

# **“The Chosen Fast: Salt and Light”**

**Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn**

**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, February 5, 2017**

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Readings from Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9 and Matthew 5:13-16**

*Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.  
Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgements,  
they delight to draw near to God.  
‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,*

*to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*Isaiah 58:1-9*

*Jesus said, '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 under foot.*

*'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.*

*Matthew 5:13-16*

This pairing together of the Old Testament reading that David read this morning and this passage from the Gospel of Matthew is, in some respects I think, very helpful to us as we begin to look at these texts. The Isaiah passage serves, it seems to me, to help fill out, to help us define just exactly what Jesus meant when he said, *You are the salt of the earth*. And, *You are the light of the world*. Salt of the earth and light of the world. The prophet Isaiah reminds us through the words of God that we are, in a sense, called to be those who loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house. "Is not this the fast I choose?" says the Lord. And do not these words, then, begin to capture the very essence of the whole message and ministry of Jesus, so that then Jesus turns to us and says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Jesus is not simply inviting us to consider being salt and light. No, he is saying to us, *you are*. *You are the salt of the earth*. *You are the light of the world*. *You are those who are called to make a public witness active to the very heart of the Gospel, to be the compassionate and forgiving and welcoming, grace-filled heart of God*. We, together, you see, are the ones who are called to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. To welcome the stranger, as the Bible tells us repeatedly, the alien, the immigrant, if you will. To care for the widow and the orphan, the down-and-out, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit the prisoner. You. Me. Us together. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And it's a tall order when one begins to reflect on it.

Sobering, at least, to me. Because so often, you see, I must confess that I just want to fade into the woodwork. I just want to go about my own business. I just want to go off muttering "leave me alone". I hear or see something contrary to the justice of God, or I hear a comment that demeans someone in some way, like a racist comment, or a slur against LGBT folks. I so often just want to shrug it off and move on, not say anything. Move on without witness of any kind to the compassion

and justice of God. After all, if I say something they may not like me. There may be unpleasantness. And, too, I can get so overwhelmed with the complexities that face us, the enormity of some public issue or problem that we face, that I am virtually rendered mute at times, paralyzed in a sense. Or worse, I begin to simply resort to a kind of cynicism and hopelessness.

Then I read these pesky words of the prophet Isaiah: *Is not this the fast that I choose, says the Lord God, to loose the bonds of injustice and to undo the thongs of the yoke?* And then again, I hear the words of Jesus. *You are the salt of the earth. And you are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God.*

A fairly recent discovery of mine has been the biography and diary of a young Jewish woman named Ety Hilesum. She was a young woman in her late twenties during the years of Nazi occupation in World War II. She lived in Holland. Like Anne Frank, but not nearly as famous, she also wrote an extensive diary. Her letters to friends have been collected, her journals. She also lived in Amsterdam, just as Anne Frank did. Prior to the invasion of Nazi Germany in the late 1930's, she engaged in intensive psychotherapy because, as she put it, she needed to sort the chaos within due to a difficult childhood. And surprisingly enough, in the process of this therapy, she was introduced by her therapist to the spiritual practices of solitude and silence, of meditation and of prayer. And so she began to practice this solitude, this meditation. And finally one day, she said, she was driven to her knees in search of the Holy, in search of God—a desperate search. Desperate search of the image of God within her. The result was a hard and fast commitment to this daily practice of gratitude and solitude and of meditation and in the process she became acquainted with and fascinated by the teachings of Jesus.

With the invasion of the Netherlands by Nazi Germany, this noose of restrictions and oppression began to tighten around her and her Dutch-Jewish community. And very soon Jews were not allowed on public transportation or to frequent cafés and under any circumstances they could not be found in the home of a non-Jewish person. It was not long before a transit camp was set up outside of the city of Amsterdam at Westerbork. It was a kind of holding camp with concentration camp conditions. A holding camp where those imprisoned could be then transported to places like Auschwitz—most of them went to Auschwitz. It was in the midst of this terror and horror in her community that Ety Hilesum resolved to continue this practice daily of meditation and gratitude and it was through this practice that she testified to a growing understanding of the nature of God. And it led her to the firm resolution that, come what may, she would not give in to hate, especially of her Nazi oppressors. She would not give in to hate. She would oppose and resist but not hate. Because to hate, she testified in her journal, meant that you began to lose the essence of life, that you began to lose the essence of God, which after all, she said, was unconditional love and compassion—the very foundation of all that is. Instead she labored very hard to see small signs of grace each day. Even in the midst of the horror and tragedy in which she was living. To actively look for and see beauty and life and be grateful for those small graces. She resolved not to be a victim and not let them defeat her.

She is finally forced with her family to go to the transit camp and it is there she writes that she finds her true vocation, that she is, in a sense, being called to bear witness to the essence of God's love and beauty and to give thanks—gratitude, not go around the camp spouting empty words of beauty and of love and of gratitude but instead to actively offer care and comfort to those around her in the camp, especially to the older people who were in that camp, most of whom were infirm and very confused

about what was happening to them and to their life. She would visit each day, like a doctor making rounds and listen to their horror stories and listen to their despair. She would care for them. She would love them as best she could and it was her practice of solitude and silence and meditation and refusing to hate, her practice of gratitude that had, in fact, liberated her to look beyond herself and into the lives of others and the struggles of others around her. While her letters definitely exposed the barbarity and cruelty of the holocaust and while there are moments when she begins to succumb to the evil around her, she does labor to not give in to bitterness and she continues her vocational calling of care and comfort.

Inevitably, of course, it did happen. On September 7, 1942, Etty Hilesum and her family were put on a transit train and sent to Auschwitz. Because of other entries in her journal, we know that she knew what awaited her, what her fate was. She was, indeed, killed in the gas chamber on November 30, 1942. But right before the train left that transit camp, she quickly scribbled a note on a postcard to a friend and as the train pulled out of the camp and was beyond the bounds, she opened the door of the car and threw the postcard out into the field. Amazingly, perhaps providentially, a farmer came along and picked it up and mailed it and it became part of her legacy. On the card she had written this: *In the end the departure came without warning, on sudden special orders from the Hague. We left the camp singing. Thank you for your kindness and care.*

We left the camp singing. Thank you for your kindness and care. One last act of gratitude. Salt of the earth and light to the world. I am humbled in the face of such a witness to the deep meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and this from someone outside of the Christian fold. But she in her death has become a kind of mentor to me for what it means when Jesus said to us, *You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.* My friends, no matter what we might encounter in the days ahead, may we be given by the Spirit the strength and the courage and the fortitude to hear the word of the prophet to loosen the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free and to fulfill what Jesus meant when he said to us *you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.* Amen.