



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 8, 2015
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
BE THOU MY VISION

Open Our Eyes to One Another
Exodus 20:1-17; John 4:1-42

Yesterday I had one of those experiences that would have made Isaiah happy. You remember the vision Isaiah had, the one about wolves and lambs and leopards and goats and calves and lions all napping peacefully together while cows and bears and lions and oxen shared a meal . . . and not of one another? Yesterday I attended the International Festival of Cultures at Nash Community College. It is an annual event sponsored by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission which celebrates the rich cultural diversity of our community. Sure enough, there were people there who trace their heritage back to the Middle East, India, Mexico, Spain, Malaysia, France, Japan, Africa, and the British Isles. There were Native Americans and lots of immigrant Americans.

The costumes worn by some of the participants were as multi-colored as the faces in the crowd and the entertainment was just as varied: dancing, singing, martial arts, and traditional instrumental pieces. Ethnic foods were served. Faces were painted. Door prizes were awarded. And a good time was had by all.

Among that vast diversity of people, I witnessed no arguments, anger, jealousy, or undue pride. As far as I could tell, there was no animosity, suspicion, or ostracism. All I could detect was interest, curiosity, appreciation, gratitude, sharing, and fun. As I said, Isaiah would have been pleased.

Yet I could not help but wonder—and when I did I felt guilty about it—I could not help but wonder how some of us might act toward one another when we left that happily noisy building and ran into each other at Walmart or the grocery store or at work or in school or on the street. I felt badly thinking such thoughts but I know how I am and I know how most of us are. When we don't have to be nice to everyone, we sometimes are not. I think that is one reason John included the story of the woman at the well in his Gospel.

The woman at the well was not welcome in her own community. If the truth be told, Jesus and his disciples were not welcome there either because they were Jews and the little village near Jacob's well was a Samaritan

village. We know from other stories in scripture that the relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews was, at best, unfriendly. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds because they had intermarried when so many Jews were sent into exile in Babylon. They had once had a beautiful temple but it had been destroyed by the Jews because worship was supposed to take place in the Jerusalem temple alone. As far as Jews were concerned, there was no such thing as a “Good Samaritan.”

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well is completely unconventional. She represents a multitude of prejudices which Jesus ignored. First, she was a woman and a Jewish man was not supposed to speak privately with a woman in public. Women were second class citizens and not encouraged to engage men in public. She was a Samaritan which meant she was considered less than human and her religion was suspect. Three strikes against her. Morally she had issues. She had been married multiple times and was living with a man who was not her husband. Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and morality were all sufficient cause for any Jew to ignore her.

We are quite adept at making up reasons why other people don't belong. At one time, voting rights in this country were denied to people because of gender or race or lack of property ownership. We witnessed a tumultuous time in our society as we struggled to guarantee civil rights for all people. Our nation was founded on freedom and equality for all people. Our faith is based upon the premise that we are all children of God. Yet we still see inequities throughout our society. Gender and race, ethnicity and socio-economic level, education and sexuality, as well as religion often determine whether or not the doors are opened or closed to a particular individual or group.

The Samaritan woman was herself shocked that Jesus would talk to her and ask her for a drink of water, but that simple though unorthodox request led to a revealing discussion about water and religion and truth. I find it compelling that this story comes on the heels of the story of the changing of water into wine. In that story, ordinary water became extraordinary wine. In this story, Jesus identifies himself as “Living Water” which quenches thirst forever. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus will invite his disciples to drink ordinary wine telling them that it represents his blood poured out for the redemption of humanity. Water to wine. Living water to redemptive wine. Kindness to grace. Acceptance to inclusion in the family of God.

I have lived long enough that I have seen the focus of exclusion shift from racial issues to gender issues to economic issues to religious issues to issues of sexuality. Rather than looking for ways to welcome people into our lives, we have continuously found additional reasons for excluding certain people. Jesus, on the other hand, made a point of welcoming the very people whom everyone else wanted to exclude. If I am not mistaken he found Zacchaeus, a cheating tax collector, up a tree. He found lepers relegated to a colony outside of town. A prostitute found him at a Pharisee's home and anointed his head and feet. He found a rogue Pharisee named Nicodemus in the cover of night and introduced him to the transforming power of God that enables us all to be born again of the Spirit of God.

When God heard the cries of his people oppressed by Egypt's Pharaoh, they were freed and put on a path to the Promised Land. In order that they might better understand his vision of life together, God offered them Ten Words, Ten Commandments as we know them. They fall generally into two categories: our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. We are to honor, respect and worship God, offering God our unfailing devotion. We are also to honor and respect one another to the extent that we do nothing to diminish the personhood, relationships, or property of another individual. We respect the Creator and we respect the ones whom God has created, ourselves among them.

Too often we decide we do not like someone else based on a characteristic we may not understand or on a belief we completely misunderstand. Everything in Jesus' cultural and religious life informed him that he should not engage that Samaritan woman in any dialogue at all, much less conversation about salvation. From that woman's perspective, however, what if he had not. And what about the villagers who came out to see and hear Jesus for themselves? They believed in him and professed that he was the "Savior of the world." They understood, as did Nicodemus shortly before, that "God so loved the world that he have his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).¹

Fred Craddock died last week. Fred Craddock was a preacher. He was more than a preacher. He was a prophet because he told things like they were. He was born in Humbolt, Tennessee in 1928 and lived a great deal of his life in the little town of Cherry Log, Georgia. He was one of those folks

¹Gerald L. Borchert, "The Gospel of John," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds., (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 1054.

who grew up of humble means and lived off the land. Although absolutely brilliant and amazingly creative, Fred Craddock never “got above his raising.” He always remembered who he was and respected other people for whom God had created them to be.

Dr. Craddock was an engaging storyteller. He loved to talk about the little mountain churches he pastored as a young minister. One of those churches was tucked into the hills not far from Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was a beautiful white frame building with pews hand-hewn from a single giant poplar tree. At the time, the little church was over a hundred years old. When the atomic plant was built nearby, people came from everywhere to find work and they would set up campers and trailers and anything else to live in while the work was good. As Dr. Craddock told the story,

After church one Sunday morning I asked the leaders to stay. I said to them, “Now we need to launch a calling campaign and an invitational campaign in all those trailer parks to invite those people to church.”

We argued about it, time ran out, and we said we’d vote on it next Sunday. Next Sunday, we all sat down after the service. “I move,” said one of them, “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.”

Someone else said, “I second that.” It passed. I voted against it, but they reminded me that I was just a kid preacher and I didn’t have a vote. It passed. When we moved back to these parts, I took my wife [Nettie] to see that little church, because I had told her that painful, painful story. The roads have changed. The interstate goes through that part of the country, so I had a hard time finding it, but I finally did. I found the state road, the county road, and the little gravel road. Then there, back among the pines, was that little building shining white. It was different. The parking lot was full—motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: *Barbecue, all you can eat*. It’s a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews are against a wall. They have electric lights now, and the organ pushed over into the corner. There are all these aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs—all kinds of people. Parthians and Medes and Edomites and dwellers of Mesopotamia, all kinds of people. I said to Nettie, “It’s

a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here."²

Isn't it interesting how folks can be civil and polite to one another in a restaurant or college auditorium but treat one another differently in a neighborhood or business or school or even a church. Well, it's not interesting. It's sad. There are people in our community, throughout our nation, and all over the world who are the children of God and want to be accepted as such. How fortunate we are that Jesus did not discriminate against those of us who do not measure up in one way or another to the standards set by other people. If hurting people could not come to Jesus, he went to them. If the synagogue or temple would not welcome them, Jesus found a well or a tree or a dusty road where he could put up a sign saying, "Living Water, All You Can Drink! Bread of Life, All You Can Eat!"

May God grant us a vision to celebrate the rich diversity of creation. May God grant us a vision to celebrate the rich diversity of humanity. May God open our eyes to see our neighbor and welcome her. May God open our eyes to see our neighbor and respect him. May God open our hearts to all our neighbors and teach us to love them, even as we have been loved. Amen.

²Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, eds, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 28-29.

March 8, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We are thirsty, O Lord, parched by the pressures of life, dehydrated by worry and confusion, depleted by the mistakes and poor choices of our own doing. Give us a drink, we pray, from the fountain of life welling up to eternal life. Give us a drink of your Spirit so that we may never thirst again. Give us a drink and save us from a death that comes from within.

Refreshed and renewed, we offer our praise for your goodness, O God. Time and again you rescue us from the challenges and stresses of life to shelter us in your love and protect us with your grace. We are grateful and pray that we will always live worthy of the care you offer to us.

We pray that you will guide us as we seek to live according to your holy desires. We recognize that you long for us to worship you alone, forsaking ultimate loyalty to temporal claims upon our lives. We long to give evidence of our love and respect to you each and every day in the ways we live, the choices we make, and the values we follow.

Help us to offer dignity and respect to all people with whom we travel this life. Enable us to see in them a reflection of your own goodness and creativity. Call out the best in us as we relate to one another and help us to recognize the best in others as we get to know them. Guide our choices and our aspirations as we seek to discover your calling in life.

We pray, O God, that as you hear our prayers for one another, you will provide the resources to answer those prayers. Bring effective treatments and remedies to those who are ill. Provide wise counsel and compassion to those who are distressed and discouraged. Fill the hungry with nutritious food, provide shelter for those without a home, create meaningful work for all who long to be employed, provide company for anyone who is lonely and alone. Look into our lives and see our truest needs and provide for them, we pray.

Open our eyes, O God, to the vision of ministry to which you are calling us. Open our minds to the possibilities of work we have never before considered. Open our hearts to the needs around and within us. And remind us that you have covered the earth with your children, among whom you count each one who affirms this prayer; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.