



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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AUGUST 30, 2015
THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Where Did Summer Go?
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

I don't know if it is simply a factor of age or if everyone, young and older, feels as if time is flying by. Like many of you, I suppose, when I was growing up it seemed as if summer was almost endless. The days were long and full of play and adventure but there was never a hint of vacation slipping by too quickly—at least not until that last week before school resumed.

Yet here we are already at the end of August. School is back in session and teachers are counting the days until their first holiday break, now only a week away! It seems like only a few weeks ago we were celebrating our 60th anniversary in early June, but that was twelve weeks ago. My, how time flies! Where did summer go?

Two songs always pop into my head when I think of summer. One is a classic Nat King Cole hit that I remember from one of my parents' old albums. All of the lyrics aren't appropriate for a Sunday morning sermon, but a few select lines provide the gist of the song:

Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.
Dust off the sun and moon and sing a song of cheer.

...

Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.
You'll wish that summer could always be here.¹

I know that it has not always been this way, but in my lifetime, at least, we have had the notion that summer is intended to be a carefree time of fun and relaxation. As far as I'm concerned, we can keep it that way.

The other song that plays in my head when I think of summer is the hit song "Summertime" from the George Gershwin opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

¹Tobias, Bradtke, Carste, "Those Lazy Hazy Crazy Days Of Summer," © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., Downtown Music Publishing LLC.

Summertime, an' the livin' is easy.
Fish are jumpin' an' the cotton is high.
Oh yo' daddy's rich an' yo' mamma's good lookin'.
So hush little baby, don' yo' cry.
One of these mornin's you're goin' to rise up singin'.
Then you'll spread yo' wings an' you'll take the sky.
But till that mornin' there's a-nothin' can harm you
With daddy an' mammy standin' by.
Summertime, an' the livin' is easy.
Fish are jumpin' an' the cotton is high.
Oh yo' daddy's rich an' yo' mamma's good lookin'.
So hush little baby, don' yo' cry.²

The words of this folk song suggest that in the summertime there are no cares or worries, just as in those endless days many of us spent as children. Yet, these lyrics by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, belie the hardships and heartbreaks of life for Porgy and Bess and everyone else who lives on Catfish Row. The Blacks who lived in Charleston in the early part of the last century lived with poverty, domestic abuse, murder, and drugs just as many people do today. In fact, one of the three times the song is sung in *Porgy and Bess* is when Bess sings it to a little baby just after its parents die in a storm—hardly a case of easy living.

I think that may be why this particular song popped into my head last week as I thought about how quickly summer had passed by. I realized that not only had summer *time* sped by but summer itself—at least the idyllic summer of childhood fantasies—had slipped away as well. Where has summer gone?

Living has not been easy this summer. Issues within our school system erupted practically as the final bell rang at the end of the school year. The shootings at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, the drama surrounding the Confederate Battle Flag, shootings of black men by white police officers, violence and destruction in numerous cities, fires, floods, drought, storms, scandals, bombings around the world, a volatile stock market, the beginning of the Presidential campaigns, personal tragedies, and the killing of two journalists by a former coworker last week meant that this summer was anything but carefree and easy.

²Dorothy Heyward and DuBose Heyward, "Summertime" from *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts* (1928).

I guess it has always been that way. Why should we think that bad experiences ought to take the summer off as well? Summertime has never been easy for everyone. For some people, life is always hard, always a challenge, always a scramble to make it to the next day. Do we continue to hope for a carefree summer because it is possible or because it is one way to gloss over the struggle and pain that so many people, including ourselves, feel, not only in summer but throughout the year?

If our pollyanna version of summer has gone by the way, how do we deal with the things that happen in our world? How do we begin to think about some of the things that have taken place? How do we sort through the often hazy and crazy attitudes that swirl around school issues, racial tensions, and political pontifications? Natural disasters and personal tragedies are just that: they are horrible events that bring pain, suffering, and challenge to us. With support from one another, we get through such hardships and find a way to live again. But how do we handle the issues which often put us at odds with one another?

Jesus was a devout Jew. He knew the traditions of his ancestors and followed them. He also understood the needs of people and felt that meeting basic needs often superceded following religious rules which had no true spiritual value. One day some of the Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples did not perform a ritual washing before they ate. Just as our parents felt strongly about washing hands, removing hats, and saying grace before a meal, so also the Pharisees believed that ritual cleansing was essential before dining. They accosted Jesus with this information about his disciples in order to embarrass and discredit him, but Jesus would have none of that. He exposed them for the hypocrites that they were and told the listening crowd that it was not what went into a person's body that defiled them or made them impure. Instead, it was what came out of them—out of their hearts—that either drew them close to or distanced them from God. In other words, our religious rituals do not determine whether or not we are in right relationship with God. In the end, what we do, how we act, indicates the health or sickness of our hearts.

The metaphor was unknown at the time, but Jesus essentially said, "You can't judge a book by its cover." You have to listen to someone, get to know them, watch them, and pay attention to their life before you can properly judge the intent of their heart. We are not always what we seem to be.

Dennis Sanders, an African-American pastor in Minnesota, related a story that could easily appear as a parable in a contemporary version of the Gospel. Rev. Sanders recounts:

Here in Minnesota, Wade Yarborough, a business owner from the suburbs south of Minneapolis, wrote a letter to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. It's about his father, the [Confederate] flag, and an incident that took place in suburban Minneapolis in 1967.

Wade's father, who was raised in the South, was stationed at a local army base and then stayed in the area to raise a family. He would fly the Confederate flag every January 19—Robert E. Lee's birthday.

A mixed-race couple moved into the house behind the Yarboroughs. The couple wasn't welcomed by their neighbors, with the exception of one person: Wade's father. He befriended the man, who was African American. The two shared an affection for barbecuing with wood chips. Wade wrote that one afternoon a group of neighbors came by and asked his father to sign a petition asking the couple to move out. He refused, a move that ruffled a few feathers in the neighborhood. Sadly, a few years later the couple left the neighborhood anyway.³

Jesus might have followed up this story with the question, "Which of the residents of that neighborhood, do you think, was neighbor to the new couple?"

I do not favor the flying of the Confederate Battle Flag on the grounds of any state house or of any house, for that matter. It is too laden with explosive emotion and an unpleasant history. I was relieved when my home state finally removed the flag from the capitol grounds. I do agree that we all have the right to display flags and any other paraphernalia on our own property. Christian compassion, I would think, would guide what we choose to display.

The flags we fly, the bumper stickers we paste on our cars, and the comments we post on Facebook or Twitter do not always reflect who we truly

³Dennis Sanders, "Reflections on the Lectionary: August 30, 2015," *The Christian Century* (August 19, 2015): 21.

are. Many of us are living as despised and misunderstood Samaritans when, at heart, we are truly good neighbors. We simply need to get our hearts and our heads in sync.

We can change, which is Jesus' point in the Gospels. The Christian life is one of transformation. A friend told me of a member of a former church who was an active participant in the Ku Klux Klan. Over a period of several years, he and this Klansman had many open and honest discussions about the Klan and Christian faith. One day the man told my friend of an experience. He had been in a restaurant when a family came in and sat down. He noticed how nicely dressed they were, how mannerly the children were, and how happy and close the family seemed to be. It was only when he got up to leave, he said, that he noticed it was an African-American family. For a Klansman to fail to notice the skin color of anyone he saw was significant. Sometime later he left the Klan because he was not the loyal member he once had been.

The writer of the Epistle of James was a practical follower of Christ. Like Jesus, he broke down the Gospel into terms that are difficult to ignore:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:19-27

It first glance, the job description for a Christian seems quite simple: take care of orphans and widows and remained unstained from the world. Have you tried to do those things? It means that we take care of those

persons who are most vulnerable and who will be completely dependent upon us. It also means that we maintain our Christian integrity and do not let the messages of culture, ethnicity, politics, or even popular religion taint our souls. We are to live as Christ lived, which was not an easy life.

So in the summertime, when tense issues rise in the community, when people call us to join their side rather than meet on middle ground, when people do ridiculous things to get attention and make a point, when tempers flare and reason is nowhere to be found, take a deep breath and wait. Watch what people do, how they live, what they love. Driving to church this morning, I heard a portion of a news story about a church in Cincinnati which has focused on reconciliation. The church is changing and people are being challenged to change as well. One man talked about how the pastor had encouraged them to find someone completely different and get to know them. That afternoon he read an article in the paper which mentioned the President of the local NAACP chapter. He thought, "There is no one more different from me," so he called the younger man and invited him to breakfast. They continue to meet about every six weeks. They don't always agree on issues, but they understand one another. And they consider each other a friend.⁴

Our hope is that people and times can change because God created us with the capacity to do so. The hopeful note in *Porgy and Bess* is that in the aftermath of a horrible and tragic storm, Bess holds a little orphaned baby. She holds life and with it all of the potential God offers us. She sings a song of hope. The living might not be all that easy, but its "Summertime . . . So hush little baby, don' yo' cry."

For those of us who believe, who know that hearts can be changed and that life can be transformed, summer is not completely gone. Before us is the fall when we will reap the harvest of God's gracious and redemptive love. May we, like Christ, not only hear the Word of God, but do it as well, allowing our lives to reflect our hearts which have been changed for the good. Amen.

⁴Rachel Martin, "A White Church Sets Out To Break Down Racial Barriers, *Weekend Edition Sunday*, NPR (August 30, 2015); available online at: <http://www.npr.org/2015/08/30/435955069/a-white-church-sets-out-to-break-down-racial-barriers>.

August 30, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Sometimes we wish we could see the angels marching around us and feel the ground shake with their glorious song, O God. Yet even when the skies are silent and all around us is still, we know that we are not alone, and we are grateful.

We face many decisions in life, and do not always know which way to go. If we do not think about it, it sounds easy to simply do what is right, to be kind to one another, and to be humble and close to you, O God. When we do think about what you require of us, we realize that it is a life of righteousness, service, and worship. By ourselves we cannot do these things, so we pray that you will help us.

Help us to know what is right in our lives. So often the issues before us are murky and convoluted. We see both sides of issues and hardly know which one is best. Grant us insight and understanding so that we might see as you see and act as you act. Grant us courage as well so that our convictions might motivate us to action and action might lead us into service.

Bless our attempts to meet the needs around us, we pray. We do not always act out of pure compassion, but we do hope that whatever we do for another person will be helpful to them. Enable us to discover our gifts and resources so that we can use them in the service of your love. As we learn to love, allow us to direct our devotion to you, O Lord, that we might learn from you, draw closer to you, and become more like you.

As we often do, we pray for our friends and dear ones who are ill. We know you as the Great Physician and pray that you will direct good medical care to them and enable medicines and treatments to be effective. We yearn for healing and wholeness, but recognize that those gifts may come even without cure. Surround us all with your gracious Spirit and see us through whatever comes our way.

We pray that you will bless all who struggle in any way today. You know our hearts and the cares that travel with us. Guide us, O God, to make right decisions, to heal broken relationships, to put past hurts away, and to believe in a future that awaits us. Walk with us along our crooked paths and help us to find our way.

We pray for peace in our world so that strife and bloodshed might cease and wholeness prevail. Teach us to listen to one another and to speak truth. Guide us to fulfill all of your hopes for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.