

Exodus 17:13-27

Mark 10:35-45

January 12, 2014

The Ordination and Installation of Elders

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

DANCING TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

Let us pray: God of mercy, grant that the Word you speak this day may take root in our hearts, and bear fruit to your honor and glory, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

William Willimon is Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School. Previously he served as Dean of the Duke Chapel and served as a campus minister. Here are two stories he tells about following Jesus Christ.

He writes: “Back when I was at Duke Chapel, I once lamented to a group of students that we attracted so few students in our services on Sunday at Duke Chapel. ‘Go easy on yourself,’ said one of the students. ‘Duke is a very selective school with very bright students,’ she said. (I’m thinking, ‘Yeah, bright but not all that humble.’)

‘I’m thinking most of them are smart enough to figure out,’ she continued, ‘that if they gave their lives to Christ, he would only make their lives more difficult. I think it’s amazing you get as many students to come to Jesus as you do.’

And I thought of Jesus: ‘You will drink my cup, you will be baptized with my baptism.’ And that’s the Good News.”

Dr. Willimon’s other story goes like this:

“When I was in campus ministry, a fellow campus minister asked me to participate in a baptism of a graduate student. The grad student was from China. He had been attracted to the Christian faith while a student at Duke. I had met him once or twice before. Well, I joyfully participated in the baptism of the student. And I thought it a bright idea to bring my camera and take a few pictures after the baptism.

‘You can send these pictures to your family back in China,’ I said. ‘You can share your baptism day with your friends at home,’ I said as I maneuvered everyone into place for the snapshots. I noticed that the group looked a little shy and awkward, but they all stood together as I took my pictures.

After the baptism the campus minister said to me, ‘Oh, that was embarrassing, you with your camera and all.’

‘Embarrassing? Why?’ I asked.

‘Well, because now that he’s baptized, his life has been ruined. His parents say that they will disinherit him. The government will probably take away his scholarship. He can’t show those pictures to anybody back home. His life as he knew it is over; he’s been baptized into Jesus.’

And, you know, when he said that, I thought of today’s text: ‘You will be baptized with my baptism . . .’”¹

In a few minutes, our session will ordain and install Rick, Zach, Harriet, Dottie, and Joell as members of the session's Class of 2016. As part of their ordination service, they will answer nine questions about their faith and their willingness to serve as ruling elders for the Church of Jesus Christ and in this congregation.

The final six questions have to do specifically with their calling and work as ruling elders. The first three questions are about their personal faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, their acceptance of God's Word in the Scriptures, and their willingness to be led and instructed by the confessions of faith of the church.

The first question I will ask the five elders is **the** fundamental, basic question of the Christian faith: *Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* How they answer that first question determines how (or if) they will answer the next eight questions. Obviously, if a person cannot answer "Yes" or "I do" to that question about the Lordship of Jesus Christ, there is no need for him or her to be asked the next eight questions.

So it is with all of us. If we do not answer "Yes" or "I do" to the question, "Do you accept Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior?" there is no need to answer any of Jesus' other questions or to respond to his call to follow where he leads.

Here we are this morning, a congregation of people who have gathered to worship Almighty God and to give thanks for his only Son, the one we call our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **If** you have answered "Yes" or "I do" to Jesus' call to "Follow me," how will you answer Jesus' other questions? "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38)

How often do we think about our lives as we knew them being over, because we have been baptized into Jesus? For many of us, most of the time, our baptism into Jesus doesn't present any sort of challenge, and we kind of like it that way. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer, who literally lost his life in the service of Jesus Christ, also wrote, "Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will."

When I was a commissioner from our presbytery to the 220th General Assembly in the summer of 2012 in Pittsburgh, I was particularly impressed with our outgoing moderator, Cynthia Bolbach. She fulfilled her responsibilities gracefully and in an inspiring manner, despite being in the final stages of the cancer that would shortly take her life.

Cynthia Bolbach was an attorney in Arlington, Virginia and a ruling elder at the First Presbyterian Church of Arlington. Before she was elected moderator of the General Assembly, she wrote an article for *The Presbyterian Leader* called "The Awesome Task of Elders." Her concluding paragraph addresses all of us — ministers/teaching elders/ruling elders/congregation members — as we try to follow Jesus Christ. She wrote, "Following Jesus is life-changing. But following Jesus is not easy, and it can't be done alone: one person can't do it alone; one congregation can't do it alone. We follow

Jesus together as a community of faith, coming together with all our strengths and weaknesses. Those of us who have accepted the privilege and responsibility of serving as ruling elders walk alongside every person who makes that life-changing commitment. We say to them, ‘I will be there with you every step of the way.’ And we find ourselves given strength for the journey. Thanks be to God.”²

At the same General Assembly, I was assigned to serve on the Church Orders and Ministries Committee. One of the items of business we dealt with was an overture from the Presbytery of Santa Fe, asking the General Assembly to overturn an action from a previous General Assembly, which had adopted different terminology for “ministers of the Word and Sacrament” and “elders” in our church’s *Book of Order*. Ministers are referred to as “teaching elders” while the elders you elect to represent you on the session are referred to as “ruling elders.” The overture generated much more conversation and debate than I ever expected in the committee meetings.

Some people seemed uncomfortable with the term “ruling elder,” afraid it might suggest a role that runs counter to what Jesus said to his disciples about what it means to follow him: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-44)

However, our *Book of Order* clearly states, in the section which defines “Ruling Elder,” that “Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life.” (Section G-2.0301)

After one of our elders had served on the session for a while into his first three-year term, he told me one night after a session meeting, “You know, I’m really glad I’m serving as an elder. I used to think the session was just a group whose job was to say ‘No.’ Now I’m finding out that’s not it at all.” To that I say, Amen and Amen! That’s why your elders and I have worked hard and will continue to work hard to develop our session as a community of spiritual leaders for our congregation.

In a few minutes, Elder Curt Simpson will ask you two questions, after your new elders have answered their nine questions. The second question Curt will ask is: *Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ who alone is Head of the Church?*

I charge you to take the questions and your answers very seriously. In her article about “The Awesome Task of Elders,” Cindy Bolbach wrote about the “privilege and responsibility” of ruling elders. As Rick, Zach, Harriet, Dottie, and Joell and the other ten elders on the session guide us in the mission and ministry of our congregation, keep Moderator Bolbach’s comments in mind: “For those of us who are ruling elders, this parity of leadership is a privilege and a responsibility. It is a privilege because we are entrusted with the matchless opportunity to step out in faith — trembling as we go — to give nurture and direction to God’s people, to help them on their journeys of faith. No

task set before us as Christians is more important. It is also a responsibility — a somewhat daunting responsibility — because stepping out to lead is not easy. Discerning and measuring our faith community’s ‘fidelity to the Word of God’ is an awesome task.”³

When James and John sought positions of glory for themselves, Jesus gave them a new vision of what it means to be his followers and leaders in his church. Someone has said this gospel story invites all of us who proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord to identify with the disciples, who don’t always get it right when it comes to following Jesus, who have to be corrected, but are never rejected by Jesus. We are invited to identify with the Twelve as “the stumbling followers of Jesus, the shaky servants of the Lord.”

In his commentary on Luke’s gospel, Lamar Williamson says, “The disciples have heard Jesus’ words, but they have the music all wrong. They still dance to the world’s tune.”⁴ As people who proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we’re called to dance to a different tune — as teaching elders, ruling elders, and members of the congregation. Learning new dance steps is always a challenge — we will step on toes, we will not always be in time with the new music, we might even be afraid of embarrassing ourselves as we’re learning the new dance as faithful and loyal disciples of Jesus.

But, remember:

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He,
And I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I’ll lead you all in the dance, said He.*

Let us pray: Everlasting God, by your Holy Spirit, empower us to live in the light of the gospel, declaring its truth with our words, and embodying this truth through our actions. Give us love for you and love for one another; in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹William H. Willimon, “Good News?” Mark 10:35-45, October 18, 2009 at www.day1.org/1474-good_news

²Cindy Bolbach, “The Awesome Task of Elders,” May 2010, at www.thepresbyterianleader.com.

³Ibid.

⁴Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 193. The idea of “the stumbling followers of Jesus, the shaky servants of the Lord” is also from Williamson’s commentary.