



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

## Why We Need Each Other I Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Rivalries seem to be a part of human nature. Most rivalries are friendly—like the back and forth taunting between colleges like N.C. State, Carolina, and Duke. Well, maybe those aren't good examples of "friendly" rivalries, but I think you know what I mean. Friendly ribbing and joking and good sportsmanship between colleges or other athletic teams or random groups of people are normal. Some rivalries, however, can become tragic like the first recorded sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel.

Most rivalries are good natured, however, like the one that apparently existed between the Galilean villages of Cana and Nazareth. Separated by only a few miles of goat paths, the ties between the two towns no doubt stretched and tightened like a rubber band.

We get a hint of this small town ribbing in the story of Nathanael's invitation to follow Jesus. Obviously an inquisitive and reflective man since he liked to spend time studying in the shade of fig trees as rabbis were known to do, Nathanael was from the little village of Cana, the same one where Jesus would later turn water into wine. When Nathanael's friend Philip came to tell him that he had found the Messiah—a man from Nazareth—Nathanael joked and said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Had the tables been turned and the two men switched home towns, the question would have been, "Can anything good come out of Cana?" Perception, rather than location, has everything to do with opinion. It is not that one particular place is no good at all; instead, it is that my place is better.

How many times have we said similar things? We pay attention to place and pedigree when we talk about people we admire or shun. Many of our presidents grew up in virtually unknown places: Dwight Eisenhower on a farm in Kansas; Abraham Lincoln was born on a farm named "Sinking Spring" in Kentucky and was raised in southern Indiana; Ronald Reagan grew up in Tampico, Illinois, once little more than a swampy area; and Oprah Winfrey (who has been in the news this week) grew up in Kosciusko, Mississippi, a town with a population of just over seven thousand people. General Hugh Shelton, former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was born up the road from

here in Speed, North Carolina. Much has been said about the fact that someone from a crossroads town in Eastern North Carolina could attain such a position of responsibility and influence as if it is an anomaly. There are always cities or towns or neighborhoods, states or countries that we think are incapable of producing anyone who can attain great things in the world.

I think Nathanael's needling remark was more playful than venomous, but there may have been a tendency to not take seriously anyone who grew up in Nazareth or any of the other tiny villages in the hills of Galilee. If so, he would have missed Jesus altogether on his own. It took his friend Philip (who lived in the little seaside village of Bethsaida) to insist the he meet this man whom he believed to be the Messiah. "Come and see," Philip urged him, and so he did.

Our biases, our prejudices, our team loyalties, our politics, our personal histories, our long-held opinions, and even our religion can sometimes cause us to discount the truth because of who delivers it or because it simply does not fit into our particular understanding of the world. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Obviously!

Nathanael was fortunate to have a friend like Philip who was willing to help him see Jesus. As we were reminded earlier, little Samuel (who grew up to be one of the great prophets of Israel) needed the help of the aged and near-blind priest Eli to recognize the voice of God speaking in the night. You and I need one another—and many other people—to see and hear and understand what God is doing in the world. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yes!

We need one another in order to understand scripture, the Written Word of God. We have talked many times about the excuse most of us use for not reading the Bible which is that it is too difficult to understand. To the contrary, the Bible is very accessible because it is a story—the story of God's wooing of his people. Granted there are plenty of passages which, because of the challenges of time and culture and language, are not always clear to the reader. That is why God has given us scholars who research those areas and offer us their best suggestions for understanding the text. Even then, we have to do the sometimes difficult work of trying to figure out what those words mean for us today, but we cannot do it alone. We must rely on each other for insights into the meaning and application of scripture because each of us has a unique and valuable perspective on God's presence in our lives. We need each other to better understand the story of God's love for us. That

is why we invite one another to come to worship, to come to Sunday School, to come to other studies . . . to come and see what God has done and said.

We also need one another to better understand the Living Word of God who is Jesus Christ. What does it mean that God was born in the form of a baby who grew up in much the same way each of us did, but who became the Savior of the world? How do we see this man from Nazareth who took on the religious and political authorities of his time? What does it mean that he was able to offer a touch or a word and a person was healed? What does it mean for us to call on his name today in order to seek healing for ourselves and the people we love? What does Jesus have to say to people in the twenty-first century that is consistent with what he said to people in the first century? I need you to help me answer these questions. I need you to help me see Jesus today!

We need one another to best figure out what it means to be the Church today. What does it look like to be the Body of Christ in Rocky Mount, North Carolina in 2018? I think this is our greatest challenge. The choir sang a beautiful anthem a little while ago titled "Prayer for Today." Listen again to those words penned by Mary M. Coulson:

God in heaven, I make my prayer  
for all the people everywhere  
who live in fear or pain or doubt;  
whose homes are gone, and hopes run out.  
God in heaven, I make my prayer  
for all the children everywhere  
who live in terrible, warring places;  
who live with hunger and strange, sad faces.  
God in heaven, I make my prayer  
for all good people everywhere  
who live in comfort, love, and peace  
and pray sincerely for strife to cease;  
but who do not always hear the call  
of those who live with nothing at all.  
God in heaven, hear my prayer!  
Help all people everywhere  
to come closer together in plenty and need,  
and to make our world your home, indeed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mary M. Coulson, "Prayer for Today," copyright © 1986 Choristers Guild.

Those words are taken directly from top news stories of today even though they were written over thirty years ago. If we are still struggling with the same issues today as we were three decades ago, we really need to pray.

The issue for us, however, is not that we don't pray—we certainly do. The question we have to ask is what form should our prayer take? Is it sufficient simply to say words, to ask God to do what we cannot or will not do ourselves? We are the ones who “pray sincerely.” We are also the ones “who do not always hear the call.” We are Samuel in the night trying to figure out if we are merely hearing voices in our head or if God is speaking to us. We are Nathanael trying to determine exactly what it is we see, a run-of-the-mill guy from Nazareth or the Savior of the world?

Charles Sheldon's question in his 1896 book, *In His Steps*, remains the important question of the day: “What would Jesus do?” That question, explored in the fifteenth century by Thomas à Kempis and proclaimed by the ancient Hebrews who revealed that we are all created in the image of God, is not merely a catchy phrase to be printed on coffee mugs, engraved on jewelry, and pasted on the bumpers of our cars. The question of how we imitate Christ day by day causes us to look closely at life, to examine every aspect of a problem, and decide how to respond in faith. We cannot do that well all by ourselves.

We also need one another to help us know ourselves. When I was a rising senior in high school, I attended a week of yearbook camp at Wofford College (as it was then known) in Spartanburg, South Carolina. There were kids from high schools throughout the state learning how to put together yearbooks so that when we looked at them forty or fifty years later they would never recognize ourselves. One evening after a session, I found myself in a small group of kids talking about all sorts of things. Somehow the topic of faith came up and someone asked me if I was a Christian. With no little amount of affront, I said, “Of course I am! Can't you see?” as I pulled from *beneath* my shirt a thin silver necklace on which hung a cross, symbol of my faith. While I never let on, it was not lost on me—or anyone else—that what I was relying on to convey my faith was nothing more than a piece of jewelry which I was wearing in a way no one could see. Talk about hiding your light under a bushel!

The following year when I entered college, I gained new friends who helped me to discover who I really am as a child of God, who God created me to be, and how I could better live faithfully day by day. I have been working

on myself ever since. Deborah, my children, now my granddaughters, my friends and all of you daily point me to Jesus and encourage me to take a good, long look. You remind me to listen to God. You remind me to look for God.

Just after Thanksgiving, one of our college friends, a special person in every way, died after a long and hard battle with cancer. At her memorial service, her pastor, who had known her only a couple of years, commented that after her death everyone he talked to had a “Sandra story” which they shared with him. These stories, however, were not simply funny or sentimental or inspirational anecdotes. Each one, though different, carried the same threads of her courage and compassion and desire to serve others without calling attention to herself. Each Sandra story was, in some way, like a Nathanael story or a Samuel story, for she was saying, “Come and see. Listen, for God is speaking.” He reminded us that we all have Sandra stories, experiences we shared with her which revealed a lot about her but also taught us something about ourselves. He encouraged us to share those Sandra stories with one another but also to go forward in life creating our own stories by living faithfully day by day. We can only do that together.

We need each other to live faithfully in the world. We need to take one another seriously and respectfully, not disparagingly. We need to recognize that God has breathed life into us and every other person on this earth and given us to one another for our benefit. We need to help one another listen for God. We need to help one another see God. Faith is not a contest between rivals. It is a journey with friends. May it be so for us all because—I need you! Amen.

January 14, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Like the sun which has chased away the clouds and mists that have hovered over us these past few days, your presence with us removes the gloom that has hovered over our spirits, O God. Our cares have been many and our sorrows have compounded as dear friends have died and other friends have grieved. Our concern over needs throughout the world grows and our worry about the future increases. But you, O God, reassure us that we are not alone. You remind us that our hope is eternal. And you demonstrate your care for us each and every day. For these gifts, we are truly thankful.

Sorrow has been at our doorstep far too often of late. We miss dear friends who are no longer with us. Our hearts are heavy for friends who grieve the deaths of their loved ones. We ask for your comfort and strength for us all. Help us through these difficult days to brighter days ahead where our memories help to sustain us and our ongoing love continues to enrich us.

We continue to pray for our friends who have particular needs of the body, mind, and spirit. May they find the help they need from professional care. May they experience the support they need from family and friends. And may they be renewed through the power of your Holy Spirit working in them and through us all to bring healing and health.

We pray for all places that need help that is greater than any one group of people can provide. Heal communities that are broken by violence and distrust. Help communities that are devastated by natural disasters leaving many with no homes and few resources. Enlighten nations that are seeking answers to daunting problems and working hard not to get mired in the petty desires we all want granted first. Surround our world with your mercy and bring us wholeness and peace, we pray. Help us all to realize that our needs are too great to waste time on selfish pursuits and our future is too precious to squander on petty dreams. Unite us in the hard work of redeeming life from the threats we impose on ourselves. Enliven us to the joyful work of making life better for us all.

We thank you, O God, that you are with us and never abandon us—even when we want to abandon you. Continue to center us in your grace and be for us the center of our world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.