



A CITY ON A HILL

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado — Sunday, June 7, 2024

Matthew 5:14-16: You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Prayer:

O God whose grace surrounds us, whose love enfolds us, whose life feeds us,

As we prepare to hear the preached word,

open our eyes, so we may only see you,

open our ears, so we may hear your voice,

open our minds, so we may grow in understanding of you and one another,

and open our hearts, so your word may dwell richly within us.

I pray especially that you will empty me of myself, so that I may be filled with you.

And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Since this appointment was announced, I have been praying and thinking about what would be an appropriate word to share with you on our first Sunday together. Mary Kate and I met some weeks ago for worship planning, and after our conversation, conversations with the staff, and time with our leadership team, the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount began to ring in my heart. In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see **the good things** you **do** and praise your Father who is in heaven."

This month, in our worship, we are exploring the theme "Light of the World," inspired by these words of Jesus. I think this is an appropriate start for us, especially as we approach the 70th anniversary of our church. I know brother Jeff Bibb has begun to organize a team and I am looking forward to this wonderful celebration. As we approach this wonderful milestone, it is good for us to ask ourselves, "where is the light?"

Since we moved into the parsonage, one of the things I have really enjoyed is watching the sunrise from our back deck. There is something special about the first light of day, when all of nature, as if in a collective sigh of relief, welcomes the dawn of a new morning. The landscape transforms at that moment—the darkness fades, colors emerge, and the world comes alive with possibilities.

But here's what struck me the most: now that we live in a place with much less light pollution than Nashville and Hendersonville, we've come to appreciate how profoundly darkness can enhance our appreciation of light. Stepping into our backyard at night, the darkness envelops us, and initially, we see nothing. Yet, as our eyes adjust, faint outlines emerge, and even the smallest flicker of light from a back porch, cellphone, or a single star becomes significant. It's a reminder that light, no matter how small, dispels darkness and reveals what was once hidden.

Jesus, in his teachings, often used the imagery of light to convey profound truths about the Kingdom of God. Here, in Matthew 5:14, he tells his followers, "You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden." I don't quite remember when I first heard this text, but from a very young age, I had a practical understanding of these words. For the past almost 50 years, my parents have lived in the same house right outside the city of Rio de Janeiro. Their community is a somewhat natural stopping point between the mountains and the sea. From their house, on a clear day, you can see the mountain range where the Imperial City is located—a city constructed by the second Brazilian emperor in the early 1800's to escape the heat of Rio. But at night, when darkness falls, with the naked eye, you can see the city lights, even though their house is some 40 miles away from the city.

Jesus, when he told his followers, "You are the light of the world," was not merely speaking in metaphorical terms. Light, especially in times of profound darkness, symbolizes hope and provides guidance. It serves as a universal symbol of clarity, truth, and revelation, dispelling shadows, alleviating fears, and revealing paths once obscured. As Jesus began his ministry among a people oppressed and burdened by generations of hardship and uncertainty, he underscored the pivotal role and the high standard expected of those who chose to follow him: to be bearers of light—to illuminate the way forward, to embody truth amidst confusion, and to radiate God's love which brings forth newness and transformation to a world in need.

If we move back for a moment and trace the timeline of the Gospel of Matthew beyond the birth narrative in chapters 1 and 2, we encounter John the Baptist, who called the people to prepare themselves to encounter the coming Messiah (Matthew 3:1-12). We then see Jesus come to John for

baptism, and immediately after, he is led into the wilderness (Matthew 3:13-4:11). Emerging from the wilderness, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee and walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee he called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him (Matthew 4:18-22). He taught, healed, and continued to minister throughout Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan (Matthew 4:23-25).

However, here, in chapter 5, we witness a pivotal moment: Jesus pauses to teach uninterrupted. Here, he imparts essential lessons to his disciples about faithfully following the path that leads to life. Jesus challenges his followers not only to speak about their faith but to embody it as living examples to the world (Matthew 5:1-12). You may be familiar with some of these words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers...” (Matthew 5:3-9). Jesus begins to teach and re-orient his followers to a new way of thinking and living—calling them to see one’s personal life as a gift to communal living. Jesus is inviting his followers into a transformative journey of faith that impacts both an individual’s character and the social dynamics they may find themselves in.

This call challenges us to live out our faith in tangible ways. It urges us to move beyond mere words and to embody a new reality that bears witness to the transformative power of God in our lives. It invites us to be living answers to the question, “where is the light?”

As United Methodists, we should resonate deeply with this concept. God’s grace in our lives invites us to respond in ways that reflect our surrender to the all-encompassing love of God, we have found in Jesus Christ and our understanding that we are not meant to live in isolation. Grace, as described by United Methodist theologian Steve Harper, is “merciful love, aimed at nothing other than incorporating the [us] recipient into the body of Christ.”¹ It is unearned, undeserved, and limitless. Grace humbles us as it shifts our focus away from ourselves and onto the One who sacrificed everything for us and for those whom he has entrusted to our care for the journey.

Sometimes, it can be challenging to discern whether our lives, witness, and actions truly impact the world around us. Yet, the essence of Christ’s invitation to us is not about certainty but about being and doing—being the light and doing good works. Howard Thurman, one of my favorite theologians, shares a

¹ Steve Harper, “Grace” in Keith Beasley-Topliffe, *The Upper Room Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation* (p. 122). Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition.

poignant story from his biography that illustrates this beautifully. Thurman, growing up in Daytona Beach, FL, during a time of deep segregation, faced a pivotal moment when he completed 8th grade. With only three schools in Florida accepting African American students at the time, Thurman had to travel nearly 100 miles to Jacksonville for school. He packed his belongings in an old trunk secured with a rope, only to find out at the train station that it couldn't be accepted unless properly secured with a handle, per regulations. Distraught and without means for express shipping, Thurman sat in despair until a stranger approached him. This unnamed man, moved by Thurman's plight, inquired about the situation, then, without hesitation, walked Thurman to the ticket counter, purchased the necessary express shipping ticket, handed it to him, and quietly walked away.² Thurman may have never learned the name of the stranger, but this person made such a deep impact on his life that in his autobiography's dedication page, Thurman writes, "To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago."³

What does it mean to be a light to the world here in our community of faith? I have learned that here at Hilldale, being the light means showing hospitality to newcomers like my family has experienced, offering care and support to those in need through the F.U.E.L. ministry and the Good Neighbor Fund. It means actively seeking ways to positively impact locally and globally through Project Transformation, Urban Ministries, Disaster Response, Operation Christmas Child, Boy Scouts, FCA, and many other ministries. I have learned that here at Hilldale, being the light means standing up for justice, advocating for the marginalized, and embodying the values of compassion and humility that Jesus taught us.

But being the light also means recognizing that our light is not our own—it originates from the source of all light, God Himself. It's God's love shining through us that transforms lives and brings healing to brokenness. How is God's light shining through your life? Where is the light in you?

For almost 70 years, we have been the church on the hill, sharing God's light with the people of Clarksville. But, don't be mistaken; while we have a beautiful campus and wonderful facilities, Hilldale is represented through our actions. God's light shines through the way we live and through the things we do. By we, I mean the people who gather in this space—physically or virtually. The light of God shines through handshakes, hugs, cards, calls, gifts, offerings, prayers, visits, time in service, opportunities to read to children, share a meal with a new friend, extend grace to a stranger, and much more. Our role as

² Full narrative can be found in Thurman, Howard. *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (pp. 24-25). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition.

³ *Ibid.* (p. 2).

those who carry God's light out in the world also calls us to live with humility and gratitude, knowing that it is God who empowers and guides us in this work.

How can we shine the light more brightly from his hill? Beloved, as we journey together, let us continually seek to shine brightly in a world that often feels dark and uncertain. Let us be intentional about nurturing and sharing our light with others, knowing that even the smallest acts of kindness and love can have a profound impact.

Just as we witness the sunrise casting away darkness and revealing the beauty of creation, so too are we called to dispel shadows and reveal God's love in our community. In Matthew 5, Jesus invites us into a transformative journey where our lives become testimonies to God's grace and love. We are called not just to speak of our faith but to embody it in every action, every interaction, and every decision we make.

May God's light continue to shine through each of us, and may we always be mindful of the light within us and others. Therefore, let us go forth from this place, committed to being a light to the world, sharing God's love wherever we go.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.