“For the Glory of God”
Matthew 5:13-16
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
July 5, 2026

13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be
restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under
foot.14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 People
do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the
lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light
shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your
Father in heaven.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Earlier this summer I was able to travel to Washington, DC with a group from Westminster. Anna Hanor and I led a group of 10 on a Youth Witness & Service Trip while at the same time Leigh and Nick led a group of 20 on an intergenerational Faith and Civic Engagement Trip. Our groups stayed in the same hotel and overlapped for roughly half of our time together. Because we were in a large city, we got to do “city things” like taking the metro AND the bus, eating a variety of ethnic cuisines, and enjoying all manner of museums and historic sites. But of course, WPCYG, had to kick off our trip by taking in America’s favorite pastime. I’ve been to DC many times in my life, but this was my first time attending a Nationals Baseball Game and the Nats’ Mascots are now one of my favorite things ever. Do you know what I’m talking about? Leigh hyped it up to me in advance of our trip, but I didn’t fully get on board with the idea until we got to the stadium and then I was hooked. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt bobble their way around the stadium in giant heads, greeting fans and posing for pictures. And yes, their jersey numbers correspond to their presidencies. So, George is #1 and Thomas is #3 and Abe is #16 and Teddy is #26. When I first saw them walking around the stadium, I screamed out loud and roused our whole group to run after the mascots in order to have pictures taken with them. After our fun at the Nationals Game, we participated in several service projects 1. Thrive DC 2. Ward 7 Juneteenth Parade 3. Kayak Cleanup of the Anacostia River. We engaged in critical conversations surrounding the suffragist movement, abolition of slavery,

and the history of the Bible. We also toured the National Mall and other historic sites from unique perspectives. It was a rich and wonderful time in our nation's capital with other saints from this congregation.

Around the same time that we were in DC, the New York Times published a piece titled, "6 Sentences That Shaped the American Story," in advance of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence that we celebrated yesterday. Among these sentences is a quote from the Declaration itself and other quotes from famous Americans like Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. I was surprised to find that one quote I was certain would be included was not.

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.

In 1630, as a ship of Puritans was approaching the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop is said to have preached a sermon that featured that phrase. Over the years the phrase became so popular that the original title of the sermon was disregarded, and it became commonly known as *the city on a hill sermon*. It would go on to be quoted by several American Presidents in pivotal speeches. Wikipedia gives us the following summarization of what this phrase has meant in American history – "'City upon a hill' is a phrase derived from the teaching of salt and light in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Originally applied to the city of Boston by early 17th century Puritans, it came to adopt broader use in political rhetoric in United States politics, that of a declaration of American exceptionalism, and referring to America acting as a 'beacon of hope' for the world."[1] But what did Jesus mean when he initially coined this phrase during a hillside sermon beside the Sea of Galilee 2000 years ago?

When examining what the metaphors of light and salt mean in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount O. Wesley Allen writes, "Salt and light do not compete but highlight the same thing: the call to do good works that can be witnessed by humanity for the glory of God. Part of what joins these two figures together is that neither salt nor light serve themselves; they are a means to an end. Salt flavors (or preserves food). Light illumines its subject (here the house or a city built on a hill). Similarly good works serve the glory of God, instead of the good works practicing righteousness so that it can only be seen by God."[2] This insight helps us better

[1] City upon a Hill - Wikipedia
[2] Matthew, 65.

understand the metaphors of salt and light, but what about the image of a city on a hill? The Greek word we translate as "city" in this passage is *polis*. Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible describes *polis* in this way – "Architecturally, a city is a settlement where people live physically close together around a complex of monumental buildings surrounded by a wall. Economically, a city is a centralized system for producing and distributing goods and services."[3] Harper Collins Bible Dictionary reminds us that there are hundreds of cities mentioned in the Bible and that ancient cities typically had 6 characteristics that set them apart from towns or villages – defensive walls, proximity to water, construction materials readily available, natural physical features that aided defense, opportunities for trade, and the presence of a sanctuary or shrine. Furthermore, "when warfare threatened, the people of the surrounding villages would flee to the walled city for protection."[4] Matthew 9:35 tells us, "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness." Cities were where things happened. Cities were where Jesus showed up and ministry was done.

The afternoon when we toured the National Mall during our trip to DC, we were led by a tour guide named Kaitlin Cologera who owns and operates a company called "A Tour of Her Own." Kaitlin guides groups on a walking tour of the monuments through the lens of the females who were part of the monuments' stories. So, we learned about the designer of the Vietnam War Memorial, Maya Lin, and how Eleanor Roosevelt influenced Franklin's presidency. We saw the proposed site of the newly approved Women's Suffrage Monument, and, beneath the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, we learned about a woman named Opal Lee. Known as the grandmother of Juneteenth, Opal Lee is still alive today at the age of 99. Juneteenth is the federal holiday that remembers June 19, 1865, when news of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached Texas. Originally issued by President Lincoln in January 1863, it took 2.5 years for the final enforcement of that proclamation to be ordered in Texas. Lee, a native Texan and long-time educator, took up the cause of making Juneteenth a holiday for all to celebrate in her retirement years. She began by organizing 2.5-mile walks in her city of Fort Worth every Juneteenth to bring awareness to the importance of the date. In 2016 she embarked upon a symbolic walk from her hometown of Fort Worth to the city of Washington DC to further bring the issue to light. In 2021 Juneteenth was deemed a federal holiday with Opal Lee proudly in attendance. As Kaitlin was telling us

[3] Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, 258.
[4] Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, 137.

about Opal Lee a young man walking by heard her name and stopped, dead in his tracks. He came over to our group and explained that he is Opal's great-grandson. He had a cameraman in tow because he was making a documentary about the history of her freedom walks. The 2026 walk was to be the next day as part of the Ward 7 Juneteenth Parade. "We're going to be there!" we exclaimed, "We're volunteering with the parade." It was a small world, Holy Spirit moment right there on the National Mall. We ended up saying, "Happy Birthday, Opal!" and having it captured on camera because the documentary is set to debut on her 100th birthday this coming October. Opal has used her life to shine her light like a city built upon a hill.

Do you want to know the actual title of the sermon John Winthrop preached on that ship named Arbella in 1630? *A Model of Christian Charity*. And that phrase, "we shall be as a city upon a hill" is only a small portion of it. The sermon itself is much longer than those typically preached from this pulpit and featured such quotes as:

- "There are two rules whereby we are to walk towards one another: Justice and Mercy."
- "Love among Christians is a real thing and not imaginary. This love is as absolutely necessary to the being of the body of Christ as the sinews and other ligaments of a natural body are to the being of that body."
- "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together."

These quotes are not about exceptionalism, self-preservation, or power. They are about community. They are about faith. They are about putting others first. They are about the well-being of all. They are about being like Jesus. I like a lot of what John Winthrop had to say in his famous sermon. But I wish he had gotten the quote about a city on a hill exactly right…exactly as the Scripture tells us Jesus said it – a city *built upon* a hill. Not a city on a hill. A city *built upon* a hill has an entirely different connation. Because someone else did the building and the placing of the city. The Greek words in that phrase are *epano* (upon) *keimene* (built). *Epano* is an adverb that, when simply translated, is "on or upon". Yet, when you dig more deeply into its meaning, you find that its more properly translated as "up above," "more than," or "outranking". Used in the infancy narratives of Jesus, Matthew 2:9 tells us the star that guided the Magi stopped *epano*, over, the place where Jesus was. Only God could put that star in the sky. *Keimene* comes from the word *kemai* – to be appointed, to lie outstretched, to be built. It's the same word used in Luke

2:12 – “You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” The infant Jesus couldn’t have put himself there…someone else did!

My point is this. We as followers of Jesus Christ can only be likened to a city built upon a hill because God is the one who places us there. And we aren’t just there for our own protection or self-promotion or because we are blessed more than others. We’re there for more than that. As our Heritage Lecturer for 2027, Amy Jill Levine, writes, “Once the disciples recognize that they are light, they also recognize that their role is to shine so that others can find their way. Jesus knows that, just as salt can lose its intrinsic identity, light can be hoarded and fail to fulfill its proper function. His followers are to become like that city: a refuge, a home, a place where there is salt and light, love and compassion.”[5] The title of this sermon is “For the Glory of God,” but I would like to attach an addendum to it – “For the Glory of God and the Benefit of Others.” That’s why Jesus calls us the light of the world and implores us not to hide that light. So that we can help others find a way to safety. So that we can be a beacon during the storms of life. So that we can proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. So that we can be a blessing to others, all in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen and amen.

[5] Sermon on the Mount, 50.