



Lakeside Sermons

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

Divine Thoughts on Human Things Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

Before I read our Epistle lesson for the day, I want you to recall the story from the Gospel of Matthew which we heard earlier. It is almost impossible to hear that story without cringing. Poor Peter was chastised by Jesus in the strongest of terms when he dared suggest that Jesus' demise at the hands of Roman soldiers manipulated by Jewish leaders could not, would not, take place. And this came just moments after Jesus had praised Peter in the highest of terms for acknowledging that he was the Messiah and offered him "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Jesus was like an angry father looking at the results of an irresponsible fender bender and asking for the keys back! Poor Peter! As one pastor commented, "When Jesus calls you "Satan" it's not going to be a good day. You can just feel it."¹

Although I think Peter had the best of intentions, Jesus accused him of having his mind set "not on divine things, but on human things." We all know what Jesus meant. Peter had conjured up an image of Jesus as a sort of super hero who was invincible to human abuse. No illness was too progressed for Jesus to cure. No sin was too heinous for him to forgive. No Pharisee was too pious to be put in his place. And certainly no emperor or army was too powerful to defeat when you are the Messiah. Jesus was the Son of God and no match for anything humans could throw his way!

Jesus, on the other hand, was very much aware of his humanity and how vulnerable he was, how vulnerable he had chosen to be. Moreover, he knew that his death was inevitable but that through his death the true power of God would be revealed.

Yet, the funny thing is that pretty much everything Jesus did was focused on "human things." He went about healing people of their physical, mental, and emotional illnesses. He fed the hungry. He focused a great deal of attention on the poor. He championed the outcasts—prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other "undesirables"—and demonstrated that they, too,

¹James Wetzstein, *Agnus Day*, commentary on this passage through his cartoon art, August 30, 2017; available online at: <https://www.agnusday.org/comics/787/matthew-16-21-28-2017>.

were children of God. He reminded people over and over of the ancient biblical injunction of welcoming the stranger because he knew that, at some point, we all are strangers in this world. And when he was challenged to name the single-most important commandment from the hundreds that Jews were supposed to follow, he offered two. The first: to love God with our entire personality—heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second: to love one’s neighbor as you love yourself. To me, it sounds like Jesus spent most of his energy on human things, but perhaps from a divine perspective. It might be worth our while to consider divine thoughts on human things.

I think that is exactly what the Apostle Paul was doing years later when he was trying to explain to the Christians in Rome what being a follower of Christ was all about. Paul knew a thing or two about divine thoughts on human living and expounded on this idea. Well, actually, he put it in basic, undeniable terms that anyone living in the first century (or the twenty-first century) could understand. Listen to what he said:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21

Paul gave his friends (and us) a check list of things to do which are very human but which have a divine ring to them. He addresses a number of different concerns such as our daily attitude and perspective on life, our sense of generosity and compassion, and our willingness to be patient and understanding with one another. All in all, he sums up this divine perspective

on human things by encouraging us to live in harmony and, so far as it depends on us, to live peaceably with all people.

Paul, who himself could be caustic, sarcastic, and vengeful, understood what he was asking of believers then and now. His life had been a test of this divine perspective on human things, and he did not always choose wisely. He knew where to start, however, and he did so with these words: "Let love be genuine." What a genius! He poked us where it hurts because Paul knew from experience that words alone do not convey love. Judas had professed love of Jesus and betrayed him. For that matter, so had Peter—several times! Paul knew from experience that love is easily spoken yet not always easily expressed. Why is our love not always genuine?

Over the past week or so, we have witnessed horrific destruction in Texas and Louisiana. Had Hurricane Harvey not dominated the news, we would also be more aware of the wildfires raging in the western parts of our country, destroying forests and homes and anything else in their paths. We have seen the flexing of military muscle by North Korea, a sure sign of insecurity. We have witnessed acts of hatred and violence in the name of superiority, another giveaway of insecurity. All of these tragic events are a witness to our vulnerability. Surely the people of Houston thought that such flooding could never happen there. Surely the people of Charlottesville thought that violence over issues of race would never bloody the streets of their city. Surely we think even today that North Korea would never be foolish enough to attack an American target or that we might hastily respond to demonstrate that we are not a weak and cowering nation. Like Peter we hear ourselves saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen!" And yet these things do happen.

Let love be genuine. Is that not what we have seen in the flooded streets of Houston and all across the Gulf Coast where Harvey wreaked devastation? People are helping people. They are rescuing, sheltering, feeding, clothing, healing, and comforting one another. The stories are amazing and touching and inspiring. And it all required little, if any, prompting. People helped because they cared. Love is genuine in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. So why does Paul even give us a grocery list of how we ought to live together? God forbid it, Lord, that we ever forget to love one another!

When Hurricane Floyd dumped over two feet of water on us and flooded large swaths of eastern North Carolina, we banded together to help one

another through that tragedy. Some of you in this room today lost your homes to the flood eighteen years ago. Our community was at its best because we all pitched in to help our neighbors and our neighborhoods recover. And I remember that we vowed we would maintain that spirit. We would never forget how much it meant to work together to help people in dire need. We would keep the spirit alive that made Rocky Mount the city on the rise.

But we did not, did we? We are as divided as we have ever been. We are not all working together to solve our problems. We point our fingers and wag our tongues at one another, forgetting how, at one time, we extended our hands to help and spoke words of kindness and encouragement when we needed one another.

We will never forget the attacks of September 11 that killed thousands of people and shook our nation and the world to the core. We pulled together to get through that tragedy and vowed that we would be a united people who would champion the core values of America. Yet, we are not united and we argue over what our values are.

During the Friday evening news, after recounting the abundant good will of people in Texas and Louisiana who have reached out to help one another, one of the “must see videos” of the day was of a fight in a Wal-Mart store in Novi, Michigan over the last notebook that was available on the shelf. The video shows a group of shoppers engaged in a struggle. One woman is on the floor while two other women have her by the hair and appear to be dragging her. A fourth woman on the left is seen opening her handbag and removing a pistol which she promptly points directly at the women who are pulling her daughter’s hair. The report confirmed that the gun was loaded. This brawl—perhaps between people who will all be in Sunday School today—was over a notebook! In Texas and Louisiana people were risking their lives to save the lives of strangers and in a school supply aisle eleven hundred miles northeast, people were about to kill one another over a notebook! God forbid it, Lord, that anything like that ever happen to us!

We have short memories! We forget. I think that is what Jesus meant when he scolded Peter. Peter had the right idea: Jesus should not suffer because he was divine. But he forgot that Jesus was also human and because of his divinity, was ready to give his life for the sake of the rest of us. Peter forgot that it is precisely because of our humanity that Jesus came to live among us because otherwise we have no hope, no future, no life.

Let love be genuine. Let it be divinely offered to meet human need. When we remember to love one another genuinely, we do quite well. We jump in potentially toxic water to save the life of someone else because we really do care. We really do love. But we must be reminded how to love. If we loved one another genuinely, we could talk about and figure out some of the hard questions that perplex us. We could have a conversation about human sexuality. We could have a dialogue about racial identity, heritage, and open wounds. We could argue about political values without demeaning or demonizing one another. We could think together about emotionally charged issues like Confederate monuments and so-called entitlement programs and still be friends. We could feel good in our own skin and admire the colorful skin of the person next to us. We could love Jesus and one another.

Let love be genuine. It was in the chest-high waters of Houston's streets last week when, as the Mayor of Houston said, no one was checking IDs, looking at skin color, asking about political parties, inquiring about sexual orientation, wondering about nationality, ethnicity, religion, or anything else. Love was genuine, but it was not in the blood-splattered streets of Charlottesville three weeks ago. Love was genuine in the flooded bayous of Louisiana when all a rescuer saw was a desperate human being in need of help, but love was not at all genuine when a demonstrator saw nothing but a despicable human being on the other side of an imaginary line. Love is genuine when we help another nation because we value their people. It is not when we fire weapons of destruction over their heads. Love is genuine when it will sacrifice self for the sake of another. It is not when I will do anything at all to save my own skin while despising yours.

I suppose that some people will interpret Hurricane Harvey as God's wrath on a godless people. I suspect some people will suggest that it is a wake up call to get our lives in order. I imagine that some people will call Hurricane Harvey the wrath of God.

I don't for a moment believe that God formed and sent that howling wind and rain to teach anybody a lesson. I do suspect, however, that God is watching how we respond during such events. And I think God is looking to see how we treat one another on a beautiful, sunny day in early September.

James Wetzstein is a Lutheran pastor who creates cartoons that address the lectionary readings of each Sunday in the Christian year. Titled "Agnus Day," a clear reference to the Latin term which means "Lamb of God,"

the cartoon features two sheep, one named Rick and the other Ted, who discuss what Jesus said and did. Commenting on today's Gospel reading in which Peter gets scolded, Rick says, "Wow! Peter goes from hero to zero in just five verses!" Ted replies, "The point isn't to be a hero. The point is to follow Jesus." To which Rick responds, "Oh . . . right! And then be a hero!"²

We are called to follow Jesus first and foremost. And when we do, it will often be into flood waters, demonstrations, fires, and the aisles of Wal-Mart where we will be tempted to say, "God forbid it, Lord!" Hopefully, we will hear Paul remind us to be heroic and let our love be genuine—and we will!

²James Wetzstein, *Agnus Day* (August 27, 2008); available online at: <https://www.agnusday.org/comics/326/matthew-16-21-28-2008>.

September 3, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In the presence of your great generosity and abundant mercy, we hardly know where to begin expressing our gratitude, O God. When we pause long enough to reflect, we know that every moment of our days is infused with your goodness. We know that we miss numerous gifts that come our way each day but only because there are so many ways that you demonstrate your love for us. We will simply say "Thank you!" for every instance of goodness and grace that is ours.

This past week we have certainly been aware of the many ways you have worked through your people to help others in need. Flood and fire, storm and military threat have all caused your children great distress. We are grateful for the reassurances you have offered to us and for all of the help you have provided for people whose lives have been upended. Continue to guide us to help with the essentials for life and to prepare for rebuilding lives that are devastated. Infuse every heart with encouragement and hope, we pray. Let no one despair, but enable each one to see a pathway back to a life that is good and safe.

For all who grieve over loss of life or home or job or security, grant comfort, O God. Unless we have been there ourselves, we do not know what it is like to suddenly lose everything that we call our own. By the mystery of your Spirit, touch each life with healing grace and offer strength for the living of these very difficult days.

We pray as well for teachers and administrators and students who begin a new year of learning. Open minds and hearts to the wonders of the world you have given us. Prod those who presume to have all the answers with a curiosity and desire to grow. Remind those who think there is no truth in the unknown to look within themselves and respect the wonder you have created them to be. For those of us who no longer consider ourselves to be students, remind us that every breath we take is done so in the classroom of life. Bless us all with an eagerness to know and a willingness to learn.

It has been a difficult week, O God, but we journey on knowing that we are not alone. Hear now those prayers we would dare not speak aloud but which are whispered from our hearts. Bless us, we pray, even as you bless everyone around us. Thank you, O God, for the wideness of your mercy toward each of us and the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.