



Lakeside Sermons

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

Outraged or Informed? Galatians 5:13-26; Luke 8:2-12

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

John 8:2-12

One of my favorite religious cartoons is based on this story. There is a crowd of angry-looking folks standing in a circle, rocks in hand. In the center of the circle, bent double on the ground, hands on her head in a vain attempt at protection, is “the woman caught in adultery.” Just inside the circle, Jesus stands looking at the woman. In front of him are scribbles in the sand. The caption is that famous line, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone!” The next frame is essentially the same with one exception: from somewhere in the back of the crowd a rock is hurtled through the air. And Jesus yells, “Mother!”

Fortunately, as John tells the story, no one, including Mary, throws a stone at the woman. Instead, they all drop their rocks and slip away one by one. And we want to say, “Way to go, Jesus! You put them in their place! Good for you!”

To a great extent, this story is told to let us know the lengths to which the scribes and Pharisees would go to trap Jesus into saying something that they could use to charge him with heresy. It is also told to remind us that any person in that circle could change places with the woman who had been dragged in front of Jesus. And it is told to remind us that mercy is available to all of us if we repent and change our ways.

There is more. This story also reminds us how quickly, with very little information, a peaceful setting can turn into an angry, even violent, scene. In this story, a Bible study led by none other than Jesus suddenly became a courtroom with the whipped up crowd serving as judge, jury, and executioner. Had Jesus not slowed the pace by dawdling in the sand, had he not come up with that brilliant line inviting all the sinless souls in the crowd to toss the first stones, the scene would have become quite grizzly. Punishments for moral and religious transgressions were often swift and harsh. Remember, not long after Jesus' death, Stephen, the first of the seven men chosen to assist the apostles in serving the people, was stoned to death. How quickly some lessons are forgotten!

In fact, such public stonings still happen today. We don't throw actual rocks (though, sadly, some cultures do stone their people for certain offenses), but we do throw words and accusations and hurl threats and insinuations. You will remember the news cycle on January 19 when it was first reported that a Kentucky teenager in Washington for the Right to Life rally was videoed mocking a native American who was playing a drum and chanting. That young man was vilified over the weekend and his principal threatened with firing. A more careful investigation reported in *The New York Times* revealed that there were actually three groups involved in what took place. A group of Catholic students from Kentucky were at the Lincoln Memorial that day. Another group, known as Hebrew Israelites, were also there reading scripture and preaching. As their proclamations became more fervent and, as some reported, racially and religiously abusive, the students began yelling sports cheers to drown out the rhetoric of the other group. Nearby, a group of Native Americans saw what was happening and two of them walked into the crowd of students. One of the men began playing a drum and chanting a song for prayer and resistance. One of the students stepped up to the man with the drum and stood there, he said, to let him know he was not a threat to him.¹

¹Sarah Mervosh and Emily S. Rueb, "Fuller Picture Emerges of Viral Video of Native American Man and Catholic Students," *The New York Times* online edition, (January 20, 2019); available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/20/us/nathan-phillips-covington.html>.

In essence, three sets of people, at the Lincoln Memorial to exercise their right to express their views on matters of importance to them, became involved in a potentially violent situation where certain actions intended to bring calm and reassurance were misconstrued as disrespectful and threatening. Video capturing a small portion of the event, sent at lightning speed across the world, inflamed public reaction. In many ways, that video was the first stone tossed in what could have been a horrible situation.

In a January sermon, I mentioned an incident from last summer in which a foul ball tossed to a boy in the front row bleacher of a Cubs-Cardinals game was scooped up by a man behind him and given, not to the little boy, but to a woman who was seated beside the man. Video of that behavior went viral and in moments the man was stoned via Twitter and other social media.

When the Cub's management tried to right things by presenting the boy with a signed ball, he proudly showed them a second ball he already had. Asking questions, they discovered that the man in the video had caught several foul balls and shared them with children in the stands, including this young boy. The foul ball caught on video was given to his wife since it was their anniversary.

Reflecting on this event, Scott Simon, host of NPR's *Weekend Edition Saturday* said, "I almost retweeted that 12-second video myself, no doubt with some caustic comment. I think I would have, if the man with close-cropped hair had been a Yankees fan. I wonder how many people who passed along that video to condemn a man with a click will now pass along the true story of his kindness?"

Then he added what was my sermon for the day, "How many of us today," he asked, "would rather be outraged than informed?"²

"How many of us today would rather be outraged than informed?" That is a biting question because if you follow Twitter, read the newspaper, watch cable news, read online comments on any news item, or discuss the events of the day over coffee with friends, you might readily conclude that, most of the time, we prefer to be outraged. And our outrage often comes at the price of truth and understanding.

²Scott Simon, "Opinion: When A Video Isn't The Whole Story," *Weekend Edition Saturday*, NPR (July 28, 2018); available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/28/633199563/opinion-when-a-video-isnt-the-whole-story>.

Without question, there are things that happen in our world that should be condemned and the people involved held accountable. As we all know, at times the actions and statements of individuals and groups are reprehensible and must be addressed. Abusive and violent acts against anyone on account of their skin color, race, gender identity, religion, or nationality should not be tolerated. Attitudes and actions that treat one person as subservient to and for the pleasure of another person should be denounced. Truth must prevail, and we must press for the truth in all things. Outrage, in its extreme forms, turns opinions into action, often vengeful and violent actions.

As he stood before an outraged crowd that had quickly become judge, jury, and executioners, Jesus understood how easily a crowd could be whipped into action. He himself had been pushed to the brink of a cliff because he dared to announce that he had come to fulfill the good news that had been promised to the Hebrew people and mentioned that it was also good news for all of their neighbors as well. A few years later, he was run through a mock trial, condemned to death, and sent to the cross.

Outrage can get out of hand quickly, especially if the people concerned are already angry. Speaking prophetically from his rural Kentucky rocking chair over forty years ago, Elder Frank Fugate, an Old Regular Baptist pastor, said, “Truth is, anger—and not necessarily the righteous kind—is rampant in our world.”³

We are angry, aren't we? We're angry about unrest, war, injustice, famine, abuse, and terrorism all around the world. We're angry about politics and the ways in which our elected leaders use us and our needs and interests as pawns in a convoluted chess game they call government. We're angry about potential abuses of power that may or may not have taken place in our local government the past two years or longer. We're angry that nothing seems to change for the better and that we continue to get mired in the same struggles over and over and over. We're angry!

When we are angry, it does not take much to light the fuse leading to an explosion, does it? The Apostle Paul urged the believers in Ephesus, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26), but we all know that anger can make the day long indeed.

³As cited in Bill Leonard, “Our Culture Needs Jesus Followers with the Wisdom to Navigate between Righteous Anger and Gospel Tenderness,” *Baptist News Global* (February 11, 2019); available online at: <https://baptistnews.com/article/our-culture-needs-jesus-followers-with-the-wisdom-to-navigate-between-righteous-anger-and-gospel-tenderness/#.XGeA9PZFzIU>.

It is easy for any of us to bring heat to any situation or discussion of it. What Jesus calls us to do, however, is to bring light. In those few moments of doodling in the sand, he made people consider what he might say. And in his invitation for the sinless to punish the woman before them, he made them look at the larger picture of what was going on. Were her actions wrong? Absolutely. But she was cringing in front of them only because the scribes and Pharisees ultimately wanted to kill Jesus. She was being used to attain their self-serving goals.

The Apostle Paul, writing to fellow believers in Galatia, reminded them that the fruit of the Spirit—the Holy Spirit—God’s presence with us right now—“is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). If we live with those kinds of attitudes toward one another, we will not tolerate any abuse whatsoever of another child of God. Neither will we contribute to speculation, heresay, or gossip without facts to support our opinion. Those behaviors are just as abusive as physical acts.

Church history professor Bill Leonard, who has graced our pulpit a time or two, reminds us that our job as people of faith, is to distinguish our “righteous anger from the self-righteous kind, and gospel tenderness from condescension.”⁴ The best way for us to do that is to do what Jesus did. Take a few moments to consider the situation before you. Do you have all of the facts? Might there be something else going on that we cannot see? Who is involved and why? If I were there, what might I see and feel and do? And that larger question: Given what is in my heart right now, what should I do? If I feel anger, should I lash out? If I feel revulsion, should I act? If I feel compassion, should I reach out? If I am confused, should I try to gain a better understanding of what is going on? How can I use love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to bring the best out of a bad situation?

There are some horrible things going on in our world, in our nation, and in our community. They demand action. There are some very good things going on in our world, in our nation, and in our community. They demand recognition. God grant us the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to become better informed so that we might live as Christ in the world. Amen.

⁴Leonard.

February 17, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

On some days, we could not stand were it not for the “everlasting arms” of your love and goodness which support and steady us, O God. On some days, we would stray off into streets and avenues where we have no business were it not for your “everlasting arms” which guide us in the straight path we should follow. On some days, we might just give up were it not for the “everlasting arms” of your encouragement which remind us that we do not walk this life alone. Thank you, God, for the joy, the blessedness, the peace, and the security that your steadfast and everlasting arms offer us day by day.

On just about every day, we need your help with our health of body, mind, and spirit. When it is time for us to change our habits and to live in healthier ways, provide us with the courage and determination to do so, we pray. When we have exhausted our self-help resources and held loved ones at arm’s length, guide us to those professionals whom you have called to use their healing arts. When crisis strikes and we have no choices, surround us with gifted and caring people who can be your hands and mind and heart for us. Heal us, we pray, for we can do little for ourselves.

Day by day, we realize how far we have drifted from your desire for a beloved community here on earth. We huddle in our like-minded groups and take on one another as if life itself is a contest and we are all adversaries. Remind us that life is a gift which we are to enjoy with one another, not at one another’s expense. Remind us that in your great generosity you provided all we need for a good and full life, and help us to learn to share even as you have shared with us.

On this day, bless us with a keen awareness of your presence. Enable us to open our hearts and minds and hands to richness of life that is ours. Teach us to set aside the striving of our lives and to be still and enjoy you, if only for a moment. Then multiply those moments for us into a lifetime of companionship with you. These things we ask in the name of the One who walks with us today and all days. Amen.