

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“Empowered to be Salt and Light”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, February 9, 2020**

**Isaiah 58:1-9**

*Ah, the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim,  
and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,  
which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, of those overcome with wine!  
See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;  
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,  
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters;  
with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth.  
Trampled under foot will be  
the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim.  
And the fading flower of its glorious beauty,  
which is on the head of those bloated with rich food,  
will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer;  
whoever sees it, eats it up  
as soon as it comes to hand.*

*On that day the Lord of hosts will be a garland of glory,  
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people;  
and a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgement,  
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

*These also reel with wine  
and stagger with strong drink;  
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,  
they are confused with wine,  
they stagger with strong drink;  
they err in vision,  
they stumble in giving judgement.  
All tables are covered with filthy vomit;  
no place is clean.*

*Whom will he teach knowledge,  
and to whom will he explain the message?  
Those who are weaned from milk,  
those taken from the breast?*

**Matthew 5:13-20**

*‘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.*

*‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does*

*them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, the word sits before us. It calls us. It speaks to us. May your spirit speak through me and all of us as we wrestle with your word for us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

When I was in high school, my family took a trip overseas and one of our stops was in Salzburg, Austria. Because my mother was a teacher, and a science teacher to boot, we not only learned about history and painting, she was always researching interesting places to learn about some aspect of science. So one day we went to the Hallzein salt mines, which is an appropriate place because Salzburg means Salt City. We all dressed in rain gear and went down these long slides deep into the earth to see where and how salt was mined. And it was there that I learned that the Celts who began mining there did so 2,500 years ago. In those days, salt was a particularly precious commodity; in fact, at one time it was called white gold. Salt was an important part of commerce as it was used to flavor food, preserve food, make cheese, wash wounds, and in some places, it was used like money. For the Hebrew people, salt was also to be included in the offerings they made to God. It was a sign of friendship when exchanged. It was a part of flavoring food, flavoring friendships, and fighting infection.

The passage we heard this morning comes immediately after the Beatitudes. Jesus has called his disciples to follow him, and they have begun to do so. But now there is kind of a shift taking place. For Jesus now tells them to go out into the world and be salt and light, to know that following him is not just about being with him. It's about a willingness to go out into the world as well. So as one person put it, "the disciples have learned who they are, now they need to know what difference it makes". So Jesus is telling them that the call to faith is one that requires a response. Faith is a gift from God. It is to be cherished and received, but that's not the end of the story. Faith is not just saying, "I believe," and keeping it to yourself. Faith is a matter of the heart. The law to be fulfilled, not as the letter of the law and a checklist, but a law on the heart that is open to serving others.

The reading from Isaiah and the call to worship this morning focus on those very things too. To touch the lives of others in need. Then there is the letter of James. "Faith without works is dead," it says. "What good is it to speak to someone who is starving for food, and just offer words about the good news?" Feed them first, and then speak. Now, Martin Luther had trouble with the book of James. He would have just as soon left it out of the bible because he was so concerned that words like this might be interpreted that works lead to salvation. And as presbyterians, we agree that faith is a gift from God that cannot be earned, only received. On the other hand, while works are not required, Jesus wants us to understand that faith should they inspire us to respond. "You are the salt of the earth," he says, "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" If you keep it to yourself, it does not flavor the lives of others. Faith is a gift that comes with responsibilities not of requiring a certain number of works, but of a willingness to be seasoning and light in the world." That scholar went on to say "it's one thing to know and claim your identity as a follower of Jesus. It's another thing to live it. But we have to. "Why?" she asks. For the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven coming to pass here and now and not just in the future. **I** Faith is not a gift to keep to ourselves. It is not just about salvation and the life to come. It is about living and serving in the here and now. Remember, the word faith in Greek is not really a noun. It's a verb. Faith is not a thing, but something that should be alive and moving. When we are open to the Spirit, faith should and can shape us and inspire us to change the world. The strength of our faith is not in preserving it but our willingness to live it out.

All this week, I heard these little vignettes that I want to share with you, and they sound like a litany, but they were powerful stories of salt and light in the world. A well-known businessman in Toledo, Pete Kadens, gathered the senior class of a high school in the inner city, and he then told all of them that he was going to pay for them going to college, including room and board. He would also send one of their parents to school as well. He said, "You might need a study partner." They were astounded and moved to tears. It was, as they say, a game-changer. But he went on to say something interesting. He didn't want them to think of it as a gift that he gave to them. He said, "This is my responsibility." He said, "I recognize I received a great education in a wealthy high school. I could go to college without worrying about anything financially. I had lots of advantages that you didn't have. My hard work and connections have paid off. I'm wealthy, now, I have to use it wisely. I want to give opportunities to others that I had. I want to make a difference." I think he was acting as salt and light in the world.

We have the gift here in this country of living out our faith without fear, unlike those in other nations. And so faith does invite us to be part of the healing of the world. Four years ago, the Presbyterian church adopted a new statement of faith called the Belhar Declaration. It's adapted from the church in South Africa and it was written in response to the ending of Apartheid there. It states,

"We believe that God has entrusted the church with a message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker; that the church is witness both by word and deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. We are to the light of hope and healing by working for racial reconciliation." Not only within our denomination but within the world.

As I thought about salt and light, it occurred to me that neither is easily diminished. Salt has the ability to bring zest and goodness to life and literally helps keep life going. Light is amazing. In that, the darker it gets, the light seems to shine brighter. And it has the ability to overcome the darkness. The light of fire often offers light and warmth of body and spirit. Sunlight is the very source for making plants grow. Light brings forth life, literally and figuratively. I know at times we can feel challenged by problems in the world that seem overwhelming. But we are reminded that God says-- or we are told that God says, "Nothing is impossible with God."

I think of the book and movie, *Just Mercy*, where one man tries to save the life of another unjustly accused of a crime. The lawyer was the only light in the life of Walter McWilliams, who was living in the darkness of despair. His lawyer was the light that helped to change his life. This week on NPR, I heard about a new place for the homeless in Rome. It's a former palace that had been used by nuns that offered housing to single mothers. But they had moved elsewhere. So there was a movement to turn the beautiful palace into a boutique hotel to make money. But the Pope said, "No. It should become a home for those who are homeless." And last December, it was turned into just that. Food, shelter, and mental health are offered to those who stay there. There were those who were shocked that this beautiful palace of marble and frescoes and grand columns would be used for the homeless. But I thought the Pope's response was powerful. He simply said, "Beauty heals. It offers healing to those who feel rejected and worthless." And so it does, and so it will. In just two months, some of the people have now found jobs, and others have returned home to loved ones. Salt and light as food and shelter have the power to heal. Change can happen. Sometimes great, sometimes, small. It might be a hug or the gift of presence. It can come with a smile or a meal or something as profound as setting someone free.

When we look for light in the darkness, it can show us the way to do our part. For we can all make a difference. For those of us who are older and say, "I can't get out, what can I do?" I always remind them the gift of prayer is important. Sometimes more powerful than we can imagine. In turn, those who are young may feel that they don't have access to what they need to change things. But this story I share tells us otherwise. Because last week I heard about a young kindergartner named Kiki, young though she is, she heard that some of her fellow students were going hungry. And she wanted to do something about it--she felt called. And that is the word I would use, "called to do something." So she decided to sell hot chocolate and cookies at various school events in her town. Soon, she raised several hundred dollars for the school. But her light shone. And people gave more money when they heard the story--over \$9000. But it didn't stop there. Her fellow students were so touched by her, and what she was able to do, they were inspired to do things. <sup>2</sup> One wants to plant trees in a nearby area. Another wants to help the homeless. The power and light of one child has inspired others to be salt and light in the world.

Salt and light can mean many different things. For some, it is hot cocoa and cookies. For others, like, Kardens in Toledo, he's living out what he believes is a responsibility for him to act in the world. Light brings hope into the darkness, and the ability to see new possibilities. The action of one person can set off a chain reaction, a series of events that we might never have imagined. So can we. When we are illumined by the light of Christ as those called to bring light into the darkness, we can become beacons of light and hope when we shine our faith into places that are dark with despair or struggle with actions that can speak louder than words.

Faith is not a gift to be squandered or wasted. It's a gift, that like love, multiplies when we share it. In closing, I share the story from one of our members who delivers for KirkCare, our local food pantry. She told someone, "One day I put groceries in my car and drove up to a lovely home in Des Peres and wondered if I was at the right address. But when I got out of my car, a man rushed out of the house and said, "Thank goodness you're here, we're down to one can of refried beans. This food will make such a difference." And she said, "I was stunned, I hadn't realized how close to the edge some people were living. I realized that this bag of groceries was the only thing between hunger and meal on a table." And it inspired her. She came to know in a powerful way, that people need salt and light. Salt and light brought by others with acts that bring hope into their world. Our faith is a gift offered by the grace and love of God. It calls us to make differences in the lives of others. We can be sources for healing and hope. So remember the Nike ad, and let it challenge us. Let us continue to consider the ways we can serve, and "Just Do It." Amen.

2 Both from CBS Evening News January 28 and January 31, 2020.