

February 9, 2020 – Matthew 5:13-20

There's a legend among the people who live on the islands of the Mediterranean. I heard about it when I was over there some years ago. The legends concerns the appearance of their houses.

If you've ever seen a picture of the coastal homes in Italy or the Greek Isles, you know that they're rather distinctive. Scattered along the seaside cliffs and made of brick, clay, and plaster, they are known best for their vivid, whitewashed exteriors and sapphire blue rooftops. Such that, if you're on a cruise ship, like I was, they pop out from the surrounding sandstone like little white pearls.

Now, most would say this is just good architecture. The white walls reflect the sunlight, keeping the interior cool and comfortable all day long. But as the legend goes, it has nothing to do with anything so practical. Because, supposedly, up until just a couple centuries ago, those home were never painted white like that. They were left completely unpainted. Remaining the exact same color as the earth around them.

Why? Well, because of pirates. The Mediterranean used to be full of them. And a brightly colored home sitting on the coast was a tempting target for any ship that happened to sail by and see it. And so they camouflaged their houses. Made them invisible from the sea. And avoided attack.

But after the pirates were driven out of the Mediterranean in the 19th century – thanks in large part, to the U.S. Navy, actually – the islanders were free from the threat of pirates. And, in celebration, they boldly whitewashed their homes. So that every ship that sailed by could see them and know that they were no longer afraid.

I was reminded of this story by something that Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today. “*A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.*” You see, the people of Jesus' day faced a similar problem to the Greek Isles in the 17th and 18th centuries. They may not have had to deal with pirates in ships. But they still had plenty of bandits and brigands. Often traveling in large numbers.

And so people had two choices. Do what the islanders did and camouflage their homes. Stay out of sight. Stay off the radar. And hope the thieves don't notice you. Or, do the exact opposite. Whitewash your walls. Let your lights shine. And pray that the city's defenses are heavy enough. Your gates strong enough. Your militia powerful enough. That when the attack comes you come out of it unharmed.

That's a choice every city had. Unless they were a city on a hill. The top of a hill was a great place to put a city. You could fortify it better than any other location. You could see danger coming for miles. Jerusalem itself was a city set on a hill. And it was rarely conquered.

But a city on a hill cannot be hidden. For a resident of the city, that's not one of your choices. Just as someone in the city can see for miles. So also, someone outside the city can see it from miles away. And there is nothing you can do about it. If you live in a city on a hill, you will be seen.

Alright. Fair enough. What does that have to do with anything? Well, it goes toward Jesus' overall message here. You are the light of the world. I'm sure you're all familiar with the verse. We've all sung the song. This little, light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...

OK, so we've heard it before. But do we know what it means? I'm not sure we do. Because more often than not, I've heard this passage used as a sort of rallying cry. The Newsboys and their song “Shine”: “Shine / Make 'em wonder what you've got / Make 'em wish that they were not / On the outside, looking bored / Shine / Let it shine before all men / Let'em see good works and then / Let 'em glorify the Lord.” President Reagan did a similar thing in his farewell speech: “We will be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

It's easy to look at this as a pep talk. Something to get us fired up to shine brighter. And there's some truth to that. Jesus is definitely encouraging us to be lights to the world. But if we leave it at only that, we might miss both the great blessing and the great warning that Jesus is giving us here.

You are the light of the world. That's not an instruction. That's not a suggestion. That's not a command. It's a statement. A fact. A reality.

You are the light of the world. Present tense. It's your current state of being. If you wanted to be something other than the light of the world... well, sorry. It's too late for that. You're already down the rabbit hole.

To his disciples then, Jesus is saying, "Look, you already followed me up onto this mountain. You've already sat here listening to me preach. My light is already inside of you."

To his disciples now, Jesus is saying the same thing, "Look, you already went through Sunday School and Confirmation. You already showed up to church this morning. You've already sat here singing and reading and listening to my Word. My light is already inside of you."

You are the light of the world. You are a city on a hill. My lamp is already burning in your home. My love and grace and salvation have already cleansed you of your sins. My Spirit is already dwelling inside of you. And nothing will change that.

So what now? Because a city on a hill cannot be hidden. You're a fool to even try. A lamp burning in a home is never covered up with a basket. Only an idiot would do that.

You are the light of the world. People are going to see you. They are going to see your light. They are going to see the Spirit of God dwelling inside of you.

And sometimes, that's going to make you a target. It's going to put a bullseye on you chest. It's going to make you a whitewashed home on the coast. It's going to make you a city on a hill. There are going to be people who see you and say, "They look like they have something valuable. Let's attack them"

They have hope. Let's hit them with despair. They have faith. Let's fill them with doubt. They have joy. Let's bury them in sorrow. As Jesus said just a few verses before this and as we heard last week, *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

Once upon a time, there were prophets who carried the light of the Lord. And they were killed for it. Now we carry the light of the Lord. It's enough to make you want to hide your faith. Darken your light under a basket. Maybe they won't see it. Maybe they won't attack. But no, that just makes you look like a fool.

Try to disguise your faith under a basket of sin and worldliness, and all that will happen is that you'll get a lot of people asking you, "Aren't you supposed to be a Christian? I didn't think Christians behaved that way." As Peter well knew, denying Christ doesn't take him out of your heart.

In a weird way, it might be easier if it did. Then you wouldn't feel so guilty. But no, he sticks around. He still loves you. He still forgives you. And, sometimes, that makes your shame all the greater.

The truth of the matter is, a city on a hill cannot be hidden. So you're better off just letting your light shine. It's a gift from your Father in heaven. A blessing that brings hope and faith and joy into your heart.

And yes, they may attack you for it. They may revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely. But they cannot take away your reward in heaven.

And after they're done. After their arrows are used up. And their spears broken. And their swords dull. That's when you turn the other cheek. You invite them in. You let them see your good works. And watch as they give glory to your Father in heaven.

Because what you have is valuable. It is of greater worth than all the treasures of the earth combined. In a world of despair, there is nothing more precious than hope. In a world of doubt, there is nothing more costly than faith. In a world of sorrow, there is nothing more beautiful than joy.

In a world of darkness, there's nothing more valuable than light. You are the light of the world. And no one can take that away. Amen.