



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

On Being Salt & Light

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 5:
13-16

Nov. 12, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

We were praying. In a public restaurant. Holding hands around the large table—17 of us. Fourteen were my students from Columbia Seminary plus me and two professors from St. Charles University in Prague where we were staying and studying. We had ordered our food a few minutes earlier from the two young women who were our waitpersons. Before the food came, I asked one of my students if she would offer the prayer for our meal and she said, “Of course,” and invited us to join hands and bow our heads and close our eyes. We were in Prague in the Czech Republic and we had spent the day out of the city meeting with pastors and their congregations and learning more about ministry there.

Columbia Seminary has had a long relationship with the theological faculty of St. Charles University in the heart of Prague. As we were praying, the servers started bringing us our food and I smiled to myself as she proceeded to put our plates in front of us. She just started putting the plates of food down. While we were praying. Then one of them noticed that one of the student’s glasses was empty and she asked out loud in English, “Do you want more water?” He looked up and said, “Yes. Thank you.” So she poured him water and then asked if anyone else wanted water. While we were praying. Holding hands around the table. We said, “Amen,” together and looked up and she was standing there, and in English, she said, “What were you doing?” I smiled and said, “We were praying.” “What?” she asked. Then she proceeded to speak in Czech to one of the professors who was with us. They carried on a lively conversation for a few minutes. She shook her head, shrugged her shoulders and left.

My friend then turned to us and said, “Welcome to the most secular nation in Europe.”

St. Charles University is the oldest and largest university in the Czech Republic. It has an amazing history. It was one of the leading centers of the Protestant Reformation. The great reformer, Jan Huss, taught there. His church was nearby. We had all visited it. So I asked my friend, “How is it that the Czech Republic has become the most secular nation in Europe?” And he said, “At a critical point, the church was focused more on her own survival than on the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

He explained that in 1948, after the devastation of World War II and the Nazi occupation, when the Communists took over, the bishop of Prague made a fateful decision. He decided his highest priority was to preserve his churches and convents and priests and nuns so he negotiated a deal with the Communists. He told them that if they would leave his churches alone, he would not criticize or oppose the Communist leadership. He agreed to cooperate with the Communist government. In that moment, my friend explained, the church gave herself away and lost any moral authority.

Jesus has just begun his public ministry. He has been baptized. He has spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Then he called his first disciples and has begun teaching and healing and has already gained a following. He is giving his first sermon and has proclaimed blessing saying blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed, blessed, blessed and then he turns to them and says to the people, “You 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 under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand so 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.”

Salt was precious in the ancient world. It was not uncommon for people to get paid in salt. We get the word “salary” from salt. Salt was a preservative. I know we talk about rubbing salt in wounds, but the truth is, salt actually draws bacteria out of infected wounds and helps them heal. It stings, yes, but it can heal also. And, of course, salt adds flavor.

And light. In the ancient world, light was precious, too. After the sun went down, the most common source of light in Jesus’ day was the oil lamp but oil was expensive. Only the middle class and the rich would afford the oil to light their homes at night. That’s why the idea of lighting a lamp and then putting it under a basket sounded ridiculous.

It is too easy for me to criticize the bishop of Prague. I believe in 1948 he was doing what he thought was best. But what he did was not being salt and light. The result? In 1989, when the Communist government collapsed and democracy was restored in Czechoslovakia, the church was no longer a relevant part of the society.

My friend Milan remembered the night in November when the Communists left. He was standing in Wenceslas Square, the largest square in the heart of Prague. It was filled with thousands of people dancing and laughing and singing—young people, old people, children, families. At one end of the long square, the young people

who had led the revolution were speaking.

Milan was surprised when an old man, the archbishop of Prague, a man he had not seen in public in many years, got up to speak. He told the crowd how glad he was for this day and they cheered. Then he told the crowd that they should say the Lord’s Prayer together and Milan’s heart swelled because he did not believe he would ever hear the Lord’s Prayer spoken out loud in public in his lifetime. He began to pray as the archbishop prayed out loud and soon the archbishop realized that no one in the crowd was praying with him. He stopped and asked them, “My children, why are you not praying the Lord’s Prayer with me?” Milan remembered that a young man who was sitting on top of a light pole near him yelled back up the square to the archbishop, “Old man, we do not know who you are and what you are saying!” And the archbishop bowed his head and said, “Oh my children, please forgive me. I am your humble servant. I will teach you to pray. Repeat after me.” And then he said, line by line, “Our Father,” and thousands of people repeated after him. “Our Father.” “Who art in heaven.” “Who art in heaven.” “Hallowed be thy name.” “Hallowed be thy name.”

For 41 years, two generations, the church had been silent. And as a consequence, no one knew how to pray. The young woman serving us in that restaurant in Prague genuinely asked us what were we doing because she had never seen anyone pray.

Every time the church focuses on her own survival over the gospel of Jesus Christ, she loses her way. We will not be that church. You are not giving your money so that Village Church will survive. You are giving your money so that the good news of Jesus Christ might be shared with the whole world and the gospel will thrive.

Be salt. Be light.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.