

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Matthew 5:13-16
A City on *This* Hill
May 17, 2009

Matthew 5: 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 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but 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.*

Today is truly a day of celebration, but what, I ask you, are we celebrating? To be sure, we celebrate in part, our decision earlier this morning, to begin construction on a place for worship, to stand alongside this sanctuary. We celebrate that this will be used for God's glory, as the chapel will provide sacred space for smaller gatherings. Additionally, it will be a resource for Augusta as a place for lectures, recitals, and other special occasions, where this sanctuary would be too large. We celebrate, too, the anticipation of building a fellowship hall – something this church has never had since moving to this location over thirty-five years ago. We will finally have space to provide seating for church-wide fellowships, without having to divide up the congregation. Like the chapel, the fellowship hall will be a beautiful space for those in our community, whom we can provide hospitality. We celebrate the work that will be done in our activities building, as we build a stage and expand our space, that will benefit our contemporary worship service, as well as allow us to offer creative ministries, such as drama and the musical arts.

Today, however, is not merely a day where we celebrate the beginning of building things. We celebrate, because this is an opportunity to remember and renew our missional commitment. Our mission is succinct: to love the Lord and share this love with our community and world.

On a hilltop overlooking the Sea of Galilee, followers of Jesus and a growing crowd of curious folk heard this son of a carpenter say the following words: *"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*

To a society that is decidedly self-absorbed with a pervasive mind-set of "what is in it for me," Jesus' declarative this morning is patently counter-cultural. It is the call to rise above mediocrity and live beyond the self.

As we prepare to break ground and move in the construction equipment, I hold before you the three words Jesus gives to his followers, which remind us of why we are here and the mission before us.

We are:

The Salt of the Earth

I see our church as a teaching and learning congregation, and so, we *preserve* the faith by *enriching* lives.

What does this mean or imply? It means we have a responsibility to grow by learning and give by teaching. It is as simple as what we do each week in Sunday School and in the numerous Bible studies throughout the week.

Being “salt of the earth,” is as relevant as our English School. This week, we will host a concluding luncheon for this year’s English School. Nancy Brant shared with me that 167 students were enrolled, representing 27 different countries. While 58 claimed Christianity as their faith, we had Buddhists, Muslims, Bahai, and Jews, who also came each week. Ninety-eight of the 167 claimed no religion whatsoever. Thank you Nancy Brant and all your teachers in what you do as salt and light of this congregation.

Being salt of the earth is about *listening* to the lives and needs around us and responding accordingly. And, as a listening church, we are to provide a place and space, where we can rigorously debate and engage the issues of our day. It can be space for growing and learning, and space for listening and enriching.

With or without buildings, however, the words of Jesus are our words: you are the salt of the earth.

We are:

A City on *this* Hill

It’s true, our location places us on a hill of sorts. According to *Google Earth*, we are several hundred feet higher in elevation than downtown Augusta, and that is not counting our steeple, which adds another 200 or so feet. Being a city on a hill, however, is not about elevation.

We are a city on *this* hill, because we are a sharing and engaging congregation. We dare not hide the compassion and love we have for our neighbors.

Last year alone we gave over a half-million dollars of our tithes and offerings towards missions. We believe our responsibility to our neighbors is a global one, which means our work may take us to Ecuador, to provide medical care for the Quicha minorities, or to Hungary, to bring support for the Roma, Gypsies, one of the most oppressed people in Europe today.

Our mission also has a local responsibility. Each week, for example, dozens of our members volunteer hours at our Benevolence ministry. Last year, we provided care, such as food, housing, utility assistance, legal counsel, and spiritual care to 5351 individuals that represented 1816 families which included 2726 children. In this endeavor, we joyfully and thankfully partner with the good folks at Golden Harvest Foodbank, as one of the leading food pantries in the CSRA.

While we are planning to build a chapel and fellowship hall, we are also working alongside the Family Y, in providing some of our land for the construction of a “Miracle League” ball field, that will provide recreation for disabled children in our region. Each week, we send students and adults to work in our downtown community, who volunteer their time and give of their hearts, as they serve in the many areas of need.

Let me share with you about a proposal Kelly Hamilton and I have been discussing, first among ourselves, secondly, with some of our city officials, and finally with the blessing of our Missions Development Council. We have a vision of partnering with the city of Augusta, to identify citizens in need, so that we can best respond. Specifically, we envision an on-going program of home assistance for the elderly and economically disadvantaged. The scope of the assistance can range from minor repairs and maintenance needs, involving only unskilled individuals, to major renovation involving multiple groups and skilled professionals.

There are elderly folks in our midst, that because of economic conditions have to choose between groceries, medicines, and repairing their home. Guess which one goes first? If the city can help us identify those whose homes are in distress, and I believe they will gladly do so, we can give a capable response. It will involve all of us – all ages, all genders, all skill sets. We will not transform every house, but we can change lives one at a time.

Kelly and I were talking about this ministry in likening it to the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah, while working for the King, and enjoying the luxury and security that royalty brings, saw that his own city was in shambles. He could abide by this no longer, and so with the King's blessing, he goes and restores the City of Jerusalem.

He mobilizes the people of God and they worked and restored their homes, their places of worship, and the walls of the city. In Nehemiah 4:6b, Nehemiah writes: "...for the people had a mind to work."

During our time in Hungary, Kelly said to me, "Greg, I think a good name for this mission to Augusta would be *The Nehemiah Project of Augusta*." Yes, that is it! We have a message to share and a community in need of our engagement. We are salt of the earth; we are a city on *this* hill.

Finally, we are:

To Let our Light Shine

We let our light shine being and living, as the presence of Christ in Augusta and around the world.

As we build, as we grow, and as we serve, I ask you to commit with your presence in our worship each Sunday. I need you here each Sunday, because everything we do is to be birthed out of our corporate devotion and celebration. I need you also to hold up our mission as we move ahead. Finally, I need you to pray that God would continue to impart upon us fresh vision as we love God and love our neighbor. We are to be a sending church, where the sanctuary becomes the launching pad for missional engagement.

We arrive at this moment, which is nothing short, in the spirit of Nehemiah, of holy consecration before this table of God. I call on you to join with me in dedication of the vision of our mission: teaching, sharing and being the presence of Christ; salt of the earth, a city on *this* hill, and to let our light shine.

Church is not a place, we are a people. Church is not about program participation; church is about passionate purpose.

Towards the end of the book of Nehemiah we read that the vision of Nehemiah was completed. The city was restored, the walls were repaired, people returned to their homes, and their worship was shared all across the land. It is written in 12:43b, that at the dedication of God's people, as well as the city, their joy was "heard far away."

May it be said of us.

You and I have a place, a calling, a claim, to be vessel of transformative change – ***Salt; Light; Shine!***