



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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A Lifelong Journey Proverbs 22:1-12; 1 Corinthians 2:6-13

One of my best friends who attended both college and seminary with me was born in Mannheim, Germany, and came to the U.S. when she was eight years old. On occasion, I would hear Susanne speaking German to her grandmother over the phone, and other students would sometimes come to her with questions about translations. What I came to realize, especially after we went to seminary and Susanne met other students from Germany, was that, just like the U.S., people from other countries also speak in distinct regional dialects; that southern Germans are also ridiculed for their accents by their northern countrymen; and, though she continued to speak her native tongue casually with family and friends, since Susanne moved to the mountains of Virginia and never studied German again, her fluency in German remained at an elementary school level.

It seems to me that our faith can be this way, too. Perhaps we go to Sunday School and participate in discipleship and missions activities as children or even youth, but then we become young adults and move to the far away lands of college or work where a different language is spoken and we are surrounded by a new culture. We intend to maintain our fluency in spiritual matters, but there are so many demands for our time and attention. Maybe we talk to a family member or close friend in our native tongue of faith from time to time, but we rarely have a serious, adult conversation which challenges us to develop our thoughts and deepen our insights. Many of us know the family stories and can still speak the language of faith, but we can converse, at best, on an adolescent level.

It was a similar realization that led St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Durham to develop a youth curriculum called *Journey to Adulthood*, which we and hundreds of other congregations now use to frame our youth ministry. Leaders at St. Philip's noticed that many of their youth saw confirmation, which happens at age 12 or 13, as graduation from church. They had learned the Bible stories, accepted the basic tenets of the faith, and professed faith in Christ. So, many of them thought, they had completed the steps in their faith development and were ready to move on to something else.

The foundation of *Journey to Adulthood* is built on the understanding that confirmation (or in our case, baptism) is not the end of the faith journey but only the beginning. Professing faith in Christ and acceptance of the basic doctrines of the Church is the first step in making the faith of our mothers and fathers our own, the beginning of a lifelong journey of questions and discovery, of doubts as well as assurances. As youth progress through the program, they take on increasing responsibility for their own faith development; exploring who they are created to be in the image of God; discovering their gifts and talents and how they are called to use them in the world; confronting issues like poverty, race, prejudice, and injustice, and considering how their faith prompts them to respond. The program helps to ensure that their childhood questions of faith can develop into a discernment of the role of faith throughout all of life, or as the eleventh-century theologian Saint Anselm of Canterbury called it, "faith seeking understanding."

And while it is true that many of us may drift away from this journey of faith because of distraction when other demands call for our attention, or complacency because we feel as though we've arrived, or neglect because we simply get out of the habit, I suspect some of us give up because the path just seems too difficult. Maybe it's easier not to be so mindful of everything, all the time. Or maybe the beliefs we once held dear bump up against real challenges that cause doubts to creep in. Or perhaps, for those of us who like to analyze and measure, who wish to have answers that fall in areas of black or white rather than gray, and who feel much more at ease once we have arrived at a destination, an important and difficult part of this journey may be in learning to live in the mystery, in finding comfort in the not-knowing, in accepting that as long as we draw breath on this earth, the destinations are really only pit stops along the way so that we can rest until God calls us to travel on.

We can see these tensions played out in the two Scripture lessons for today: The writer of Proverbs shared a number of helpful, pithy truths, among them: "Train children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not stray." (Proverbs 22:6)

Clearly, it is important to give our children a solid grounding in faith, to train them in the ways of faith, and to establish that faith practices are important for their lives. If our own conventional wisdom isn't enough to confirm this truth, there is plenty of research to back it up. Perhaps most notably is Christian Smith's extensive work in adolescent faith development, summarized in his 2005 book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual*

*Lives of American Teenagers.*¹ Smith and his colleagues surveyed thousands of teens and conducted over 300 face-to-face, in-depth interviews across the country and in a variety of religious groups. Their conclusions are much more complex and interesting than I can summarize here, but among their findings was the clear pattern that, as much as teens put up a rebellious front, it is the beliefs, and even more importantly, the religious practices, of parents that shape the faith commitments of young people. Teachers, ministers, coaches, friends, and cultural factors do exert some influence, and it is not unusual for youth and young adults to explore other paths as they discover their independence, but in the long run, the faith modeled within the family is the single most influential factor in determining a person's lifelong religious practices. "Train children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not stray."

While it's clear that the foundations of our faith are important, a foundation without a structure built on it, however, is of little use for protecting us when storms rage around us. In today's epistle lesson we read a portion of Paul's words to the Corinthian church about what is necessary for building a strong and mature faith, one that will grow beyond an adolescent level in order to withstand challenges from without and doubts from within. The believers at Corinth faced constant threats from all directions, but it was clear that Paul's greatest concern was the bickering and division from within the congregation. On a number of occasions in his letters to them, he addresses issues of fostering unity, how they are to seek peace when there is disagreement among them, and how they can grow toward a more mature faith in Christ which will withstand whatever assails it. In this passage, he makes it clear that they can only reach maturity through developing the spiritual gifts which are from God, and that this can only happen by seeking a wisdom that comes from the Spirit of God. This path to a strong and mature faith can be difficult to find because the work of the Spirit is often mysterious and beyond our human abilities to comprehend it apart from God's guidance.

Paul's emphasis on the development of the spiritual gifts and discerning God's wisdom surely points us toward a journey that doesn't offer easy answers or a shallow faith. We are called to persevere on this lifelong journey, to do the hard work of looking deep within our own hearts so that we will be granted, as Paul will write to the Ephesian church "the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

¹Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* Oxford University Press, USA: New York, 2005.

The question remains, then, if we truly take this journey seriously, how do we know where it might lead us? In some sense, what is both exciting and daunting is that we don't know for sure. We are promised only that it will lead us where God calls, and if we will listen and follow, we may find ourselves in some surprising places.

We can, of course, look around us, right here in our own Lakeside family, to find examples of those who have been open to following this path of faith wherever it leads.

I think of Marion Weathers, who, though she was already an accomplished artist, has continued to explore new media and hone new skills and to use those gifts to bring beauty and inspiration to our facility and throughout our community. One of the results is her gift of the stunning print of the Lehman benediction which is now available for all of us to enjoy.

And then there's Betsy Waters who taught piano lessons for fifty years, sharing her skills and encouragement with hundreds of students. But when she retired, she started taking piano lessons again. She says that there's still so much music out there for her to learn!

And I think of Brian Scott who, after a long and successful career as an attorney, and after serving in nearly every leadership capacity in our church, began in his 80's attending small group Bible studies because he wanted to continue to learn and grow in his faith and to consider new perspectives on scripture.

And we are all grateful that, after retiring from her career as a preschool teacher, Susan Skinner, believing that she was being called to a deeper involvement in the church, came to the church staff to ask if there were some way her gifts could be used. As a result of those conversations and her willingness to follow God's call, Susan has served as our Senior Adult Director for the past ten years.

I could, of course, work my way through this sanctuary to point out ways that so many of you have continued to be open to the Spirit's leading, to grow and mature in faith, and to understand this journey of faith as a lifelong adventure. And it is significant that we have made this faith commitment, not in isolation, but instead as a community of Christ followers called Lakeside Baptist Church. Indeed, the opening words of our Mission Statement read, "We, the members of Lakeside Baptist Church, are people on a journey of faith who seek to deal with questions of life openly and honestly. Our faith is in God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ and who

sustains us by the Holy Spirit. We believe that the quality of our lives is enhanced by our commitment to Jesus Christ. Through our worship, our Christian education, and our mission outreach, we seek to help persons discover who they are and explore their faith rather than prescribe what they should believe."

We find our way along this journey together and deepen our faith in the One who calls us, first gathering each week for worship and then by offering opportunities like Sunday School and study groups, meditation group and musical ensembles, missions circles and projects that bring us together to serve our neighbors. We expand our own knowledge as we teach our children and youth, and we gain far more than we could ever give as we serve on boards and as volunteers across our community. We come together for worship and learning, fellowship and service because we are people on a lifelong journey of faith who need trusted companions for support and encouragement along the way. Each of these opportunities serves as a navigational system, helping us to decide which routes to take and to see more clearly the road ahead.

It is a journey filled with blessing but, at times, uncertainty. It has its challenges but also offers the gifts of grace and goodness which God gives in abundance, and you just might find that you will meet some wonderful fellow travelers along the way. So fasten your seatbelts, and keep your eyes on the road. You never know what you might find just around the corner! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Holy and Almighty God, we thank you for these few, quiet moments out of our hurried lives to worship in your presence. You are Creator of the universe and Lord of our hearts. You are mighty enough to part the seas and gentle enough to speak to us in a still, small voice. You are Yahweh God who established a nation of your people generations ago and who continues to speak to us in unexpected and relevant ways today. You give us your Word and your Spirit that we might know you, and you remain beyond our comprehension or control. For these and all the great mysteries of life and faith, O Lord, we offer our thanks and praise.

Redeeming and Sustaining God, gathered as the Body of Christ, we enjoy your fellowship in this place of comfort and protection, and yet we know that we are called to reach beyond these walls to a world that does not know you. There is much in your world that is virtuous and noble and good, but among these instances of beauty we find too many places where violence and suffering, need and despair continue to reign. We remember those who endure the effects of political turmoil, grief, fear, poverty and violence, both around the world and in our own city streets.

Gracious and Merciful God, we claim that we travel a life-long journey of faith, but we have learned well to demand a quick fix and expect instant gratification. We sprint through our days—anxious, hurried, distracted and tired. We give up easily when the challenges we face require care and perseverance. Teach us, O Lord, to be patient in waiting on your Spirit, to be attentive to meeting the needs around us, to be persistent in seeking justice for those who are exploited, and to be diligent in showing mercy to those who cannot repay our kindness. Give us, we pray, hearts to learn, to love, to share and to serve, after the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.