



Lakeside Sermons

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

A Safe and Dangerous Place Matthew 4:12-23; I Corinthians 1:10-18

I don't have to tell you that there is a proverbial elephant in the living room of our nation. The difference between this elephant and the ones we tend to deny or ignore in other parts of our lives is that we do talk about this elephant. We talk about it a lot! The problem is that when we do talk about it, we are like the group of blind men who came upon an elephant for the first time ever. In an attempt to identify what this enormous object was, each one approached it from a different angle.

The first man touched a leg and, running his hand up and down, said "The elephant is a pillar." "No, no, the elephant is like a rope," said another man who was holding the tail. "You are both wrong," insisted a third man whose arms were wrapped around the elephant's trunk. "The elephant is like a thick branch of a tree." "No," said another man as his hand rubbed across the creature's ear, "the elephant is like a big hand fan." "It is like a huge wall," declared the fifth man who had stretched his body against the belly of the elephant. "You are all wrong. The elephant is like a spear," said the sixth man who happened to grab hold of the elephant's tusk.

In a poem he wrote about this ancient Indian parable, John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887) concluded:

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!¹

It is true, each one was partly right . . . but they all were wrong. Each one was right about the part of the elephant he experienced but they were all wrong in assuming that they had experienced the entire elephant. None of them had an appreciation for the elephant itself.

¹John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," (ca. 1850).

So it is with the elephant in our national household. Each of us is right . . . and all of us are wrong! Each of us has experienced a part of the national debate, but not the entirety of it. My experience and my understanding are true and valid, but they are not the same as your experience and your understanding. I know that what I have touched of life is greatly defined by my experience as a middle-class, white, Christian, male from the South. Change any one of those factors and the perspective is different. Had I grown up in poverty, I would see the world in another way just as I would had I grown up with great wealth. My friends who are Black, Hispanic, Arab, and Asian see the world differently, even though other factors are identical. Women who grew up in the same circumstances as I did have a different perspective on many issues. Other friends who are Jewish or Muslim or who do not believe in God at all see life in ways that I do not. Those of you who are younger or older than I am have a different perspective on life.

When we begin to move outside of our region of the country and multiply the variables that shape our lives, it is no wonder that we define the elephant in many different ways because we touch this creature in so many different places. Not only do we talk about larger issues from a limited perspective, but we tend to define ourselves based on our limited understanding of the world. For companionship, for support, and for comfort, we gather into groups which in many ways further shape us.

It is perfectly natural for us to want to find other people who think and look and act as we do. It is normal to gather into groups that share our particular traits. Admittedly, that is why we are all here this morning. At some point, however, we ought to always ask ourselves, do the groups to which we belong define who we are or do we help shape the groups to which we belong?

The other day I got behind an SUV and felt like I was reading the driver's autobiography. I immediately knew that this person was married, had three children, two dogs, and a cat—based on the cartoon family figures pasted on the back window. I made the assumption that the driver was female because her initials were pasted in paisley pink on the center of the back window and her alma mater and sorority were proclaimed on the far right side of the window. From other stickers strategically placed on the window, I also learned where this person worshiped, which schools her children attended, that she loved the Outer Banks, and supported several charities. Oh, and the bumper told me a thing or two about her political leanings!

We like to belong. We find part of our identity by uniting with other people who share similar commitments or interests or passions. We affiliate with groups because they offer something we need like an education or companionship or spiritual enrichment. We join groups because they offer a means to do good in the world, to raise awareness of what we think is a vital issue, or to influence others to think and act in certain ways. We like to belong.

Sometimes, however, our affiliations take on a role larger than we intended. Sometimes the groups to which we belong begin to define us. They shape who we are more than we shape who the group is. When that happens the group becomes more important than the cause. Our ideology becomes more critical than the reason we exist. Our commitment to the group negates the validity of any other group. Our loyalty belongs to the group rather than to a higher truth or calling.

The Apostle Paul experienced this problem firsthand among his beloved friends in Corinth. He had established the church there and deeply loved the believers who had received the Good News of Jesus Christ. He had lived among them, struggled with them, and had left them in good stead to move to Ephesus in order to continue his ministry. Sadly, visitors from Corinth delivered the news that rival groups were springing up among the Christians in that cosmopolitan city. They had divided into camps and were quarreling. Some aligned themselves with Apollos. Others appealed to a more traditional mind set and claimed Cephas or Peter as their patron. Another group claimed allegiance to Paul while a fourth group sought to distinguish themselves from all the rest and arrogantly proclaimed that they alone "belonged to Christ." All of these believers had different influences, unique ideas, and various opinions about what it meant to be a follower of Christ, but they forgot that first and foremost they were supposed to be following Christ. They had been saved by Christ and by no other person. Apollos, Peter, and Paul were mortals like the rest of them. The Corinthians were touching a leg, an ear, or an arm while thinking that was the full reality of the Body of Christ. They had divided into "godly gangs," and were ready to rumble. But why, Paul asked. They were all of Christ but the only thing that united them was their divisiveness. The Body of Christ had become broken because of them, not for them.

Paul urged his friends to dissolve their divisions and find common agreement. He insisted that they be of one mind and one purpose. But in such a fractured situation as they found themselves, how could they find

common ground? In our splintered nation, how can we find a mind and purpose that unites us?

Later on in his letter to his Corinthian friends, Paul wrote more about the things that divided his brothers and sisters and how important each person was to the other and to the whole. Knowing that they needed help in overcoming their differences, Paul offered to show them "a more excellent way" (I Corinthians 12:31b) which he revealed in his unforgettable "hymn to love" which we know as I Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (13:1).

Love is the only means by which we can fully open ourselves to one another. I do not mean a sentimental love which swoons in the presence of the other; rather, the love of Christ is tough and demanding: patient, kind, enduring, demanding, sacrificial. The only way we can love one another sincerely is to learn how to listen and talk to each other and to remove the blinders which prevent us from seeing one another as God sees us.

Over the weekend, we all witnessed our democracy in action as responsibility for leadership of our nation passed from one person to another. We also witnessed the freedom we enjoy as citizens of all stripes expressed their approval or their concern over the incoming administration. For the most part, those expressions took the form of non-violent protests, though sadly, some violence did occur.

We are familiar with the practice of non-violent confrontation, but I recently learned that many people are seeking to practice non-violent communication. Denise Anderson writes that non-violent communication "begins with the assumption that all people are 'compassionate by nature, and that violent strategies—verbal or physical—are learned behaviors taught and supported by the prevailing culture."² In other words, we need to interact with one another through our common humanity and stop using "enemy images" to define one another. "Enemy images" arise through the assumption that there is something wrong with people who have values and involvements that we don't like. We immediately see them as antagonistic to us and our values without finding out what really shapes how they think and who they are. The problem with enemy images, Rev. Anderson points out, is that when we apply

²T. Denise Anderson, "Living by the Word: January 22, the Third Sunday after Epiphany," *The Christian Century* (January 4, 2017): 20.

them to another person we are creating them in our image, according to our limited understanding of them, rather than seeing them as God made them. Other people become enemies before they ever have a chance to become friends. The believers in Corinth discovered this truth long before it appeared in our twenty-first century culture. We do not have to look far or think hard about how we use and experience enemy images every day of our lives.

Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that they had a higher calling and the writer of Matthew reveals that calling in the familiar story of Jesus inviting his first disciples to join him. Before doing so, however, Jesus began traveling the countryside, calling his people to repentance. "Repent" is a scary word for most of us, but it is the core principle of our faith. Repentance means that we stop what we are doing that is wrong, turn around, and begin to do what is right. Jesus urged people to begin thinking and doing and speaking things that are right and true. Then he invited his first disciples to join him and to become "fishers of men" or people.

Jesus did not call anyone to go after a particular religious doctrine or social understanding or political position. He called us seek people. People are what matter the most. You matter to Jesus. I matter to Jesus. Everyone outside our window and throughout the world matters to Jesus regardless of where they live, how they look, or what they think. They are brothers and sisters, not enemies.

Last week, the daily program *The View* featured an episode in which Sunny Hostin and Clay Aiken visited West High School in Iowa City, Iowa. They talked with students there about their experience of bullying which had occurred as a result of our national election last fall. Eight students were interviewed together, four of whom had supported Mr. Trump and four who had not. They spoke about their beliefs, their fears, their frustrations, and their hopes. As they talked, the interviewers pointed out that students holding politically opposite views often shared the same fears and hopes. They came from different places, but felt and thought the same way about many issues. Yet, in reacting to one another in that room or in the hallways and classrooms of the school, each considered the other an "enemy." They were touching different parts of the elephant, but were blind to the larger reality of the animal itself.³

³*The View*, ABC TV (January 16, 2017); available online at: <http://abc.go.com/shows/the-view/episode-guide/2017-01/16-monday-january-16-2017>.

How we react to one another politically, socially, morally, and spiritually is important because our calling in Christ is to catch people. We are to help one another recognize that we are each a child of God and help one another live into that wonderful reality. Relating to one another as enemies will never enable us to see one another as belonging to Christ. Speaking the truth in love, however, opens up new opportunities for the redemption of individuals and the world.

Taking on this mindset, of course, reminds us that the reason for the very existence of the church is that it becomes a safe place for us where we might gather as enemies but soon become friends. But that same safe place becomes dangerous because we never know where Jesus might ask us to follow him, and often it is into what we may perceive to be “the enemy camp.” The church is to be a safe and dangerous place because that is the only way we can fulfill our calling.

As we walk through each day, as we navigate a new political reality in our country, let us not assume we are enemies to one another. Rather, with respect and interest due someone we do not know, let us remove our own blinders and appreciate the full reality of the people around us. Perhaps then, we shall see the elephant for who it is and discover that we all are right and we all are wrong and we all need each other to find the truth. Amen.

January 22, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know, O God, that even when our days are dark and the way is not clear, you are our light which illumines the path ahead. And when we are uncertain where we should go or what we should do, you, O God, provide the vision by which our lives are directed. We thank you for being with us, never abandoning us, and always guiding us.

Many are the needs that we bring to you today. We pray for our friends and for ourselves that we all will receive the medical care we need, the emotional support that is essential for our well-being, and the spiritual nurture that keeps us vibrant in the world. We pray for the people who bring us aid and for countless others who research, teach, and work to bring health and healing to our world.

Our world does need healing, O God, and, just as we pray for help for our bodies, we pray for help for all of your creation. Many people have been harmed by storms of all sorts, and we seek help for them. Others have been harmed by war and other forms of violence. Help them, we pray. Still others have been wounded by subtle but equally harmful forms of hatred, prejudice, and oppression. We pray for their healing also. Above all, O God, heal our hearts and our minds so that we might reflect your heart and mind in all that we say and do.

Today we pray especially for our new President and Vice-President. Grant them the grace to serve our nation and the courage to serve well. Guide them in the decisions they make, the ways in which they seek counsel, and the understanding they gain about this people and nation. We pray for their well-being, for openness of heart and mind, and for an awareness that they have been chosen to serve us all. We pray, O God, that it will be the desire of each citizen of this good land to seek peace and foster brotherhood in everything that we do. Grant us all your grace and guidance, we pray.

Rest your Spirit upon us, O God, and whisper your desires into our hearts. Sing through us, O God, that the melody of your love might waft across our land and throughout the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.