



Lakeside Sermons

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

Potluck Faith? Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12

We have all had "Aha!" moments. An "Aha!" moment occurs when something happens and suddenly a lightbulb goes off in your head and something you have puzzled over becomes clear. You read a mystery novel and discover a clue that makes all of the pieces of the plot fall into place. You think about a friend from school you have not heard from in years but cannot come up with their name. In the middle of the night, you wake up and Aha!—"John Smith" pops into your head! You are trying to figure out how to do something on your smartphone and getting no where when your five-year old grandchild walks up, takes it from you, and says, "This is how you do it." Aha!

I had an "Aha!" moment last week when I was reading over the story of the escape from Egypt that we heard a few minutes ago. Like you, I have read and heard the story of the parting of the Red Sea many, many times, but this my reading turned out to be a little different. The passage began as usual, "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea." I knew what was going to happen. We all know what is going to happen: "The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided." Hmm. That sounded quite familiar. I read about the Israelites crossing over on dry land and the Egyptian army chasing them and then I came to these words, "So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth."

"Aha!" I thought. "Is that how it happened?" A lot of us grew up knowing this story as much from the movie *The Ten Commandments* as we did from the King James Version of the Holy Scriptures. In the movie, we saw Charlton Heston as Moses lead the Hebrew people to safety as the waters piled up on either side of the passage with quivering menace. I discovered that in order to create that effect, the crew went to the water tank on the Paramount Studios lot and filmed water spilling over into a trough, but they angled the camera sideways so that the backwash in the bottom of the tank became the wall of water on each side.¹ Aha! Quite creative, if you ask me.

¹YouTube video of the making of the scene "The Parting of the Red Sea" in *The Ten Commandments* (Paramount Pictures, 1956); available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bliUHhcd3Sc>.

But that was not the scene that popped into my head while I was reading the story last week. What came to my mind was a group of people walking out into Tampa Bay during Hurricane Irma last Sunday. All of the water had been swept out into the Gulf of Mexico by the powerful winds of the storm moving from east to west. Most everyone who saw the video of those people walking in single file through the exposed mud of the bay thought it was a foolish thing to do, but I learned something about the way winds work on water during hurricanes. Sure enough, when the hurricane advanced north and the winds shifted from west to east, the water came rushing back.

Now, we could debate all day how the events recorded in the book of The Exodus actually took place. Did an angel of the Lord flap his wings, forcing the water into liquid walls that allowed the Hebrews to pass safely to the other side or did some enormous storm push the water away so that a temporary expanse of land made safe passage possible? Or did something else altogether happen? We don't know. One thing is certain: if we spend our time arguing over what might or might not have happened, we risk getting mired down in the muck of our own self-righteousness. The story itself tells us that getting mired down did not go well for the Egyptians. The "how" of the parting of the sea is not nearly as important as the key factor that it was God's doing. Aha! The message of the story is that God wanted his people set free and God made a way for it to happen. In attempting to thwart the escape and keep the Hebrews in captivity, the Egyptians met their demise.

As you know, the Old Testament is rich in the insights it offers us about faith. Agreed, the Exodus story is first and foremost about God hearing the cries of his people and responding. Miracles abound, to be sure, but through it all, almost laboriously, God uses some of his children to help others of his children. The focus is on God and how God responds to us. Another lesson we can take away from this story is that any attempts on our part, intended or not, that hamper the progress of God's children toward freedom, result in our getting mired in the muck of our own selfishness.

The Apostle Paul saw this very thing happening while the Christian faith was still a toddler in the realm of religions. Writing to the believers in Rome, he admonished them to go easy with one another and allow a little room for insight and understanding. Listen to what he says:

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 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. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, 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. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God. Romans 14:1-12

The problem was simple though the answer would prove to be quite complicated. As the Gospel was spread, more and more people became believers. That is good news, but those believers were sometimes from very different backgrounds, especially those who were Jewish and those who were Gentiles. Some of the Jewish Christians believed that the Hebrew faith was the doorway into faith in Christ; therefore, Jewish laws and practices should be maintained. In particular, the dietary laws should be followed and only kosher foods consumed. Likewise, Hebrew worship took place from sundown on Friday evening until sundown on the last day of the week. Thus, Christians should worship on the sabbath. But Gentiles were accustomed to a more diverse dining table. They did not have the restrictions the Jews had. Moreover, many new believers were convinced that followers of Christ should worship on the first day of the week since it was on that day that their Lord was raised from the dead. Obviously, from what Paul wrote, conflicts over these issues could get rather tense. Professor Scott Hoezee puts a humorous spin on a serious issue. He writes,

It didn't take too long before each group was regarding the other with suspicion. Those who refused to keep kosher snickered at the immature spirituality of those up-tight folks who

worried about silly things like not eating pork. How childish! How antique and quaint! On the other hand, the Jewish Christians found plenty of cause to look down on the others, too. How dare they live such casual lives!? If they'd only listen more closely to God's Word in Scripture as handed down by Moses and the prophets, why they'd start keeping kosher in a heartbeat! Hadn't even Jesus said he had come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them? Well!?

The congregation at Rome was clearly in trouble and on the verge of splitting up. In fact, it already *had* split in one sense: whole segments of the church refused to have anything to do with each other. You couldn't even have a church potluck anymore. Long about the time you had everyone together, someone would unwrap the newspaper from around her casserole dish and there would be some scalloped potatoes with ham and bacon! Suddenly the whole fellowship hour would be finished! The Jewish Christians would be offended by the non-kosher ingredients and so wouldn't touch a thing on the rest of the buffet, either. The Gentile Christians would be offended that these other folks could be so easily offended!²

Often, the Early Church toddled along like children fighting in a sandbox, all wanting to do something different with the toys they had to share. And lest we smile amusingly at the earliest followers of Christ, let us remember that churches in our own memory have split over differences about scripture and doctrine but also over issues like the color of the carpet, music in worship, and, I understand, even the purchase of a vacuum cleaner!

To all of us, Paul offers a simple but profound reminder: "We do not live to ourselves, 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." Or, as we recall from the story which formed the core of Israel's faith: it is all about God.

Our faith is directed to God, not to one another, not to rules or regulations, not to buildings or programs, not to traditions or treasure. What

²Scott Hoezee, "Lectionary Epistle: Romans 14:1-12," *Calvin Seminary Center for Excellence in Preaching* (September 11, 2017); available online at: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-19a/?type=lectionary_epistle.

brings us together and what holds us together is faith in God, specifically faith in God through Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that Paul himself referred to Jewish Christians (himself being one) as the “weak in faith” because they limited themselves—by faith—in what they would eat, he knew that our faith is the foundation on which everything else we do is built. And on that foundation, there is plenty of room to accommodate some of the differences that we hold that are not essential to our faith.

If we can remember this one thing, then we can move forward as the people of God toward whatever Promised Land God has in store for us. If we remember that it is God who created us, who gifted us with all we have, and who leads us day by day toward freedom, then we can make more room for those who carry a different kind of baggage on this journey and, perhaps, even help them to carry it from time to time.

Paul tried to help the Christians in Rome understand that there is room at the table for those believers who found value in observing traditional dietary laws and for those believers who understood that God’s grocery store is unrestricted. Furthermore, he insisted, dining together does not defile anyone. To the contrary, we are enriched when exposed to different ways of thinking and being. If God is at the center of our faith, we will be able to handle the issues that lie on the perimeter of our faith.

There are a lot of issues facing us today that do not form our faith but which people of faith ought to address. Religious matters such as the authority of scripture, the focus of ministry, the character of worship, and the scope of outreach are all areas that can cause a lot of heat, but ought to generate a lot of light as we seek to discover where God is leading us. Social issues like health care, immigration, racism, sexuality and gender identity, poverty, education, taxation, housing, disaster recovery, terrorism, and military defensiveness are all critical concerns that people of faith should think and talk about. Some of these topics frighten us. Some of them anger us. Some of them stir feelings of hope within us. All of them deal with the welfare of the children of God and should concern us.

If we remember that our faith in God is primary for us as individuals and cohesive for us as a community, then we can talk about anything at all. Instead of beginning at a point of opposition, we start from a position of mutual faith and interest. I care about an issue and want you to know why. I also want to know your thoughts and why you feel that way. Together we want to discover what God thinks about such matters and the direction we

should take to find the freedom of life God envisions for us all. We do not have to be adversaries because we are first and foremost fellow believers. "We are the Lord's." We live and die on that fact alone. Our faith is not "pot luck." We do not take whatever is offered. Our faith in God is the one sure and steady foundation on which we all stand. As such, it behooves each of us to give attention to growing and deepening our faith.

When we quarrel and fight with one another, pursuing each other with a desire only to conquer and win, we get mired down in the muck of our own self-centeredness. Perhaps if we keep in mind that the story of our faith is always a journey from some form of captivity to freedom in Christ, we will discover that we get there faster, safer, and happier when we walk together. Maybe, just maybe, those "Aha!" moments will be more frequent when, as people united in faith, we open our hearts and our minds to new insights from the heart and mind of God. May it be so with us. Amen.

September 17, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

What a blessing it is to be here today, O God, to breath life-giving air, to see light and color and movement, to hear glorious music and friendly voices, to touch friends and family, and to know that we are your children and loved by you. What a gift it is to be alive and to share in all of the wonders of your world. Thank you for these gifts and for all of the ways you have blessed us in the week just passed.

We also admit that it was a difficult week, not so much for us, perhaps, but for our nation and the larger world. We still cannot quite comprehend the destruction caused by hurricanes that have wreaked havoc these past few weeks. We grieve over the school attack in Washington State and for all who lost life and a sense of security. Our anger and fear rise once again over the bombing in London and the reality that there are people who desire nothing more than to do harm to the rest of us. And we lament the unrest that permeates our nation because of injustice past and present and our inability to find a way to live well together.

We need your help, O Lord. Help us as we rebuild homes and businesses, schools and hospitals, and lives. Help us as we find ways to genuinely love one another and convey that care in tangible ways. Help us as we seek to overcome hate with love and misunderstanding with truth. Help us as we learn to relate to one another with honesty and compassion.

We gather on this first day of a new week to worship and pray. We gather on this day because we celebrate your resurrection and the gift of life given to each of us. May we experience the rebirth which you have offered and discover new ways for you to sing and pray and live through us. Lead us, O God, that we might become your partners in the redemption of our world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.