



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
 Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
 Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333
 Fax 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

Amy Richter
 5 Epiphany A: Matthew 5:13-20
 St. Anne's Episcopal Church
 February 6, 2011
Salt, Light, Church

Dr. Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, begins her book *Beyond Belief* with the story of her own encounter with church. She writes, "On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a T-Shirt and running shorts, I stepped into the vaulted stone vestibule of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York to catch my breath and warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress – the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death.

"That morning I had gone for an early morning run while my husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son were still sleeping. The previous night I had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors at . . . Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center had performed a routine checkup on our son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open-heart surgery. The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare lung disease. Disbelieving the results, they tested further for six hours before they finally called us to say that Mark had pulmonary hypertension, an invariably fatal disease, they told us. How much time? I asked. 'We don't know; a few months, a few years.'

"The following day, a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help? It couldn't, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day's ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart – literally – and die. We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark's blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit and carried him home.

"Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a . . . community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. Yet the celebration in progress spoke of hope; perhaps that is what made the presence of death bearable. Before that time, I could only ward off what I had heard and felt the day before.

“I returned often to that church, . . . because, in the presence of that worship and the people gathered there . . . my defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. In that church I gathered new energy, and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited us as constructively as possible. . . I was acutely aware that we met [in that church] driven by need and desire; yet sometimes I dared hope that such communion has the potential to transform us.”¹

Stepping into a church building to catch her breath and get warm, Pagels discovered the Church: a community “gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine,” a community of hope, of transformation.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, his first group of apprentices, people who would yoke themselves to him, learn from him, follow him, become the Church, the body of Christ in the world, “You are salt . . . you are light.” Salt brings flavor, preserves food from spoiling, has medicinal uses and healing qualities. Light drives out darkness, brings safety, exposes hidden things, gives vision, clarity, comfort. You are salt. You are light. Not, you *may* be salt. Some day you *may achieve* the status of light. No, you are. So salt! Flavor, keep fresh, heal. So light! Shine, illumine, expose, comfort.

Jesus is telling us, you have enormous, immensely important, profoundly elemental, foundational power. Jesus is telling us, you have my power, mine, from me, the great I Am, the light of the world, the bread of life, the way, the truth, the life. Salt. Light. Be Church. Use my power. Use it, or your very existence becomes absurd. Use it and be who I made you to be.

Even to consider using the power that is Jesus Christ’s and ours may be shocking, something we have to practice saying, talk ourselves into, be reminded of over and over again, or better, just done – jumped into with both feet, plunged into with the practiced abandon of a sea cliff diver who trusts that the water he has waded into from the shoreline is the same water that will receive his body when he dives, and the masters he has learned from were not lying when they said, “this is how, now you try it.” Perhaps it takes a leap of faith to embrace and use Christ’s power of salt and light and church, because this is how it sounds in a prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr:

“I will believe the truth about myself
no matter how beautiful it is:
I believe in my power
to transform indifference into love.
I believe I have an amazing gift
to keep hope alive in the face of despair.
I believe that I have the remarkable skill
of deleting bitterness from my life. . .
I believe in my passion to speak the truth
even when it isn’t popular.

I believe I have the strength of will
to be peace in a world of violence.
I believe in my miraculous capacity
for unconditional love.
I will believe the truth about myself
no matter how beautiful it is.”ⁱⁱ

If it weren't Christ's power, salt power, light power, conferred on the Church to be Church in the world, it wouldn't only sound too incredible to be true. It would be impossible. But, as Jesus say, "For humans, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.”ⁱⁱⁱ And although Wiederkehr puts it in the first person singular, "I believe in my miraculous capacity for unconditional love," don't you believe for a moment any of us is alone in this. As Pastor Eugene Peterson says, "We are a family in Christ. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child.”^{iv}

My brothers and sisters, we are Church. Salt, light, Church. And we are gathered into a particular church community, a small immediate family, a particular twig on a particular branch on an immense family tree called the Church Universal, a colossal eternal tree whose roots are planted by streams of living "water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither, everything they do shall prosper," says Psalm 1 of this amazing family tree. Our family, this parish church named for the grandmother of Jesus, has been placed here in this particular place, in Church Circle, in Annapolis, to be salt and light, Church, for those who worship here and for those who do not. We are to keep our doors and minds and hearts wide open, being salt and light, to those who stop in to catch their breath, and find their breath taken away by the beauty of holiness, and for those who do not. For those who stop in to get warm, but find their hearts strangely warmed instead, and for those who do not. We are like a city on a hill that cannot be hid, and people are watching, looking at us. Some may be so jaded by Christians or so misinformed about Christianity that they are waiting to watch us fall and fail. Some may be so hungry for hope and breath and warmth that even a glimmer of light, the tiniest taste of salt may save their lives.

Today we meet for our Annual Meeting, a meeting that has happened hundreds of times as each year we gather to do the business of continuing for another year as St. Anne's Parish, the Church in the Circle. It's not a long meeting, but it is important, because it is one of the ways we live out our identity as an Episcopal Church, where lay leadership and participation is as important as ordained leadership, where we acknowledge that we wish to be responsible stewards of the incredible blessings given to us by God to be God's church in this place and time, *for* this place and time. Where we do the business, briefly, that opens us to the possibility of claiming our duties and responsibilities of being salt and light and Church, like a city on a hill, willing to descend into the deepest valleys of human suffering and loss, and soar to the highest joys of heaven.

Tilden Edwards describes the life Jesus calls us to: “This is the way of the Paschal Mystery, or Jesus’ death and resurrection, in which we are called to be formed daily: the willingness to see and touch the worst, to trust God’s presence even there, and to let ourselves to be available to God for whatever good might arise. . . It is willingness . . . to live caringly in the broken now, surrounded by all our hopeful images of heaven, watching for the Spirit’s faint breeze that slowly stirs our hearts and reveals and empowers the next step along the way.”^v

We are salt. We are light. We are Church. Come be Church with St. Anne’s as the Spirit stirs our hearts and empowers our next step along the way.

ⁱ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 3-5.

ⁱⁱ Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2008), 109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 19:26.

^{iv} Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 169.

^v Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 14.