

SALT AND LIGHT FOR THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS

President Kimball; Students, staff, and faculty; Regents, Convocators, friends:

Thank you so much for inviting me to be here with you today to celebrate again the founding of this university. It is an honor to be with you on this occasion, an opportunity to step back for a big-picture view of this institution and its mission, your history and your future.

When a big-picture view is the subject, there's a popular story that is often referenced. It's the story of three stonecutters, and in the version told by management guru Peter Drucker, it goes like this:

A passerby asked the stonecutters what they were doing. The first stonecutter replied, "I am making a living."

The second one kept on hammering as he said, "I am doing the best job of stone cutting in the entire country."

The third stonecutter looked up thoughtfully and said, "What am I doing? I am building a cathedral."

I feel a bit like this passerby here today, coming onto campus and asking, What are you doing, CLU? Some might say, "We are learning, teaching, coaching, mentoring; meeting, planning, budgeting, building; earning a living, or getting a degree." Others like the second stonecutter might say, "I am climbing the ladder of success," or, "We are developing the best university in the country, offering the best of liberal arts and professional preparation, developing our endowment, recruiting the best faculty and students, excelling in sports, and building an amazing new stadium—with an art gallery!"

What about you who identify with the third stonecutter, who are building a cathedral? What does that look like for this university at this time? I wonder if it might have something to do with salt and light.

I speak to you today, not as an alum, or a pastor, or a representative of anything, but as a fellow inhabitant of this world at this time. Count me as an inhabitant who struggles to remain hopeful, amid serious problems in our political and economic systems, our families and communities, our environment. Given that struggle and hope, I was struck recently by that great source of inspiration, a Facebook post. My friend got it from an Anglican

evangelical preacher, John Stott. Stott said, we know the world is broken and fragmented. It has always been that way, with some strong human tendencies toward rottenness and confusion. But salt can prevent spoiling, and light can illuminate darkness. In this world, then, where is the salt and the light?

God knows, the world needs them. It needs the health and flavor that salt can offer. It needs light's illumination against confusion and conflict. And it needs them from you, CLU. I hope that celebrating your recent 50th anniversary has been a chance to reflect on the ways this institution has been salt and light throughout your history. And, through your many thousand alumni, your faculty and staff, supporters and constituents, salt and light have spread well beyond this region through all kinds of vocations in all kinds of places over five decades. Today, I'd like to consider the next fifty years. So let's start there, with vocation.

In life, as in the reading from Matthew's gospel,¹ salt and light come through individuals being the best of who they are for the sake of others. That's how each of us "lets our light shine": through the sharing of our gifts. We call that vocation, or calling: using your particular giftedness in service to others. Those "others" may be at work, home, or school; they may be friends, colleagues, or just fellow inhabitants of earth. (Martin Luther summed them all up in one key word: neighbors.) It takes time, community, and some trial and error to discover the best of who you are and your particular gifts, and to discover the particular neighbors with whom you're called to share those gifts.

We call that practice of search and discovery, discernment. While it's often associated with the college and young adult years when it's particularly intense, discerning our vocation continues throughout our lives. So, those of us who are past our college years are still on the journey too! I like to think of it as a treasure hunt, where there isn't one grand plan, but simply one clue at a time that leads on to the next. Each of us needs places where we can practice this treasure hunt as we live and discover our vocation. We need a community of discernment. We need that community to be a mirror for us and show us our gifts, which can be hidden rather well sometimes. To help us recognize a clue when we encounter one. To give us a chance to apply our gifts to the world's problems and

¹ Scripture text: Matthew 5:13-16

opportunities, in the classroom and outside it, and point us in new directions when a trial ends up as error. We need company on this journey too—no one can do it for us, but we cannot do it alone. When you put it all together, this is the true meaning of education, which in its root word means “to draw out.” CLU, we need you to be a community of discernment that draws out the best in your students, faculty, and staff, so that the world can experience them as salt and light.

These hopes got even more personal for me when my congregation in Reno sent one of our own off to CLU as a first-year student this year, Dana Henjum. Dana affirmed his baptism at his confirmation four years ago this weekend, and I was part of the community who promised, as the liturgy says, “to support these sisters and brothers and pray for them in their life in Christ.” Over the years we have supported him as best we could on his treasure hunt, as he was discovering his gifts that the world needs. It was with joy and hope that we saw him and his peers off to various colleges a few months ago. We know they are all gifted. Now we trust you all to help Dana develop those gifts, help him find the next clues on his treasure hunt in a spirit of inquiry and curiosity, give him opportunities to use his gifts for the sake of the world. We trust that his professors and mentors have amazing gifts that they will share with him, and we trust his peers to do that too. We trust you to call out the best in Dana, because we know the world needs him to be salt and light. And because this is what you do, not just for Lutherans and not just for Christians but for all who become part of this community of inquiry and service.

Finding and using your gifts is only one component of vocation. Vocation requires guts, and this too has something to do with salt and light. The discovery of our vocations throughout life is not just an intellectual endeavor, although it requires mindful attention. It’s not a sentimental experience, although it requires emotional investment. It’s not a self-centered journey, although it demands and develops self-awareness. Having guts means having courage to leave your comfort zone and explore new mysterious dimensions of self and world and discipline. With no guarantee of success, I might add. That lack of guarantees is one reason it’s so important to have community that encourages one another to learn, experiment, and risk. (“En-courage”: literally, to put courage into.)

There’s also another way our guts shape our vocation, and that is compassion. In the time of the Bible’s New Testament, people understood the seat of compassion to be the

guts, not the heart. There's a word in its original Greek that means "to be moved in one's guts," which gets translated into English as "moved with compassion." It happens to Jesus a lot—he's moved over and over by others' pain, hunger, and confusion. He's a gutsy Savior. And, he tells stories about gutsy people. For example, there's the story of the prodigal son, who leaves home in arrogance and returns home in shame. Rather than encountering rejection or even stern judgment, he encounters his father who is "moved in his guts" to welcome him with open arms. There's also the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the beaten man lies on the road as several well-intentioned people pass by, until finally someone is "moved in his guts" to act compassionately.

It's not only the prodigal son and the beaten man who long for gutsy people to show compassion. The world is desperate for people with Jesus' kind of guts, in both senses of the word: courageous and compassionate. So, CLU, we need you to be a place where people can encounter others' pain, hunger, and confusion—things to move them in their guts. It may happen in classroom learning, or it may be volunteer service, study abroad, or residential life. Wherever the encounters happen, they can have powerful effects. Last year a small book was published in France called *Indignez-Vous*, translated as *Time for Outrage*. It was written by Stephane Hessel, a 93-year-old survivor of concentration camps and one of the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after World War II. He called on people—especially young people—to search their learning and their encounters for the things that made them outraged. His book is a call to gutsiness, a combination of courage and compassion. For it to be true compassion, though, it has to be for the sake of someone else. Take the Occupy Wall Street protests, for example; there is much outrage and courage there. Compassion comes in when people protest, not only because they themselves feel wronged, but also because they are moved in their guts by neighbors who are struggling to find work, housing, adequate nutritious food, a secure retirement, and access to health care. It becomes a time for outrage on someone else's behalf besides one's own. Taking a risk to protest may make you brave, but compassion for neighbors is what makes you gutsy.

Neighbors are the key to vocation in the Lutheran tradition. They are the reason God has hidden gifts, talents, and experiences within us—to be used for the sake of our neighbors. They are the reason our guts get involved in our teaching and learning—so that our outrage and compassion can move us to action for the good of others. Without

neighbors, vocation is merely self-aggrandizement. Risk is merely an adrenaline rush, and outrage merely complaint. That is salt without flavor and light under a bushel. Self-aggrandizement, adrenaline, and complaint are not what the world needs. It already has plenty.

CLU, you are a gutsy university. Your alumni, faculty, staff, and students overflow with stories of people being moved in their guts to use their gifts, not just in general but for particular neighbors: For *these* immigrants. In *this* watershed. With *this* government. For *this* movement toward justice. On behalf of *these* disenfranchised and left-out ones. Two gifted and gutsy alumni are receiving awards today who encouraged and were encouraged by this community, and we know they are not alone.

So, CLU, you have gifts and you have guts, but there's one more ingredient necessary for the divine alchemy that creates salt and light. It's one I didn't find at my own secular liberal arts college. As a student I scrambled to prove my gifts and found plenty of opportunities for outrage, though I'm not sure how gutsy it was. What I missed was something your Lutheran tradition offers: It is grace.

In the Lutheran tradition, grace is the container of freedom and humility which holds this call to gifts and guts. Grace says that the reason we use our gifts and act with compassion, is *not* because we're going to get credit or a gold star for the hereafter, or because we'll become worthy or loved or that elusive state, "saved." This is the freedom: We are *already* deeply loved and worthy, and we have all the credit with God that we will ever need. It's also all the credit we will ever get, and that's the humility: The world has a Savior, and it's not us. As John Stott said, the world is pretty much what it has always been, which includes the rotten and confused aspects. Even a community like CLU is not going to turn all that around. So there's a limit to what you can accomplish, and remember, you don't *have* to do any of it. But we have this amazing invitation to use our gifts and guts in the life-giving work of wholeness and illumination. So the question is, what do you *want* to do, now that you don't *have* to do anything in order to be saved?² (Or worthy, or loved.)

² I first heard this question voiced by Dr. Timothy Lull at a Lutheran Student Movement gathering when I was a sophomore in college, and as a seminary student I discovered it again in a book by Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde.

It's a great question in the context of so much pressure on teachers and students and administrators to achieve and succeed and get a step ahead. That graceful question wasn't asked by my secular college, but it's at the heart of the Lutheran tradition, and it's right in line with Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Notice the verb tenses in today's reading. They are not an imperative: "Go out and be salt and light! Work those gifts and guts! Save the world!" It is simply: "You are salt and light." You are gifted. You are gutsy. *How* you are these things may still be partly a mystery to you, and the things that move your guts may surprise you. Keep following the clues, and know that you do not generate your own light or saltiness. You just have to let it do what it does: shine, and contribute its flavor.

Doing that won't matter to your worthiness, but it will matter a great deal to your neighbors in this world. The uniqueness of *your* gifts and *your* guts are what the world desperately needs. How do you *want* to use them as a teacher, learner, neighbor, inhabitant of earth? How do you want to do that today, this academic year, and in years to come?

None of us can foretell how the next fifty minutes will play out, much less the next fifty years. So I can't say with precision what will be needed or asked of CLU, but I'm sure it must have something to do with salt and light. You have the gifts. You have the guts. You have the grace. In a divine alchemy, those transform you into salt and light in the world.

I wish I could promise something in return, some specific reward or marker of success. When students began here fifty years ago, political and economic life, families and communities, and the environment all looked quite different. Probably they expected more future prospects than college students and faculty and staff are assured of under current economic conditions. Finding your gifts and being moved in your guts offer no guarantees of success, or security, or popularity, and grace does not promise them either. But being salt and light offers its own reward: A life in which you get to experience salt's flavor and light's beauty. An interesting, passionate, compassionate, connected, illuminated life. That is the kind of life I hope for all of us inhabitants of earth. It's the kind of life I hope for Dana and all our students. In your teaching, learning, and serving, it's the kind of life you are building together—like a cathedral, perhaps. It's the kind of community I hope you will continue to be for the next fifty years and beyond. Thanks be to God for what you do, for who you are, and for the way that you shine.