

Ephesians 2:1-10

Matthew 5:13-20

February 5, 2023

The Ordination & Installation of Ruling Elders

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

SAVORY SALT AND LUMINOUS LIGHT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I enjoy listening to NPR's "The Splendid Table" on Saturday afternoons. The program is described as "an original weekly companion, celebrating the intersection of food and life for more than two decades. A culinary, culture and lifestyle program, it hosts our nation's conversations about cooking, sustainability and food culture and introduces us to generations of food dignitaries."¹ Last Saturday's guest was Dr. Jessica B. Harris, two-time winner of James Beard Foundation awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020, and author of fifteen books, including *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*, which in 2021 was adapted into a 4-part series on Netflix.

Near the end of the interview, Dr. Harris described the foods and meals she likes to prepare and serve in her home state of New York, in New Orleans, and on Martha's Vineyard. She talked about visiting the Martha's Vineyard Farmer's Market twice a week for locally grown, fresh vegetables and salads. Then she talked about how "the idea of seasoning with salt that was literally panned, if you will, evaporated from the sea, and then in some way seasoned and inflected with other ingredients that are local is incredible." She then briefly talked about fixing a traditional Bastille Day meal featuring a leg of lamb which she enhances with lavender from her garden and a marinade that includes blueberry salt that comes from a salt company owned by some of her friends on the island.² I had never heard of "blueberry" salt, so I read a bit about it (and other flavors). One article said it does not have an intensive blueberry flavor because the salt overwhelms it, but the blueberries provide a gorgeous color, and it serves as a beautiful garnish or finishing salt.

Spanish chef Ferran Adrià, who is considered one of the best chefs in the world, has said that "salt is the only product that changes cuisine." Salt adds saltiness (which our bodies both crave and require), skews the overall flavor of foods to the positive, suppresses bitterness, and enhances the sweet and savory tastes, as well as the food's aroma.³ Salt is a preservative, a texture, flavor, and color enhancer, a nutrient source, and a binder.

And Jesus said, "You (plural) 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." (Matthew 5:13) Or, as *The Message* puts it (and think about Dr. Harris' and Chef Adrià's comments), "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up

in the garbage.”

Now, let’s mix our metaphors, just as Jesus did on the mountain that day. You’ve probably heard the old saying, “It’s better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” That wise advice has been attributed to Confucius, a Chinese proverb, Eleanor Roosevelt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Adlai Stevenson, John F. Kennedy, and even Charles Schulz. However, the earliest known appearance of the saying is in a 1907 collection of sermons by William L. Watkinson. In his sermon, “The Invincible Strategy,” Rev. Watkinson “downplayed the value of verbal attacks on undesirable behaviors and championed the importance of performing good works.” He said, “But denunciatory rhetoric is so much easier and cheaper than good works, and proves a popular temptation. Yet is it far better to light the candle than to curse the darkness.”³

For a good illustration of that, think about our Christmas Eve worship service just six weeks ago last night. Although the days started getting longer on December 21, at 8:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, it was plenty dark outside and even in our sanctuary. At the end of the service, as is our tradition, we lit our individual candles from the Christ candle. Then I asked everyone to lift their candles and to notice how much the sanctuary brightened. The one Christ candle in the middle of the four purple Advent candles is beautiful, but doesn’t light up the sanctuary as much the 175-200 candles lifted high in the air. But the source of our lights on Christmas Eve is the light from the Christ candle, just as the source of our light in life is the light of Christ.

During Advent and at Christmas, we hear the familiar promises of scripture:

- “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)
- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:1-2, 3b-4)

Of course, there is this proclamation in 1 John 1:5-7: “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

And Jesus said, “You (plural) are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.” Or, as *The Message* puts it, “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your

lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

In our elder training last Monday, Sandy, Debbie, Blake, and I watched a video about our *Book of Confessions*, which contains creeds, confessions of faith, and catechisms. The presenter in the video made the point that our creeds and confessions seek to answer two basic questions: (1) What ought we to believe as followers of Jesus Christ? and (2) What ought we to do as followers of Jesus Christ?

Think about that in terms of Jesus's words, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." When Jesus taught his disciples and people on the mountain about what it means to be citizens of the kingdom of God, he spoke in declarative sentences, "You (plural) are the salt of the earth and the light of the world." He didn't say, "One day, if you (plural) work real hard, you will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world" or "If you (plural) follow the law perfectly and never mess up, you will eventually become the salt of the earth and the light of the world." Instead, he said, "You (plural) **are** the salt of the earth. You (plural) **are** the light of the world." But just how seriously do we take Jesus' description and demand of us?

Again, this week, I'd like to share some thoughts from Rev. William Willimon, former Dean of the Duke Chapel and now professor at Duke Divinity School. Willimon said in a sermon, "How many people have rejected the Christian faith, not because they have considered and then rejected Christ, but rather they have watched us, the presumed followers of Christ make our public declarations of love for Christ here in church on Sunday morning but then observed us at work, our behavior toward others in the office, the way we mistreated fellow students at school, the hurtful things we said about people, and they were scandalized by the gap between our declarations of 'love' for Christ and the way our daily lives diverged from the way of Christ? Let's say that we're here this morning because we love God and we want to be close to God. That's good. But there are conditions. What are those terms? What is the specific 'therefore' that God sets before us? The prophet Micah puts it succinctly (*sic*), 'What does the Lord's love require?'"⁴

In the Call to Confession this morning, we heard what the Lord's love requires — "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." This is how we are called to live and who we are called to be. Or, as Jesus taught us, "You are the salt of the earth. Don't lose your saltiness. You are the light of the world. Don't hide your light under the bushel basket, but let it shine so people can see it in your good works, and give God the Father the glory."

Along with those expectations of us as kingdom people and his followers, Jesus adds this seemingly impossible direction, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20) But Jesus was talking about the **quality** of our actions more than the **quantity** of our actions. For that reason, Jesus sets us free. He sets us free from getting so caught up in meeting the letter of the law that we forget about the needs of the people we are dealing with. He sets us free from keeping score (which we inevitably do) and comparing ourselves to others ("Well, I'm not perfect, but at least I

haven't done what that person has done . . ."). He sets us free from drawing such restrictive boundaries around our lives that we don't have much room to include others, because we're really good at using the rules and the laws and such to exclude others, rather than to build and restore our relationships, both with our fellow human beings and with God. That's what "righteousness" is really all about — not the "self-righteousness" that inevitably comes along when we keep score, but the right relationships we were created to live in with other people and with God.

In 1937, Rev. Martin Niemoller, a German Lutheran pastor, was arrested, convicted on spurious charges, and sent to two different concentration camps. Although Adolph Hitler instructed that Rev. Niemoller be executed, his aides convinced him that the pastor's death would be bad PR and work against Hitler's purposes and goals for the Third Reich. Rev. Niemoller survived the camps, continued his ministry into the 1950's, and died in 1984.

Initially, Rev. Niemoller hoped that Hitler would be good for Germany, particularly after Hitler promised not to restrict or persecute the church and its leaders and members. However, Niemoller became disenchanted with Hitler when he broke those promises. Rev. Niemoller began to work with other German pastors to oppose Hitler and his claims and, at great risk, openly preached against Hitler's practices and the Third Reich.

Not long before his arrest, in a 1936 sermon called "Christians must be a Light in the World," Rev. Niemoller preached on this morning's text from the Sermon on the Mount. Before he preached, he said this to the congregation: "And now, dear brothers and sisters, tonight, in this hour of worship that brings the week to a close, we cannot help remembering, in silent intercession, those who belong to our congregation, to the company of Christ's disciples, and who cannot be here in the congregation with us this evening. We hear the names of those who, for the Gospel's sake, are hampered in their freedom or robbed of it." Then a list of names was read, of church members who had been forbidden to speak or had been evicted or arrested by the Nazi authorities. It took five minutes to read the complete list.

I'd like to share a brief section of Rev. Niemoller's powerful sermon. As you listen, think about what it means for you (plural) [and I include myself in that "you"] to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

"The Lord Jesus Christ does not mean, however, that we are to take care to distribute the salt among the people, but He draws our attention to another responsibility: 'But if the salt have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?' Our responsibility is not how we shall pass on the salt, but we are to see that the salt really is and continues to be salt, so that the Lord Jesus Christ — who is, as one might say, the cook in charge of this great brew — can utilize the salt for His purposes. . . The problem with which we have to deal is how to save the Christian community at this moment from the danger of being thrown into the same pot as the world: that is to say: it must keep itself distinct from the rest of the world by virtue of its 'saltiness.' How does Christ's community differ from the world? . . . The salt loses its savor. It is not for us to worry about how the salt is employed, but to see that it does not lose its savor. . . That is

our responsibility – ‘Ye are the salt of the earth.’ It is precisely when we bring the salt into accord and harmony with the world that we make it impossible for the Lord Jesus Christ, through His Church, to do anything in our nation. But if the salt remains salt, we may trust Him with it: He will use it in such a way that it becomes a blessing.”⁵

What will it take for us as a church to act and live as who we already are as followers of Jesus Christ – the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Here are some thoughts from a Methodist minister about that. They sound like a benediction, an appropriate “good word” with which to end this sermon: “May you be all that you really are as a follower of Jesus. Be the salt of the earth, valuable, preserving, stable, and flavorful; rightly applied without excess or deficiency. Be the light of the world, and not just the light of your own personal Journey. Shine unhidden and unhampered. Keep the law of love in Jesus Christ in such a way that knowing the word and how to rightly interpret it doesn’t get in the way of living it and teaching others to do the same.”⁶

You are the salt of the earth. Stay salty! You are the light of the world. Let your light shine!

Let us pray: Lord God, help us to bring light into all the darkness of life, spreading hope for a better world, a world where justice is made real by your children living together in harmony. Help us to bring salt into the blandness of life, encouraging vitality and joy in living in a world that dares to hope for the future that you promise where all your children will know themselves loved and valued and treasured, created in your image, bringing you glory forever. Amen.

NOTES

¹www.splendidtable.org.

²Ibid.

³ “Better to Light a Candle than to Curse the Darkness,” at www.quoteinvestigator.com.

⁴William H. Willimon, 2023, “Unconditional Love?” at www.asermonforeverysunday.com.

⁵Martin Niemoller, “Christians must be a Light in the World,” at www.abcog.org.

⁶Tyler Boyer, “Flavor, Focus and Fullness,” at www.aplainaccount.org.