### “Practice What You Preach” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Feb. 5, 2023

**Isaiah 58:3b–8**

3 Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. 4 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. 5 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?

6 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? 7 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? 8 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.

**Matthew 5:13–17**

13 “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.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In 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.”

Welcome to Sunday service. I am grateful for the peaceable atmosphere in this church, the lack of conflicts or factions. Thank you for coming to church with honest hearts and generous spirits.

Our Isaiah passage might have some elements that will seem strange to you. It starts out talking about people who fast in order to quarrel and fight. Some are lying in sackcloth and ashes, with their heads bowed. We may not see such competitive fasting in our society, but this implies that it was present in Isaiah’s time, that is Third Isaiah: after the return from the Babylonian Exile, around 500 bc.

The narrator questions whether this is the kind of fasting that is needed, especially if people are continuing to oppress their workers. Instead, fasting should be accompanied by feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the near-naked (58:7). *That’s* what will make your light “break forth like the dawn, and your healing . . . spring up quickly” (58:8). Charity is good for the giver, it says, even bringing healing. God will become your leader in life, at least that’s what I think is meant by “your vindicator shall go before you” (58:8). God will lead you in your life.

In summary, fasting should not be for showing off or for competing with your fellows who are also fasting. It should be a time for charity and kindness, and then it will result in healing and Godly guidance for you. You have to practice what you preach. This inspiring passage has often been read by Christians and Jews who wish to inspire good deeds instead of religious showiness. There is even a Jewish charity named Isaiah 58.

Jesus’ message this week also has to do with doing good. Being a light to the world includes doing good, and being seen by others. It magnifies God, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). There is a similarity in the two passages on the theme of light. Isaiah’s “Your light shall break forth like the dawn” (Isa 58:8) seems to be echoed in “You are the light of the world” and “let your light shine” in the gospel (Matt 5:14, 16). Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus uses the expression “children of light” twice. In Luke, he bemoans the fact that “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (16:8). Believers are children of light, but are not necessarily as clever as they should be. In the Gospel of John he says “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light” (12:36). Ephesians reinforces the image by saying “Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true” (5:8–9).

This is what the image of light means in both Isaiah and Matthew—it means everything that is good and true. That is our ideal.

Good works really do matter in the teaching of Jesus, unlike the somewhat strained doctrine of Luther, who pours scorn on the whole idea of good works, because he is so concerned that no one should think they are *saved* by their works. He makes an extreme contrast between faith and works which Jesus himself never does. Nor do Paul or Peter or James, in their epistles.

Faith leads to good works. The two are as closely bound together as cause and effect. Let your light shine. Let acts of kindness pour forth from your personality. God knows and preserves the value of every good deed. Ask not for credit, but trust God to know the value of each deed. God knows how to string them together and make for a cumulative good effect. God knows how to build the city on a hill. We just have to do our part, and trust God to do the rest. Trust God to preserve all the light. Sometimes a light goes out here on earth; sometimes a good community loses some of its charm and its good practices. But God loses none of the light. It is all preserved. The poet Robert Browning speaks of goodness as a melody, and says “Enough that God heard it once: we shall hear it by and by” (from “Abt Vogler”). He writes “There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before.” Let the poetry in *your* heart find expression. Let the light in *your* soul be seen.

There is a story of the Light and the cave. Every day the sun illuminated the world, but its rays did not go into the cave. The cave had darkness day and night. Finally the cave grew weary of its situation and asked the sun if they could trade places for once. The cave went up into the air and it saw the light that was always there during the day, but, except for its doorway, the cave’s inner reaches were not penetrated by the daylight. It became sad about its condition, it complained of darkness, and it asked the sun to go down into the cave and see the darkness that it had to live with. The sun went into the cave and lit it all up. It could not see any darkness. This story tells us that the enlightened ones bring light wherever they go. They cannot see darkness, whereas those who have darkness within are always in the dark, unless they can find some way to invite the Light in. The children of light bring light wherever they go. (from <https://yourspositively.com/the-story-of-light-and-darkness/>) They also bring light into places of darkness. Where there is light, there is no longer darkness. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Let us be children of light, and be wise about our use of the light, be discerning about how much light individuals are ready to receive, letting it shine graciously on people who will appreciate it. Let us be wise in our generation, and let our light shine in a way that it will be noticed and appreciated.