

“A City Built on a Hill” / Matthew 5:13-16 / 9 February 2014

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. “You’re a city built on a hill. There’s no hiding. People see you. Whatever banners you fly, folks will see them from afar. If your flag’s at half-mast, people will know. When your lights burn bright, they illumine the night. But if your streets are dim, if your heart is dark, if you become a place of shadows, well, people will see that, too. You! You’re the light of the world, a city built on a hill. People will always see your heart; they’ll know what you most deeply value.

A year or two ago, I mentioned to you the hit TV drama “Breaking Bad.” It’s a series about a regular family man, a high school chemistry teacher in Albuquerque, Walter White, who is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The doctors have only given him about a year to live, and he’s worried about the family that he’ll leave behind in poverty without his modest income. Walter is a quiet guy, a little dull, and most people have no idea that he’s a brilliant chemist. Long ago, he missed out on an opportunity to become rich and famous with his chemical discoveries, and he’s secretly still bitter about it. But he hides it well. He never talks about it. He just plugs away at his humble life with a wife, a son with cerebral palsy, and a baby daughter on the way.

Walter is a guy who looks, well, kind of like yours truly. In fact, when I’m trying to entertain a crowd, I often do my “Evil Walter White” impersonation. He’s a bald, middle-aged guy with glasses and a wispy little decorative beard, like most bald guys wear, just to prove that they can indeed produce hair. They picked a mild, wholesome actor to play Walter; it’s Bryan Cranston, who was the passive, easygoing dad on “Malcolm in the Middle.” He’s nondescript, harmless, but when he sees death staring at him from a distance, something inside of him clicks. He joins up with one of his former students to corner Albuquerque’s trade in methamphetamines. Because he’s such a superb chemist, he makes the best “meth” on the market, but it pulls him into the seedy under-belly of the drug world. Addicts. Ruthless dealers. Mexican drug cartels. Over time, you can watch him slide ever so slowly from sanity and safeness into a murderous state of near-paranoia, drunk on infamy and power, all the while hiding his secret life from his wife and son. “Why are you working so late?” his wife might ask, when he’s spent a day in an RV in the desert, cooking meth. “Oh, you know, all these papers I have to grade!” It’s the hiding and the deception that tears at your heart. Here’s a woman who loves him and a son who idolizes him. But they don’t know what he does when they’re not looking. They don’t know who he’s killed and how. They don’t know that he’s getting secretly rich and famous—infamous really—in the underworld of illegal drugs.

Oh, hiding from the people who love you! Have you ever done it? It’s draining. It’s crushing. Hiding from the people you care about! You can’t do it forever. It takes everything you’ve got. And most of the time, they see through you. Now, in case you’re planning to catch up with “Breaking Bad” on Hulu or Netflix, I’ll try not to spoil anything for you by giving too much in the way of details. But since the climax of the final episode has already been lampooned on “Saturday Night Live”—which of course, I do not watch until Sunday night—I do feel free to say a little something about it. Walter’s wife finds out his secret, as we knew she eventually would. In the final episode, he says to her, “You need to understand that everything I did...” She interrupts him. “If I have to hear again that you did all this for our family!” Then he interrupts her. “I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really...I was alive.” Then in that moment, you realize the thing that you’ve suspected all along about Walter. He felt that he’d missed his chance at life. What he really wanted was to make a mark in the world before he died, even if it was an ugly mark. All he wanted was to feel alive. The show is a parable, really, about how our poor choices can snowball and grow bigger, pulling us further and further from the person we’re meant to be. But it’s all the hiding that kills Walter! In the end, it’s the one thing he just cannot continue to do. In the end, it becomes clear to everyone, including the family that he had deceived, that Walter’s first priority isn’t them; it’s him. He loved them, and wanted to provide for them, but ultimately put himself first.

“You’re the light of the world,” Jesus says. “You’re a city built on a hill. There’s no hiding.

People see you.” The things that you most deeply value will be evident to all. You wear them on your face. You search for them on the Internet. Your bank account and your calendar attest to the things that truly matter in your life. And people know if it's them that you care about...or yourself. You can't hide the light, but you can cause the good light within you to grow.

Of course, the whole mention of “a city on a hill” is a reference to Jerusalem. Jesus lived and died a Jew, and his teachings weren't entirely new. His talk about loving your neighbor and treating people fairly, this isn't unknown to Judaism. Jesus was simply reemphasizing the best that the Torah already taught. And in his 1st century imagination, Jerusalem was forever the city on the hill, the holy city. Jesus was simply expanding the holy city to include all the poor dirt farmers and fishermen in far-flung Galilee, and even to the furthest ends of the world. “You! You, too, are the light of the world. You're the city built on the hill. Someone is watching you. How you live and what you value will be evident. What you do matters.”

There are the things we put on display, our charms, our abilities, our knowledge, our wealth—if we're new to it. And there are the things we try to hide, our sadness, our guilt, our shortcomings, or sometimes even our infirmities, fearing that we might be judged weak for them. Yes, there are the things we put out there for all the world to see, and there are those other things that we hide away forever, hoping no one will ever learn of them. But the things that we most truly live for, the things that we value above all others, these things will be evident to all.

Now, if you're a lover of history, as I know many of you are, then Jesus' words about “a city built on a hill” call to mind early America. Our Puritan ancestors in the New England colonies went so far as to claim that their new settlement in the wilderness was just that: the New Jerusalem, the city built on a hill for all to see, the perfect human society, ordered by God, ordained to carry out God's plan among all the lesser nations of the earth. It was the place where true religion—meaning “their” religion—would be practiced, made official, and no one would hinder or persecute them. Much of the rest of the world heard the ice cracking beneath the Puritans' feet even as they made the claim that theirs was the perfect human society. I'm an admirer of the Puritans. I mean, look, I dress like one. But the things they most deeply valued have become evident to all. They did value the teachings of Jesus, yes, but his sense of justice wasn't their first love. No, the Puritans loved education above all else. Their heritage is Harvard, and Yale, and Dartmouth, and Wellesley. It's Hawthorne, and Dickinson, and Emerson, and Thoreau. It's Robert Frost. Not a bad light to hold up for all the world to see. I'm not sure that Boston is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he coined the phrase “city built on a hill,” but it is the fruit of everything those Puritans in their powdered wigs most deeply valued.

England, France, Spain, even the Netherlands, and yes, America: many nations have called themselves the “city built on a hill,” but then the lights that they've ended up shining out into the world have proved that no nation is up to the task. Some nations are surely better than others, but which of them glories in the justice and the kindness that Jesus had in mind? The nations of this world glory in personal gain; they glory in power, and influence, and war—all things for which Jesus had no use. If we are not, as a nation, the city built on a hill, it's not because we do not allow prayer in schools, for whose prayers would we pray? No, if we're not the city built on a hill, that our Puritan forbears intended, is it not because we glory in things that Jesus deploras, things that the wise of every age have deplored? Just as with individuals, the most deeply held values of any group become apparent with time. Individuals, not nations, are the light of the world. Everything that's wrong with our world is just the sum total of all the brokenness in our individual lives. So too, all the forgiveness, and the generosity, and well-being in this world is the sum total of all those things in ourselves. If we should allow our hearts to grow cold and dark, what hope does our world have? “You're a city built on a hill.”

A church member recently sent me a video clip of Ronald Reagan making jokes. When he was President, I was too young to notice it, but I have to admit, he was a pretty funny guy. He told a story about an old man out in Kansas who owned a piece of scrub land along the banks of a stream. One summer, the man decided to get out there, dig out all the rocks and brush, and plant a big vegetable

garden. And, watered by the stream, the garden grew beautifully. He was so proud of his accomplishment, that the man asked his minister to come by and see the garden. The minister was impressed. "Look how God has blessed you," he said. "God's given you zucchinis, and cabbages, and look how tall that sweet corn is. The Lord has dealt bountifully with you!" As the minister raved about the garden and the goodness of God, the man got more and more annoyed until he could contain himself no longer. "Now, hold on a minute, reverend," he said. "You should have seen this place when God was doing it without my help!"

There are things that we are proud to show off to the world, as that old fellow was proud to show off his garden. But our truest selves, our deepest selves, those selves are also made up of the many things we feel the need to hide. In fact, our secrets surely say much more about us than our window dressing. "Who you are when you're alone," some say, "is who you really are." And yet, the things that we most truly live for, the things that we value above all others, these things will be evident to anyone who cares to see. No matter how well we hide them, there always comes a day when they become known. Hardship doesn't change people; it reveals them. It calls out all that's hidden deep inside.

As most of you know, my wife and I met in seminary. After we got engaged, we began to feel a little smug, sitting together in class. We were getting married. We were so ready to be done with our master's program. We wanted to get out into the real world and get started with life. A prominent and well-respected attorney used to teach our class on "polity" or church law. This was a dignified, older gentleman who had had a brilliant career downtown. But Michelle and I sat in the back row and giggled at him.

He loved church law. He was passionate about it. He read and reread *The Book of Order* the same way you might reread a favorite novel. Michelle and I were seniors, and we were pretty much already checked out. We would pass each other notes, and snicker, and giggle so hard we'd hiccup. The old adjunct professor never broke his stride. He never gave us a dirty look, never asked us to settle down. I was convinced that he couldn't even see us there in the back row of the lecture hall. Now I stand each week at the front of a room big enough to seat six hundred, and I see each and every face. Like Santa, I see you when you're sleeping—in church—and know when you're awake. And looking back now I think, "Oh, yeah. That guy saw us." He was simply being kind by not saying anything, not shaming us in front of the other students.

People very often see much more than we give them credit for. They will always know what you most deeply value, because it will come out in the way you treat them and in how you live. If you dwell on the good, and the true, and the beautiful, then it will show in your life. If you dwell on the wrongs that have been committed against you, the old injuries that should have healed by now, the slights, and the insults, and the injustices, then that too will show. Somebody, somewhere, looks to you for strength, for hope, for stability, for courage. This is why we must pay close attention to our own inner life. It doesn't stay inside. It comes out in who we are. There are ways to nurture the light within. There are ways to expand its empire deeper and deeper into the domain of darkness. Practice prayer. Practice hope. Practice forgiveness, at least try! Practice dwelling on all that is true, and beautiful, and good. You! You're the light of the world, a city built on a hill. People will know what you hold in your heart. Amen.