

“A City Built on a Hill”

a sermon by

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Text: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14).

The current issue of *Newsweek Magazine* carries a piece by George Will entitled “Now, Defining Decency Down.” In this article Will speaks to an issue that plagues our society today, the continued corruption in our national political life. He cites, as illustrations, the case of Larry Craig, the disgraced United States Senator, who was arrested in the Minneapolis airport for soliciting sex in a men’s restroom. He cites as well the now resigned Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, who also disgraced himself as head of the Justice Department of the United States Government. In his departing remarks Gonzales noted that his worst day in the Justice Department was far superior to that of his father who was a day laborer and first generation American. That seemed a strange statement. His father had raised eight children and had supported a family without being hounded out of a job.

I.

In Matthew’s Gospel there is a short section that follows immediately after The Beatitudes that form the first part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). In this section Jesus describes discipleship in terms of three very powerful metaphors: “salt,” “light,” and a “city set on a hill.”

Salt was essential for life in Palestine. In the days before refrigeration, it was a powerful preserver of food as well as giving flavor to it.

Light was also essential to everyday life in Palestine. In the small mud houses in which most people lived there were small oil lamps that provided the only light the house. Jesus noted that when a lamp was lit, it was put on a lamp stand, so that it could give off light. A lamp hidden under a bushel could not give off light.

The third image is that of a city set on a hill. Jesus noted if a city was built on a hill, it was visible to all. If a city was built in a valley, it could be hidden.

All three of these images point to the imperative of discipleship as a witness to the world and all three remind us of the essential nature and mission of the church. So the question I want to raise this morning concerns the mission of First Presbyterian Church and what makes that mission distinctive.

II.

The first distinctive element of our mission is the emphasis on God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ. The Presbyterian or Reformed faith has always been distinguished by its emphasis on God's sovereignty and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Salvation in the Presbyterian Church is not an activity of the church or of individuals. It is an activity of God to which the church bears witnesses. The evangelist Dwight L. Moody once told of a man who came up to him after a worship service. The man was the "town drunk" who was in a slight stage of inebriation when he approached Dr. Moody. He said to Moody, "Dr. Moody, don't you remember me? You saved me at one of your revival services." Moody, looking at the man who was obviously in a state of some disarray, "You look like something I would have saved."

The point is this: We don't save people. This is God's activity, and because God is both gracious and free, God is able to call unto himself those whom he chooses. The central task of this church, of any church, is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that is lost. When the Book of Order speaks of the "Great Ends of the Church" the first of these "Great ends" is the "proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind."

Presbyterian theology has often been described as "Theocentric." The central theme of our faith is not the plight of humankind, not even Jesus Christ, but God, who is the creator of all that is and who was uniquely present in Jesus Christ.

This insistence that the object of our faith is the Triune God has been a defining characteristic of our church and is evident in all that we do. In our worship, we focus not on entertainment or making people comfortable, but on pointing people to the God who is creator, redeemer, and sustainer. In our hymns we do not focus on sentimentality or even on the feelings of the worshipper but rather point people to the God who is the center of our worship. Likewise, Presbyterian theology has demonstrated little sympathy with charismatic movements or even the introspective analysis of one's own psyche. There are many people today who can benefit greatly from therapy, but all of us need redemption from sin and death.

III.

The second distinctive aspect of our mission as a "city set on a hill" is the insistence of excellence in all that we do as a church. One of the ministers who had a huge impact on my life was Dr. James A. Jones, who for many years was the minister of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte before becoming the President of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. I am quite sure I have never been associated with the head of an institution that commanded the respect that James Jones commanded. He was respected by the faculty, the board

of Trustees, and the students as well. When I was a senior at Davidson College, Dr. Jones visited me and told me that he wanted me to come to Union Seminary. He made it pretty plain to me that this was not an invitation, but a command.

James Jones, in many ways, was a Southern Aristocrat. He was born to a very wealthy family and he was as comfortable in the presence of great wealth as he was in the presence of great poverty. He was not only committed to theological education, but to the world wide mission of the church. His life in many ways embodied the words of a great Missionary, William Carey, who once said, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."

James Jones was man who appreciated quality. He believed that quality was a human virtue. "If you cannot go first class," I heard him say on a number of occasions, "do not go." He was more interested in the dignity and competence of life than in physical comfort. He believed that God could forgive sin, but he doubted if even God could forgive mediocrity, vulgarity, crudeness, or laziness.

One of the great challenges of this church is to insist on excellence in all that we do. Whether it is worship, music, education, or outreach, we owe it ourselves and to our God to insist that the work of the church demands hard work, imagination, and the insistence on quality.

In recent years there has been a trend to what are sometimes called "destination weddings," which are weddings that take place at some other location beside a church. Often they are at the beach or the mountains and frequently are in very exotic and beautiful places. Now please do not misunderstand me. I am not against "destination weddings." They have their place. But the church has also to insist that weddings, like funerals, are acts of worship and as such, the same standards that govern our worship in the sanctuary must govern our worship in all places.

Some weeks ago our ministers were in a conversation about weddings and wedding policy. Jim Miller shared an experience he had in Scotland with a bride and groom. The bride was in her early fifties and had not been married before. The couple explained to Jim that they wanted their wedding to be a "theme" wedding and that the theme was going to be the "Frog and the Princess." The plan for the wedding, according to the bride, was that the bride would dress as a princess and the groom would dress as a frog. Then at the end of the service the groom would spring out of his frog costume and become a prince. Needless to say, this theme did not get played out in the presence of Jim Miller.

The point of this, of course, is that the church in our time is called to be the church. It is not our job to embrace a secular and often inane culture, but to transform that culture in the name of Christ who did not come "to be served but to serve." The church, in all aspects of its ministry, must insist that excellence is the standard to which we are called to adhere.

IV.

The third distinctive quality of the mission of a church set on a hill is the emphasis on mission that is an integral part of this church. One of the great challenges that faces our nation today is the great collapse of urban America. There are many cities in our nation today that

resemble third world countries. There are neighborhoods in the city of Charlotte that remind one more of Bagdad or Beirut than they do neighborhoods in a prospering New South City such as Charlotte.

For the most part, we have turned our back on these people. People have moved to the more prosperous neighborhoods, and today there are severe issues that threaten the very future of our nation, including the widening gap of wealth between rich and poor, the collapse of the public school system in many places, and the presence of a permanent underclass in this country today.

From its earliest beginnings there has been an intimate relationship between the First Presbyterian Church and the City of Charlotte. In the early years of the church, after its founding in 1821, a group of Presbyterian Women came to the church every Sunday afternoon to provide a school for the children of slaves. Over the years there has been a long involvement with the Community School of the Arts, the Child Development Center, and in more recent times, programs such as the Urban Ministry Center, Freedom School, and a host of other programs as well.

One of the great opportunities of First Presbyterian Church is to be a ray of hope and light in the midst of so much of the darkness around us. In a very unique way the location of this church offers a juxtaposition of great wealth and great resource.

Will Willimon, who for a number of years served as Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once related a story of a young student who came to see him. The student was having problems with his roommate. When Dr. Willimon pressed him on the subject, this young student said that his roommate was a young Muslim student. Part of the frustration for this young Duke student was that his roommate was always asking him about his religion. Now, this young man was a Christian. He had been raised in a Christian home and a Christian church. But his Muslim roommate was always challenging his religion, particularly about the excessive amount of drinking and partying in which this student was engaged. On one evening the student came in very late after a long night of hard partying. To his dismay there was his roommate, waiting up for him. After this Muslim student questioned him again about his faith and how it related to his behavior, the student answered angrily, saying to this young Muslim, "I told you that I was not an active Christian and I also told you not to judge my religion by me."

Then, shaking his head sadly, this young Muslim replied, "Then how else can I judge your religion?"

Jesus said that a city set on a hill could not be hid. For us it means that people are going to judge our religion by us—at school, at work, on the golf course, in our neighborhoods. People are going to make assumptions about First Presbyterian Church based on what they see in you and me.

So, what are we standing for? May God give us wisdom and courage for the facing of these days.

Amen.