

The old Baltimore Catechism defined our purpose in life as; to know God, to love God, and to serve God. The more we come to know God, the more we come to love Him. When we love someone we want to do things for them and so we want to show our love for God by serving Him. But in practical terms, how do we show our love for God? Today Our Lord tells us exactly how.

We are the salt of the earth. Salt does not exist for its own sake, it exists to preserve and give flavor to food.

We are the light of the earth. Light also does not exist for itself, it exists to drive back the darkness.

Each of us has been given a unique blend of gifts and talents and abilities. These are not given to us to use for our own desires or gain. Rather they are given to us so that we may use them in the service of our brothers and sisters. Each of us is a singular light brightening the dark corners of our world.

Helping each other is a natural state for us it is part of our human nature, it is one of the ways in which we were made in the image of God. How many times do we read of the compassion Jesus shows us, sheep without a shepherd?

Our mission in the world is the same as Our Lord's, to bring the light of the Gospel to others, to be a beacon that cannot be hidden so that others may see and be lead to Christ through the actions we take. We respond to this mission, each of us, according to our gifts.

Let me tell you how one person responded to this call, a woman named Clara Barton.

The civil war was one of the darkest periods of our national history. Its repercussions are still felt today, more than a hundred years later. Up until that time, a soldier wounded in battle was left on the field until the fighting was over for the day. Only then, would both sides go out and retrieve their dead and wounded. The wounded were loaded into horse drawn carts and taken to field hospitals which could be several miles behind the lines of fighting. This meant that it could be many hours between the time a man was wounded and the time he received any medical attention at all. Often if the delay in treatment didn't kill him, the trip to the hospital did.

Clara Barton, thought we could do more.

Clarissa Harlowe Barton was raised with these Christian principles and knew it was her duty to help others. In her particular case she felt bound to help soldiers. She obtained a cart, loaded it with medical supplies with the help of a Ladies Society, convinced a volunteer or two to join her, and then went to see the quartermaster of the army, Colonel Daniel Rucker.

It was Colonel Rucker's job to distribute supplies and provisions to the army. Clara told the colonel of her plan. To bring first aid to the men right on the field of battle, to get to them as quickly as possible after they have been wounded and increase the chance of saving her lives. This was an extraordinary idea at the time, and to the colonel, equally appalling.

“Miss Barton,” he said, “what you are asking is absolutely impossible. The battlefield is no place for a woman. You couldn't stand the rough life and besides we are doing everything that can be done for our soldiers. No one could do more.”

“I can,” Clara replied, “I will drive the van myself and give the soldiers what relief I can.”

And this exchange went on for a while. Every time the colonel said no, this slender little woman would simply repeat her plan from the beginning. Finally she wore him down, Colonel Rucker gave in and allowed Clara Barton a pass that would let her through the lines.

Imagine that first soldier. He is wounded and dazed. Every time he moves is a new expression of pain. He knows from what he has seen that he will most likely die that day. And then he opens his eyes and sees a woman bending over him. He could be forgiven for thinking it was an angel. In fact that is what the soldiers began calling her, the Angel of the Battlefield.

Her life was in constant danger. On one occasion a bullet tore through the sleeve of her dress and killed the man whose wound she was tending.

But as the success of her efforts became clear the army allowed her more support, more supplies and more provisions. She was officially designated as the “lady in charge” of the hospitals at the front. There is no telling how many lives she saved, how many generations owe their very existence to her willingness to use her gifts in the service of others.

After the war she realized that there were many families who did not know the fate of their brothers, husbands, and fathers. So she worked many more years for the government, obtaining and sending that information to the families of soldiers that never made it home.

Then she heard of a man in Switzerland, Jean Henry Dunant, who had a similar plan to help soldiers in wartime. But he had a larger vision and founded an international committee to help soldiers in need regardless of which side they were on, what culture they were from or what religion they practiced. So Clara went to work with Mr. Dunant for several years.

When she returned home she convinced the United States government to join the twenty two member nations and give money and supplies to the International Committee of the Red Cross. But she brought with her another idea that would come to be called the American Amendment.

She wrote: "There are many other calamities that befall mankind, earthquakes, floods, forest fires, epidemics, tornadoes. These disasters strike suddenly, killing and wounding many, leaving others homeless and starving. The Red Cross should stretch out a hand of help to all such victims, no matter where such disasters befall."

Clara Barton used her gifts of courage, love, and charity, in the service of others and became a light radiating her brightness in some of the darkest places humans will ever know. We are called to do the same, as a church, as a community, and as individuals. A Christian who rejects this teaching, one who hoards their gifts for their own purposes, no longer

radiates anything and should not be surprised if he is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

We may not all be in a position to serve others on the scale that Clara Barton did, but she would have described herself as an ordinary person. And the most ordinary person can change the world. We can all do something. Isaiah referred to the corporal works of mercy; sharing bread with the hungry, providing clothing for the naked, or sheltering the oppressed and homeless.

But there are also the spiritual works of mercy, comforting the sorrowful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, counseling the doubtful, praying for the living and the dead, bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving injuries.

These of course are general ideas. But if we are open to the Holy Spirit He will inspire us to some very practical possibilities. Even so, it is always up to us to say yes or no.

When we do this. When we find the proper use for our gifts, when we find that unique expression of our talents that only we can do, and then go ahead and do it, God will reward us. He will send light into our lives, healing, justification, protection from our enemies and answers to our prayers.

We are here to help our brothers and sisters. We are the city on a hill, built to serve as a help and guide to others, a city with doors open to all who have the heart and the will to follow the light.