



Lakeside Sermons

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

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Turning Luke 24:36b-48; Acts 3:12-19

Math and science classes were never my passion in college. I learned a lot in them, but my real interest was in the humanities. Nevertheless, I did pick up a few concepts from science that have proved quite important to me. For instance, in my Biology 16 class at Furman, we studied the structure of a leaf. To hold a leaf in your hand and look at it, you would think that there is not much to study. Leaves are paper-thin. You can see the veins which run through them and realize that the size and shape have something to do with the manner in which the tree thrives, but there does not appear to be much beyond that. But slice through a leaf and look at it under a microscope and you will discover it is comprised of six layers of material. The leaf absorbs sunlight and carbon dioxide, transforming them into carbohydrate, the main source of food for a tree. It allows water to evaporate thus pulling up more water from the roots, a process we know as transpiration. And the leaves produces oxygen for us to breathe. To top it all off, leaves provide food and shelter for animals and insects, shade for humans, and often change into glorious colors to dazzle our eyes in the fall.

The realization that every simple-looking leaf on a tree has a rather complex structure and purpose which are essential to the health of the tree and beneficial to its environment awed me and pointed me directly to God's creativity and wonder. Only a couple of weeks ago, the Japanese maples that stand in the courtyard were still covered with last year's leaves, dried, dark, and lifeless. Almost overnight, however, beautiful vibrant red leaves covered the trees, each glowing as sunlight passed through them. Science taught me that the simple leaf of a tree calls for praise of the Creator.

Another, vastly different, scientific concept has also remained with me over the years. It is the difference in centrifugal and centripetal forces. As you know, a centrifugal forces throws things outward while a centripetal force pulls things inward. What may be surprising to you is the fact that the importance of these two forces became significant for me, not in a science class, but in a course on missions.

When God tapped Abram on the shoulder and told him to take his family and all of his possessions to a new land, God said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). God’s plan was to apply a centrifugal force to his people. Israel would receive God’s word and blessing and, in turn, would spread throughout the earth, sharing the good news of God’s love with all people. Instead, Israel chose to operate with a centripetal force. They expected to draw people to themselves. They wanted the other nations of the world to come to the holy mountain where they would see how God had blessed Israel and then desire to benefit from God’s generosity as well. Thus Israel saw itself, not as a missionary of God’s grace, but as the source of God’s benevolence. Jerusalem and the temple became the dwelling place of God to which all people were to be drawn. Over time, the priests, scribes, and Pharisees strengthened this inward pull by creating rules and laws that governed every aspect of daily life and became a burden to the people. God’s desire to spread his love and grace throughout the earth became an effort to pull all people into the center of Jewish belief, practice, and power.

Jesus came to reverse the flow of energy. To prepare the way for Jesus, John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness and began preaching at the Jordan River. It could be argued that John preached the shortest sermons ever for, in essence, his sermons consisted on one word: Repent. When Jesus began his ministry, he told his disciples, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). And as we heard in the Gospel lesson earlier, as his earthly ministry concluded, just before his ascension, Jesus said to his most loyal followers, “Repentance unto remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all nations” (Luke 24:47). As we read a few moments ago, after healing a man who was lame, Peter addressed the crowd of curiosity seekers and said, “Repent, therefore, and turn to God” (Acts 3:19). In these moments and throughout Jesus’ ministry and the ministry of the Church, we see science and the humanities holding hands. Physics and theology collaborate to reverse the focus of our faith from a centripetal force focused on ourselves to a centrifugal force concerned with the rest of the world. Repent.

In the Discipleship Class which we finished a few weeks ago, our young people talked about the word “repent.” The Greek concept involved a change of mind. Scholar J. Murray explains that the idea behind the word is a “radical

transformation of thought, attitude, outlook, and direction.”¹ In other words: turn. As our young people discovered, repentance is doing a one-eighty. You find yourself going in the wrong direction, stop, turn around, and go back in the right direction. Repentance is all about turning.

This idea of turning is the core of the biblical story. God consistently calls his people to turn—to turn from sin, to turn from ignoring God, to turn from false and empty beliefs, to turn from hurting one another. Not only does God call us to turn away. God also calls us to turn toward something. To turn toward God, toward one another . . . toward life.

Simon Peter, the once self absorbed, impetuous, brash, and hard-headed disciple whom Jesus had chosen to lead the other believers, turned and became the humble, focused, thoughtful, compassionate, and courageous witness for Christ that the Church universal remembers to this day. His turning led to the healing of a man who had been lame. His turning changed the focus of the Gospel and caused the Good News to go spinning out into the world. The science, if you will, of repentance resulted in the spread of the Gospel and we are the beneficiaries.

As he explained what had happened to this man through the power of Christ, Peter called the people of Jerusalem, most of whom were Jews, to repent, to turn. They were in awe over what they thought Peter and John had done, but Peter insisted that they reverse their thinking and recognize that humans have no such power. The power to heal comes only through Christ.

Peter called on the Jews to turn from their ignorance and abuse of God. “You people of God, you children of Abraham, God chose you to bring this Good News to the world,” he reminded them. “Instead, you killed the very Word of God. The Living Word was in your midst and you sacrificed him in exchange for a murderer. Turn!”

How often do we choose those things which diminish life or even siphon all of the vitality out of life rather than choose those things that support life? Violence, war, inhuman treatment, inadequate resources, and ignoring real needs all draw life out of us rather than infuse life into us.

¹J. Murray, “Repentance,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, org. ed., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 1084.

Last Sunday, the Peanuts® comic showed Lucy walking up to Snoopy's doghouse with his supper bowl in hand. "Hello, you stupid Beagle," she growls. "Charlie Brown is going to be gone all day so he's asked me to take care of feeding you. You know what that means, don't you?" she asks with her fake angelic smile. "It means I've got you in my power!" she gloats. "I've had enough of your insults! But you'd better behave today because I control the supper dish! I've got you where I want you!" Then she shouts a claim that is painfully true: "The hand that controls the supper dish rules the world!"²

How many people around the world live under oppressive rule without adequate nutrition because it is difficult to fight or even protest when one is malnourished or starving. How many people throughout the world will end this day hungry when thirty percent of the food we prepare will be tossed in the garbage? How many children do not perform well at school because they suffer from food scarcity? Food is power. Turn!

In so many areas of life, we turn the focus upon ourselves instead of outward into the world. We try to determine what is best for us and others rather than looking to God for guidance. The Good News is clear: Turn! Repent! Change your direction. Turn from ignoring God and instead worship our Creator. Turn from handing God a small portion of our life to offering ourselves fully to him. Turn from doing harm to other people to making life better for your fellow travelers. And turn from doing harm to yourself and recognize the image of God within you.

The prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and countless witnesses through the ages have told us over and over that sin is about us. Pour a bit of cream into a cup of coffee and stir it. The centripetal force draws everything toward the center. If our focus is on ourselves, if everything is about "us," then everything around us will be negatively affected. Our relationship to God, to other people, to our community, and to the world will be focused exclusively on what we think is best for us—usually to our detriment and the peril of the rest of the world. If everything is always about us, we will eventually implode.

If we turn, however, and allow God's centrifugal force to operate in our lives, everything will flow outward. Our interest and attention will go to God, to other people, to our community, and to our world. Jesus did not wrap his

²Charles Schulz, "Peanuts featuring 'Good ol' Charlie Brown,'" (©1968 Peanuts Worldwide LLC, Dist. By Universal Uclick): April 12, 2015.

arms around himself for protection when he was about to be placed on the cross. He willingly opened his arms wide so that the power of his love could flow freely to anyone who would embrace it. Jesus did not choose twelve people in order to offer them privilege. Jesus began with a small group so that he could teach them the science of love so that they—and we—might spin the Gospel outward and exponentially change the world.

I am not given to cute mnemonics, but if it will help you to remember, then so be it. The center of “sin” is “I” but we find “U” in the center of “turn.” When we turn our lives around, when we commit ourselves fully to Christ, we go in a different direction, one that leads us to people and needs that we can meet instead of focusing on our own desires.

The Shakers said it well nearly three hundred years ago and our choir sang it beautifully as our worship began:

‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free,
‘tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
‘twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.³

By turning, we eventually find ourselves “in the place just right.” It is not always an immediate action. Sometimes turning is a long and difficult process. We turn and turn and turn but eventually, we will “come round right.” May it be so with us all! Repent and turn.

³Shaker Song, “‘Tis the Gift To Be Simple,” 18th Century.

April 19, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God who created all things, even the extravagant idea of resurrection, we come to sing our joyful Alleluias and to lift our hearts in praise in this Easter season because we have experienced again the jubilation and hope of that first Easter morning. Some of us come like Mary Magdalene, running through the garden to share the astounding news that Christ is risen indeed! Some of us come like Thomas, hoping beyond all hope that the news is true but needing reassurance. Some of us come like Peter, wavering between our good intentions and desire to serve you and the obstacles of our own fears and weaknesses, humbled that your mercy can forgive and transform even us. Some of us come like Paul, confronted by such a powerful experience of your love that we are changed in spite of ourselves. But we all come, Merciful God, knowing that we are welcomed as your children, redeemed by your grace, and called to leave our old ways of thinking and being in order to live as your disciples. We come because we have heard and witnessed the good news of your Resurrection, and our only response is to offer ourselves in gratitude and wonder.

We pray, O God, that even in this season when we celebrate the life-changing news that Christ has conquered sin and death, you would help us also to focus on his life and ministry. As we live out our discipleship by gathering to worship you and departing to serve our neighbors, make us faithful to answer your call to minister to your children everywhere. This day we pray especially for those who, because of oppressive regimes or disintegrating neighborhoods or volatile relationships, live in the constant fear of violence. We lift up those whose minds and bodies are consumed with pain. We offer our prayers for those who lack the necessities of life, who lack companionship through the journey of life, or who lack hope for a meaningful and productive life. Make of us agents of healing and compassion and messengers of your peace. May this community in which we enjoy worship and learning and fellowship inspire us to live lives patterned after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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