



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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SEPTEMBER 2, 2018
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Church in the World
Mark 2:13-17; Acts 9:36-42

It has been quite a week since we last met. Last Sunday we already knew that both Aretha Franklin and John McCain had died. We knew that there would be abundant expressions of gratitude and honor offered for both of these well-known people. And we knew that their funeral services would be unique and celebratory. What an understatement!

There were three services to honor John McCain's life: one in Arizona, one in the Capitol Rotunda, and yesterday's service in the Washington National Cathedral. If you add the burial at Annapolis which will take place today, it makes four services to honor his life. The combined time of those four services, however, barely equaled the over seven hour funeral service that celebrated Aretha Franklin's life. It was a week when our nation was fixed upon the deaths of two prominent Americans.

It seems fitting, then, that today we should hear a related story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. It is not a funeral story. It is a story about a death, but moreover it is a story about life. Listen:

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Acts 9:36-42

Tabitha, or Dorcas as she was also called, was well known in her hometown of Joppa, a harbor town on the Mediterranean Sea. She is the only woman in the New Testament identified as a disciple of Christ and apparently gave much of her time and energy to charity and other good works. When she died, friends and acquaintances throughout Joppa gathered to grieve together and pay tribute to her life, much as we witnessed this past week.

It happened that Peter was in the nearby town of Lydda and someone went to get him to come to Joppa. Perhaps he was a friend of Tabitha's or knew of her reputation. Perhaps the believers there thought that he could bring them some comfort in their grief. Maybe they thought he might do exactly what he did.

When he arrived, some of the people Tabitha had befriended, many of them widows, showed Peter the clothes that she had made for them, clutching them as if they held the very essence of this dear saint of God. We know what happened. Peter dismissed everyone from the room (as Jesus had done when he visited the daughter of Jairus who had died). He prayed and then called her name, inviting her to get up, which she did! This story about death quickly became a story about life.

Regardless of the number of services held or the length of them, the deaths of Aretha Franklin and John McCain became stories of two lives well lived. Both of these individuals served our country: Franklin as an entertainer who brought joy and comfort through song and McCain who sacrificed and worked for the well-being of everyone in this country and anywhere else in the world.

In much the same way that the friends of Tabitha showed Peter the clothing that she had made for them, witnessing her care and generosity, so also the friends of Ms. Franklin and Senator McCain showed us the various things they had done for the sake of others. Their funerals were not so much about their deaths as they were about their lives. And their lives were about their faith.

In 1972, Ms. Franklin released an album titled *Amazing Grace*. On that album, her father the Rev. C.L. Franklin recounts an incident when he met a woman at the cleaners who had seen his daughter perform on a recent television show. She noted that Aretha had "done okay," and then added, "But I'll be glad when she comes back to the church." Rev. Franklin was not

pleased with this faint praise and told the woman, “If you want to know the truth, she has never left the church. All you have to do is have . . . the ability to hear and the ability to feel, and you will know that Aretha is still a gospel singer! . . . The way she sings in this church she sings anywhere she sings.”¹

His point was that just because Aretha Franklin started singing in church and then took her music to nightclubs, theaters, and concert halls did not mean that she left her faith behind. Her friends bore witness to that fact all day long on Friday. Like the friends of Tabitha, they held up examples of how Aretha Franklin lived out her faith through her music and in her day to day life. In a similar fashion, the men and women who spoke about John McCain’s life talked about the sacrifices, the tireless efforts, and the stubborn determination he had to bring freedom and justice to all people here and throughout the world.

When I was growing up, a regular fixture in our church and in our town was a man everyone called “Brother Dean.” We called him that because he called everyone either “Brother” or “Sister.” Brother Dean Jourdan was for decades the usher in charge at First Baptist Church of Chester. He made certain someone was at every door to hand out orders of worship and greet people who came to worship. And he made certain that eight people were lined up to receive the offering and return it to the altar. He worked at The Hub, a clothing store in the center of town. If you bought a pair of shoes from Brother Dean, you got a free pair of socks. If you bought a suit, you received a free tie. Whether you bought any thing or not, you received a warm handshake, a friendly smile, and treatment as if you were the most important person in the world. When he died, he was honored by his church but it was a simple service lasting probably thirty minutes. To this day, however, if you asked someone who grew up in my hometown twenty or more years ago, they will know Brother Dean and will tell you about his kindness to them.

The point of these stories is not simply to heap praises upon people who are no longer with us. Neither is it to claim sainthood for people who, like us, were cleared flawed. It is to remind ourselves of what Tabitha and Aretha and John and Brother Dean all knew: our calling is to take our faith into the world. Whether our world is a seaside village where widows struggle to get by each day or a vibrant concert hall where people hear their lives sung by the Queen of Soul or a POW prison where waking up every day is cause to

¹“Aretha Franklin ‘Started with Gospel, Ended with Soul’ Says One Headline,” *The Wired Word* (August 26, 2018).

rejoice or the United States Congress where every decision affects millions of people or a clothing store where everybody appreciates a kind word, we take our faith with us.

The Gospel writer Mark tells the story of the calling of Levi, or Matthew, as he is commonly known. He was one of those despised people, commonly called a sinner, collecting taxes from his fellow Jews to pass on to the Roman government after taking a healthy cut for himself. Jesus saw him sitting at his tax booth and simply said to him, "Follow me." And he did! The next scene is of a dinner party at Levi's house filled with his friends who were tax collectors and other assorted sinners. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for consorting with such a tainted group of people, but Jesus pointed out that these were the very people he came to serve. Levi had experienced acceptance from Jesus and wanted his friends to enjoy that same grace. He received his faith at his tax booth and immediately took it into the world of his friends.

Every Sunday most of us come through the narthex and pass what we know as "the Benediction Window," the stained glass window that honors our former pastor Gaylord Lehman and the benediction he offered every Sunday for over thirty years. Many of you know it by heart. It begins, "Go now to a responsible involvement in the world." That is what we are all called to do: to take our faith into the world and make a difference in the lives of the people around us. That is what Tabitha did with the clothes she made for widows in Joppa. That is what Aretha Franklin did with her music whether it was sung in a church or in a nightclub. That is what John McCain did when he encouraged his fellow captives to remain hopeful and when he worked for freedom and justice for all people in the United States Senate. That is what Brother Dean did as he dispensed hospitality by selling clothes and making people feel special. That is what we can do wherever we go. If you are not certain how to take your faith into the world, I remind you of the simple prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Take your faith into the world and make a difference. Amen.

September 2, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

At some point, O God, we have all felt like Levi—going about our lives, doing our work, enjoying our fun, trudging through our struggles, and drinking in the goodness that is ours—when we feel a tap or sense a nudge or hear a voice inviting us to follow you. Whether we got up at that moment or took days or months or years to tag along with you, we are here today because we wanted to be in your presence and to receive your blessing. We thank you, O Lord, for calling us to follow you.

Today we pray that we may still walk with you through life and someday into the life beyond what we know now. We ask that you help us along the way to be faithful and truthful and generous and kind. We ask that you open our minds to new ideas that better grasp who you are. We ask that you open our hearts to feelings that we so often try to avoid. We ask that you open our hands to be generous with our friendship and our resources so that, like Levi, the people we bump into along the way may also sense that you are near.

Like your earliest followers, we, too, have many friends and acquaintances who are ill and distressed and brokenhearted. As you did with them, may you reach out to us as well. Bring your healing touch to all who long to get well. Offer a hand of welcome to anyone who feels alone. And brighten the way for each one who feels lost. And when you discover that we are one of those people, bless us as well, O God.

We have just come through a week of national sorrow and grief. We walk daily through a maze of issues and concerns that will determine the future for our nation. We witness great prosperity and tremendous poverty sitting side by side and we do not quite know what to do with it all. Call us again, our Father. Call us to follow you in making your way known in our world.

For work and what it produces, for career and its satisfaction, for vocation and a calling to do something meaningful in the world, we are grateful. Bless us all, we pray, with an understanding of what is most important in life and of who is of greatest value in the life to which you call us all. Amen.