



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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AUGUST 9, 2015

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
*OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH*

## Why Do We Acolyte?

Matthew 5:14-16; I Corinthians 12:1-14

One of the most common and frequent conversations in family households begins with the question, “Why?” and ends with the mom responding, “Because I said so!” She answers that way, not because she does not want someone to know the reason behind what they are being asked to do—say take out the garbage, wash the dishes, pick up your clothes, or take a bath; rather, her answer is brief and emphatic because she figures that a grown man should know why he needs to do those things!

Children also want to know why they have to do the things they do. A question is the best way to find out. That is why I was so pleased that our children had a list of questions about faith that they wanted to ask me early last spring. They were such good questions that I decided to share them with the entire congregation since most of us tend to ask some of the same questions.

We have already looked at some of those questions dealing with the nature of God, God’s power and authority, freedom and faith, why God made us as we are, and the nature of the church. These questions have helped us all to think more deeply about God and ourselves.

During experiences of trauma, disaster, or grief, I often tell parents to answer only the questions a child asks. Most children have specific questions about circumstances and, when those questions are answered, the child is satisfied. There is no need to offer details that do not interest them or to work out your own questions through a child. Let the child guide the conversation.

On the other hand, during normal times, a simple question may provide the opportunity to talk about more important matters. Two of our young men were very practical and down to earth in their questions. They wanted to understand why things work the way they do. Edward Evans asked me, “Why do we acolyte?” and Daniel Edwards wanted to know why you have to be eight years old before you are able to acolyte. Good, practical questions.

Acolytes have served in worship for centuries with the primary purpose of carrying candles and lighting candles on the altar. In fact, the earliest mention of acolytes was in a letter written by Pope Cornelius in the year 251.<sup>1</sup> As the note on the back of our order of worship explains each week, “The Acolyte brings light to the altar as a reminder of Christ, the Light of life, and leads us out of the sanctuary [at the conclusion of worship] as a reminder that we are to take this light to the world.” The Apostle John identifies Jesus as the Word who was in the beginning with God and participated in creation as the source of life. “In him was life,” John wrote, “and the life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it” (John 1:1-5). Later, Jesus himself said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

As they carry the flame and light candles on the altar, our Acolytes remind us every Sunday whom we worship and why. We come together to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for bringing light to our world, for coming to reveal himself through the person of Jesus Christ. Then we leave worship to go and take that light into the world. Jesus told his followers,

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Our Acolytes also place an offering object on the altar each Sunday as a way of reminding us of the many ways in which we shine the light of God’s love throughout the world. Our personal involvement through our offering of money, time, and talents beams the light of God’s love directly into the lives of other people. As Gaylord Lehman reminded this congregation every Sunday, “Come to worship . . . Go to a responsible involvement in the world.”

Serving as an Acolyte is a very important ministry and a great responsibility. We are grateful to our girls and boys for their willingness to serve us in this way week by week. Daniel’s question about why one has to be eight years old before he or she can acolyte points to the responsibility of this ministry. Our Acolytes carry fire through the sanctuary and among us.

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<sup>1</sup>Meehan, Andrew. "Acolyte." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. 8 Aug. 2015 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01106a.htm>>.

They light and extinguish candles. They carry other objects down the aisle and up the steps to the chancel. We have to be certain they are old enough and mature enough for that responsibility. In some congregations, the Acolytes are all adults.

I remember when we were in Savannah, a young girl, barely eight years old, was serving as an Acolyte for the first time. I will never forget her walking down the aisle of that nearly 200 year old sanctuary, constructed of well-seasoned wood, with the flame of the lighter blazing three or four inches into the air. I knew for certain that we were all going to be a “burnt sacrifice” if she tripped or dropped the lighter. Being an Acolyte is a tremendous responsibility. Some tasks in worship require one to be of a certain age or to have particular training. Being only seven years old, Daniel is eager to participate. I like that kind of enthusiasm.

Beyond the issues of functionality and eligibility, the questions of both of these boys point us to a larger question: What is our role in worship? Why do we come to this sanctuary each Sunday and what are we supposed to do?

One of the great wonders of the Christian Church is its diversity. Worship is a pure marvel. Liturgical churches like the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutherans follow a prescribed order of worship that universally indicates what worshipers are to say and do. The purpose is for the unity of the Church so that no matter where you are in the world, despite language and culture, you will feel at home and familiar with worship.

During our visit to Europe a couple of years ago, we enjoyed a delightful stay in Vienna. At the end of one day of sightseeing, as we returned to the guest house where we were staying, I noticed people entering the church that was served by the monastery there. We entered to view a beautiful sanctuary that glowed from the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows. A service of evening prayer commenced and, although everything spoken was in German, I knew what was going on because I was familiar with the liturgy. The music, the rhythms, and the actions of worship were familiar. It was a meaningful experience.

Even though there is unity in liturgy among various churches, there is also a broad range of personality among the millions of congregations throughout the world. That is the great beauty and wonder of the church. We

all worship the same God but do so in ways that are unique and personal to us.

I have always appreciated and taken guidance from the Danish philosopher/theologian Søren Kierkegaard and his thoughts on worship. He explained that worship is somewhat like the theater. We often think of the congregation as the audience, the clergy as the actors, and God as the prompter. It is an appealing analogy, but, sadly, can lead to a distortion of our worship. With this mindset, congregational participation is often passive, ministerial leadership can become misdirected and performance driven, and God's presence is completely misunderstood.

Kierkegaard suggested that we redefine our roles in worship so that the congregation serves as the actors, the clergy function as the prompters, and God is the audience.<sup>2</sup> Immediately we understand that our role is to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. God is the focus of our worship, not the other way around. We do not come together to be entertained. Instead, we gather to offer blessing to God. The heart of worship is gratitude and the purpose of our worship is greatly affected by our attitude. Certainly we receive many benefits and blessings from worship but that is because of God's nature and God's overarching love for us. Our intent, however, is to bring our offering of love to God.

Our role in worship is to be prepared to worship God and to offer our best to God. Therefore there should be no distractions. Watches, books, phones, and idle conversation do not enhance our worship. Our intent is to let God know how grateful we are. We ought to bring a certain enthusiasm to worship which is demonstrated in our litanies and singing. We ought to read over the things we will say as a congregation—the Call to Worship, the Confession, and the Affirmation—and then say them as if we mean them—for we should. Our singing ought to be heartfelt and energetic. Amy talks with the choir often about the fact that it is important for their singing to be technically correct, but the most important—and telling—aspect of singing is that it should come from the heart. So it should be with our hymn singing. These are the songs of our faith. They are more than words and notes strung together. They tell our story and the story of God's love for us.

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<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing*, Trans. Douglas Steere, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).

There should be an energy to our worship which is palpable. When we feel it, we know that God feels it as well. There is excitement and expectation and joy in offering our worship to God.

Our acolytes remind us that we come to worship the light of life and then share that light with the world. Our ushers demonstrate God's welcome through hospitality and enable us to share in ministry through our offerings. Deacons greet us and minister to us. Our choirs and musicians help to give voice to all of the emotions we bring to worship and our clergy serve to prompt us to reach within ourselves and offer our best to God. And we, with heart and voice and soul, give of our best to God in every way.

The Apostle Paul frequently wrote to his fellow Christians about the ways in which each person is gifted in different ways. Writing to the church at Corinth, he emphasized, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:4-7).

Together we make up the Body of Christ, as we talked about last week. Each one of us possesses certain gifts and abilities. One purpose of worship is to come together to thank God for those gifts and to seek guidance for how best to use them. The other purpose is to use those gifts to praise and honor God. When we do that together, our worship is profound and energizing. God is blessed and we are enriched.

Worship is a meaningful responsibility, and participation in worship is a privilege for each of us. Amazing things happen in worship. God is blessed and we are changed. We cannot take that opportunity lightly.

I think I have mentioned to you before a quote that I have posted beside my desk. It is from the review of a jazz album by Wynton Marsalis and Carl Vigland. The topic is jazz, but it reminds me week by week of the importance and opportunity of worship. Reviewer Larry Meagher wrote:

There is a moment, in that dark room where people rustle in their seats as they look eagerly toward an empty stage, when anything is possible. What comes next, they know, can be good or bad, brilliant or uninspired, uplifting or depressing.

Out of this moment pregnant with anticipation and anxiety, an unbreakable bond can be forged between the people waiting in the seats and the people waiting in the wings. It is a moment ripe with creative and spiritual opportunity. It draws musician and audience alike toward the lights of the stage. In the next moment, something will happen. Either the opportunity will be seized and everyone in the room will be transformed, or the opportunity will be squandered.

But in this moment, this fleeting interval between heartbeats, everything is possible. Welcome to jazz.<sup>3</sup>

I would say: Welcome to worship!

As our Acolytes remind us each time we gather for worship, we come to bear witness and to offer praise to the Light of the World. We depart having blessed God and been blessed by God to share that light with the world. When we gather, anything can happen, but it is up to us to make it happen. May our light so shine and give glory to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Larry Meagher, Special to CNN, Review: "Marsalis Captures the Jazzy Swing of 'Life'," *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life*, by Wynton Marsalis and Carl Vigland, Da Capo Press.

August 9, 2015

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We gather here week by week, Holy God, because in the midst of the challenges and tensions and uncertainties of life, we know that in this sacred place and among these our brothers and sisters is where we should be. We gather to experience your presence through the nurturing of your Holy Spirit, to hear an inspiring word or melody that might cause our hearts to soar above the mundane concerns of the day, and to receive an encouraging word or embrace that will reassure us that we are cared for and accepted. We gather because in this world of conflict and confusion, we need to be reminded of the peace which only you can bring and to hear again the good news that your truth will set us free.

Even while we come with gratitude for the abundance of these gifts and all the loving-kindness you offer to us, O Lord, we confess that we also come with reservations. We are called to be your disciples, but yours can be a costly discipleship, sometimes requiring of us more than we bargained for. We offer glory and honor, praise and adoration to you, our Beautiful Savior, yet we often feel inadequate to live out the demands of the gospel. You call us to extend welcome and a cup of cold water to others in your name, yet our suspicion of the other causes us to hesitate to be hospitable and our scarcity mentality convinces us that our resources are inadequate to meet the needs around us. We hear the difficult truths of your word and are confronted by the teachings of Jesus which challenge our assumptions and nudge us from our comfortable places. We sense the stirring of your Spirit who will not leave well enough alone, who nestles deep within our souls and seeks to transform us in ways that are both inviting and unsettling. And so we begin to wonder whether we have the strength or the courage to claim the name of Christ and to live as your disciples at all.

Create us anew, Loving God, in these moments of worship and every day of our lives, that we might recognize and live the fullness of your image within us. Cleanse and redeem us, Merciful Christ, that we might become suitable vessels, fragile though we are, to carry your gospel to the world you came to love and serve. Fill and empower us, Renewing Spirit, that we might be equipped to respond to the needs around us out of the abundance we have been given. Grant us the strength to do the work of discerning your will. Grant us the wisdom to reject anything that hinders the joyful and abundant life you intend for us. And grant us the courage to reach out beyond ourselves to extend mercy wherever we find suffering, always remembering that in your kingdom, we must lose ourselves in order to find our true life in you.

We give witness to our faith that we do not travel this journey alone, as we pray in the name of the Risen Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of the Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister