



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## When the Going Gets Tough, Where Do We Go? Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Mr. Thomas opened the bedroom door and saw that Mandy was still asleep. He walked over to the bed, gently shook her foot, and said, "Honey, it's time to get up. It's the first day of school!" Mandy pulled the covers over her head and growled, "Leave me alone! I don't want to go to school!"

"Sure you do," he said. You're moving to fourth grade this year. All of your friends will be there and you will know a lot of the students from your class last year."

"It's just too hard!" Mandy cried from under her pillow. "It gets tougher every year! Give me one good reason why I have to go to school!"

"Well," said her husband, "You're the teacher!"

Sometimes, when the going gets tough, the tough simply want to go away!

Hopefully none of our teachers or students will have to be dragged out of bed to go to school tomorrow. Some of you who started last week may have already been through this trauma. We do tend to assume that once you have been doing something for a while, it gets easier, not harder. We also know, however, that's not necessarily true.

Take Jesus' disciples, for example. We cannot know for certain how long the twelve and the many other people who were following Jesus had been with him when this protracted story of him referring to himself as the Bread of Life took place. The writer of John has a way of collapsing time as he tells his story. Certainly weeks or months had passed. The people who considered themselves disciples of Jesus—students committed to following him from place to place in order to learn from him—were well established and the Twelve certainly made up what we might call the "inner circle." They had already been through quite a bit together and had learned a great deal from Jesus and about him.

From John's Gospel alone, we discover that some of them had been with Jesus in Cana when he performed the first of his "signs" which was turning water into wine. They went with him to Jerusalem to celebrate

Passover and witnessed him overturn the tables of the moneychangers and drive the livestock merchants out of the temple area. They witnessed scores of Samaritans come to faith in him because of the gracious way he conversed with the woman he met at Jacob's well near their town.

They saw him heal many people who were lame or blind or near death from illness, sometimes on the sabbath, and they listened carefully as he rebuked the charges of the scribes and Pharisees that he was a heretic and blasphemer of God. They were present when over five thousand people were fed after he blessed two loaves of bread and five fish. And they heard him talk for several days about being the Bread of Life and how one must eat his flesh and drink his blood to gain eternal life. No doubt Jesus followers had heard him tell some of the parables which challenge us today, parables that teach an ethic that is often foreign to the ways we treat one another, parables that insist the last will be first, the often unlikely persons will be faithful, our enemies become our friends, and to lose is to gain, whether it be money or possessions or life that we seek to hold onto. Imagine being with Jesus day after day, listening to him teach, watching him heal, seeing him love those of us whom everyone else sees as unlovely! How easy it must have been to believe in Jesus when you were right there with him!

Yet, some of the people who were with Jesus day by day did not find discipleship easy. Certainly they thought Jesus was someone special. Some of them were beginning to think that maybe he was the Messiah. For all of the love and good will and blessings they received from him, some of his followers finally decided that his teachings were too difficult or even too offensive for them. When the going got tough, they went back home.

Faith sometimes gets tough because life sometimes gets tough. Every Sunday we listen to a long list of people who are ill or otherwise struggling in some way. We hold another such list in our hearts with many more names and circumstances on it. Not a person on those lists deserves to be sick. They are people of faith and at least deserve to get well again. Nineteen years ago our community along with many other communities in Eastern North Carolina were inundated by a flood caused by hurricanes. Each year since, other hurricanes and floods have caused horrendous destruction and death. This weekend the people of Hawaii are dealing with nature's fury. Other disasters and incidents have changed life for many people forever. We wonder why. Many of us grew up believing that God controlled wind and rain and earthquake and fire. If so, why harm so many good people? If not, then who is in charge? What rules this world? Is it God or simply the forces of

nature? What about the tragedies that we cause one another? Who has control over humanity, God's crowning point of creation formed in his image?

Questions like the ones with which we struggle proved to be too much for some of the followers of Jesus. When new perspectives on faith bumped up against long-held beliefs, some of the people who thought Jesus was going to offer an easier way through life decided his way was actually too difficult. When things got tough, they decided to get going. They went back home.

What are we supposed to do when the reality of life and our understanding of faith do not necessarily jive? What do we do when faith becomes too difficult, too hard, too tough?

We do what the true disciples of Jesus did. I think the old adage still applies: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. If we do not turn away, as some of those early disciples did, where do we go? Simon Peter (for whom life and faith were anything but easy) had the answer. When Jesus asked if his remaining disciples would turn away as well, Peter confessed, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Instead of giving up and going home, we are expected to go right to the source: Jesus. We go to Jesus to help us figure out faith and the life it is supposed to sustain. After all, Jesus himself knew a lot about the struggles of life. He was human and yet divine. He was the Son of God and the Son of Man. The circumstances surrounding his birth were anything but normal and his very presence in the world riled Herod to the extent that he slaughtered countless baby boys in order to eliminate this one child. Try carrying that reality around with you day by day.

When he began teaching and preaching and healing, Jesus was welcomed by many people and criticized by many more. The people with whom he grew up rejected him. The religious leaders who should have embraced him instead chastised, questioned, falsely accused, and harassed him. Even his family had questions about what was going on with him. Sometimes he felt completely alone in his mission to save the world. Jesus knew a lot about life—our life.

We discover that he relied upon the teachings that had formed the faith of his people for generations. He often found help and encouragement in scripture. So can we. We can read the prophecies that foretold his coming

and the Gospels which tell his life so that we can discover who Jesus is, what he teaches, and what he wants us to do.

John again helps us out. In his Gospel, he reports that Jesus sought to help people understand him by making “I am” statements. In these confessions, he explains who he is and what he does for us. I suggest that these “I am” statements are a good place for us to go when we need to better understand Jesus and his call to faith.

“I am the bread of life,” he said (John 6:35, 48, 51), the source and sustenance of life itself. Just as bread is a staple of life the world over, so Jesus is the basis of life. He reminds us that he is the origin of life and the way to life eternal. Consume his teachings, ingest his love, and take in his Spirit so that you might live forever.

“I am the light of the world,” he offered to people who lived in an often dark time (John 8:12; 9:5). Just as the light of creation was the first gift God offered to this world, so Jesus is the gift which generates true life for us. His light scatters the darkness around us and reveals for us the path we are to follow.

“I am the door of the sheep,” (John 10:7, 9), “I am the good shepherd,” (John 10:11, 14) he told people who were themselves shepherds and knew the dangers and risks required to take care of the family’s livelihood. Jesus let his followers know that he would provide for them and protect them no matter what happened in life.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” he told his disciples just before he died (John 11:25). When life seems at a dead end, when the prospects for anything better seem remote, when all hope is lost, and despair threatens, a new day dawns bringing new life for each of us.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus offered for anyone who was looking for the right path to follow in life (John 14:6). By observing his life, studying his words, and taking the risk to do the things that he did, we discover the eternal truths that guide all of life and experience full and complete life now and forever.

“I am the true vine,” Jesus promised (John 15:1). Cling to me and you will be nourished to life. You will also remain connected to God and to one another through the vine of life which is faith in God through Christ.

In offering these and many other explanations about himself, Jesus provided us with hope and help in maneuvering through this life which can be challenging at times but which can also bring untold joy and delight. Granted, the way is not always clear, the guidelines are not always what we want, and the risks seem great, but the destination is true and we are never alone.

As twenty-first century followers of Jesus, we have to decide whether we will stay the course when things get tough. We have to decide where we will go when faith becomes challenge. I suggest that we find out what we do not yet know. Engagement in worship and Sunday School, in Bible Study and fellowship will help us to find out what we do not yet know.

We also need to listen to our own questions and find other people who are asking similar questions. By sharing our stories, our concerns, and our doubts, we can learn and grow from one another.

Above all, we need to trust that Jesus does have the words of eternal life. We need to learn how to hear them and how to live them. We do both of those things best together. The life of faith is not always an easy life, but it is a fulfilling one. It is sometimes difficult, as we all know, but it is never solitary. We have one another to share our journey, and we always have the Spirit of Christ who never chooses to stay home when the going gets tough. Where can we go? To the One who has the words of eternal life. Enjoy the journey! Amen.

August 26, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Sometimes we seem to have circumstances under control and convince ourselves we have life figured out, O God, when something happens to shatter our assumptions or shake the foundations upon which we have constructed our lives: an illness or injury, the unforeseen opportunity to realize a long-held dream, a devastating disappointment, a new relationship which broadens our perspective, or a tug to go in an unfamiliar direction. Life can both delight and terrify us with its possibility and unpredictability.

Through all of the doubts, questions, and changes of course, you, O God, remain a constant source of strength and comfort. Just when we feel most uncertain or frightened, glimpses of your kingdom often appear in unexpected places to offer direction and hope. You have not promised that our faith in you will prevent us from experiencing sorrow or pain, but you have promised that you will walk with us through every season of life, provide light to guide our steps, and offer grace to calm our restless spirits. When the path is unclear, our souls are weary, the choices are perplexing, or the outcomes discouraging, be our vision, our defender, our place of respite, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

We also acknowledge, Generous God, that, though we have struggles and fears, we are a people who have known privilege and comforts and opportunities far beyond our deserving. Out of the great gifts we have received, teach us to be a blessing to others. Help us to bring healing and wholeness where there is suffering, to speak peace in the midst of violence, to be present with those who know sorrow and loneliness, to stand with courage for those who are vulnerable. Place us in the path of those with whom we can share the gifts of mercy you have so generously given to us. Grant, O Lord, in our abundance and in our need; in times of peace and in times of turmoil; in all that this marvelous, beautiful, surprising, and mysterious life holds, an extra measure of your grace for today and hope for all our days to come. In the name of the One who came to share life with us, and who showed us how to live and how to love, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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