SORT OF LIKE A CELL PHONE TOWER

Matthew 5:13-16

Back last year when the restrictions on so many businesses eased up for a little while, I had lunch with a friend at a restaurant. It was the first time I had been in a restaurant in several months, so it was kind of a cool experience. At least I thought so until I walked into the place. As soon as I walked into the restaurant without a mask on my face a woman employee said, “Sir, you can’t come in without a mask.” I said, “Exactly how am I supposed to eat while wearing a mask?” She said, “You can take your mask off when you are seated at your table.” I said, “So I have to wear a mask while I walk 20 feet to the table to meet my friend over there? How is that going to make any difference? Is there covid lurking between here and there but not at my table? Or am I going to spread covid on my way to the table but not while I’m sitting there. Does this make any sense?” She said, “I’m sorry, but it’s the law.” One of the many absurdities of the pandemic. I retrieved my mask.

I recognize the authorities were desperate to stop the spread of the virus. But like many I was uneasy with how intrusive government became in our lives. There was so much that authorities said we couldn’t do and much of it was utter nonsense. It started me thinking about some of the things that I once did that you can’t do any more. When we were kids on long car trips our family found creative ways for us to stretch out in the back of the car so we could sleep. You can’t do that now because the law is that you have to wear a seat belt. Poor kids these days have to be strapped into seats like they are being secured in a rocket that is about to blast off the launch pad headed for the moon. I realize that these rules are intended to keep us and the kids safe. But as with so many of these things, they are taking away freedom. More and more we are told what we can and can’t do. In Los Gatos it is illegal to own more than 2 dogs. In New Hampshire it is illegal to collect seaweed at night. In Carmel it is illegal for women to wear heels over 2 inches high without obtaining a permit. We may be the home of the brave, but more and more we are becoming the land of the sort of free.

My desire is not to criticize any of those laws and regulations. Some of them are helpful and most are well-intentioned. But one of the unique things about this country is the freedom we have. It is unusual in the history of the world. On this July 4 let’s think for a little bit about our nation and our place in it.

WE HAVE A PRECIOUS LEGACY

There are things that are no longer being taught or are even being attacked in our education system these days, that are things that I think we need to remember. Those things have to do with how this nation, now 245 years old, began. Perry Miller was a 20th century historian at Harvard who did ground breaking work on what he called the American civilization. He observed that most nations came about by chance or by accident of geography or politics. At its core, he asserted, America is unique because it was founded with a purpose. While there were other influences, he pointed out that this purpose was most clearly expressed in the Puritans.

Miller was the first to seize on a sermon by John Winthrop, a lawyer who led the first wave of Puritan colonists and would serve as the colony’s governor for 12 of its first 20 years. In that sermon in 1630 titled “A Model Of Christian Charity,” Winthrop laid out a vision for the colony that “we shall be as a city upon a hill.” He had continually told his fellow colonists on their voyage to America that the eyes of the world would be on them. Winthrop wanted to establish a new society as a model for all to see, one intended to guide them to God and his ways. This idea dominated colonial development in New England and influenced the thinking and governments of other colonies as well.

That sermon by Winthrop has been quoted by Presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. President Reagan said, “there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of a love of freedom and a special kind of courage.”

This was a vision of a nation where there would be freedom, especially religious freedom. It would be a place where the worship of God would be open and where the nation would be shaped by that worship.

John Adams, who played so crucial a role in America’s pursuit of independence and who became our second President, said, “We recognize no sovereign but God, and no king but Jesus.” John Quincy Adams said, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.” Noah Webster said, “No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people.”

I could go on at considerable length, but you get the idea. Our nation was founded on the idea of freedom and that freedom is rooted in our God. What a legacy this is. Our nation has been and continues to be far from perfect. We have had many faults. Perry Miller pointed out the Puritans’ commitment to a higher cause and their dedication to God made their community unusually successful. But when they started making money their purpose began to collapse. They began to lose sight of their cause, their plan, their purpose and their devotion. This has always been a theme in our nation, and continues to this day. Loss of sight of the real purpose always has and always will result in inequity and injustice, and that’s still a problem today. But with all of that, it is still true that this nation has been unprecedented in human history. It is still a beacon of freedom that draws people from all over the world. It is still a place where we enjoy remarkable freedom, security, and abundant material blessing.

Sometimes we get obsessed with the wrongs and the failings that we see. It is easy for us to focus on the negative. That’s kind of a human trait, for some reason. But it is important that we not lose sight of the good. It is crucial that we be filled with gratitude for what we have. We worship the Lord Jesus Christ openly. We have no fear of oppression. We are free to travel where we will, to pursue whatever jobs and hobbies we might like, to live our lives without interference. These are huge blessings that many do not enjoy. We should give thanks to God every day that while it is not perfect, a foundation for our nation that is solid and good was laid a long time ago. Many have fought, bled and died to protect that foundation, and we must always be thankful for their sacrifices. But what I want to encourage you to do today is thank God for this unique nation that you are blessed to call your home.

OUR LEGACY IS ERODING

That’s the good news. There is bad news. One of the greatest documents in human history was the one that launched this nation, our Declaration of Independence. Some of the most profound words of human history are found in one sentence from that document. “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Those words are at the very core of what this country is all about.

One of the hottest issues in our nation lately has been that truth that all men are created equal. That is what our nation is to stand for, and it is a terrible thing when our society falls short of that ideal. All of us want our country to be the place where that is a reality, where every person, regardless of race, status, gender, age or religion is considered equal, especially before the law. But it is in that statement from the Declaration that we see where the cracks in our legacy have formed.

Start with the words, “we hold these truths to be self evident.” The prevailing belief in our nation today is that there is no truth. All is relative. If there is no truth, there certainly can be no self evident truths. When you remove truth from the foundation the whole thing falls apart. A few weeks ago I was playing with our grandson, Wesley and I made a tower with a stack of blocks. He thought that was mildly interesting, but then he decided he wanted one of those blocks that was near the bottom of the tower. He pulled that block out. You know what happened. It’s what always happens when you take out a block at the bottom. The whole thing crumbled. That is precisely what happens if you take truth out of that statement from the Declaration of Independence. There are no self evident truths if there is no absolute truth. At that point the whole document becomes empty. It is based on that idea that there are self evident truths, so without them it has nothing to say. Everything that depends upon that statement is nullified. All that has flowed from it also falls apart, as will happen with any structure without a solid foundation. The tragic events that recently took place in Florida stand as a grim reminder of what happens when a foundation crumbles.

It gets worse. Our society’s contention is that God is at best irrelevant and at worst does not exist, but certainly is not to be discussed, if he exists at all. The thinking of most of the elites of our culture is that he doesn’t exist. He is taken out of the equation. What does that do to the great hopes of that document?

The Declaration says all people are created equal. That’s out the window, because people aren’t created at all. They’re just the products of accidents and random chance. Take a look at the human race. Do they look equal to you? They don’t to me. They have a wide range of capabilities and talents. Some are powerfully strong, some are weak, some are wildly physically attractive, most are sort of plain and some are downright unappealing, some are brilliant, some are as dumb as a rock. Some are able to produce all sorts of wonderful creations and ideas, some don’t seem to be able to get out of their own way. People absolutely are not equal.

The simple truth is that some people are more valuable than others. Laurie and I went to a Padre game a while back. We hadn’t been downtown in a long time, thanks in part to the pandemic. I was shocked at what I saw there. In places along the sidewalk there were tents and lean-to’s of all kinds, large encampments of homeless people. Some of those homeless people are disease-ridden, dirty shells of human beings. Here’s the question I have: is one of the worst of those people equal to, say, a brilliant doctor who saves the lives of many people? Of course that begs the question, “valuable to whom?” Who decides who and what has value? The point here is that our whole sense of equality is utterly dependent upon us being created by God who values each human being equally. If you remove God, then there is no basis for that statement that all people are created equal. They simply are not equal. One might say, “Well, people ought to be considered equal, having equal rights and being equally valuable.” But where do you get the “ought to” in that statement? It implies some objective standard existing outside of our subjective opinions. Without God that doesn’t exist. Without him there is no “ought to.”

It gets even worse. The Declaration says that we are all endowed with certain unalienable rights. We have the right to live, to be free to pursue life as we desire it. Later the Bill of Rights listed things like freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and others. Those rights come from God. Once again, if you take God out of that equation you have to ask where rights come from. Who gives you the right? Well the government gives me my rights. No, it doesn’t. It can only recognize your rights and protect them, hopefully. Let’s suppose that rights are, indeed, given by the government. Do you see what the problem with that is? They are no longer unalienable rights. You only have them as long as the government, which is made up of people, decides you should have them. There is no guarantee that the government will not decide you should not have some of those rights, and takes them away.

Our nation has foolishly, insanely barreled a long way down that road. That is a road with no truth, no equality and no rights. What is left? There is only power. Remove truth, remove God, and you create a vacuum, and what fills it is the raw exercise of power. Forget equality. That will just come down to who is the strongest. Forget rights. You will only be free to do whatever you have the strength and power to do, whatever you have the power to keep others from taking from you.

Laurie and I have had the opportunity to spend time with little Wesley. When we take care of him we usually take him to the park not far from his house where there is a large playground. There are usually quite a few children there overseen by parents, grandparents and nannies. It is instructive to see how things go with those toddlers and 2 year olds. Often some bring toys with them to play in the sand. Do you know how it goes when one child is playing with a toy in the sand? Another child sees it and decides he or she wants it. Their method for obtaining it is, they just try to take it. There is no truth that this belongs to the other person. There is no right or wrong, that they should respect the property of the other. There is only power. They want it, so they try to take it. Only the presence of an adult keeps that from becoming an all out winner take all Donnybrook. And right there you have human society without the self evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, without God.

Of course if you have no truth you also have no morality. Where then do you get a recognition that there are some ways of treating other people that are wrong? Where do you get that it is wrong to steal from someone else, or to beat them up if you don’t like them or if they offend you? Where do you get the truth that even if you perceive that someone cut you off on the freeway, it is wrong to fire a gun into their car? Without truth there is no right or wrong. There’s only what you can get away with.

We need to listen to brilliant men like John Adams. He said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Can liberties be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?” These are stern warnings that give us reason for great concern when you see that our nation by and large has overthrown the faith in God upon which it stands and has become a moral cesspool. Patrick Henry said, “It is when people forget God that tyrants forge their chains.”

We should listen to the proclamation of a national day of fasting and prayer issued by Abraham Lincoln on March 30, 1863. He said, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten you, O God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us. It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

WE ARE SALT AND LIGHT

When you think about how the dangerous and destructive path our nation has taken, it is easy to become panicky. It is easy to freak out and say, “We’ve got to do something. We’ve got to take power and reverse the trend that we see in our nation.” Many do just that. But there is another, much better way for us to respond and to think about what we should do in response to what we see going on in our country. We must remember that Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, **I have overcome the world**.” Do you believe that? I hope you do, and if it is true, then we do not need to panic and fret. Jesus wants us to be at peace. Repeatedly we are instructed in the Bible, “do not be afraid.” God has not given us a spirit of fear. So we should not freak out. Stay calm, Jesus has overcome whatever people may do. Trust him for what happens in our nation. But what should we do about what is happening in our land?

That brings me to Matthew 5:13-16. Jesus says we are salt and we are light in this world. This is the truth about who we are, and about our role in our nation. First we should ask if being salt and being light is a good thing. Is it something that others would value? The answer is that yes, both of those are very good things. In Jesus’ day salt was highly valuable. They had no refrigeration. In the often warm climate of the Middle East they had no way of even making ice. So how did they keep meat fresh? You read about them killing a fatted calf. Do you suppose they ate the whole thing at one meal? Maybe at a feast for many people, but otherwise no. What happened to the meat they couldn’t eat? They used salt to preserve it. Salt was used in curing other foods and it is crucial to the health of humans and animals. So salt was very important, and sometimes hard to get, thus highly valuable. It was a big deal.

Do I really need to ask if light is important? Laurie and I noticed that after their wedding last month Kyle and Amanda went to Kauai for their honeymoon. They stayed at a hotel Laurie and I stayed at 7 or 8 years ago. We had a unique experience there. One evening around 8 o’clock we were at a mall a few miles from our hotel. That night they had some entertainment outside. There was a concert. We had just started listening when suddenly the sound system shut down, and more important, all the lights in the area went off. We waited for a while for them to come back on, but it soon became apparent that it might not happen quickly. Along with others we decided to head back to our car in the parking lot. The problem was, there was no light anywhere. The whole area had gone completely dark. The only way we could find our way out of that unfamiliar mall and back to our car in the parking lot was by using the lights from our cell phones. We drove carefully back to our hotel. There were no street lights and the traffic signals were also dead because the power was out everywhere. We got back to the hotel and the lights were out there, too. We sat out by the pool in the dark for awhile, but then decided we’d like to read to pass the time. But our books were in our room, and it had no lights. Once again we had to blunder around our room by the light of the cell phone to find our books. My point here is that the dark was not fun and it made everything more difficult and limited.

Imagine living in a world with little to no light. Actually, you couldn’t do that. All of life depends upon light. Without light, plants die, animals then die, and eventually humans die. So light is essential to life even existing. Yes, light is a hugely important thing. We could not live without it.

Jesus was speaking to people who were mostly poor, at the lower strata of society, the powerless, the ones with no influence. He said, “You are the salt, you are the light.” You are valuable. You are what the world needs. He said that to his followers, to us. It is important to notice that he didn’t say, “You should become salt and light.” You are salt and light. By virtue of the fact that they were listening to him, looking to him for acceptance from God, because they admitted their need for grace, they and we are salt and light.

The world largely ignores us. It may even think poorly of us, even in some cases despise us. But Jesus said, “Though the world doesn’t know it, and you may not even recognize it, you are the light of the world. You are incredibly valuable and important. You are what the world needs.” Just by humbling yourself before God, trusting in his grace through Jesus Christ you are salt and light. You are bringing something to the people around you that they want and need. I want to point out one aspect of the blessing you bring today. There’s something about you as a follower of Jesus that you might not be aware of often. I’ll point you to some passages from the Old Testament to remind you of it.

When God called Abram he gave him some promises. There is an interesting one in Genesis 12:3. “I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God would bless the world through Abram, because he would rescue them through Abram’s descendants. But that is a pattern God set up, that he would bless the people of the world through his people. His plan was for his people to be a blessing to others.

In Genesis 18 there is that funny negotiation between Abraham and God. God informed Abraham that Sodom had become so morally corrupt that it was like an aggressive malignant tumor. It was such a cancer that he had to destroy it. Sodom was malignant, and if it were allowed to continue it would be destructive to life on earth. But Abraham’s nephew lived in Sodom. Abraham loved his nephew and was concerned for his safety. He thought this plan to burn down Sodom would surely put his nephew in danger. So Abraham tried to head off the “demolish Sodom” plan. He asked God if he would still destroy the city if there were 50 people who were actually godly living there. That didn’t seem fair to those faithful people. God said, “No, you’re right. If there are 50 righteous people there, I’ll spare the whole city.” Abraham was pretty sure there weren’t 50 righteous people in Sodom, which says a lot, but now he had his foot in the door so he began negotiating. How about 45? How about 40? Years ago we had a garage sale. A woman was interested a particular shirt that we had priced at $2. She said, “I kind of like this shirt. But would you take $1 for it?” Laurie said, “How about 50 cents.” I said to Laurie, “I don’t think you get how this is supposed to work.” Abraham got it, and so did the Lord. Abraham was able to get him down to just 10 righteous people. His nephew and family counted for at least 4, so the Lord only had to find 6 more out of thousands.

You know the story. As God already knew, there weren’t even 10 righteous people in Sodom, so Sodom was wiped out. Think about the implications of that story. The presence of just a handful of godly people would have been enough to save that entire city. Some say there were only a few thousand people living in Sodom, but others say a likely estimate is around 150,000. Just 10 out of 150,000 would have been enough. That means if only .007 of one percent of the population had been godly, Sodom would be around today.

The very presence of God’s people blesses others because it brings God’s protection on them. It would have taken only a tiny number of God’s people to protect Sodom. There are other places in the Old Testament that say the same thing. Just the presence of God’s people brings that blessing. They are the salt and the light. Proverbs 11:11 says, “Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted.”

Just 10 out of 150,000 would have brought blessing on Sodom. Let’s that ratio to the 3 million residents of San Diego County. What does it come out to be? You’d need 200 of God’s people to save the entire county. Just 200! I’m pretty sure we have that covered, aren’t you? What will it take to cover California’s 40 million people? A mere 2,667 godly people in the entire state. How about the United States and its 330 million? That’s just 22,000 believers. The Pew Research Center says 25.4% of our population, almost 84 million of us, are evangelical Christians. I saw one expert who says if you look at how people actually live it’s really only about 9% are genuine followers of Jesus. But even that comes out to almost 30 million. That lowest figure is way, way more than 22,000.

You know all around us are cell towers. I don’t see anything coming from them. I don’t hear anything coming from them. I don’t feel anything from them. I am almost 100% unaware of them. And yet I can use my cell phone almost everywhere I go because of their presence. I don’t even know where one is near my house, yet I can make calls because of it. I experience the “blessing” of cell towers without even knowing it. As a believer in Jesus you are kind of like a grace tower. God’s grace and his blessing and his protection spread to the area because of you.

I don’t think you should tell your neighbors, “You are lucky that I am here. You experience blessing and grace because of me. You can thank me whenever you’d like.” But the truth is, God’s grace and blessing surround you and they benefit from it. Because our nation is so corrupt morally and in many ways rebelling against God, I’ve heard preachers say things like, “If God doesn’t judge America he’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.” No he won’t. God said if the percentage of godly people that live here in the USA had existed in Sodom, they’d still be with us. At the lowest estimate if Sodom had the same percentage of godly people as this country there would have been more than 13,000 of them there. That’s way more than 10. Lots of pastors and other Christian speakers like to paint a dark picture of how awful things are here and warn that we are, indeed, heading toward destruction. I disagree. Yes, there’s much in our nation that cries out for judgment, but there are also millions of God’s people here, and that’s what keeps it safe.

I tell you this because it is so easy to get discouraged. I often have conversations with Christians in which they decry the horrible state of our land and lament the fate that is certain to befall us. I’m not saying that nothing bad will ever happen. Bad stuff happens in this world. I got one word for you – pandemic. ‘Nuff said. But what I am saying is that because we who follow Christ are here, there is reason for hope. There is cause to be confident of God’s presence, provision and blessing, and to not be discouraged and living in fear.

So one last thing I will say is, since we are the salt and the light, let’s live like it. You don’t have to become salt and light. You don’t have to work up some incredible spiritual power and maturity. Jesus said you already are salt and light. Just by virtue of the Spirit of Christ living in you the blessing and goodness of God will surround you and radiate from you. All we need to do is walk in peace in Christ, rely upon him and let his grace pervade our lives. Let’s bring God’s kindness, his grace, his love and his hope to every person we deal with. Let’s be grace towers that emanate God’s blessing and grace and hope to all around us, regardless of who they are or what they might do.

John Winthrop concluded his sermon in 1630, “Let us choose life that we and our seed may live, by obeying God’s voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and prosperity.” You are the light of the world, the shining city set on a hill that John Winthrop spoke of. So let your light shine.