision the full scope of God's church. It is truly universal, and includes past, present, and future. It includes those who have gone before us, and those who will follow in our steps. It's bigger than our faith community, God's church; it's bigger than our generation, or all generations woven together as one. We have received the light of God's love from those who walked before us, and it is our calling to preserve and pass on that light to those who are to come.

This calling offers a clue to the burning we must endure, a clue to the preparation we must experience before we can shine. We have been called to preserve the legacy of light for the generations that follow us. Will we? Can we? It won't happen spontaneously; we have to decide. We have to decide if we *will* be light and seasoning, if we *will* pass on the ability to taste all the flavors of God's creation and to savor its colors.

We have to prepare for such a mission. We have to be ready to shine. We have to endure a preparatory burning; yet while the idea itself makes perfect sense to me, I'm not sure what it might include. So many things come into my spirit when I think about what it might mean to endure the burning. Could that mean, for example, that we are to burn with passion for a world that desperately needs light? Could it mean that we are to burn with righteous indignation, and lash out at those who hurl slings and arrows at the church? Or, could it mean that we are to find ourselves awed by the presence of God like Isaiah; to be seared by the sheer holiness of God; to be touched and transformed by God's presence?

Do you remember Isaiah's experience? He imaged the burning fire of the Holy as hot coals that burned his lips and transformed his spirit; so much so that when God asked whom could be sent to serve, Isaiah responded without hesitation; send me. Perhaps becoming more like God through spiritual transformation; perhaps walking more intimately with God; perhaps seeking our way more deeply into the faith; perhaps this is the burning by which we will be prepared to shine.

Then again, maybe the burning has to do with the refiner's fire that is so celebrated in scripture. Perhaps the gold within must be cleansed of the worthless metal in which it is hidden; our spirits purified and purged of all impurities. Again, it could refer to the separation of sheep and goats in the church. Surely we could shine if we could only get rid of the hypocrites, the hangers on, those along only for the ride, interested only in what the church can do for them.

While there is something to the notion of personal purification as a prelude to shining; Matthew would never agree that our preparation as a church involves expelling the goats from our midst. In his estimation, the church has always been and will always be a mixture of sheep and goats. If we are to be a city on a hill, if we are to shine, it will be with the rich and imperfect diversity that makes up the church. Perhaps it is in reaching out to each other despite our imperfections that the church becomes a city on a hill. Perhaps it is in modeling lives of compassion and justice that recognize the image of God in all that causes us to shine.

There are many things our burning might be; this preparation we must experience if we are to be light. I am not anxious to decide between them, because they will occur in due course if only we are *willing*. And this is my point; the prospect of enduring our holy burning is more a question to be pondered than an answer to be sought. The prospect of enduring our holy burning raises for us a crucial question: are we willing to shine? Are we willing to be a city on a hill? Are we willing to pass on color and flavor to the generations that are yet to come? If we are willing, we must be intentional about it. We have to say yes to God; we have to accept the mantle of light, grow in its illuminating warmth, and let it shine!

So let's make no further effort at defining our holy burning; let's struggle with the prior and all-consuming question; are we willing to shine? We need to grapple with this question over time; we need to grapple intentionally with this question; we need to discuss it openly and honestly, and in time grasp the vision God has for us, and the courage it takes to live into it.

Our faith community has reached a stage of life at which courage might be necessary. If we are to bequeath color and flavor to generations to come, there will be challenges, difficulties, and obstacles in our way. There is a consensus among many religious consultants that the natural life span of a church is sixty years. I came across this claim in a book recently,

and how do you think it made me feel? Me, the pastor of a church poised to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary in less than a year. What should we do, close the doors next year? Should we follow our anniversary celebration with a wake? Should we turn off the lights, lock the doors, and walk away?

Some might be tempted to answer, yes. We've had quite a history of nurturing children, reaching into the broader community with compassion, even taking stands for justice and equality that others couldn't, or wouldn't take. Maybe we should close the doors. And Lord knows we've experienced our share of adversity. We're sixty now, it's time for somebody else to pick up the torch; time for somebody else to be courageous; time for someone else to keep the flame alive to pass on to later generations.

Some might be tempted to answer, yes; but not me. Average life spans, even if correct, are statistics; and we are not a statistic, we are a vital, living community of faith. It is true that the first generation of any movement, any institution flows more easily, more smoothly. But that doesn't mean one should give up the spirit at sixty like clockwork. We do face unique challenges in our day. We're living through the most radical change in faith's terrain since the Protestant Reformation. No one yet sees how we're going to come out at the other end, but we will emerge. The church will emerge at the end of this stressful period; we simply have to decide if this church – this unique faith community – will be among the courageous, the faithful.

Perhaps the days of fluidity and easy growth are behind us; perhaps we will have to work harder to discern God's vision for our ministry and to attract others to the cause. We have to deal with an aging facility sorely in need of the three R's: repair, replacement, and restoration. And dealing with only a part of these needs is not an option. A vital faith community requires not only an intact facility – warm, safe, and dry - it requires a facility whose beauty reflects the pride and respect we have for God, and the value we attach to what we so easily call good news. We have to overcome a growing number of fixed income givers to address these challenges; and, after all, there is only so much blood that can be squeezed from a turnip.

There are and will be challenges to our ministry; we only have to decide if we have the will to follow God into the future; we have to decide if we have the will to bequeath color and

flavor to subsequent generations; we have to decide if we have the will to shine as a beacon; to be a city on a hill. I've made my personal decision. I was called to be the pastor of a city on a hill; period, end of story. Yet mine is but one voice in what must be a community decision. We have to make an intentional decision to be God's city on a hill; not for sixty years, but for sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three and beyond. Future generations will need holy color and flavor no less than we; but they must be attracted first to the flame; they must be attracted to a city on a hill.