



Lakeside Sermons

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

MAY 7, 2017
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

How Far Have We Come?
John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47

Many of us remember those days when doctors wrote out prescriptions on a piece of paper and handed it to us to take to the pharmacy to be filled. Today, thanks to technology, the pharmacist is often already filling the prescription before we leave the doctor's office so that it will be waiting for us to pick up. Sometimes I miss those old prescription forms. They were mysterious and curious because there were Latin words we did not understand and handwriting that was completely undecipherable—except to the pharmacist we hoped. There was a time when I thought that I was destined to be a physician because my handwriting is seldom legible. Be glad that was not the only requirement for me to be a doctor!

Tradition holds that Luke was a physician. No one knows what kind of penmanship he had, but his writing, his ability to capture stories on paper, is profound. Most of us know his version of Christ's birth practically by heart. Granted, we hear it more often than we hear any other story from scripture, but it is an elegant story well told. His Acts of the Apostles is no less a good read. He tells the story of the early church effortlessly, with good detail and engaging dialogue. For example, following his wonderful recitation of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, Luke described what the earliest form of the church looked like in a simple, yet compelling, way. Listen:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

Luke makes the early church sound so simple, so common-sense and practical that we want to assume that all believers behaved this way. But did they? If we were to read through the Old Testament, we would discover that God urged his people to live in this manner of generously helping one another, being together, and enjoying being a part of the family of God. But did everyone live this way in first century Palestine? Did the Jews band together and take care of one another?

Apparently not or Jesus would not have spent so much time urging everyone to change the way they thought about life together. For some reason, however, after Jesus' death, his followers decided he was onto something and decided to give it a try. They listened as the apostles passed on Jesus' teachings to them. They shared meals and prayers. They pooled their resources and took care of one another. They were glad and grateful and praised God for it. Other people saw what was going on and they wanted in. The earliest form of the church, Luke tells us, was a perfect balance of worship, learning, sharing, and helping.

Or was it? In chapter two of the Book of Acts, Luke tells us about this ideal community which existed after Jesus' ascension. By chapter five, however, we discover that Ananias and Sapphira held back some of the proceeds of the sale of their property and a chapter later the Greek Jews accused the Palestinian Jews of not distributing food and other help to their widows and orphans. The apostles were forced to spend time mediating quarrels instead of teaching parables, and deacons had to be chosen to help get the fellowship back on track.

We have come a long way since house churches and communal living. Granted, many of the early believers thought Jesus would return soon and there would be no need for personal possessions. Instead of hoarding things for themselves, they gave away what they had to benefit other people. The earliest Christians lived together, shared all things in common, and learned from the people who had been closest to Jesus.

The Church of Jesus Christ has come a long way since those early days. Instead of a small group of believers, billions of followers of Christ have graced this planet. Instead of crowding in small, one room houses or gathering beside a river or stream, we now enjoy beautiful buildings, good programs, fun and interesting activities, meaningful missions, and purposeful worship. Rather than getting rid of all our possessions and living communally, we work cooperatively to provide for the physical, emotional, and spiritual

needs of the people around us. Being a Christian today is nothing like it was in the days after Jesus' resurrection—or is it? Is this (looking around the sanctuary) what Jesus had in mind or did he intend for that earliest version of the Church which so captured Luke's attention and heart to be the model we follow today? How far have we come? Or have we gone too far?

While I do not think that churches as they exist today are what Jesus had in mind two thousand years ago, neither is the culture in which we live like the one in which Jesus lived two millennia ago. I have to believe that the form of the church as it has evolved is both the design and the desire of God. We may not always do church the way God intends just as the earliest believers did not always get it right, but we keep seeking God's guidance and blessing as we become the Church of Jesus Christ.

I do think that the values which the earliest believers embodied are the ones we should seek to emulate as well. It is no less important for us today to be generous, to demonstrate care and concern for one another, to live in community, to hold one another accountable, and to do everything out of mutual love. No matter the time or place, a group of followers who genuinely love and care for one another will comprise the Church. When we live as Christ lived, we become his body on earth.

However, the Church Universal and the church located at 1501 Sunset Avenue look and act very different from the way that early group of believers gathered in Jerusalem did. How can we be certain that we are being faithful to Christ's call to be his body on earth? How can we ensure that we remain faithful to God's ongoing call to us? In a world in which a traditional church like ours is challenged to remain relevant to the life going on outside our window, how do we follow Christ into a changing and sometimes indifferent culture?

Last summer, Sam Wells who was at one time the Dean of Duke University Chapel and now is rector of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, wrote an article in which he outlined seven possibilities that he sees for churches like St. Martin's and, I believe, Lakeside. Each of his ideas are excellent, but today I want to highlight two of them which I think speak to where we find ourselves on the Fourth Sunday of Easter 2017.

Dr. Wells suggested that we begin looking for possibilities for ministry rather than at the challenges that hinder our ministry. To that end, we begin

to pay attention to the assets each of us brings to the church rather than notice the deficits that are often seem more obvious. He writes,

In a community of fear we begin with our hurts and our stereotypes and find a hundred reasons why we can't do things or why certain kinds of people don't belong. But if we peel off labels like disabled or wealthy or migrant or evangelical or single, and instead see qualities like passionate or committed or generous or enthusiastic or humble, then there's no limit to what a community of hope can do. God gives us everything we need to fulfill our vocation. If we experience our life as scarcity, and yet don't receive and enjoy the gifts God gives us, we have no one to blame but ourselves.¹

Far too often, churches today talk about limitations to ministry before ever exploring the possibilities for ministry. From its beginning, our congregation has been given the resources to be the presence of Christ in this community. We still have the potential to reach more people in our community than we have begun to imagine. The only limitation we have is our unwillingness to look within ourselves and recognize the gifts God has given each of us and then to offer those gifts in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Building upon that idea, Dr. Wells rejoices that "in Christ the future is bigger than the past."² It is true that our sanctuary is not as full as it was fifty or even ten years ago. We have lost many of our founding members and numerous active and generous congregants. We compete against a host of activities that keep our members busy doing other worthwhile things. Yet, we were called sixty-two years ago to be a presence of Christ in this neighborhood and that calling has not changed. We have an amazing past, but the possibilities for the future are enormous. All we have to do is to step into the next thing God wants us to do just as those people who preceded us here did decades ago. God continues to call us to live out the Gospel. All that has changed are the context and opportunities.

There is one other factor that will insure that we remain faithful to the spirit of the first believers. Earlier we heard that favorite passage from the

¹Samuel Wells, "Seven Possibilities for Church," *The Christian Century* (June 16, 2016); available online at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-06/seven-possibilities-church>.

²Wells.

Gospel of John which talks about Jesus being the gate of the sheepfold. Or was he described as the gatekeeper or perhaps as the shepherd? Jeffrey Gallagher notes that in this passage, it is a bit confusing as to whether John understands Jesus as gate, the gatekeeper, or the shepherd of his followers. In fact, Jesus is depicted as serving all three roles in watching over, providing for, and protecting his sheep. We know who Jesus is, what we are not always clear about, Gallagher suggests, is what the sheepfold—the Church—is. Is it a safe zone where Jesus nurtures and protects us, leads us to quiet waters and walks with us through shadowed valleys or is it some type of barrier that also keeps other people out?³ If we want to be part of the true church of Jesus Christ, we have to realize that our future lies in being the fold which welcomes people in rather than shuts them out. We must allow Jesus to be the gate that is wide open to the souls of the world. When we act like the early believers who were welcoming, caring, compassionate, and generous, the gate remains open so that the any sheep who wandered away can return or any sheep who has never dared enter will feel welcome.

How far have we come as the Church of Jesus Christ in the past two thousand years? Quite far, if you consider the context and opportunities that God offers us today. At the heart of our ministry, however, we must remain like those earliest believers Luke wrote about. Like them, we, too, are Easter people with love in our hearts, hope in our souls, and a calling as big as eternity.

³Jeffrey M. Gallagher, "Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary: May 7, Fourth Sunday of Easter, John10:1-10," *The Christian Century* (April 12, 2017): 21.

May 7, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Each day of life is an opportunity for our spirits to rejoice in the experience of your grace, Holy God, but in the beauty of springtime and the celebrations of this Easter season, your generosity is especially apparent. The new life springing forth around us serves as a reminder that, like a shepherd cares for a flock, you watch over and nurture us, calling us by name and providing for us and for all of creation. The variety of colors and fragrances in every yard and field make evident your love of diversity and your artistry which dances with exuberance across every hill and valley, through every stream and forest. Warm breezes and gentle rains soothe and renew the earth just as your Holy Spirit offers the comfort and vitality of your abiding love for us. Every corner of our world bears the imprint of your creative handiwork and desire for life, and every creature sings your majesty. In the midst of such a bounty, Gracious God, how can we not be filled with wonder and gratitude as we recognize the abundance of gifts which give meaning to our lives and move our hearts to worship and praise?

Surrounded by such splendor and brimming with the possibilities of the joyful life you offer, we pray, Merciful God, that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear not only the magnificence of your world but also the rich beauty of our human family. Move our hearts to share the extravagant love we have known from you and to respond to others with a generosity of spirit because we have been shown great mercy. Help us to know, in the guidance of your word, in the companionship of one another, in the smallest expression of kindness or the grandest of miracles, that you abide with us and that your love is unfailing.

But even as we acknowledge and give thanks for the abundance of your gifts to us, Gracious God, we also acknowledge that we are broken, and our world is broken. Our hearts are fragile and bruised from assaults of disappointment, loneliness, and fear. Our minds are distracted and stressed by the demands of life. Our relationships are strained, our community is wounded, our nation is fractured because of misunderstanding, mistrust, apathy, and hatred. But at your table we are reminded, Loving God, that you have come to us in our brokenness, walking alongside us in the person of Christ. You have experienced our brokenness through his life and death, and in this Easter season, we rejoice that you have redeemed our brokenness through his resurrection, offering to us restored hope and new life. We rejoice once again in this good news, and we give thanks for this greatest of gifts, which is given to us through the Christ who satisfies our hunger and makes us whole, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

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