



Lakeside Sermons

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

Are You Different . . . Or Am I?
Romans 12:1-18; Luke 7:36-50

I have been thinking a lot about differences lately—differences among people. The fact is that we are all different and thanks be to God that we are! How dull would this world be if we all looked alike, dressed alike, talked alike, and thought alike? One of God's gifts to us is uniqueness. No two snowflakes are exactly alike. No two people—even identical twins—are exactly alike. We are different.

Yet, there are some people who are more different than others, aren't there? We are different because of our age, race, gender, color, religion, ethnicity, social standing, wealth or poverty, education, politics, and any number of other things that distinguish us from one another. Nevertheless, we might be in a group of people who possess all of those differences and still get along fine. But another person might walk in the door and we perceive that they are "different." This kind of difference is not based on specific characteristics. It is founded on perception. It occurs when someone is not "similar" to everyone else in the room—or to me.

For instance, the Republican primary campaign includes fifteen people who are quite different. They vary in age, in political experience, in education, in vocation, race, gender, religion, family life, and numerous other characteristics. Yet, they are quite similar because of the political perspective they hold. The other differences do not matter because of the importance each of them places on their political position. However, there is one candidate whom everyone would agree is "different." Because of his straightforward, often insensitive, often offensive, always pompous manner of speaking and acting, Donald Trump is seen as radically different from the rest of the group. Although in every other way he fits perfectly into the group of candidates, his personality makes him dissimilar. Many people have a negative reaction to this difference. Obviously, many people also like it. The fact is we react to the dissimilarity rather than to the differences.

We have the ability to accept people who are different if they are generally similar to us. That is why we are able to all be a part of this

wonderful congregation. We are different in many ways, but the similarity of our faith in Jesus Christ holds us together.

Jesus encountered this reality many times in his ministry, but he had a way of looking beyond the obvious differences people have to find the core ways in which we are similar. One of those occasions was a dinner party at the home of a pharisee. Listen as Luke tells the story.

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 7:36-50

It is obvious in this story that the woman who anointed Jesus was quite different from the rest of the men who were gathered around the table. Simon, however, had no real problem with her. He did not try to prevent her from entering the house or approaching Jesus. For Simon, the one who was “different” at that dinner party was Jesus.

Like the rest of the men dining together, Jesus was a Jew, born and bred. He had studied scripture and was a rabbi, as were many of them. They were a rather homogenous group. Jesus, however, was different. He was different because he was accepting of the woman. He was different because he felt kinship with her. He was different because he saw something in her that she might not even have seen within herself. He recognized a sister, another child of God.

He never indicated that he approved of her behavior. By all accounts, Luke indicates that she was a prostitute. Then, as now, prostitution was privately accepted even though it was publically condemned. Jesus knew that this woman had likely fallen into this lifestyle out of desperation. Sometime before this dinner party, she had experienced Jesus’ acceptance and grace. Her response was absolute gratitude and adoration, thus the emotional and lavish anointing of Jesus’ feet.

In his heart, Simon condemned Jesus. He thought, “This fellow does not belong here. He does not fit in. He is not one of us.” As if reading his mind, Jesus tells his host that he, Simon, is the one who is “different.” He does not fit in because of his lack of hospitality. He did not wash Jesus’ feet, a common courtesy offered by a host. He did not welcome Jesus with a kiss. He did not anoint his head. Each of these acts was a common courtesy, an indication of welcome into one’s home. Where Simon fell short, the woman demonstrated abundant gratitude and honor.

There are many ways we are different from one another and, generally, we have learned to be accepting, sometimes welcoming of such differences. It is when we perceive that someone else is not similar to us in whatever way that we begin to distinguish them from ourselves. We put up our barriers. We want to exclude them.

This weekend we are privileged to share Lela Chesson’s wonderful play, *Out in Left Field*. It is about a little boy who is left-handed. Being left-handed is simply who he is. It is a characteristic with which he was born as much as his blond hair, blue eyes, and innate ability to hit a baseball. There was a

time, however, when people who were left-handed were looked down upon. The Spanish Inquisition persecuted such people, even condemned them to death because of a perception that they were not similar to everyone else. They did not fit in. They did not belong.

Lela's play reminds us that little boys who write or bat left-handed are children of God. By extension, people who have a different color skin, hold a different political opinion, live on a grand estate or in a shotgun house, hold multiple degrees or dropped out of school in the eighth grade, even who read and interpret the Bible differently are all children of God. That fact alone makes us quite similar.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul sought to remind his fellow believers of this fact. He pointed out that God has created us with different gifts and abilities which suit us for different functions in life. Then he appealed to his friends and said, "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" (Romans 12:16-18).

We are generally pretty good at accepting people who are different from us. One of the great strengths of our country is the vast diversity of people who make up this land. It is when we perceive people to be dissimilar, to not "fit in" with the rest of us, that the trouble begins. Those dissimilarities vary for each of us. For some it is race because we carry prejudices that have been handed down through the generations. For others of us it is political persuasion because our philosophical ideas about what is best for our country are deeply ingrained in us. Some of us have trouble with people who struggle with addictions or mental health issues or other problems which we think they ought to be able to "fix." Others of us cannot tolerate a sexuality that is different from what we were taught because we do not understand it and do not want to. Some of us shun others who read the Bible differently and interpret it in ways that are at cross purposes with who we understand Jesus to be. Some of us are uncomfortable around people who are rich, poor, dirty, obnoxious, or even saccharine sweet. I certainly have my list of people who are not similar to me. Who is on your list?

The story is not one of our scripture lessons for today, but the story of Noah and the ark has been on my mind this past week. You remember the story. God noticed Noah among all of the people of the earth. Noah was a

good person, a loving father and husband, a person of faith. He trusted God, which is a good thing because God had some strange plans for Noah.

God informed Noah that a flood was about to overwhelm the earth. God wanted Noah to build an ark, an enormous houseboat, and fill it with all of the creatures of the earth, including his family. Noah thought God must be joking. How could anyone build a boat big enough to hold two of every creature on earth? There were so many details to work out— how would they survive? What would they eat? Who would take care of them? God assured him it would work out fine. And it did.

We tend to focus on the humans in the story and what happened to them. Noah and his family rode out the flood safely in the ark while everyone who made fun of Noah and thought he was crazy perished in the flood. It is a story of the world going wrong and God taking major corrective action. It is a story of re-creation, a new birth of the earth and humanity. But what about all of those animals? How did they survive? Remember, there were two of every creature so that each species would survive. Some were big, some were enormous, and some were rather tiny. Some of the creatures were herbivores and ate only plants. How did Noah feed them? Some of the animals were carnivores and predators? How did he keep the lions from eating the sheep and the foxes from raiding the henhouse?

As with every story in the Bible, the story of the flood is a story from which we are expected to learn something about ourselves. Thinking about the ark and all of those animals caused me to think about how different they were; yet, somehow, they managed to survive the voyage without attacking and devouring each other.

God has placed us on this earth to enjoy the journey of life. We are all on this voyage through time and space together—and we are quite different, which is good. It is important that we get along, respect one another, and learn from one another. We are different, but we are similar in one critical aspect. We are all the children of God. That fact alone trumps all of our differences. That fact alone has the power to bring us together, to solve our problems, resolve our differences, and, so far as it depends on us, to live peaceably together so that we do not attack and devour each other. The next time you sense someone is different, ask yourself, “Are they different . . . or am I?”

September 20, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God whose giving knows no ending, you have created us and you continue to sustain us by your loving grace, so we come with hearts filled with gratitude for the countless ways that you have blessed us. We thank you for the beauty of your creation. For cool mornings and hints of fall color, for the warmth of the afternoon sun and the refreshment of a rain shower, for every creature great and small which sings your praise, we offer our thanks. We stand in awe as we consider the beauty and wonder and variety of your earth and all that is in it. We also give you thanks for the beauty and variety of people around us. In your loving creativity, you have made each of us unique and uniquely gifted, and yet each of us is created in your image and enlivened with the breath of your Spirit. We are grateful that in your wisdom you have made a world of such diversity and imagination, of such majesty and beauty.

But we confess, O God who is the gracious Donor of all our days, that sometimes we are frightened by our differences. We confess that we don't always know how to respond to those whose language or customs or opinions or abilities seem so different from our own. And so we build walls to separate ourselves from them and to protect ourselves from the challenges of fostering understanding or risking change. When in our ignorance, fear or apathy we forget that all people are made in your image, help us to tear down the walls that limit our vision and divide our human family. Teach us to build bridges of understanding and compassion. Inspire us to reach out beyond these walls, beyond ourselves, to those in our family and neighborhood, in our city and our world, who are hurting and lonely, who are poor and hungry, who suffer because of violence or persecution or corruption. Make of us a people after your own heart, a people who love the unlovable, who welcome the outcast, who offer healing and hope wherever there is pain and despair. Keep ever before us the example of Christ, who came to give of himself for the sake of others, who served you by loving all, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

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