

Just over thirty years ago this past January, President Reagan sat in his chair behind the desk in the Oval Office and delivered his farewell address to the nation: his perfectly-done wavy hair, his charming eyes, his kind smile, with enough of his Hollywood personality to reel in viewers time and time again. Oddly enough, with this particular conversation with the American people, he had a cast on his left hand and a bandage over his ring finger after minor surgery only days before, further evidence that time was showing its wear on his 77-year old body. Nevertheless, President Reagan provided not just an attempt of reassurance to a nation and listing what he considered to be his accomplishments over his eight years of service; he, also, provided the clergy with rather helpful sermon material, still to this day, just over thirty years later; as he described the country with the biblical language of the “city on the hill,” that we heard this morning.

Now, I’m sure I was not watching anything the President said at that point in my life. The only thing I was concerned about on television, then, was Dennis the Menace in the morning before school and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on Saturday mornings. So, I would have to say I had a rather different experience with that portion of the Scripture the Commander-in-

Chief used. Actually, it was about that time when I started in a rural elementary school, several miles southwest of town. I still remember all my teachers, and a few interesting memory tid-bits here and there: starting with Mrs. Barth in kindergarten. Soon enough, I started to learn the supposed art of cursive-writing from Mrs. Bear in first grade, and now I avoid it like the plague, because of my horrendous hand-writing. Mrs. McMillan had to leave us for a decent portion of second grade for the birth of her child, setting the stage for Mr. Funkhouser to come in, who had us use shaving cream on the desks to practice our spelling, oddly enough. Math turned out to be the big deal in the next grade with Mrs. Swavel. Mrs. Castanian had us really pay attention to current events, even getting us into local competitions in the fourth grade.

Then, there was Mrs. Peifer, whom I still remember from the first day of fifth grade, when all my classmates and I thought we ran the entire countryside, now, being the oldest students at that school; but Mrs. Peifer on the first day said that her mission was to get us ready for what she called “the big house,” meaning the middle school in town. And what I remember most about Mrs. Peifer’s teaching style was that she didn’t do much with us

taking tests on paper. She, instead, had us, one-by-one, come up to her desk and answer questions; having us explain, in our own words, about history or health. Looking back, that was not only about getting us ready for the next year to intermingle with different students we had never met before, but getting us ready for life in general; and even, in her own special way, convincing us that there was something unique inside each of us, a light waiting to shine: that our voice mattered, that we had something special to offer, not just in a middle school, but in the world, soon enough.

So, with all due respect to a former president, who many Americans still revere thirty years later, and fell in love with even more when he spoke of our beloved land as a “city on a hill”; nevertheless, I’m not so sure that’s what Jesus had in mind. Granted, as much as I have *not* mastered the art of cursive-writing, to the dismay of Mrs. Bear still to this day, I’m sure; I have, also, *not* mastered the Bible, not to mention Greek and Hebrew, but I have this sneaking suspicion Jesus was not thinking about some distant Western civilization, not even the past or future Israel, not any supposed superpower of a nation. Instead, Jesus is looking into a crowd already entranced by his Beatitudes take on the world, not where powerful nations

are blessed, but poor and meek and hungry and peacemaker types, instead. He looks into a crowd of people who have been taught throughout their life that their voice does not matter, that they have nothing to contribute to the world, that they might as well go along with an empire and religion hierarchy program, because they cannot do anything of worth for humanity anyway.

And yet, this audacious and thought-to-be outright naïve teacher unleashes a completely different curriculum on life altogether, when he stares into the desperate eyes of them wanting more hope and basic compassion and love, and tells them in no uncertain terms: “*you* are the light of the world.” “You, who are greater than any fortified city, you from this very hillside cannot possibly be hidden from the rest of humanity who yearns for what you have to offer. Your voice does matter. You are loved, and I am about to show you just how much I adore you soon enough.”

Obviously, if they were not convinced, then; if they weren't quite so sure to believe him of their own self-worth in the grand scheme of a God of the entire universe: Calvary was about to prove it. And even more, an empty tomb was about to reveal to them the true Gospel: that the same light that

shattered apart a stone of self-hate and deprecating evil and full-on death itself, that same light that tore it all apart was already set ablaze in each of them.

So yes, the words took on a different meaning for me in a rural elementary school, of all things: a brick building that no longer stands, by the way, as it was torn down several years ago. One could argue that means the light from that place has been quenched forever, but the memory says otherwise. I remember the teachers who had more than their fair share of light bursting through their own basic compassion and love and relentless drive for each of us, as if they thoroughly believed we were worth all of it, as if they could even empower us to share a bit of hope-filled light too. As if even if buildings we once cherished are torn down, even if we feel as if all our hopes are torn apart as well, as if we have nothing more left to give; even when the point comes that our life is finally torn down once for all; evidently, when God unleashed a light in us, it was meant to somehow, someday, last forever. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!