

“The Light of the World”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 5:11-16

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 118:21-29

I was checking in with a church member on Tuesday and she started talking about her church attendance as a child. “We used to walk to church from Lynn Street out off 24 Highway,” “Can you imagine,” she asked, walking that far to church?!?”

But they didn’t have a car and that’s where the church was, so every Sunday, they walked. The only time they took a cab was in bad weather, “but she said, we still didn’t miss church, ever.” And if she did miss church, she didn’t get to date or go roller-skating or anything, because she said if you were too sick to go to church, you were too sick to do anything else that week.” To which I said, “Oh, to roll back the years; wouldn’t that be great!”

But times have changed. The church is no longer the center of people’s lives. Even in the time of Jesus, the church was not the center of people’s lives – at least for people who didn’t know Jesus. There are a lot of people these days who don’t know Jesus, don’t know the church and what it’s all about.

Listen again to what Jesus said as he was forming his church – our church: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

We as the church have reason to feel a little persecuted. People do have “false” impressions of church. Jesus knows this, and he says that is still no reason for us to be discouraged. In fact, we are to (quote) “rejoice and be glad,” says Jesus. And in fact we do rejoice. We are glad. As the Psalmist says, “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” That is the same scripture verse chosen by Bill Esry for the Stewardship Brochure he spoke about a few moments ago. As the church, we have reason to rejoice. Jesus gives us reason to rejoice.

Jesus calls us “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” and we can rejoice in this calling. Salt is used to flavor food. But notice that the focus is rarely on the salt itself. When salt is correctly used, it brings out flavor in

whatever it's applied to; meats and vegetables and other foods. In such cases, it's the food that matters most.

And the same could be said about the church. Church flavors our lives, but it's how we live our lives that matter most. Whether it's through worship, mutual care and concern, Christian education, or missions outreach, your participation in this church takes what's going on in our ordinary lives and raises it to a new level, a more heavenly level.

Jesus says "rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." Church raises our lives to a heavenly level. Having a job or a hobby or some type of passion in life is great. Having your job, hobby, or passion tied in somehow to your faith is heavenly.

Having family is great. Sharing in the faith with your family is heavenly. First Church is where we come for inspiration and instruction in living out our faith as families, and particularly as the family of faith gathered here each week. It's where we can channel our skills, talents and passions toward God's purpose and plan, both in our ministry through the church and in our day-to-day jobs, hobbies, and activities.

God's plan and purpose for First Presbyterian Church is to be, as Jesus said, "the light of the world." And in the same breath, he describes the church as "a city on a hill." A city on a hill gives off light, doesn't it? It's a place that draws people in from the darkness of the wilderness.

People are drawn to First Church in the same way. We gather here because this is one of the bright spots of our week. Come Sunday morning or Wednesday evening, people are drawn to First Church to listen for God's word for them that day and to share in each other's joys and concerns, to sing praises to God and ask for God's blessing, to commit themselves to caring for others, and to go forth into the world following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Just because the church is as fragile as it has always been – open to being persecuted, misunderstood and ignored, as Jesus says – this doesn't make it any less important in our lives or in this world. In fact, the more the church is marginalized and overlooked, the more important it is! That's as true now as it was in the time of Jesus. And look what those followers built up!

So it is at this time – as in all times – that we are called to give of ourselves to the ministries of the church that Jesus has established in our midst, the church that is being called forth even now from this place, in this time. Being the church is a sacred trust, given to us by God. God has put his church in our hands.

There's an old story of a deacon who was gathering up the offering during Sunday school. Passing through one children's classroom, he came to the little wooden church that the children passed around as they put in their offerings.

As he picked it up to empty it (of course his was more of a box than this one), a newcomer to the class shouted out: "Be careful, mister, you've got our church in your hands."

God has put his church in our hands.

Next Sunday, we will bring forward our Commitment Cards as we pledge our financial support for 2015. As you reflect this week on what to write on your pledge card, keep in mind that God has put his church in your hands, and that's a big deal. Our participation in the church is important to God, whether it's through financial giving or giving of our time and talents. Both ways of giving are important to God.

As you can see in the Stewardship Brochure this year, giving to the church is "about giving to something bigger than ourselves." We can see this in the brochure photos – all the ways that "we together do much more than any one of us could do alone."

Whatever you think you might be able to give, search your heart, challenge yourself to give a little more. If you're not yet tithing to the church – giving 10% – pledge this year to give at least 1% or 2% more than last year. And if you do tithe, consider adding to God's tithe a little something extra as your offering, because with the tithe, we're really just giving back to God a portion of what God has given to us. It's God's tithe - God's 10% not ours.

So I do, I encourage you to increase your pledge, not to sustain this church, but to sustain your faith. Giving sacrificially to something bigger than ourselves is a spiritual act of faith. You're showing in the most concrete way possible – short of giving your life – that you trust in God and count on God's grace and mercy and hidden blessings to see you through – to see us through.

It's the most concrete way of showing our trust in God short of giving our lives. Which is to say, this is not all about money. I know that some people here simply cannot make a pledge. They have no money to give. And yet, here they are, giving of themselves in love and service to the Lord. Thank you. I honor your contribution as full and faithful members and friends of this church.

Let me conclude our sermon time today with the Prayer of Saint Francis; say it in your heart along with me:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;

Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, harmony; where there is error, truth;

where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

So prays St. Francis; so pray us all.

We have the ability to be the light of Jesus in a world of darkness. We have the ability to tell people about God's world through our church, through the way we admit our faults, the way we cling to Christ, love our enemies, feed the needy, and the way we keep our commitments, both to each other, and to God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and truth, we call ourselves your people; help us to be worthy of our calling. Jesus has called us "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

May we joyfully undertake this ministry in Jesus Christ, that through his church we may become your instruments of light and peace in a dark and troubled world.

Give to all of us the will and ability to fulfill the promises we have made – in church membership, in ordination, and in baptism.

Lord God, we pray for your blessing on this church, and particularly on those who are struggling this day.

We send up prayers of joy and thanksgiving for the marriage of Becky and Gordon, and for the birth of Troy and Tessa's little girl, Ramey.

Marriage, children, families – both ours and our family of faith – these are gifts to us, given in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

So it is in the spirit of Christ that we give back to you, through our worship, our service, and even our prayers. And especially through the prayer that you taught to us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,

For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.