



# *Lakeside Sermons*

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

APRIL 10, 2016  
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

## Keeping God's Lambs Luke 11:1-13; John 21:1-17

When our granddaughter Savannah was born, she went home to a cheerful room populated with stuffed animals, dolls, and more toys than a newborn could ever need. On the walls of her room, painted by her talented mother, were images of sheep to watch over her as she slept and played.

Each month, on the corresponding day of Savannah's birth, Lenka dresses her in an outfit suited for the season, sits her in a large red chair in their den, and places beside her a round pillow made to look like a sheep. Month by month, that sheep seems to get smaller as Savannah grows larger. It is a creative way to help us see how Savannah grows from month to month.

Today, John paints a picture that is familiar to many of us. It is a camping trip, a fishing expedition, a cookout on the beach, complete with fish and bread. In some ways, this story, with all of its intriguing elements, offers us a way to gauge the growth of Simon Peter, if not all of the disciples, from his first meeting with Jesus through his death and resurrection appearances.

Some of the disciples had left Jerusalem and traveled to the hill country. Were they giving up on Jesus' commission? Had they heeded the message of the women who told them Jesus would meet them in Galilee? Or were they trying to find their bearings again by going back to what was most familiar to them which was fishing?

John tells us that they fished all night without a catch. As dawn began to pull back the curtains of the night, a solitary figure appeared on the beach. He was standing at the edge of the water, a fire blazing behind him, but they could not tell who it was because they were about a hundred yards offshore. His voice carried over the still water, however, as he shouted to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" What an odd way to ask that question. Most of us would have shouted, "Had any luck?" or "How many have you caught?" But the man presumed that they had caught nothing . . . and he called these grown men "children." Like most fishermen who were tired and hungry and frustrated after no success, they simply shouted back a hollow sounding "No."

The man shouted back, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” I can imagine what might have been said inside the boat at that suggestion! They had tried the right side, the left side, fore, and aft many times over throughout the night with no luck at all. But someone decided they might as well give it a shot, so they threw the net on the right side of the boat. Immediately it filled up so that they could hardly haul it in. John, self-identified as the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” looked at Peter with astonishment and said, “It is the Lord!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Peter pulled on his tunic, jumped in the water, and started swimming as fast as he could to the beach while the others followed behind, dragging their heavy catch to the shore.

When they beached the boat, there was Jesus, already grilling fish over the fire. He invited them to add some of their fish and cooked it as well. He gave them bread and they ate a hearty breakfast. They shared stories. They remembered. They enjoyed being with Jesus once again.

Their shepherd was back. The reminders of his previous miracles were not lost on the disciples.<sup>1</sup> The fish and bread now in abundance took them back to that day when Jesus had used a child’s lunch to inspire generosity and sharing. Sitting by the sea they thought of the times he taught from a boat while people listened on the shore. They remembered the storm he had calmed when they thought their lives were in peril. And they recalled that unforgettable night when he walked on water to get to their boat. So much had happened since those days. So many things had changed. Jesus was changed. They were changed.

After breakfast, Jesus and Peter talked alone. Jesus wanted to know just how Jesus had changed. He spoke to Peter, but called him by his given name, Simon, rather than by the name he had given him. Simon means “one who hears.” Maybe Jesus was reminding his friend to focus, to listen carefully to what he was going to say so that he would know for certain if Peter was prepared to be the “rock” Jesus needed him to be. Perhaps Jesus was searching for a reference point to judge his growth. Three times he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Surprised, perhaps even hurt at the suggestion that he might not love Jesus, Peter answered, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Crenshaw Shelley, Reflections on the Lectionary: April 10, Third Sunday of Easter,” *The Christian Century* (March 30, 2016): 18.

Deep down he understood why Jesus would ask such a question three times. Three times he had denied knowing Jesus during that horrible night before the crucifixion. Now three times he had the opportunity to affirm his love and to receive Jesus' forgiveness. Three times Jesus instructed him: "Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep . . . Tend my sheep." The focus had moved from the seashore to the pasture, but I wonder if Jesus realized that although Peter might not be such a good fisherman, he would be a wonderful shepherd. Indeed he was. As a leader in the early church, Peter preached, he performed miracles, he ministered to the needs of people, and he helped share the Gospel throughout the known world. Years before, Jesus had invited him to become a "fisher of men." Now he was calling him to be a shepherd of the sheep. Each of Peter's answers was like a snapshot of his growth as a believer and a leader. Jesus recognized Simon Peter's growth and trusted him to carry on the ministry he had begun.

According to John, Jesus' first assignment for Peter was to "Feed my lambs." I think Jesus chose that term carefully just as he had when he called the disciples "children" from his vantage point on the seashore. Other stories in scripture are clear about Jesus' concern for children. In the adoration our choir sang earlier, Jesus encouraged children to come to him and suggested that our faith would benefit from the trusting attitude of a child.

Our children are important and they have much to offer us. As we have seen this morning, the children in this congregation are poised and mature and talented. They offer us fresh ways to understand God and the world. They bless us with their trusting natures and joyful attitudes. Jesus was right, we need to feed his lambs.

Our lambs are our children—all children. Each year at this time, The Down East Partnership for Children reminds us of the importance of making certain our children are nourished physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is the responsibility of parents and the community as a whole to provide for the needs of our children. As Jesus reminded his disciples when teaching them about prayer, if a child asks for a fish, we will not give him a snake. Just as God gives good things to us his children, so we need to give what is needed to our children. If we are to heed Jesus' instructions to us, we need to feed and tend our lambs.

It is important that a child have nutritious food to eat and enjoy an active lifestyle of play and learning. In our community, continuously challenged by high unemployment and persistent poverty, many children do not have access

to a healthy diet. Fortunately, through school feeding programs all children can enjoy at least two nutritious meals a day throughout the school year. Thanks to innovative programs like Backpack Buddies, children are provided with food for the weekend and, in some cases, for portions of the summer. Food pantries and other resources help families stretch their dollars in order to feed their children throughout the year.

As we all know, obesity is a problem for all age groups in our country, but it is a primary problem for children. In North Carolina, nearly 30 percent of young children are overweight or obese. Nash and Edgecombe counties mirror that reality.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, our community is actively engaged in promoting exercise and outdoor activities. We are fortunate to have one of the finest parks and recreation programs in the state. We have wonderful play areas and exciting programs for children and adults. Over the past few years, the Down East Partnership has worked with businesses, schools, and other groups to create play spaces that are fun, lively, and help children engage the natural world. When children are more physically active, they tend to continue that lifestyle as adults, reducing health issues and enjoying a more vibrant life. Feed my lambs and give them health.

Education is an essential element in the well-being of all people. If we ever want to successfully address issues such as poverty, crime, unemployment, and healthcare, we must educate our children. Studies have demonstrated that a child who is able to read on grade level by the third grade is more likely to graduate from high school, become a life-long learner, and generally be successful in life. On the other hand, prison officials often study the results of third grade reading assessments in order to determine how many prison beds will be needed in the future. What a sad reality in the twenty-first century!

Our children are our greatest asset and the promise of a hopeful future. It is essential that we provide the best education possible for every child in our community. Rather than arguing over who needs to pay for quality education, it is in our best interests to work together, to pool our resources, and to make certain that our children have the finest educational opportunities available to them. Feed my lambs and give them knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup>The Down East Partnership for Children, "Growing Happy, Healthy, Hopeful Children," Annual Report 2015.

We all know that the most important element in a growing child's life is the home in which he or she lives. The gospels tell us that Jesus and his parents settled in Nazareth where he grew and matured and was nurtured throughout his childhood. Family and healthy emotional support are important as we grow up and form our sense of self and our place in the world.

Not every child has a healthy home environment. Not every parent is adequately prepared to handle the challenges of raising a child. Not every home is a loving, nurturing place to be. We are fortunate in this community to have resources such as parenting education and support groups that the Down East Partnership provides. Ministries such as CareNet Counseling provide a safe place for children and adults alike to explore their needs and sort through their resources. Churches can do much and should do more to provide programs and opportunities for parents and children to learn about and experience what a healthy family might mean for them.

Our children also need hope. Too many young people in our community are used to hearing gunshots in their neighborhoods. Too many children are well acquainted with violence or homelessness or extreme poverty. As we overcome these challenges together, we can help restore hope for our children.

Let us not make the mistake of assuming that hope dies only in poorer areas of our city. When our children observe the ways in which we resolve our problems, what do they learn? When we give more energy to hurling insults than to exploring solutions, what are they to learn? When our words suggest we are open to diversity but our actions admit our bigotry, what do our children learn? When we exploit the concerns of one group of citizens in order to fuel the fears of another group, what do our children learn? When people who ask us to choose them to lead us behave toward one another in ways we would never permit on a playground, what do our children learn?

Imagine if we sat down together to discuss our concerns and differences. If we talked candidly with one another and listened attentively to one another, what would our children learn? If we worked long and hard to find ways to accommodate the needs of everyone in our community rather than branding some of our neighbors as aberrant or immoral or weird, what would our children learn? If we looked at one another with appreciative eyes and acknowledged that our collective experiences, cultures, and insights make us far stronger than do our individual prejudices, what might our children learn? Feed my lambs and give them hope.

Every child of God deserves to know that he or she is a part of life that is larger than we can truly imagine. We all need to be fed spiritually. The purpose of religion is to give expression to our faith, and the purpose of our faith is to connect us with God and one another. For Christians, spiritual nurture is the life of the church. As a church, we need to explore the many and varied ways that we can grow in faith and live out our faith. It is not our calling to impose our particular beliefs on anyone, but it is our calling to live in such a way that the people we encounter experience the grace of God through us. We need to be certain that we adults nurture our faith and pass it on to the children who are in our care. We need to be certain that we grow as a family of faith and that our involvement in the community bespeaks the One whose name we claim. We need to bring up our children in the faith so that they never have to wonder who God is or whether God loves them.

When Luke recorded the story of Jesus' bar mitzvah in Jerusalem, his confirmation into adulthood, he ended the story with these words, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and humankind" (Luke 2:52). His parents and his community made certain that he grew up healthy and happy and prepared for life in every way. They fed and nurtured and tended him and the other children of Nazareth. We are the beneficiaries of their good work.

When Jesus measures the growth of the lambs in our care, let us be certain that they have been well fed and tended in every way. Let us make certain that we listen to, learn from, and follow the One who claims us all as his children. Feed my lambs and give them life! Amen.

April 10, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who creates and sustains all life, who came to us as a helpless infant, who welcomed and blessed little ones, and who loves and nurtures us as our heavenly Parent, you have called us to have a child-like faith and trust in you to provide every good gift needed for life. You have called us to make ourselves vulnerable to life in community with one another, to seek all that we need from you and then to share with others out of the abundance you bestow. You have given us immeasurable blessings and have charged us to be good stewards of those resources, and among the greatest and most precious of these gifts and responsibilities are our children. You have given us their laughter, their love, their trust, and you have asked that we protect, teach, and nurture them. We thank you for the promise of these young lives that motivate and inspire us and give us hope for the future. Forgive us when we fail them and you. Make us truly grateful for these extraordinary blessings and for every gift which comes from you.

Even as we offer our praise and gratitude, Loving God, we understand that ours is a world where many suffer more pain than we are likely to experience and have needs greater than we can comprehend. Even as we hear the sweet voices of children in this place, we are reminded of the cries of your children throughout our world. For those who live under the shadow of illness and death, we pray for your healing. For those whose homes and families are not safe havens but rather places of fear and violence, we pray for your peace. For those whose minds and bodies and futures are stunted by a lack of food or education or hope, we pray for your mercies. Forgive us, O Lord of the small broken things, when we fail to recognize the ways you are already at work in our world—in the meek and the poor, in the lowly and the small, in all the vulnerable places where we would not think to look for you. Forgive us when we do not see, when we do not speak, when we do not care for all of your children. May we speak for those who have no voice. May we stand for those who have no strength. May we make in this congregation and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of light and hope and peace. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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