



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JULY 9, 2017
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Yokefellows Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Romans 7:15-25a

I'm curious. What was your reaction when you heard the words of Paul that were read earlier? Many of us know that confessional-worthy admission by heart: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:15, 19-20). When you hear those words, do you cringe or smile? Do you hear the words of the late comic Flip Wilson whose character Geraldine explained away her peccadillos by charging, "The Devil made me do it!" Do you dismiss Paul's words as the neurotic rumblings of an old man who is over thinking his thoughts and actions? Or do you identify with that inner struggle Paul's knows so well?

Those of us who have racked up more birthdays might well cringe at Paul's words, recalling our upbringing which focused largely on behaving in socially appropriate ways that often went counter to the things we wanted to do. We probably identify with what Southern physician and author Ferrol Sams called being "Raised Right." In his novel, *Whisper of the River*, Sams remembers:

The child who had been Raised Right was not only saved but spent a large part of his formative years in the House of the Lord. Attendance at piano recitals did not count, but everything else did. From Sunbeams through BYPU, from Sunday School to prayer meeting, from Those Attending Preaching to Those With Prepared Lessons, everything was counted.

. . .

Raised Right children wore suits and neckties that produced a stiff-legged discomfort that lasted well into adulthood. These children regarded Sunday afternoons as periods of tedium, since fishing, hunting, and attendance at movies were undeniable violations of the holiness of the Sabbath and consequently were forbidden. There was in addition the subliminal impression that one might go to Hell for failure to wash one's hands before eating,

and one certainly never forgot to say the blessing. Guilt was established early as spicy seasoning for pleasure¹

Younger folks among us might not feel the tug of guilt over how they spend their time as acutely as those of us who grew up when “Blue Laws” were in effect and there was little to do but go to church on Sunday. Hopefully we have learned that God does not keep a score card on whether or not we do all of the things that our culture says are proper and appropriate. However, the relaxing of social norms about religious activities has resulted in more secular activities on Sunday and lower attendance at church and church-related events. Still, I suspect that there are behaviors that still induce feelings of guilt or ambivalence when they run counter to what we understand to be “right.” In its mildest form we might struggle with prayer, church attendance, diet, exercise, spending habits, and so forth. In its most severe cases, we struggle with addictions, violations of trust, and the breakdown of relationships. At some level, we all know what it means to “not do what I want, but [to] do the very thing I hate.”

All of us who want to be the persons God created us to be, who want to live a life of goodness and integrity, know this struggle between knowing right from wrong but not always choosing right over wrong. We know the tension that exists when the line between right and wrong is thin at best and there seems to be no good and right choice to make. Like Paul, we also might finally cry out in desperation, “ Wretched [soul] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Enter Jesus. He and Paul grew up in the same time period, though Paul may have been a bit younger. They both grew up as faithful Jews, students of scripture, desirous of living the life God had offered them. Jesus grew up in a Palestinian family in an humble village. Paul grew up a Roman citizen, in the city of Tarsus. Paul, named Saul at birth, was a Pharisee, a legalist, one who attempted to follow the letter of the many laws Jews were expected to follow. Jesus, no less a faithful Jew, took a different approach, one that was noticed by all, condemned by some, and admired by others.

Jesus had a way of honing in on hypocrisy, of exposing the tendency to follow social norms to a “t” while ignoring the ethical issues that were sometimes more critical. He likened the people who were “Raised Right” in his day to children who played in the marketplace. “You won’t play along with

¹Ferrol Sams, *The Whisper of the River* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 3-4.

us,” they complained. “We pretended we were celebrating a wedding, but you wouldn’t dance to our flute. We played like we were at a funeral, but you wouldn’t cry!” In other words, you won’t behave according to our whims. And Jesus exposed their hypocrisy by pointing out that they accused John the Baptist of having a demon because he fasted and then accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard because he didn’t fast but ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. You want it both ways depending on your motives, Jesus observed, but you don’t want it God’s way.

I have to admit that I understand how those Pharisees felt. Presbyterian minister Joann Lee speaks for my “Raised Right Self” when she protests,

What a threat [Jesus] is to the rest of us who have so carefully crafted our reputations and résumés to prove how worthy and respectable we actually are! How dare he be so cavalier, so comfortable in his own skin. It is an affront to what we have built as a society.²

What we do not always want to admit, and what Jesus demonstrated with his life, is that culture and Christianity are not one and the same. Certainly, hopefully, at times our culture embodies the values to which Christ calls us, but not always. Jesus did not feel as if he inhabited a “body of death” nor did he think he had a divided heart. He saw heart and body as gifts given to us all which needed to be in sync in order to live as God wants us to live. Jesus was perfectly comfortable in his skin and did not sweat the criticisms of people who saw life in a different way. He saw life through the eyes of God . . . and it was good!

Rev. Lee reminds me of why Jesus came to live among us:

. . . to be a Christian means to be like Christ: to love deeply enough, to live expansively enough, to have and to give so much grace and mercy that you are willing to put your reputation and even your life on the line for others and for your relationship with them. Jesus’ words to us in Matthew are liberating and life-giving. They take us out of our guilt and the punishing glare of expectations and rules and place us lovingly into the embrace of God—reminding us of who we are and whose we are.³

²Joann H. Lee, “Living By the Word: July 9, 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *The Christian Century* (June 21, 2017): 18.

³Lee.

The way Jesus lived his life reminds us that our personal sins are not the only ones that play tug-of-war with us. Our attitudes toward other people, our expectations of what they should do and be, and our opinion of whether or not they are worthy of God's love all create a tension within us that opens an opportunity to do what is right or what is wrong. Jesus models how to choose what is right.

I think where the "Raised Right" Pharisees of Jesus' day took a wrong turn is that they assumed that Jesus associated with sinners and condoned their lifestyle and poor choices. Nothing could be further from the truth. Matthew, a tax collector, was invited by Jesus to become one of his disciples, turning from a life of taking advantage of his fellow Jews to offering them the great advantage of knowing God in a deeply personal way. When Jesus told Zacchaeus, another tax collector, that he wanted to dine with him, his acceptance was so powerful that Zacchaeus promised to repay fourfold all of the taxes he had taken unfairly. Saving the woman charged with adultery from brutal death, Jesus reminded the mob that we all are sinners and, before she left, he invited the woman to "go and sin no more."

Time and time again, Jesus offered acceptance, forgiveness, healing, and friendship in order to demonstrate God's welcome of all people. He also wanted everyone to know why he had come to live among us. "I came that you might have life," he said, "and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). The Apostle Paul realized that the struggle we often experience between doing what is good and right in God's sight and what we want or crave to do is often life-depleting. He summed it up in those words that resonate in our bones: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Jesus was tough on the Pharisees because they were so tough on the people. "Raised Right" folks tend to think that there is only one way to behave and that way is the only way to salvation. We all know, however, that juggling the expectations of other people while trying to discover who we are is a difficult and stressful task. We either spend our lives trying to live up to the standards imposed by other people or we rebel and reject those standards and the people who hold them, usually people we love. Rather than finding a path that leads to life, we discover that life is drained from us. The people to whom Jesus ministered lived that tension and, I suspect, so did the Pharisees.

Had Jesus recognized a change in expression on the faces of the Pharisees as he chastised them? Did he sense the tension in the people who were listening to him speak? Did he know firsthand that the faith which was intended to be life-generating had been used to be life-depleting? Did Jesus understand that people wanted to live abundantly but did not know how? Yes! Jesus looked at that crowd of folks just as he would look at us and he understood the battle that often rages within. In what is one of the most tender and compassionate statements Jesus ever made, he said:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
Matthew 11:28-30

There are many things that tax our souls but, as Paul confessed, the struggle to live as God wants us to live is one of the greatest because our choices have great consequences. We often feel the weight of the desires, inclinations, and demands that bear down upon us. The good news—the wonderful news—is that we are not alone. God in Christ offers to share the burden with us, to help us find our footing, to choose the right path.

Jesus offers to be our yokefellow. A yokefellow is someone who shares a burden with us. He does not take it from us, but willingly carries part of the weight so that we do not grow weary from all of the pressure. God does not simply remove our burdens because we have acquired them, usually of our own volition. But God does help us carry them and, if we will allow him, teaches us how to choose better in life.

Whether we are chafing under the constraints of someone else’s expectations or we are struggling to make the right decisions for our life, God understands that we feel pressed down by the inner struggle that is ours. God wants to help and invites us to share that burden with him—perhaps by sharing it with someone else, seeking help through a trusted friend or counselor. God wants to help us carry our burden and invites us through prayer and commitment to trust our lives to him. God wants to share the burden so that we can finally Live Right and experience all of the goodness and grace God offers us. Amen.

July 9, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

What a joy it is to offer our praise and thanksgiving to you, O God! We praise your majesty and the wonder of your being. We celebrate your goodness and the grace which falls around each of us. We thank you for your generosity and for all of the love which permeates our lives. Glory and honor be yours forever!

Forgive us, O God, if our praises have barely floated into the air before we begin asking more of you. It is not that we are not truly grateful nor is it that we are simply selfish. Rather, our needs sometimes feel so great and the burdens we carry weigh so heavily upon us that we must appeal to you in haste. You know our needs before we speak them, even before they are fully formed in our minds, but we must say them so that our concerns are clearly before you.

Often uppermost in our minds are the health needs of loved ones or ourselves. We are grateful for all of the advances of medical science which we believe to be a gift of your compassion, but there seems to be more illness and frightening diseases than ever before. Continue to help, us, we pray. Guide doctors and researchers and nurses and aides to provide what we need. Give strength to our families and peace to us all, we pray.

We are also concerned about our community and nation and world. Violence claims lives and destroys property. Hatred poisons relationships and builds distrust among us. Ignorance masquerades as wisdom and decisions are made which place the most vulnerable among us in greater jeopardy. Teach us patience and kindness and generosity, we pray.

We need your help, O God, to find the better path to follow. We need courage to do what is right and strength to stay the course. We need mercy when we sin and healing to repair our wounded lives. We need to know that there is a better way to live and the good sense to follow you there.

There is much that we need, O God, but what we have are open and thankful hearts, trusting in your grace to be sufficient for all of our needs. Thank you for all that you are and everything that you do through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.