

# **Building for Faith in Action: A Beacon**

May 7, 2023

## **Beacon**

As we focus today on how Union serves as a beacon, it might be helpful to unpack that image a bit. When I speak of a beacon, what first comes to mind? For me, I picture a lighthouse. And what is the function of a lighthouse? First, as the name implies, it is a light. The scriptures include numerous passages that refer to God and Jesus as light, and the Gospel we read today tells us that we are the light of the world.

Have you ever been lost or simply spent time in nature at night? We use the image of darkness a lot. We might say, “I was in the dark” when talking about a lack of knowledge or understanding. A “dark night of the soul” is a time of deep introspection that often includes a high degree of anxiety or depression and a feeling of being disconnected from what matters. We might talk of being in a dark mood or, seeing as we celebrated Star Wars day this week, we may fear someone has been lured to the dark side.

To all of these images, the antidote is light. When lost in the wilderness at night, the light of a campfire or farmhouse can bring immense joy, because it is orienting. In that case, as with a lighthouse, the light draws you in. It orients you. It helps you know where you are in relation to the rest of the world. It gives you a goal and a purpose.

When we celebrate Union Church as a beacon, we’re lifting up all of those dynamics. When we’ve been in the dark, Union’s commitment to love can be wonderfully orienting. Our church, with our focus on God’s love and our commitment to radical welcome, helps us to know where we are in relation to the rest of the world. And, I hope, that gives us a goal and a purpose.

The light of a campfire or lighthouse draws people to it. Not only does it help you know which way to go and what to avoid, it beckons, saying, “come this way.” A beacon, by its very nature, is hospitable, welcoming. AND, as our Gospel points out, the enlightenment and graciousness of the light isn’t only intended for the individual. As the text says, “A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” So, too, with the enlightenment and direction and purpose we find in the light. It’s not only for us.

Union’s role as a beacon is to fill each of us so powerfully with the love and grace and healing and compassion of God that it radiates out of us and enlightens others as well. The light in the city on a hill mentioned in the Gospel does indeed enlighten the residents of the city, but it also draws others to the light.

## **Application**

As we lift up how Union serves as a beacon, the dots between this image and the story Tina told about this church rolling up our sleeves to address the housing needs of some of our city’s most vulnerable are easy to connect. In initiating Jubilee House and then establishing the Ecumenical Partnership for Housing, Union served as a beacon of hope. We functioned as a light, not only in the lives of the countless families who have called Jubilee House home in the last 30 years, but

also to our neighboring churches who we inspired to join in on this extravagant experiment of love.

Part of what I love about the Capital Campaign that we're undertaking now is that it includes mission funding to make sure that we don't lose sight of this aspect of being a beacon. A beacon doesn't exist solely for itself. Its role is to offer safety and hospitality and sometimes even community to others.

Some of those others may become incorporated into our community, like the folks who are joining the church today. And sometimes, as in the case of Jubilee House, the function of our church may be to help people navigate particularly rocky shores.

A couple more notes about our scriptures today: The two passages tell us the story from very early in the Acts of the Apostles. Just to refresh your memory, the Acts of the Apostles is the book of the Bible that tells the story of Jesus' early followers shortly after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. It tells the story of how Jesus' earliest followers picked up when he was no longer with them. In that, it is powerfully instructive that both of the passages we read today, one from directly after Pentecost and the other from just two chapters later, emphasize taking care of one another financially. In no uncertain terms, Jesus' earliest followers understood that an integral part of Jesus' teaching is the physical care for all.

The other piece that I'd like to lift up takes us back to our Gospel passage for today, where Jesus tells us to go beyond loving those who love us and to love our enemies. That, of course, is the hard part.

Back in 2010, there was a controversy in the little town where my parents live in southern Sheboygan County. A Muslim man owned a property outside of town and wanted to convert it into a mosque. Quite the public outcry ensued, spurred, in part, by one of the very conservative local churches. There were rallies at the church in opposition to the mosque, but the town planning commission eventually permitted the building for use as a worship center.

Hostilities were still running high when tragedy struck. A little 9-year-old Muslim girl was enjoying the waters of Lake Michigan with her family on vacation when she disappeared into the water. One of the neighbors, who belonged to the church which had been championing anti-Muslim sentiment, witnessed the event and immediately opened her home to what was first a rescue event but later became a recovery event.

As the little girl's family and their friends arrived to help in the search, the woman whose church had vilified Muslims so recently thought, "If I were in this situation, I would want spiritual support," and she enlisted her pastor, the same pastor who had been leading the charge against Muslim people, to contact the Imam of the new mosque. It is edifying that, while the story ends in tragedy, a community was able to see beyond their hate for a moment as they loved their enemies.

## **Conclusion**

I would argue that hatred is not a Gospel value, but nonetheless, the fact that this community was able to see beyond their hatred when the chips were down is a witness to the power of love. It's a witness to the power of God's love to radiate out of us and shine like a beacon for those in peril.

And so, as we continue to celebrate just how remarkable this church is, today, let us give thanks for the ways that Union serves as a beacon – providing light and direction and wayfinding not just for us and those we love, but for all. Thanks be to God!

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**Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35, Matthew 5:13-16; 43-48**  
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