

Shining Our Light

January 25, 2026

Isaiah 58:6-12

Matthew 5:13-16

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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Today we're discussing outreach, how Center Harbor Congregational Church already practices outreach, and new ways we could practice outreach. So, what is outreach? Essentially, it's the church - not individuals, the church - going out into the community, or the church inviting the community into church life. And why do we do it? Well, because it is an essential part of being a Christian community, right up there with worship. In fact, Isaiah reminds us this morning that worship on its own is not enough. He tells the people, "When your practice becomes introverted, personal, ritualistic while there is oppression and violence and inequality in your land, it is meaningless."

The way to demonstrate our faith, according to both of our readings this morning is not just to shine our light in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, but to shine it out into the world as well. We do shine a gorgeous, joyful light on Sunday mornings, no doubt about that. But sometimes, a church's building can act as a bushel.

We are also called to be a city on the hill; we are called to be visible. Certainly, our church building is visible in town, but we know that the church is not the building, it's the people. And so, the question is, are the people visible doing God's work out in the world? Setting an example, not to boast or feel "holier than thou," but to inspire and invite.

And the metaphor of salt may have some helpful suggestions because it had so many meanings and connotations in the Jewish culture of Jesus' time. Salt was used as a sacrifice, seasoning, and preservative. It was used for purification and connoted loyalty and covenant fidelity; "sharing salt" meant eating together in a binding relationship.

New Testament scholar M. Eugene Boring writes that with these salt, light and city metaphors that we read today, Jesus "strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private." He goes on to write that the church "is not an introverted secret society shielding itself from the world, but is a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed."

I think one of the best ways we demonstrate our authentic church life, one of the most beautiful forms of outreach this church does, is the outside Christmas Eve service, where we literally shine lights in our luminaries to invite people "in." And how many of the

participants are not the usual Sunday morning crowd. What a special, community-nourishing tradition this church has practiced.

Another meaningful action this church practices is generously giving to Missions of the Month. We are connected to these life-giving organizations through this community's financial gifts. How can we do even more to develop interpersonal connections? I ask what more we could do, not because what we currently do isn't good enough, but because outreach changes with the times, and churches must be dynamic in order to survive and carry out their mission these days. We must always be dreaming of new ideas.

Now being seen and heard out in the world may not come naturally to New England Protestants. We are typically private about our faith, we don't like to be loud. But there are very loud people in our country right now who claim to be Christians, but who do not practice expansive love or extravagant welcome, who do not treat other humans as beloved children of God. And they are typically the loudest, most visible example for unchurched folks of who "Christians" are and what "Christians" do. That's why the UCC has a campaign called "Love Louder." We can no longer cede the airwaves to hateful "Christians," we need to make our loving voices louder.

Being salt means connecting with people, not just through financial gifts. Being light means illuminating another way as a church community out in the world. Being a city on a hill means being an inspiration, a visible example of what it means to follow Jesus, as a church community.

I think outreach can feel scary and unnatural. Coming even farther out from the comfort zone of our bushel. But God is with us, it is God's light that we shine. And the prophet assures us that when we take that step out of into the community together, that light will shine, our needs will be satisfied, and we will flourish like a well-watered garden. We can repair broken systems that exploit and harm, and the streets, that recently have been full of fear and death, we can restore with joy and life