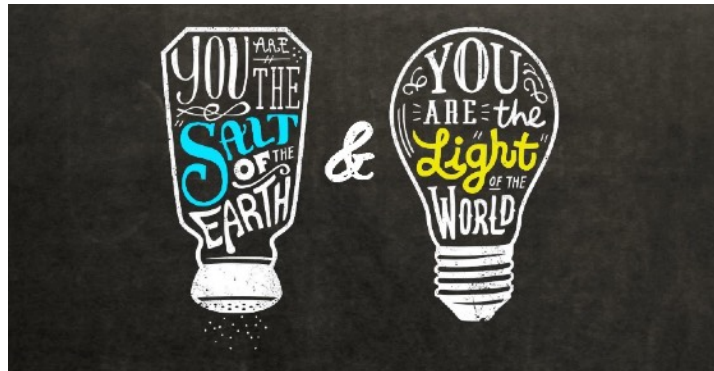


**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
Black History Month  
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am  
January 29, 2023  
The Rev Dr Scott Couper**

**“Ella Baker’s Song”  
Christian Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20**



Credit: The Joy FM

This month is Black History Month. Many might think it strange that we recognize Black History month in church. Yet, it is right and good to recognize Black History in church because much of it took place *in* church and was motivated by church. Black History is, in my opinion, quintessentially Christian. As I mentioned in my *eNews* meditation this earlier this week Thursday, many of our most beloved Christian songs came from the Black experience, be it “Amazing Grace” or from Spirituals such as “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder”. Many of our heroes and heroines came from the African-American church, such as Martin Luther King whose legacy we celebrated last month. Much of our history and

hymns, such as the Civil War and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”, respectively, were inspired by the emancipation of Blacks from slavery in the United States.

The African-American story is not strictly ‘history’. Slavery morphed to Jim Crow, which morphed to mass incarceration. Today, we struggle with many of the same dynamics caused by racism that we struggled with 400, 200, and 100 years ago. Listen carefully.

The percent of Black Americans in the general U.S. population is about 13%. Yet, the percent of people in prison or jail who are Black is 38%. The incarceration rate for Black vs white Americans is 2,306 vs. 450 per 100,000. The percent of people serving life, life without parole, or ‘virtual life’ sentences who are Black is 48%. And the arrest rate for Black vs white Americans is 6,109 vs. 2,795 per 100,000.<sup>1</sup>

We have a choice. We either believe that people of color are biologically more prone to crime than Whites - which is as scientifically absurd as it is blatantly racist - or we believe that we have a huge problem in our society that leads to this kind of incredible disparity – a disparity that is reflected also in health and income indices.

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<sup>1</sup> Prison Policy Initiative, “Race and Ethnicity”, found at: [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/race\\_and\\_ethnicity/#:~:text=Percent%20of%20Black%20Americans%20in,450%20per%20100%2C000%20%2B](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/race_and_ethnicity/#:~:text=Percent%20of%20Black%20Americans%20in,450%20per%20100%2C000%20%2B), accessed February 5, 2023. Updated January 30, 2023.

Our scripture reading from Matthew indicates those to whom the Kin-dom of God belongs. Basically, the scripture states that as people of faith we are to stand-out. A light goes out from a light house, to the shore, into the ocean, and thus out into the darkness. A light on a hill is not private. It is public. It is not a light for our immediate surrounding, say for only reading our personal Bibles for devotions. It is a light that is meant to fill a room and fill the world.

The scripture states that as people of faith we are to stand-out. Before the age of refrigeration, salt protected and preserved food so that it did not spoil. In addition, salt provides flavor to an otherwise bland dish. This is the primary benefit to which Jesus refereed. Salt enhances, improves, distinguishes, and makes nourishment bolder. The food itself is insufficient to be savored. Jesus' point was that food's inherent content, though all well and good, is not adequate for a kin-dom that is *extraordinary*. Without salt, a food's color, texture, and even nutritious value are all bland. Light and salt are valuable because they are more than simply 'good'. They stand-out. Friends, so must we as Christians.

For this message during Black History month, I choose to focus on Ella Baker who a civil rights leader largely because I was very unfamiliar with her. "Ms. Baker played a key role in some of the most influential organizations of the time, including the NAACP, Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership

Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Like her, we [can] spark change by unlocking the power of every person to strengthen [our] community [in Brattleboro] and shape their future”.<sup>2</sup> The song that we are about to hear in honor of Ella Baker was inspired by her actual words. The song is sung by Sweet Honey and the Rock (very biblical!) and echoes the message of Jesus to bring salt and light into the world that is so wounded and hurting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rATQz5nUC4k>

It is my prayer that as Just Peace church, as a member of Brattleboro’s NAACP chapter, and as a Christian community of faith that we will be light and salt to our town and state. May we not rest in personal piety and goodness like the Pharisees, but rather stand-out in a world that is yet to be like the kin-dom of heaven.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

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<sup>2</sup> Ella Baler Center for Human Rights, “Who Was Ella Baker”, found at: <https://ellabakercenter.org/who-was-ella-baker/>, accessed February 5, 2023.