Have you ever had the experience of telling someone you that you go to church, and you get that blank stare? Or even worse, the moment they realize you are “religious”, there’s this instant discomfort, and they quickly change the subject…?

Yet every now and then, and I am sure this is true for many of you, I talk to people and I just know they’d love being a part of a church community, they would thrive here – if only they’d known about it, if only someone had told them about it.

And then there’s the kind of conversation that I sometimes overhear right here our own church, in which people talk wistfully about “the good ol’ days” when the church would be full, with a full-time minister and a thriving Sunday School and big choir (and even a Youth Choir!), and money in the bank.

Is it true what these conversations imply? Are our best years behind us – or is there life here now? Are we no longer relevant to this world – or can we offer it a better vision on life that stands out from everything else around us? I firmly believe that Pinegrove has lots of life left and that we have something to offer that our community needs; I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe that. But how to express that to the outside world? How to remove that “blank stare”?

In our Bible passage this morning Jesus offers his own unique vision for the church. Be salt and be light, he says; add flavour and contrast. Be a city on a hill; don’t blend in, don’t follow the crowds, lead the crowds. The church is not a monument – it’s a movement, a movement. So let’s move, not sit still!

To give you an example: “Levittown” was built between 1947 and 1951 in Long Island, NY. It was the first truly mass-produced suburb and became the standard for most postwar suburbs throughout North America. It provided modern, affordable houses for those in the white middle-class. People just loved it and it triggered a mass migration from the crowded city centres to the leafy “burbs”.

“Why are we?”
Pastor Hubert, Annual Meeting Sunday, Feb. 5, 2017
Matthew 5:13-20

“You are the salt of the earth!”
However, Levittown also had its problems. One of them is what we now call the “cookie-cutter culture”: everything was the same. It was bland, it was predictable, it screamed conformity to white middle-class values. If you tried to do something different, like growing a bushy front yard full of wildflowers instead of the crew-cut lawn that everyone else had, well, that was quickly stamped out. Differences were not tolerated. No wonder that today the name “Levittown” is used as a term to describe bland, overly sanitized suburbs consisting largely of identical housing and identical people with identical ideas. The 1998 movie “Pleasantville” does an excellent job at poking fun at that kind of conformity while also showing the dangers of it.

Over against this idea of making everything the same, mass-produced, and blending-in is Jesus’ call to stand out by being a bright light. Of course in Jesus’ days you couldn’t flip a switch to make light; all you had was the tiny flame of a candle or an oil lamp. Jesus says, you are that light, you are that little flame. So if you wanted to make a bright light, you need a lot of little flames all put together. In other words, you need to be in community together to make a bright light, to make a difference in the world. That’s why we are a faith community.

So much of our world today tries to press you into its mold. So much of religion and the media and especially politics is about conformity, about being afraid of anything that’s different or unusual. Different cultures, different ways of dress, different forms of faiths. And it’s getting worse fast. We just have to look at the horrific shooting that happened in Quebec City last week.

But Jesus says: Don’t be bland, be flavourful like salt! Don’t just sit there and let the world pass you by, be active and engaged. Stand up for what is right! Be a light!
Don’t just follow the crowd and do as they do. Stand out from the crowd, live your life on God’s terms – not the crowd’s. Be a city on a hill!

A city has lots of people and houses, so it emits a lot of light at night. A lit-up city that’s on top of a hill is like a beacon that can be seen for miles around, guiding people with the glow of a warm, welcoming light. That’s the way Pinegrove will be. It’s light will be seen lighted from far away, if it is united in love and faith…

Pinegrove can be a thriving community of creativity and joy and healthy relationships and acceptance of our differences. A community where people grow into the persons God has in mind for them. Also a community that’s chaotic and messy and difficult. In short, a community that’s the polar opposite of places like Levittown.

Did you ever notice that when we talk about the good ol’ days, it’s usually about how many people showed up? We don’t often ask ourselves how many of those people were actually transformed by this community of faith, how we added salt and light into people’s lives around us, how we managed to be a bright city on a hill. And yet, that’s what Christ says is what counts.

So as we prepare to look back and forward in our Annual Meeting later this morning, let us keep that question in front of us all the time: how have we been transformative to each other and others around us; how have we changed lives? And how can we be an even more compelling community that transforms even more people’s lives?

Of course that doesn’t just happen magically or automatically, it takes work. Are we willing to do that work? Are we willing to step out of our comfortable shell and engage with the world around us? We cannot justify our existence just because we’ve been around for 62 years. We cannot assume Rosslyn needs us just because we are here. For that to happen we first need to matter. So how do we matter? How do we transform lives?

Christ tells us that if we are living in a way that adds flavour and light to the lives around us, Pinegrove will matter. If we are living in a way that is the opposite of the greed, fear and intolerance we see sprout up all around us, Pinegrove will matter. If we are living in relationship to God – not the world, but God alone – and allow ourselves to be transformed more and more into the children of light and love, we will have an impact within our communities, our families, and our workplaces. We will matter, and we will thrive, that’s a promise.

So let us focus on where this is already happening, where God is doing a new thing in Pinegrove. And let us join in by being salty, by being a bright city on a hill that others will want to be part of.

Amen.
Matthew 5:13-20

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

14 “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. 19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

20 “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!