



Lakeside Sermons

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

MAY 29, 2016
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

I Kings 8:22-23, 41-43; Luke 7:1-10
Discover Something Cool

I am not in the habit of reading "Mommy Blogs," but I do listen to NPR throughout the day. Last Sunday morning, as I was getting dressed, those two worlds merged and I heard a rather compelling story.

Leslie Blanchard and her husband live in Norman, Oklahoma. They are parents of five children. Those of us with one or two children know that they can generate many stories worth retelling! Imagine what five children will get you!

Mrs. Blanchard often looks back over the years and experiences with her family and writes about them in her blog, *A Ginger Snapped*, named, I assume, for her red hair and personality, a mixture of intensity and lightheartedness that is appealing. A month or so ago she wrote about an incident that happened when her middle daughter was in fourth grade. The rather popular and pretentious girl told her mother one day that a girl named Bethany was annoying her. "What is she doing to you?" her mother asked, immediately taking on a protective "mother bear" attitude. "She's following me around on the playground and sitting by me at lunch!" the little girl answered. And her mother, rather incredulous, responded, "You mean she's trying to be friends with you?"

Having been a "Bethany" when she was growing up as the child of an Army officer, always the new girl in school, desperate to make friends, and attracted to the girls who oozed confidence, Leslie Blanchard knew immediately what was going on and decided to stop it. She told her daughter that she needed to spend some time with Bethany, get to know her, and learn something about her. Her primary task for the next day at school was to find out "three cool things" about this other girl and report them when she came home.

Anyone with a headstrong child knows what ensued. The daughter dug in her heels and refused to invest any time with this intruder into her circle of friends. The mother had higher heels, however, and dug in deeper. With tremendous reluctance and little time left in the school day, the daughter and Bethany finally chatted in the car pool line. When she got into the car, she

again complained about her assignment and argued that her friends' mothers did not choose their friends for them. Nevertheless, she did report three cool things she had learned about Bethany. Subsequent phone conversations with Bethany's mother revealed that the little girl was being welcomed into the circle of friends. The two girls became very close and, when Bethany's family moved away a few years later, it was a tearful separation. Now in college, they remain in touch through all of the social media methods available today.¹

The point of the blog was that everyone deserves a chance to be welcomed. Everyone is worth being known. If we take a little time to discover what is unique about someone else as well as what we have in common, most people will find a place in our world and we in theirs. In addition, parents and, I would suggest, each of us, have a responsibility to remind children and adults that hasty assumptions and exclusions cause pain and often eliminate potential good friends.

When I began my doctoral work at Princeton Seminary a couple of decades ago, I felt very alone, isolated, and out of my element. Every self-doubt I had rose to the surface. I remember being in the library trying unsuccessfully to figure out how to use a then new, computerized card catalogue when a couple of fellow students came near. One fellow in particular was very excited about beginning his studies. Confidence radiated from him. Expertise in scholarship and computers was obvious. It was immediately clear to me that I was not going to like this guy. Obviously I was intimidated and jealous, but figured I would deal with it by refusing to get to know him. How wrong I was . . . and fortunate that he did not feel the same. In a day or two we bonded effortlessly and became close friends. To this day he is one of my most trusted colleagues. How much I would have missed if I had stuck to my original assessment of him!

There are many things that divide us and many issues on which we disagree with one another, but that does not mean that we cannot get along or even be friends. In how many families do all members of the family think exactly alike? Are there not disagreements, often intense ones, and yet the members of the family continue to love and care for one another. My brothers and I are different in many ways. We have different views on politics, on religion, and on social issues, but we still love each other and would do anything to help one another. Although we see the world in different ways, we still value and respect each other.

¹Leslie Blanchard, "My Worst Nightmare — What If I Accidentally Raise The Bully?", *The Huffington Post* (April 14, 2016) Copyright © 2016 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., heard on Rachel Martin, host, "To Put An End To Her Daughter's Bullying, A Mother Takes A Page From Darwin," *NPR Weekend Edition Sunday*, May 22, 2016.

There is too much exclusion and rejection in our lives these days. We do make hasty determinations about one another and decide on the spot whether or not we will like someone else. If someone takes a different position politically, socially, or theologically, they are my enemy. There is no place for them in my camp and certainly not at my table.

How grateful I am that Jesus did not think that way. I realize that if Jesus had been as narrow-minded and cliquish as I can be, the Gospel would have been offered to the Jews alone . . . and you and I would find ourselves outside of his grace. Instead, Jesus preferred to get to know someone before passing judgment on them. He was open to learning something surprising, something "cool" about everyone.

Most of the time when we read the story from Luke's gospel about the healing of the centurion's slave, we think of it as a miracle cure. If that is all we see, however, we miss something profoundly important. This story is about a Roman centurion, a man given military authority in Capernaum, a significant port city on the Sea of Galilee. This town was on the major Roman trade route from Syria to Palestine and on to Rome itself. He was a powerful man and not a Jew.

At a time when most Romans were despised, this official was obviously a friend to the Jews in Capernaum. The Jewish leaders tell Jesus that he had even built their synagogue for them. When his servant became ill, the Roman officer asked the elders of the town to go and ask Jesus for assistance which they were happy to do. And when Jesus directed his steps toward this man's house, he sent word telling Jesus not come but only to say the word so that his servant would be healed. He knew the "rules." An observant Jew was not supposed to enter a pagan's house or to shake his hand. He would not put Jesus in that compromising position but trusted in his power to heal even from a distance.²

What was Jesus' reaction? He was not put off, offended, or insulted. He never considered not meeting this request because it came from a Gentile who, politically, ruled over him. His response was surprise and delight. He turned to the crowd following him, comprised, I would think, primarily of Jews, and he exclaimed, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." To Jesus, that was a pretty cool thing to learn--a pagan, Roman soldier understood the gospel better than all the Jews put together!

²Bruce Prewer, "The Faith of an Outsider," *Resources for Common Lectionary*, (Year C, Sunday 9, May 29-June 4); available online at: <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocC/C38sun9.htm>.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day and throughout this weekend we are remembering and honoring the women and men who have given their lives fighting for freedom and dignity for all people of the world and especially for us. When I talk to those of you who served in our armed forces, I am always impressed by the number and variety of friends you made in the military. Suddenly thrust into a life or death situation with people from all over the country, from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, from all levels of the socio-economic ladder, you became friends. We have all heard the adage that "There are no atheists in foxholes." I would suggest that another saying might also be true, "There are no enemies in foxholes." When your life may well be in the hands of another person, or theirs in yours, differences do not matter nearly so much as do trust and respect.

Paul Braun was a Sergeant in the Minnesota National Guard when he was sent to Iraq. An Iraqi nicknamed "Philip" was assigned to be their interpreter. From day one their relationship was distrustful. Philip was frightened by the Sergeant's appearance and attitude and hated all Americans because they were the "enemy." Paul Braun did not trust his interpreter at all. He warned him that if he messed with his soldiers he would shoot him. Philip looked at him and said, "Some day, we will be able to laugh about this conversation while we're drinking tea." Their relationship immediately began to change. After working, living, and risking their lives together, however, they became good friends. Braun even helped to bring Philip to the United States, fearful of the fate that might befall his new friends as it had other interpreters who were considered traitors to the Taliban. Today they sum up their relationship in this way. Braun says, "My Iraqi interpreter became my American brother." Philip affirms, "My American soldier became my Iraqi brother."³

In one of the most stunning displays of trust and respect found in scripture, Solomon, the king of Israel identified with wisdom, offered a surprising prayer when dedicating the temple to God. Recognizing that it was a house set aside for the worship of God and not merely for the fellowship of humanity, he prayed,

“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that

³StoryCorps, "My American Soldier Became My Iraqi Brother"; *StoryCorps*; available online at: <https://storycorps.org/listen/paul-braun-and-philip/#>.

the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built." I Kings 8:41-43

Surely if God is open to listening to the people of all lands and nations, we can be as well. Certainly if God has asked his followers to convey his love and mercy to the world, we can be loving and merciful to the rest of the world. Obviously if God has welcomed us into his fold, we can welcome other people into ours.

In an age when so many things divide us from cultural to political ideologies, from religious to regional perspectives, from ethnic to personal preferences, we need to find those things which we hold in common. And when we recognize that we may not be God's favorite child sent to earth for the delight of all, perhaps we can find the time to learn some really cool things about other people which might just bring us delight.

I don't know how much we can do to effect world politics, to curb terrorism, or to slow down the runaway train that is our own national bigotry toward one another, but I do know that we can be kind to one another and to the person who lives next door and across the street. I know that we can be a good neighbor.

That is why it is important for us to reach out into this neighborhood, to meet the people who are our neighbors, to let them know who we are, and to find out some rather cool things about them as well. A few weeks ago, members of the Neighborhood Ministry Committee, the Missions Committee, and the Diaconate walked through our neighborhood passing out flyers about next Sunday's cookout at Sunset Park. Among the people we met were teachers, business owners, clerks, and artists. We met a State Trooper, a nutritionist, a welder who enjoys fishing, and a man who grew up here and recently returned to care for his aging mother. And we saw many children. What else will we discover when we have a chance to get to know one another better? The world might not change as a result of our efforts to be better neighbors here, but I am confident that the Kingdom of God will become more evident in the City Lake Neighborhood. We might make some new friends and Jesus just might be astounded at the faith we exhibit simply by expressing our trust and interest in one another. That would be cool! Amen.

May 29, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Truly there is no God like you in heaven or earth or throughout the universe, for you are indeed the Lord of all, O God. We are humbled by the opportunity to worship you and honored that you would visit us with your gracious Spirit.

Amid the various feelings that are ours today, there is a deep sense of gratitude for the bounty of goodness that you have lavished upon us. Already today we have been blessed many times over. Grace upon grace has come our way, and we thank you for your kindness. Forgive us for those times when our gratitude is not obvious, O God, and know that we are thankful for every good gift that comes from your generous hand.

We are certainly mindful today of the gratitude we feel for those women and men who serve our country and place themselves in harm's way for our sake. For all who have given their lives seeking freedom and life that is fulfilling for others, we offer thanks. We pray for their families and friends who know a pain deeper than we might understand. We pray that their sacrifice will not be in vain but that liberty will come to all people and peace might one day reign over all the earth. Toward that end, enable us to continue their work in peaceful ways and bring blessing to this world you have created and handed into our care.

We pray as well for all who are ill. Use the skill and compassion of the medical community as well as medications and treatments to improve their health. Bless those for whom each day is a struggle which they feel they are losing. Bring them the help they need and the inner strength to persevere. Guide all who are facing decisions that feel larger than they are, who need guidance in choosing the right path, and who need companions to walk with them in this new way. Comfort each one who grieves and give hope to all who are afraid. Grant us all your peace, we pray, and fill us with the delight of life.

Remind us of the many ways you have gifted us, O God, and enable us to use those gifts in the service of your love. Make of our lives a gift to your world and love others through us as in Christ you have loved us eternally. Amen.