



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
*OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH*

## How Many Weeks Did It Take to Build this Church? Matthew 16:13-20; I Peter 2:1-10

Size and time are sometimes difficult for children to comprehend. To a child, everything else is large and time seems endless. Houses, schools, malls, cars, trains, planes, forests, mountains, and oceans all seem enormous in scale to them. Time rarely has much meaning for a child. Days feel long, weeks are endless, months are interminable, and years are simply impossible. What child, scarcely into a family trip, has not uttered that question which can send even the most patient of parents into orbit, “Are we there yet?”

I was not surprised when Elizabeth Paszek asked the question, “How many weeks did it take to build this church?” Though modest compared to many church buildings, for many people, ours is a large sanctuary, and for a small person it feels gargantuan. Elizabeth is observant. She takes in the slightest details of things. She marvels at the wonders of the world. She looks, she sees, she ponders.

To a child used to playing with blocks and Legos®, making forts and castles out of chairs, sticks, and boxes, with imagination as the primary building material, constructing an edifice such as a church is an unimaginable task that could take forever. Those of you who were here at the time may have felt that it did take forever. Elizabeth wanted to know precisely how long it took to build our sanctuary.

“How many weeks did it take to build this church?” is a good question and, on one hand, can easily be answered. Groundbreaking for the sanctuary was held on August 14, 1960—almost 55 years ago to the day. The sanctuary was dedicated on September 3, 1961. It took fifty-five weeks to build this church.

When I first answered her question a few months ago, I realized that Elizabeth might also have had something else in mind. No doubt she was curious about the sanctuary, but she also might have wondered about Lakeside itself and how long it has taken to get us to where we are now. She

is a bright young lady and has likely learned something of the histories of other congregations. We all know that in the scope of the Christian faith, Lakeside is but a toddler. Compared to churches downtown, we are rather young. I have mentioned to you before that Lakeside is the youngest church to which I have belonged. The others range in age from 166 to 215 years old. Many of you have visited churches in Europe and the Middle East that have been around well over a thousand years. A friend who was once pastor of three parishes in Scotland told me that one of the chapels in which she regularly preached was over 1500 years old. Elizabeth's question could also have probed how long it has taken to build up this congregation to where it is now.

That answer is also simple and quite obvious: from conversations about founding a new church to the congregation we are today, Lakeside has been built over a period of sixty years and six months, 3175 weeks, by my calculation. Some congregations take years of discussion, planning, and decision-making before getting started. The birth of Lakeside took only four months from the first meeting of interested persons to the chartering of the first members. We have been going strong ever since. We just celebrated our sixtieth birthday, and we are still building this congregation.

The thing I like about questions that children ask is that they are rarely simple. There is almost always a follow-up question or angle that is yet to be explored. When I was a little fellow, less than six years old, I found our neighbor working in his yard one day. After about thirty minutes, he called to my mother to come and get me. "Why?" she asked. "Because he's asking too many questions!" he replied. "Then answer them!" Mom advised.

In that spirit, Elizabeth's simple question points us to something else—something larger, deeper, and more profound about the church than the length of its construction or its years of existence. Her question prods us to think about church in a way that is not so easy to define in weeks or even years. It causes us to think about the nature of the church itself.

One day, as they were walking along the dusty roads of the northernmost reaches of Palestine, Jesus and his disciples stopped to rest near the city of Caesarea Philippi. Out of curiosity and to create what he hoped would be a "teachable moment," Jesus asked his closest friends what people were saying about him. "Who do they say I am? What is the word on the streets?" he wondered. They gave answers typical for the religious expectations of the time: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and

still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “Who do you think I am?” Jesus wanted to know. Before anyone else could even draw a breath to speak a word, Simon Peter declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Obviously pleased, Jesus praised him: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . .” (Matthew 16:13-20).

There has been a lot of discussion about this passage over the years. As you know, in the Greek text, there is a play on words between the proper name “Peter” which is “Petros” and the word for “rock” which is “petra.” In the Aramaic language which Jesus spoke, the name “Peter” and the word “rock” are the same—“Kepha” or “Cephas.”<sup>1</sup> We could talk all day about whether the foundation of Christ’s Church is the person of Peter or the truth of his confession that Jesus is the Messiah—the Christ—the Son of the Living God. Personally, I prefer the latter understanding. Either way, it is understood that the Church of Jesus Christ is not a building but people. The Church Universal is not brick and mortar; rather, it is people bound together in relationship to Christ.

All of us as children played the finger game: Here’s the church; here’s the steeple. Look inside—there’s all the people! That is the church—the people. Jesus used a word which we translate as “church” which actually means “to call out.” The church is the people whom God calls out of the ordinary stream of life to follow Christ into service. The people who are called out are to live as Jesus lived which means to act with compassion and justice. When we keep playing the finger game and say, “Here’s the church; here’s the steeple. Look inside—where’s all the people?”, that is also the Church—the people of God serving human need outside of the buildings where we worship.

How long did it take to build the church made of people? Some folks would say that the Church began on the day of Pentecost when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon the believers who were waiting to see what would happen after Jesus’ death and resurrection. We do refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup>Elwyn E. Tilden, “Annotations to the Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*, Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977), 1193.

Yet, we know that God was at work in the world long before Jesus was born or even began his ministry. God called Abram to follow him into an unknown land and there begin a nation that would be a blessing to all the nations of the world. Israel was to be a light to everyone else, not as a beacon calling them to come to Jerusalem, but as a lamp helping them find the way to God wherever they were.

The Bible tells us, however, that God has been at work in the world and calling his people to act on his behalf from the very beginning. If we want to know when Lakeside and every other church that has ever existed or will exist in the future began, we have to look for that first spark of love, that initial twinge of compassion, that natal breath which carried the kiss of life, that yearning for relationship with another that was first felt in the heart of God.

It was out of compassion that God created the world and everything in it, including humanity. And it was for compassion that we were all formed. The Church Universal spans space and time to serve as the face and hands of God in the world. As believers, we are called to love God and to love one another. We are to live as Christ lived, which is often contrary to the way many people live—even some who claim to be followers of Christ. We do things differently because we see things differently if we see with the eyes of Christ and think with the mind of Christ.

There are few places where we experience more profoundly the reality of the Church than at the Lord's Table. Here, the bread and the cup remind us of Jesus who came that we might have life and gave his life that we might live compassionately in the world. He set before us an example of sacrifice, not to satisfy God, but to guide us to meet the needs around us. Christ came to show us how to live as the people of God, as the Epistle of I Peter puts it, "a spiritual house" of "living stones."

How long did it take to build the Church? There is no way to count the weeks, the days, the hours, the minutes, the seconds, the breaths, the heartbeats, the thoughts, and the prayers that have been invested into building up the Church of Jesus Christ. In truth, it has taken forever because God has been at work from the beginning to craft us into his people. The Church is not finished for we are continually being transformed by God into the likeness of Christ. Our calling, as individuals and as a family of faith, is to be the Body of Christ in this place, week by week, day by day, moment by moment . . . to service of God and God's people. Amen.

August 2, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

What a gift it is to be claimed by you, O God! How wonderful to be welcomed as your people. So often we feel lonely and alone, wandering in a world that feels more unfamiliar day by day, looking for the best path to follow. To be reminded that we are your people, your children, included in the household of those who trust in you, is a relief and a joy. With thankful hearts, we praise you, O Lord.

We are grateful to be welcomed at this table of fellowship. Here we find our true home. Here we discover who we truly are. Here we are nourished for the life for which you created us. Here we recognize our sisters and brothers for who they are and accept them as you have accepted us.

We are also thankful that we can open our hearts to you, sharing our joys, confessing our sin, admitting our worries, asking for your help. We know that you are present in every moment of our lives whether we acknowledge you or not, O God, and we are grateful that in each of those moments you are reaching to meet our needs. Thank you for caring and for acting upon your concern. Teach us to be as compassionate with one another, we pray.

May we, as your Church, understand that with our fellow believers we reach around the world and across time to share the Gospel with all people. May we, as your people, be good stewards of the world you have given to us. May we, as your spiritual house, become a haven for all who are lost, a refuge for any who are afraid, and a home for everyone seeking peace. By your grace, may we shine the light which illumines the way to hope for all people; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.