



# Lakeside Sermons

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

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THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Vanity or Legacy? Ecclesiastes 1:2-3; 2:18-26; Luke 12:13-21

Someone told me the other day that they had been on a family vacation at the beach which brought together siblings and their families from distant places. His brother arrived early and taped a sign to the cottage door which read, "No politics or religion spoken here!" For a week the family avoided both topics and had a great time.

In these days, however, it is difficult to avoid either of these subjects. I sat down at lunch yesterday following the memorial service and within five minutes we realized a conversation about sports had evolved (or devolved) into a discussion about politics. Someone quickly called a ban.

We tend to get passionate about our politics and religion, and that's not all bad. How we live together in the world and how we live out our faith are extremely important matters. We should talk about these things. Wisely, however, we realize that some occasions are not the time or the place to delve into such hot topics. Vacations and church dinners are probably two of those times. When we decide to stay away from the hot button issues in politics and religion, we tend to get along well. Yet, there is another subject that raises hackles and causes even deeper divisions in families: inheritance. Throw money, property, or heirlooms on the table, and peace and harmony go right out the window.

I have seen it often. Normally cordial, cooperative, even loving families become estranged when the will is read and not everyone is happy or when there is no will and a free-for-all erupts. Someone says, "Mama loved me best and wanted me to have the dining room furniture with all the china and silver service to boot!" Or another one says, "Daddy never did love me like he did the rest of you so I deserve to get more than you!"

Jesus had seen it, too. Some fellow tried to pull him into a family fray by shouting from the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Like a five year old wanting to use the red crayon in the box his sister is hoarding, this fellow thought maybe Jesus could get results which he knew he never would.

Jesus was wise. He let the fellow know that was not his job to probate a will, but he would tell a story. Jesus was good at telling the right story at the right time. He told a story about a farmer who had a tremendous harvest. It was a banner year for his crops, but he had a problem. His barns were not large enough to hold the harvest. He did not want to sell any of it. He did not want to give it away. He wanted to keep it for himself. So he decided the reasonable thing to do was to build bigger barns. That's not a bad solution, but the problem is that right after the last of his harvest was stored safely in his barns, he died. What good were the barns or the crops to him then?

I wonder if, when Jesus heard the man's question, his mind went immediately to the scroll of Ecclesiastes. He could have asked the fellow if he had read what the Teacher had written there. We heard it earlier:

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-21

Hundreds of years before the man shouted from the crowd for Jesus to get involved in his family affairs, someone else thought about this very problem. The writer of Ecclesiastes must have had a family who did not share his values or have his work ethic. What do you do when you work hard and leave an inheritance to someone who will do nothing but waste it? Do I hear echos of the Prodigal Son's older brother here? No one wants their hard earned, wisely invested, generously shared money or property to go to waste. How often have we seen one generation fritter away the hard work and sacrifice of a previous generation? The Teacher said it is all vanity—breath, air, a vapor that will not last. So why risk it?

I don't think Jesus' story or the reflections of the Teacher suggest that we should not save some of our money or prepare an inheritance for our children and grandchildren, but the two passages should give us pause to think about how we spend our lives and our resources. Do we make choices that are ephemeral and ultimately unwise? Or do we find ways to invest ourselves that will have both immediate and future benefits?

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes has an answer: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil" (Ecclesiastes 2:24). But doesn't his advice sounds a lot like the farmer when all of his harvest was stored in his bigger barns? "Soul," he said, "you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19). The words are similar, but the intent could not be more different. The farmer was self-satisfied, having hoarded his harvest without thought for anyone else while the Teacher suggests that we enjoy life day by day, experiencing it as a gift from God—a gift to enjoy and a gift to share.

The question becomes, do we want our lives, our work, and our wealth to be simple vanity, a vapor that does not last? Or do we want each day to count for something other than ourselves? Would we like to leave behind a legacy that suggests the world is better for our having been in it? I am always moved by that final scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* when, near the end of his own life, Mr. Ryan, now an older man, returns with his family to the cemetery in France where the captain who gave his life so that he could live is buried. Standing before the cross marking the grave, he begs his wife to tell him that this man's sacrifice was worth it, that he had lived a life worthy of another's death.

Is that not the question we ask, or should ask? Do we live worthy of the sacrifices made for us—by our parents and spouses and friends—by Christ himself when he gave his life so that we might enjoy life, full and complete? Do we invest our lives in such a way that other people have a chance to live abundantly as well?

We begin with our families, spending the time and energy and resources so that each one will be healthy and happy and equipped for life. We so often take our families for granted, knowing that they will be there while we are working, realizing that they will understand when we miss an important event for another good cause, hoping that they will appreciate the sacrifices we make on their behalf. The reality is, however, that our families do not always understand because we put them second to the needs of others. They may not appreciate our sacrifices because they, too, have sacrificed much for us. We must place our families as a priority in life so that our hard work will bring benefits to us all.

You have likely noticed the interest that is growing among some people to live in what are called "tiny houses." These tiny houses are tiny indeed, some having a total square footage of a couple of hundred square feet. I saw

one program which featured a family with three children looking at such a home. Their purpose was to bring the family closer together. That's one way to do it, but personally, I would prefer to be together in a bit larger space. Overall, most people want to live in a tiny house so that they can use their resources for other things: travel, educational experiences, volunteer work, building a business, or shedding the burden of an over-abundance of possessions. They want to get rid of a "bigger barn" so that life can be a bit simpler and they can focus on family and their experiences together.

I am not suggesting that we all move into tiny houses, but we should consider where we invest our resources. In the end, family experiences are far more important than a bigger television or a better boat or an additional room. Spending time with children and spouses and parents is critical to helping one another enjoy the life we have.

We can also invest ourselves in other people around us. I see it every day when you take food to people who are ill or offer transportation for a spouse to get to the hospital to visit her husband. I have known you to clean the yard of someone who cannot do it themselves, buy groceries for someone who cannot leave the house, or accompany a friend day after day for chemotherapy treatments in another town.

I see the service you give through civic groups which work to make our community a better place to live. I watch you invest time away from work mentoring a student in school so that they will complete their courses, graduate, and have a chance to attend college. I see you serving on non-profit boards that seek the welfare of all people in our city. I have watched some of you serve food to children in our fellowship hall this summer and then read to them so that they won't be behind when school begins again. I know you call a friend to have a cup of coffee because you know they are having a hard time and could use a few minutes away from the stress. I see you writing cards and making phone calls and visiting other people just to let them know they are not alone.

You are tearing down your old barns, but not building bigger ones. You are investing yourself in the lives of other people. You realize that a healthy child is likelier to stay in school and that a child who can read will have a greater chance of graduating from high school. You know that a strong community is a better community, that it will attract good businesses with better jobs and offer more opportunities to people who live here. You understand that a life well lived is a far greater treasure than a larger bank

account or bigger toys. You know that we cannot predict what will happen tomorrow, but we do know that we can make a difference in someone's life today.

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." If we live wisely and faithfully, the inheritance we bequeath to our children and our community will already be shared. It will be the experience of being loved, the reality of being healthy and safe, the memories of good times shared together, and the understanding that we are all held in the loving arms of God. If we live our faith, perhaps our politics and religion will follow. That would be a legacy that would never fade. Amen.

July 31, 2016

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The soaring temperatures and long, dry days have caused us to yearn for rain, O God. The soil is dry, plants are desperate for water, and we are weary of the heat. We will be grateful when rain falls and temperatures drop and then we will think of sunshine and warmth once again.

We are not easily pleased, God, but that is more a concern of our spirits rather than our bodies. So often our spirits are parched and wilting. We need rivers of mercy to wash and refresh and revitalize us. You bring healing waters through the gifts of your Spirit, and we are grateful.

We pray for healing for each of us. We ask that you bring renewal to the bodies of those of us who are ill. Use caring health professionals, effective medications and treatments, and the love and support of family and friends to help us get well. Attend to those of us who struggle with mental illnesses which cannot be seen but which threaten to debilitate us. Provide us with the same care as others with physical problems but also remove the stigma from the troubles we have. Brush away the cloud of secrecy which hangs heavy over us and help us to handle our challenges with courage and dignity. Minister to each of us who is wounded in spirit. Grant us the courage to face our problems and the support to find a path to wholeness. Remind us daily of your presence with us and remove all fear from us, we pray.

Heal our world as well, O God. There is so much anger and hatred which acts out in violent ways. Teach us to find ways to express our deepest desires without harming one another in the process. Free people from oppression which ignites hostility and vengeance. Deliver us all from the deception that some of our neighbors are not your children. Bless us with a fresh openness to the larger world which you have created for us all.

Once again we offer our thanksgiving for the life and ministry of Jerry Jolley. We were blessed to have shared his gifts and fortunate to have claimed him as our friend. Bless Charlotte, his children, his grandchildren, and each of us as we find our individual ways to say goodbye. And always keep his memory dear to us.

We thank you for all who love us and for those whom we love. We are grateful for the bonds which hold us together and the shared experiences which draw us closer. Keep us from taking such affection for granted and enable us to live worthy of the love we are given.

We know that we are blessed, O God, to receive your grace. Walk with us, we pray, as we explore its possibilities for our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.