
Light for Our Cities

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A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith
Epiphany 5A

Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

""Hebrews 13.14

There's a witty proverb that's become somewhat popular nowadays, and it connects with one of our scripture readings appointed for today. Maybe you've seen it on a bumper sticker or a poster or T-shirt; even on a coffee mug. It goes like this:

[It's hard to soar like an eagle, when you fly with turkeys.](#)

It's a one-line joke of course, and like many jokes it offers a piece of conventional wisdom. We might even say that it expresses the kind of "human wisdom" that St. Paul rejects in today's scripture from 1 Corinthians. And as a kind of conventional wisdom it's been translated in other ways that I also want to share with you. But first you might suspect why the apostle would reject the proverb as a form of defeatism, or "[de-motivation](#),' when I repeat it according to the following variation:

You can't soar like eagles when you're surrounded by turkeys.

And now for its translation into more conventional forms of wisdom that you can also find on the internet:

In other words, if you want to flourish and succeed, surround yourself with good people - because if you mix with lesser types you might become like them.

And here's a related translation:

"Virtue can only flourish among equals." <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?gid=20120326181121AAcbiD9>

Or finally, to mix the metaphors, consider this alternate form of wit for expressing why we're not soaring in our lives or careers:

If you lie down with dogs, expect to wake up with fleas.
http://www.togetherweteach.com/Sayings/Fountain%20of%20Wisdom_Counselors2.htm

But godly wisdom, according to St. Paul, is not just about surrounding ourselves with the right kind of people, on the one hand. Nor, on the other hand, does divine empowerment depend on our ability to work things out. "For," the apostle says"

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified . . . so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." 1 Cor. 2.2,5

Here the apostle rejects conventional wisdom and privileges the power of God as "'crucified power' so to speak" that is, the seemingly inept, incompetent, or ineffective power of the Cross as a symbol of apparent failure. On the contrary, the apostle implies, that kind of power can supernaturally motivate and empower us. To stick with our metaphor, it can enable us to soar like eagles whether or not we're surrounded by birds of a different feather.

Speaking of birds of another feather, allow me to keep things witty *one more minute*. You may recall that as one of the founders of our country Benjamin Franklin wanted to make the wild turkey our national bird rather than the bald eagle. That's right: the turkey! It's more native to our land, Franklin argued seriously, and while it may appear "a little vain and silly" it is in nature a more courageous and virtuous bird than that particular eagle. Surely most of us are glad that Ol' Ben lost that argument to Ol' Baldy!

* * *

Continuing with the founding of our country, and in a more serious vein, let's turn now to our other scriptures appointed for today. In American political rhetoric, as a matter of fact, there's a good chance you have heard today's gospel expression, "'let your light shine like a city on a hill.'" Indeed it appears again and again in our

religious and political self-description. You may recall that Boston as our "'city on a hill' was first invoked by the Puritan leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, in his famous sermon aboard an immigrant ship still crossing the Atlantic ocean in 1630.

In more recent generations Jesus' gospel metaphor was invoked by President-Elect John Kennedy, speaking in January, 1961 before the Massachusetts General Court:

I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arbella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. "We must always consider", [Winthrop] said, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill . . ." Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us"

[Kennedy continued"] and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill "' constructed and inhabited by [people] aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities. For we are setting out upon a voyage in 1961 no less hazardous than that undertaken by the Arbella in 1630. We are committing ourselves to tasks of statecraft no less fantastic than that of governing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, beset as it was then by terror without and disorder within.

History will not judge our endeavors""and a government cannot be selected""merely on the basis of color or creed or even party affiliation. Neither will competence and loyalty and stature, while essential to the utmost, suffice in times such as these. For of those to whom much is given, much is required . . .

By the way, notice the President's careful qualification of conventional virtues like "competence and loyalty and stature""I wonder if today he would include patriotism""as essential but not sufficient in the administration of national life that he inaugurated.

Be that as it may, it also happens that President Ronald Reagan used the image of "'city on a hill,' first in his 1984 acceptance speech for the Republican Party nomination, and finally in his January 11, 1989, farewell speech to the nation:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still . . .

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_upon_a_Hill

Now precisely here, Christian friends, precisely here I'm committed as your fellow American to a vision of our country as a beacon of light set on a hill for all the world to see. That vision, as you surely know, is repeatedly challenged if not condemned in the world today. For an example of a challenge I have in mind the provocative title of a book by my scholarly colleague from Duke University, ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas.

Prof. Hauerwas will be lecturing here next month on my campus, at the Emory Law School, on March 26th. His most provocative book title is: *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Abingdon, 1991). One reviewer of Hauerwas' post-Christendom theology has written a summary with which Hauerwas agrees; explaining that Hauerwas

rejects [the idea of a Christian nation] because "the world" cannot be this society and we only distract ourselves from building a truly Christian society by trying to make our nation into that society, rather than be content with living as a community-in-exile. (Gerald W. Schlabach in Hauerwas, 1991: pp. 7-8)

Well, here I agree with Hauerwas that we Christians are indeed a "community-in-exile" or, to use the term that is the title of his more popular book, I believe that the church is a community of *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon, 1989). But even as resident aliens and ethical exiles, I believe, we must continually strive to make the institutions and laws that govern us and others more Christ-like, more like the kingdom of God or ""to use Dr. Martin Luther King's now popular expression, more like "beloved community."

I must agree with Hauerwas, however, as my elder colleague and even mentor in these matters that the world will always continue to be itself until the end of history

as we know it; that is, continue to be the crucible where Jesus Christ and Christ-like virtues are crucified rather than completely enthroned and honored.

Until then, however, until then we have again and again in our scriptures like those today a charter and a mandate for what beloved community looks like when it is fully realized among a society of human beings. It looks like the society that Isaiah prophesied, where:

[You] share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, [you] cover them, and [do not] hide yourself from your own kin . . .

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly . . .

then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday . . .

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil . . .

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. "Isaiah 58.7-10,12

Indeed blessed are such streets, and blessed are such cities, that admit the light streaming through these scriptures to guide, rule and govern them!

And so we pray our Collect appointed for this fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ . . . Amen.

-*The Book of Common Prayer* (1979; p. 216)

www.bcponline.org and

www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html