

## **"Hold the Light"**

A Message for the Celebration of 150 years of Ministry at  
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, July 21, 2024

Texts: Luke 9: 57-62 and Matthew 5: 1-16

"You are the light of the world!" - Matthew 5: 14a

What a celebration! One hundred and fifty years and counting that this congregation has been in ministry in Gaylord. Most of those years right in this place, we have celebrated worship and encouraged one another to carry to the light of Christ into the world. We've had amazing times together. We've had rough times together. We've had major conflicts, and stunning successes. To think that this church, never more than 200 members, could have impacted this community the way we have in those 150 years is extraordinary. Contrary to popular belief, it's not about how big a congregation one has, but the impact. And for a group never larger than 200, we sure have made an impact.

I don't want to get into naming names because I'll forget someone, but just look around the city of Gaylord and Otsego County, and you'll see some of the same names that adorn the walls of this sanctuary, and certainly have graced her pews. It's been a glorious past in so many ways. And through it all, God has been more than faithful to this congregation and it's people. And we, in response, have

been faithful to God's calling.

The remainder of Jesus' words about the light of the world read like this:

A town built 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. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Parent in heaven (Matthew 5: 14b-16).

Take a moment with the imagery. A town built on a hill. A lamp on a nightstand (think oil lamp). Your own light. Those are all pretty small in comparison to the whole world, don't you think? How does Jesus put together you are the light of the world, with images so small? I think it is a key to where we've come from and where we're going.

Father Richard Rohr in his book we've been using during this series, *Jesus'*

*Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, writes:

We needn't be the mountaintop, the city, the whole house. We're simply that which shines on the mountaintop, which illuminates the house. We're not the whole loaf of bread, we're just the leaven. We're not the whole meal, we're not the broccoli, mashed potatoes or roast beef; we're just the salt (we'll talk about that more next week!), and our shared and loving God is the banquet, the mountain, and the focus of all praise. (p144)

Back in 1874, I'm not sure people were so worried about the size of churches as they are today. Yes, they had to pay the bills, and they wanted to reach as many people as possible. But today, I think we've become over-focused on the mega-church, which really originated in the 1980s, or the big church with

the big staff and the big budget. However you slice it, bigger became better.

We also over focused on reaching the young people. Don't get me wrong, nothing is better in any community -- let alone the church -- than the sound of children. But the church growth experts (which was as much about survival as growth) thought you had to be big, young, and flush with cash to do God's work. Make no mistake, I'm not bashing those churches. In fact, I once felt that a lot of church growth strategies were good ideas, and I too, for a while, thought bigger and younger was better.

The truth is that God's work can and does happen anywhere. But if you follow Jesus, you'll see that he never talked about being bigger. In fact, most all of his images were modest. Some have said that Jesus "never expected the whole world to follow him (Rohr, p144)." But here is what he did tell the disciples, "I've given you great truth, I want you to hold the light and the leaven in the middle of the world. As light or leaven, it will do its work, and God's purposes will be achieved." Father Rohr tells us, "What relaxed and patient trust Jesus has in God! (p145)"

What a novel idea in much of the church. Rather than our own size, success and ego-driven self-flagellation in the name of Jesus, maybe we could be relaxed

and patient, trusting God to help us with the rest. Think about how leaven and light work. A lamp set on a stand really doesn't light much. Those oil lamps are even tough to read by. And yet, when someone chooses to read by the light of the lamp, what can happen? When people gather around that same light, or a campfire, or the fireplace in a home, maybe there isn't light everywhere, but the warmth of the light and the community formed around it can lead God only knows where!

This congregation, for all of its history, has never been large. Some people drive by and don't see our small building, or see the activity that happens here. There aren't thousands of people watching our livestream this morning. But at the same time, what light has been shared from this congregation that has reached all the way around the world? What lives have we touched who have gone on to make great contributions to humanity? What young people we served in Detroit, or overseas, or somewhere else, have gone on to do great things that we'll never know about? You see the point is not how large we are, or what human accolades we receive. What matters is the impact. The light and the leaven may not even be remembered, but the impact was made anyway. There wasn't press coverage, but the difference was made. There wasn't a movie made, but lives were touched. For Jesus, it's not about the movie, but about the love

that was carried forth.

Father Rohr continues:

The Church has always been the most effective, I think, when it has been in a minority or even persecuted position. The Spirit works best underground, when we work from the bottom. Jesus surely never intended Christendom to be gospel imposed by law and government and majority status....Jesus says we are a mere mustard seed, we are leaven, we are the pearl of great price, we are a hidden treasure in a field.

Jesus is quite content, it seems, with such a humble position.

So as we celebrate, consider how this small place has had such an impact on so many throughout the years. From founding a community, to remaining faithful and loving throughout the years, to a future that is again our opportunity to be that light like a town on a hillside. Not a neon, flashing light, but a light that says, "Come! Enter. Welcome. Love. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey."

Maybe we could have a few more people along the way who write something like what Mary Peterman wrote not too long ago. She's pretty new here, but I wonder if she's captured some of what we aim to be. A place of love, community, grace and inclusion. Happy Anniversary, church! Let's end this message with Mary's poem, "Our Home Church."

We have attended many churches in the past,

Our attendance did not last.  
In each one, we tried to find acceptance in God's home,  
Where grace and love eternally roam.  
In this church, we've finally found,  
A place where God's love and acceptance abound.  
This church feels like our true home,  
With God's love and our church family,  
We're never alone.

Alleluia! Amen.