



# *Lakeside Sermons*

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

## What Are You?

Isaiah 6:1-8; Ephesians 4:1-16

I want to thank our children for helping me with our sermons this summer. Not only did you give me some good ideas for sermon topics, you also made me think! You asked questions which could have been answered quickly and without much thought, but I knew you wanted complete answers. You caused me to think deeply about what you asked and I have learned a lot. Thank you!

The final question asked by one of our children definitely caught my attention. It came from Ramsey Ward. I have gotten to know Ramsey fairly well over the past few years. I met him while Travis and Witten were planning their wedding and began to know a young man who is joyful, caring, and thoughtful. Ramsey is one of those children who constantly stuns you with his surprising observations and deep insights. Ramsey and I know each other and are friends.

His question was about me. I have been asked a lot of questions about myself: Who are you? Where do you live? What do you do for a living? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? These questions are the ones you ask when you first get acquainted with someone. Ramsey's question, however, drilled right to the heart of the matter. "What are you?" he wanted to know.

What are you? Now there's a question that will stop you in your tracks. What are you? Not who or where but what! Was he wondering if I was of a different species? Do I look and act so strange as to not appear at least similar to the rest of the human race? Or is what I do so different as to be a curiosity? Ramsey has seen me in a variety of roles. On Sunday mornings he sees me in a robe leading worship and preaching. On Sunday evenings he sees me in more casual clothes walking around chatting with the children. He has seen me in a suit at other events. He has seen me dressed in odd costumes at Vacation Bible School while telling a Bible story. Ramsey has seen me in a variety of different roles. Perhaps like many of you, he wants to know, "What are you?"

It is a good question and one we should all ask of ourselves because it has to do with our call in life. What am I as a result of who God has created me to be?

First and foremost, I am a child of God. I love that single verse in the Epistle of First John which states, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (I John 3:1). A few years ago, I came across a Peanuts cartoon which shows two of the children meeting. One of them says, “Hi! I’ve just been told that I am one of God’s children . . . Who are you?” In truth, everyone we encounter is a child of God. Ramsey, I am a child of God just like you!

Of course, like each of us, I am other things as well—a husband, father, grandfather, son, and friend. I take each of these roles seriously and cherish the responsibilities they call for and the opportunities and joy they offer.

I am also something else. I am a child of God who has been “called” to use the gifts God has given me in a certain way. In my case, God led me to become a minister. I think this is the creature Ramsey wanted me to explain. What exactly is a minister?

I don’t have many names that I can drop, but I’m going to toss a couple out today. When I was a sophomore at Furman, I interviewed a few people for personal interest articles in the yearbook. One of the people I interviewed was then freshman Amy Grant, now a well known singer-songwriter. The campus was all abuzz that fall when the pretty girl from Tennessee arrived with the distinction of already having an album published. I am certain that we talked about her musical interests, the thrill of performing, and what her future plans were. To be honest, however, I don’t remember anything that she said. I doubt she even remembers the conversation.

I also interviewed Dr. L.D. Johnson, Chaplain of the University, and I remember exactly what he said. When I asked him to talk about his role as Chaplain, he reached back to the three Old Testament roles which served the Hebrew people—prophet, priest, and king. As Chaplain, he said, he served as a prophet by proclaiming the Gospel through preaching and teaching. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea, his job was to help other people to see the ways things are in the world and the way God wants them to be.

He told me that he acted as a priest to people when he ministered to them in the holiest of moments: in times of great joy or sorrow, in decision-

making, crisis, struggle, and celebration. The job of a priest, he explained, is to eliminate the space between God and his people, to help us realize that God is already with us.

Dr. Johnson certainly did not see himself as royalty, but noted that part of his job was administrative. He was responsible for the ministry activities of the University and for the care of students and staff.

The model of prophet, priest, and king is the guide for all ministers, he told me. It is rooted in the call of God on many people through the ages, but is best seen in the ministry of Jesus himself.

I took those words to heart and have modeled my ministry on Dr. Johnson's example. As your minister, I seek to be prophetic in the pulpit and when I teach. I want us to discover that God is involved in our world and cares about how we live together. I enjoy the priestly opportunities I have to lead in worship, to care for you, and to help you recognize God in the midst of whatever life event you are experiencing. Finally, working with our lay leaders and staff, I make certain that our congregation has what it needs and does what it should. What I am is a minister.

What am I? I am a child of God, called by God to minister to this congregation, and privileged by God to be loving and supportive of my family and friends.

The great thing about Ramsey's question is that it can be asked of every one of us. What are you? You are a child of God to be certain. What gifts has God given to you? What are you doing with those gifts? What is God calling you to do in life?

I do not for a moment think that ordained clergy are the only people who are "called" by God to do anything. That is an arrogant and misguided attitude and not at all consistent with biblical teachings. We are all called by God to do special things in life, often many different things in various ways.

The Apostle Paul talked about the call of God with his friends in Ephesus. He noted the gifts that God has given to us and pointed out that our gifts are not all the same because God needs us to do different things. We have various talents and abilities for a reason. Paul was writing to a church, so he pointed out that some people are called to be "apostles, prophets,

evangelists, pastors, and teachers.” Those are some of the roles people need to take in the church.

A larger community of people has other needs as well. We need teachers to educate our children, firefighters, police, and EMS workers to take care of us. A community requires government leaders, store owners, clerks, construction workers, doctors, lawyers, bankers, sanitation workers, reporters, and volunteers. When you consider the needs of our world, the options for our calling multiply exponentially. What are you called to do? And how can you know if and when God is calling you?

Before he was known as Paul, Saul the rabbi was on a personal mission to eradicate all followers of Christ, but that was a misuse of his gifts. No one is ever called by God to bring pain, suffering, and oppression to other people. Once he met Christ on the road to Damascus, however, Saul’s life changed. His understanding changed, his heart changed, even his name changed. Moreover, as he began using his God-given gifts as God wanted him to, he changed from being a persecutor of Christians to being the first Christian missionary. In contrast, Paul’s young protégé Timothy grew up in the faith as most of us did. Paul recognized gifts in Timothy that equipped him as a minister. Different gifts. Different experiences. Both children of God called for ministry.

The various careers we choose in life, even the volunteer opportunities that we take on in the church and community, often require certain skills. Teachers, accountants, construction workers, nurses, musicians, chefs, attorneys, and physicians all require specific skills to do what they do. The choice of a career often comes down to finding where our passion and skills meet the needs of the world. It is at that intersection that we often find God waiting for us. God calls us to use the gifts we have to benefit other people. Sometimes that understanding may come in a dramatic sort of way. Most often it takes place naturally.

Parker Palmer’s gift is teaching. He helps other people hone their skills and become more effective educators. There was a time, however, when he had no clue as to what he should do in life. At the age of thirty-five, he found himself at Pendle Hill, a Quaker community in outside the city of Philadelphia, seeking God’s guidance for his life. As he struggled to gain clarity about his life’s vocation, some of the Quakers would encourage him by saying, “Have faith and way will open.” But God opened no way before him. Frustrated, he sought out an older Quaker woman whose wisdom he valued. He explained

that he had meditated, prayed, and done all he could think of to discover what God wanted him to do, but no sign ever came. She replied, “I’m a birthright Friend and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me. But,” she continued, “a lot of way has closed behind me—and that has had the same guiding effect.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes God leads us by showing us what is not to be. Doors of opportunity sometimes close for a reason. One of the gifts of God, however, is that when one door closes, there are still many more that are open for our exploration.

I have friends who trained as lawyers and then went on to seminary to become ministers. I have friends who graduated from seminary and then decided to go to law school. I know people who have switched careers several times as God continued to lead them to their place of greatest effectiveness and joy. I also know a lot of people, you included, who have found what they enjoy most and know that God has led them there.

Elaine Prevallet, whose decision to become a Roman Catholic nun was a sometimes difficult and uncertain experience, now affirms that there is no “typical” call of God. God leads us all in ways unique to us. Our primary calling is to be faithful to God, what we do with that can vary and even change often over time. “God only calls us to be who we are,” she reminds us.<sup>2</sup>

There is an old Hasidic story about a rabbi named Zusya. When he was advanced in age and asked about his life in comparison to the great leaders of the Bible, he replied, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, that is the issue of our calling: are you being who God created you to be? Ramsey, the final answer to your question, “What are you?” is: I am Jody, a child of God, privileged to have family and friends, blessed to be a minister of Lakeside Baptist Church. What are you?

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<sup>1</sup>Parker J. On Minding Your Call—When No One Is Calling,” *Weavings* (May/June 1996): 16.

<sup>2</sup>Elaine Prevallet, S.L., “Minding the Call,” *Weavings* (May/June 1996): 6-14.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hassidim: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 251, as cited in Palmer.

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## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Generous and merciful God, we are awed and humbled by the extravagance of the blessings you have already bestowed upon us. You have given us the gift of life, and even with all its doubts and mysteries, we know that we need not fear because you are with us and because you have also given us the gift of eternal life. You have given us freedom to work and to speak and to worship and have called us to use these liberties responsibly, trusting in you for provision and caring for one another. You craft our talents and place them within us. We live by your grace day by day, and because of your grace, we can walk through the sometimes uncertain journey of life with assurance and hope. For these and all of your blessings, we offer our thanks and praise.

But even as we recognize the abundance of gifts your Gracious Spirit has given, we come seeking more. We know that we have been blessed so that we might be a blessing to others, and yet so often we continue to doubt your gifts within us and to feel inadequate to meet the needs before us. Like Moses, we may fear that we lack the skill to communicate the significance of your word effectively. Like Jeremiah, we are unsure if we possess the wisdom or experience to accomplish the tasks to which you call us. Or like Isaiah, we may be convinced that our sin and imperfection leave us unfit and unclean to handle such holy matters. And so, O God, we pray you would give us the words to share your good news, the courage to speak your truth with sincerity, the tenderness to love others as we have been loved, the power to dispel darkness and fear wherever we find it, and, in all circumstances, an extra measure of your grace.

Holy God, because we have been called to work and to pray for our brothers and sisters out of our love for one another and our common love for you, we lift up to you those who are sick and those who grieve and pray for your healing touch upon them. We pray for peace for those whose lives are disrupted by chaos and violence. We ask for your mercy for those across our city and around your world whose physical and emotional needs overwhelm them and whose hope has abandoned them. Burden our hearts with compassion and generosity for your children and move our hands and feet to respond to their needs. Grant us courage and make us faithful as we work with diligence and creativity for the sake of the world that you love and have called us to love. We make these and all our prayers in the name of our Risen Lord, even Jesus the Christ, and by the power of your Gracious Spirit who indeed dwells with us. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister