



Lakeside Sermons

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

Toleration or Transformation? Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12

A man was shipwrecked and stranded alone on a desert island for many years. Eventually he was rescued by a passing ship. Once he was safely aboard, freshly clothed, and fed, the captain invited him to the bridge where he inquired about his misfortune and the ways in which he had survived over the years. "I thought you were all alone on this island," the captain observed. "Yes, sir, I was," answered the grateful man. "Then why are there three buildings instead of just one?" wondered the captain. "Well, the one in the center is the hut where I lived all these years and the one on the left is the church where I worship." "I see," said the captain. "What, then, is the building on the right?" "Oh, that one," answered the man, "is the church I used to attend."

If you check the Yellow Pages online for churches in Rocky Mount, you will discover about 474 listed. Granted, a few names are duplicated, but based on the number I have heard over the years, there are just under five hundred churches in this area. Now, we would like to think that each one of those churches was established because there was a need for it in the area where it is located, but we know that is not always the case. If churches existed based on need alone, there would probably be no more than two hundred or so, assuming that everyone who lives here also attends church. We also know that is not the case. Based on attendance alone, one hundred churches of all sizes would probably be more than enough to meet the current demand.

Yet each of the existing four hundred plus churches is unique. While many are similar, none are identical. Some are as small as a dozen or so members who meet in homes or storefronts while the largest congregations count several thousand parishioners. Worship styles vary from traditional to contemporary to liturgical to blended and everything in between and beyond. Churches exist for many ethnic groups. Mainline churches include Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Christians, Roman Catholics, and Episcopalians. Non-denominational churches abound as well. There are varieties of each of the familiar denominations and there are churches that do not fit any traditional definitions.

Churches multiply for numerous reasons. Traditionally, a new church was always established because of the need for a new ministry in a particular area, but that is not always the case. Baptists, for instance, are notorious for multiplying by dividing. That is, new churches are formed when older churches split. I remember hearing of a cluster of churches in one rural Kentucky community that bore names something like: Harmony Baptist, New Harmony Baptist, Second New Harmony Baptist, and Third New Harmony Baptist. The story was that the original split of the Harmony Baptist Church resulted after two of the older men in the church went after the last chicken leg at a fellowship supper and neither would relinquish the leg to the other. Tempers rose, feelings were hurt, sides were drawn, and the church split. If only they had chosen the wishbone!

We all have our differences, and thanks be to God that we do. How dull the church would be if we were all identical! Because we are different, church life is never dull, a truth the Apostle Paul learned early on.

The Christian Church was little more than two decades old when Paul addressed the church at Rome which was experiencing inner turmoil. Again, food was the source of the controversy, but in this case it was the practice of eating meat which had folks agitated. Some people ate meat without hesitation while others felt that it was contrary to their faith to do so. Paul urged toleration on both sides, by saying, "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them" (Romans 14:3). He did, however, reveal his own prejudice by referring to the vegetarians in question as "the weak in faith."

Almost from day one, the Early Church struggled over issues which believers felt were critical to faith. Jewish and Gentile believers, circumcision, eating meat, drinking wine, observing certain holy days, leadership and authority, the role of women, men, masters, and slaves, obligations to parents, widows, and orphans, the timing of Christ's return, the authority of scripture, and the role of law and grace in salvation were all sources of controversy among early Christians. At least they did not have carpet to fuss about! Paul encouraged people to be considerate of one another while practicing their faith in full commitment to God. "We do not live to ourselves," he said,

. . . and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the

living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Romans 14:7-10

I applaud Paul for urging our Christian forebearers to be tolerant of one another and remind us each and every one that we ought to heed his advice. No one of us has a patent on the truth. We are all fellow travelers on this journey of faith. If my faith today is exactly as it was five years ago, then I am not spiritually alive. If I believe exactly as I did ten years ago, I have failed to take advantage of the marvelous and wonderful experiences God has afforded me. If I think for one moment that I have attained the mountaintop of faith and have nowhere else to go, I have proved that I am still at the bottom of the hill and actually have a long way to go!

Arrogance and intolerance have no place in the Christian Church. But I have to wonder if tolerance alone is the Christian ideal? Is it enough simply to “put up” with another person when we disagree? Or do our differences of opinion, expression, and belief offer opportunities for growth and transformation? Are we to be merely tolerant of people with whom we differ or should we be transformed by the relationships we build with one another in Christ?

A few weeks ago, I shared with you a quote from Sam Wells who reminds us that “Jesus transforms our fears about being different.”¹ We need not fear those who are different from us nor should we ever attempt to generate a sense of fear because of our particular differences from other people. I believe that Jesus can use our differences to transform us into the people he wants us to be. Rather than putting up with people who are different, we ought to get to know them and discover how they might enrich our lives and our faith.

Mental illnesses are frightening both to the one who is ill and the people around him or her. Craig Rennebohm, A United Church of Christ pastor in Seattle, Washington, spends several days a week ministering to homeless people in his city. In his book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, Rev. Rennebohm tells the story of Jerry, a former radioman in the Navy whose intense experience of being the single contact between a fishing boat sinking in a fierce storm and his ship’s rescue team eventually caused his brain to malfunction. Following his discharge from the Navy, he held a public sector

¹Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 139.

job for a while, but his illness progressed rapidly, eventually sending him into the streets and a horrendous cycle of highs and lows. Jerry could be calm and capable or he might be running around the city claiming to be a Coast Guard Commandant or the Treasurer of the United States. His angry outbursts got him ousted from numerous shelters and soup kitchens. His instability left him with few friends.

Rev. Rennebohm befriended Jerry and did his best to get him help. It was a challenging, exhausting, and often disappointing relationship. There were, however, moments of illumination. When Jerry was in the hospital and the pastor took communion to him, Jerry asked if he would pray over his medicine as he had the thin communion wafer. At the funeral of soup kitchen worker, Jerry stood up and shared how the man, named Eddie, had saved his life when Jerry was banned from the shelter. Although he was not supposed to do so, Eddie would meet Jerry at the back door, give him a sandwich and a blanket, and make sure he was okay. Before he sat down, Jerry sang the “Bugle Song,” which you know as “Taps”:

Day is done
Gone the sun
From the hills,
From the lakes
From the sky
Safely rest
All be well
God is nigh.²

Jerry’s story reminds us that an act of complete self-giving such as helping save the lives of the crew on a sinking boat can be truly self-sacrificing, that mundane acts like taking medicine can be sacramental, and that mental illness does not exclude one from understanding that all of life is in God’s hands. Someone as different and difficult as a Jerry can offer us profound lessons about faith.

Last evening I watched a portion of an interview on C-Span regarding the establishment of the Presidential Leadership Scholars program, a collaboration between the presidential centers of four former presidents. The interview featured Bill Clinton and George W. Bush discussing the merits of this program. Toward the end of the interview, each was asked to share what

²Craig Rennebohm with David Paul, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 19-28.

they had learned from the other president. One time considered bitter political enemies, certainly coming at politics from vastly different perspectives, each man talked about what he admired about the other and the way in which he had carried out his job when President.³ It was a very telling moment and you wished that in the intensity of political debate all parties would take time to sit back, reflect, and appreciate who their opponent is.

Too often, however, we are afraid to do so. What frightens us about one another? What differences in other people cause us to circle the wagons and go on the defensive? Nearly two thousand years ago it was eating meat. A few decades ago it was race and churches barred the doors. Then it was women and churches barred their pulpits. We argued over prayer in schools, the primacy of the Bible or science, faith and our right to make medical choices for ourselves. At times we have differed with one another over church music and biblical interpretation, war and peace, capital punishment and the environment. These days we agonize over homosexuality and immigration and the use of technology in worship. We see antisemitism rising around the world because of what Israel is doing in Gaza and we see Palestinians suffer because of terrorist attacks on Israel. Christians are being persecuted in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. A young person who mentions on his job application an affiliation with a Muslim religious group is unlikely to be called for an interview with an American company.⁴ Who knows what we will be fussing about tomorrow!

Joann Haejong Lee, Associate Pastor of the House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul Minnesota, recalls seminary discussions about the difference between a “boundaried faith and a centered faith.” “A boundaried faith,” she explains,

contains a detailed list of rules and laws that set up a defined line between in and out. This kind of faith secures the walls against anyone who might breach them with improper behavior or unfit conduct. A centered faith, on the other hand, holds only to a few central tenets of the faith, allowing space for difference on all other matters. This kind of faith is fluid and flexible. It is permissive so long as the main truths are upheld.⁵

³Presidential Leadership Scholars Program, C-Span (September 8, 2014); available online at: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?321335-1/former-presidents-george-w-bush-bill-clinton-leadership>.

⁴“Century Marks: Keep It to Yourself,” *The Christian Century* (July 23, 2014): 8.

⁵Joann Haejong Lee, “Reflections on the Lectionary: Sunday, September 14,” *The Christian Century* (September 3, 2014): 19.

It appears to Rev. Lee, and I agree, that the Apostle Paul urged the Christians in Rome toward a centered faith. What is it that makes us Christian? Belief in Jesus Christ as Lord. What are we called to do? Love one another as Christ loved the church and offered himself for it. One way to love one another is to listen, to learn, to be tolerant, and . . . to be transformed by the faith of people around us, even when they differ from us.

Instead of stiff-arming people who are different, how about opening our arms in welcome and discover what each of us has to offer the other. When Paul encouraged the Roman Christians to tolerate each other, he was not advocating either eating meat or become vegetarian. He was asking people to accept one another and, perhaps, in the process to learn something about God and faith from one another. Can we do any less?

When we gather for the summer worship services as a community, I always enjoy experiencing how other congregations worship. I will admit, however, that the high intensity, constant music and motion of some services leave me exhausted when they are over. I could not worship like that every week. Yet, I always come away from those experiences aware of the importance of completely immersing ourselves in the worship of God. Some of our brothers and sisters do that by singing choruses over and over. I can do it by listening to a classical anthem by Maurice Duruflé or a traditional folk hymn like “Down to the River to Pray.” Neither is “right.” Neither is “wrong.” Both are a means to express our faith in God who created us all.

Earlier we heard a psalm in which the psalmist praises God for all of the good and wonderful gifts God has given to us. God forgives and heals, redeems and blesses, vindicates and works for justice for his people. When God looks at us, God does not see our sin, the psalmist sings. Instead, God removes our sin from us and offers us compassion. We can only assume it is an opportunity to do the same for one another.

We should open eyes, ears, mind, and heart to one another and discover what God might say to us through them. Paul, a bit earlier in his letter to the Romans, said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Our differences are often little more than that—differences in the way we experience and live life. In those cases, it is good to learn from one another and be transformed into the image of Christ. When that happens, perhaps there will be less need for more churches and more churches that reflect the Spirit of Christ. May it be so with us. Amen.

September 14, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In a world that sometimes feels as if it is growing colder with hatred rather than warmer with friendship, we wonder where you are, O God. And in a time medical treatments are advancing rapidly yet disease and illness seem to be running faster, we wonder where you are, O God. In a culture where our efforts to bring people together seem to fail in the light of ongoing divisions and disputes, we wonder where you are, O God.

This morning as we worship, as we sit still in this haven from the pressures of our lives, sing to us those good words again, O Lord: "*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*; Where charity and love are, God is there."

We have been in many places where we have received charity and experienced love. We know that you were in those places with us, O God, and we are grateful. We know that you are present in the struggles of our lives. We know that you care and act to help us out. We know, but we forget. We know, but we would rather complain than act in trust. We know, but some days, we just are not sure.

So continue to move in the hearts and minds of your people to bring an end to violence and suffering. Stir the minds of scientists and physicians, bless the efficacy of medications and treatments, and bring healing where there is brokenness and pain. Surround all who are worried and fearful and confused and grant them the peace that only you can offer.

Help us to take your charity and love to places that have not experienced your presence. Enable us to be your vessels through whom the grace of the divine flows freely. Grant us the courage to serve and the wisdom to serve well, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.