



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Moonshot,  
Houston, we have a...*

Matthew 5.13–16

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## HOUSTON, WE HAVE A...

# 1

I remember it well. It was a hot day, like most July days in Cleveland, especially when air-conditioning was still a rare commodity and there was no lake breeze. Our squad of eight girls had just finished cheerleading practice for the highly anticipated opening of the 1969 football season—we were hot and sweaty and tired...ready to go home. But as we climbed in my friend's car, we quickly forgot the heat and excitedly tuned in the radio. Apollo 11 was only minutes away from lift-off from the lunar surface. Just a few days prior, we had tuned in our B&W TVs to view the successful lift-off at Cape Canaveral. Then we had waited with baited breath as the boosters ignited to send the craft into orbit. Hours later we watched as Neil Armstrong took the controls and manually guided the lunar module over a field of craters to a safe landing on the moon's surface. We all applauded as he took that first small step, really a giant leap for humankind. But probably the most critical stage in the whole mission was the lift-off from the lunar surface. We knew that there was only one ascent engine and it had to light. It was the only way to get the astronauts back alive. And so we waited, in the Fairview High School parking lot, glued to that AM radio in my friend's car. And finally, there it was. The ascent engine ignited and lifted the lunar module, back on its way toward earth. And we broke into a cheer to rival any football crowd. I can still remember that excitement and pride—we were part of history being made—something extraordinary was happening and we shared the joy. Little did we know that the prospect of Armstrong and Aldrin being stranded on the moon had been real enough that President Richard Nixon and his speechwriter, William Safire, had a condolence speech prepared, which began, "Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace, will stay on the moon, to rest in peace." These men had risked their lives for a noble cause... something bigger than themselves. We were inspired.

Fast forward...several years and space missions later. Not all ventures were so successful.

# 2

## APOLLO 13

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Although the mission was aborted and didn't come to fruition, it could have ended much more tragically. It didn't go the way we had expected, the way we had hoped. We thought that the success of Apollo 11 would carry over into subsequent endeavors.

And I think in some ways, that's how it has been for the church. 50 years ago in the US, the church was a pillar of society and a foundation of our culture. Good people went to church—nobody I knew didn't "have" a church. For me growing up in the suburbs, it wasn't a question of whether someone went to church, but which one they went to. In our development, there were Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, probably more Catholics than any other tradition, as well as a few folks who were Jewish, like the Clymer family just next door. Church or synagogue membership was assumed. It was part and parcel of our 50's and 60's culture. And we sometimes pine for the good ol' days, when the pews were full and there were chairs set up in the aisles.

John Pavlovitz is a contemporary author, pastor and blogger. I find his writing to be refreshingly to-the-point, insightful, thought-provoking and right on. In a recent blog, "Dear Church, Here's Why People Are Leaving," Pavlovitz tackles the realities of Christianity today. He says "people are leaving and they are probably not coming back." We have experienced that exodus. Statistics have clearly indicated that for some years—we've watched the clear, downward trend in church affiliation. The Church of the Brethren overall has been losing members quickly—many to age, many to independent and other churches, some to just plain lack of interest. While our congregation is actually one of the few to be trending the opposite—we are taking in more new members than we have in the past several years—we, too, just might have something to learn about this conundrum. Pavlovitz argues that people are leaving the church because we are silent now in ways that matter to them. We aren't saying what they need us to say and what we should be saying. He says that people can get most of what we offer somewhere else. We can find meaningful

community and entertainment for our families and acts of service in which to participate. We can get music and inspiration and affinity and relationships without the church. The singular thing that the church offers us, he claims, is a clear and unflinching voice that emulates the voice of Jesus<sup>1</sup>. If we really want to be relevant again, he says, say everything.

As so let's hear again what Jesus did say to those who wanted to follow him:

### **MATTHEW 5.13–16**

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*<sup>13</sup>“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 underfoot. <sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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.*

This passage, part of the Sermon on the Mount, follows on the heels of the beatitudes. The disciples have learned who they are. Now, they need to know what difference this makes. This teaching on salt and light implies that followers of Jesus have a particular function to perform on earth and if they...if we... fail to perform it, we might as well not exist. We are called to live out our identity as salt and as Light. Perhaps, as Pavlovitz states, our default setting leans toward comfort, conformity, and complacency when what Jesus really needs from us is to be the salt and the light—the salt that just might sting and the light that just might expose what we do not want to see. We can just talk the talk...we must walk the walk, as salt and light. What if Jesus' intention was for us as disciples to imagine and live into our call as salt and light, that makes the kingdom of heaven possible?

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<sup>1</sup>*Dear Church, Here's Why People are Leaving*, John Pavlovitz: <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2019/05/14/dear-church-heres-why-people-are-leaving/>

# 4

Jesus encourages his followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. We must be willing to go where the darkness exists, to engage and walk through it, so that in time, the light can overcome it. As I see it, being called to salt and light calls to the prophet in each and every one of us and all of us together.

Joan Chittister writes, ours is a “world scarred with violence, institutionalized fraud, rapacious human degradation, political suppression, economic slavery and rampant narcissism at all levels. Ours is a world that waits for some wise and wild voices to lead us back to spiritual sanity. She asks: Will we take up what we know is our moral and spiritual responsibility: to make the world a better place for all, to bring to life the fullness of Christ for all? That’s the kingdom of God and that is where the prophet comes in.”

The prophet, according to Chittister<sup>2</sup>, is the person who says no to everything not of God:

- No to the abuse of women
- No to the rejection of the stranger
- No to crimes against immigrants
- No to the rape of trees
- No to the pollution of the skies
- No to the poisoning of oceans
- No to the despicable destruction of humankind for the sake of more wealth, more power, more control for a few.
- No to hand guns and gun violence
- No to death.

And while saying, no, the prophet also says yes.

- Yes to equal rights for all
- Yes to alleviating suffering

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<sup>2</sup>*The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, Joan Chittister, Convergent, New York.

- Yes to embracing the different and the other
- Yes to who God made you, and made us
- Yes to life.

We recently toured a city that has said and continues to say Yes to life.

Comuna Trece Medellin is a particular area of Colombia, South America and it has a strategic location. It gave easy entrance and exit to the city of Medellin via the Andes mountains and served as a common illegal trade route for drugs, particularly cocaine. For years, the drug kingpin Pablo Escobar was the most powerful Colombian figure of his time. Gunned down in the early 90's, his death left a big power vacuum at that point in Colombia's history. The bloodiest of times, an ongoing battle ensued between the government, the guerrillas, cartel groups and the paramilitary. Following a decade of bloodshed, the government stepped in with Operation Orion in 2002. Countless people died, many innocent, and many in the crossfire.

Today, life in Comuna 13 Medellin is all but unrecognizable to those who remember it as its violent worst. The people knew they had a problem and together they transformed what was one of the most dangerous cities in Colombia. Our tour guide, Nick, led us through a community full of art, smiling, friendly faces, independent shops and the world's only outdoor electrical stairs. Comuna 13 is built onto the side of a mountain, leaving its streets steeply inclined. The roads lead only so far into the communities and from there people must walk. These escalators have made the community much more accessible to the downtown, changing the lives of the locals. Tourists began to visit this notorious city and their curiosity brought the opportunity for shops and restaurants and lots of art. I asked Nick what will keep the city safe from slipping back into a city dominated by drug wars and violence. He said that the people remember what it was like and do not want to return to that way of life. And they are telling the next generation so that the youth remember. In fact, the locals

6 have covered much of the city with murals that tell their story. We reached the end of our tour and the last piece of artwork that we saw upon leaving the area was “esperanza” –hope.

Houston, we have a problem...we also have an opportunity. The world is yearning for esperanza—that God’s kingdom might come to earth ever more fully. We, too, along with those first disciples, have been called. To be salt and to be light. When we are open to the invitations that God has for us, we can—like the Apollo moonshot, it will take imagination, determination, innovation, focus, hard work, risk, courage, faith and lots of heart. But we can’t let that deter us. We are needed now, more than ever—any moonshot worth its weight in salt needs that. The good news is we don’t do it alone—we have each other and countless others who are ready to be that invincible, unflinching voice that emulates the voice of Jesus in this world. And we have God, who calls and equips and empowers us to bring forth the city of God. May it be so.









