



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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OCTOBER 1, 2017
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Does God Live Here? Ephesians 2:13-22; Philippians 2:1-13

While most of us never give it a thought, there are some people who have spent a great deal of time trying to figure out whether or not Jesus was a carpenter by trade as most of us assume. There are two mentions of this possibility, one in the Gospel of Matthew and the other in the Gospel of Mark. The story each narrative tells is the same. Jesus is teaching and people are astounded that his young man they watched grow up is so wise and profound. In Matthew, they refer to Jesus as “the carpenter’s son” (13:55) while in Mark, they identify him as “the carpenter, the son of Mary” (6:3). When you dig into the subject a little, you discover that the word translated as “carpenter” is actually a general term that might describe someone who works with wood or stone or in various kinds of construction. In other words, it might be enough to know that Jesus was a craftsman, perhaps proficient with a number of materials.

The topic has intrigued me because so many of the parables Jesus tells are about farming. He speaks of sowing seeds, of harvesting, of people working in vineyards, and of building bigger barns. Obviously many people in that time period raised food for their own consumption and to sell, so agriculture was usually a good background for a story because Jesus’ listeners would readily understand the context.

The Apostle Paul, however, brings out the craftsman in Jesus, even comparing him to a stone mason, which would not have been unlikely since wood was not abundant in that part of the world. Writing to Gentiles who were new in the faith, Paul talks about Jesus tearing down old walls and building new, sturdier foundations, with himself as the cornerstone. Paul imagines a new temple crafted in such a way that each joint fits together perfectly in order to create a new dwelling place for God. A unique aspect of this new temple, however, is that it contains neither wood nor stone. It is constructed of the hearts and minds of the people of God, Jews and Gentiles, males and females, young and old. The Master Craftsman has the ability to choose any available soul and carve, shape, and otherwise fit it into the temple of God.

What, do you suppose, caused Paul to use such imagery? What pre-existing walls needed to be torn down? Why build a new temple to be the place where God lives, especially one comprised of humans?

There is a lot of conversation about the time frame for the writing of the Epistle to the Ephesians, but it certainly could have been after the second temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The temple was sacred to the Jews for they believed it to be the dwelling place of God. The destruction of their temple was a wound to the heart of their faith. Could the occasion of that destruction and the anxiety it brought about be the reason Paul spoke this way? Perhaps, but he was writing to Gentiles who probably did not care whether or not there was a temple in Jerusalem because, after all, they were not Jews. They were followers of Christ, but some Jewish Christians thought that a Gentile had to become a Jew first and then a Christian. This attitude caused a lot of trouble in some of the new churches throughout Asia Minor. It essentially built a wall between Jewish and Gentile believers because Gentiles were not always welcomed into the faith. Paul did not agree with this position and argued long and hard with the disciples in Jerusalem over what makes one a follower of Christ.

As he sought to write a letter of encouragement to the believers in Ephesus and other churches, I wonder if Paul did not think about the ruins of the temple and his own belief that God does not live in buildings made of stone (Acts 17:24) but in the hearts of his people. He may have thought about that area of the temple in which an actual wall separated the court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of the temple where only Jews were allowed. Reflecting on Christ's own sacrifice which removed all obstacles to our access to God, he compared Christ's work of redemption to the removal of a wall which separates one group of people from another so that everyone has access to God.

Without doubt, Paul had in mind the dividing wall of the Law which some people were using to keep Jews and Gentiles separate. So, in his letter to people who were just beginning to discover the joy of their salvation, Paul announced the good news that Jesus had come to establish a new temple, not one made of stone but built in the hearts of his people where no walls whatsoever separate us from one another or from God.

All of these things occurred nearly two thousand years ago. They are ancient history, so why hear this word today? Even if there were a temple in Jerusalem, it would have no bearing on our faith because we do not perceive

that God can be limited to space or to time. If Jesus set aside the law which separated Jews from all other people and offered us grace which unites us in Christ, what can separate us now? What walls does Christ need to tear down today?

Sadly, we know that new walls that intend to determine who is in and who is not are being erected all the time. We tend to assume that our cultural experience is the defining template for how the Christian faith must be lived. Our particular view of the economy amplifies or distorts how we understand the words of Christ. Our politics often work to shape and refine our faith rather than the other way around—and that reality is shared by every political group. Even our religion—the ways in which we think about and live out our faith—far too often builds high and wide walls which divide rather than unite us.

Later this month, on October 31, All Hallows Eve, we will commemorate Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg church. His desire was to begin a discussion about faith and what he considered to be abuses that were rampant in the Church. He never intended to cause a schism, but the unwillingness of people to enter into open and honest discussions about the various issues which concerned them caused great divides in the Body of Christ on earth. Luther's intent was right on target. We should talk about and address matters that concern the way we live as the Church of Jesus Christ. Yet, even Luther was not immune from erecting his own walls, even at the table of fellowship. Let me offer an example.

As the reform movement progressed in the early sixteenth century, the leaders met to come to an agreement on the doctrinal foundations that they felt were essential to the Christian faith. They agreed on fourteen points rather quickly. For some time, however, Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, had been engaged in a heated argument over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Luther insisted that upon the words of institution, "This is my body," the bread actually became the corporeal body of Christ. Zwingli took an approach that considered the symbolic though real meaning of the bread as Christ's body. When the group sat down to begin their discussions, Luther took a piece of chalk, drew a large circle on the table, and wrote in it the words, "This is my body." He would not budge on his opinion of the matter or give any consideration to Zwingli's point of view. When the meeting ended, an emotional Ulrich Zwingli, extended his hand to Luther in a gesture of brotherhood despite their differences. Luther, however, refused to take his hand and said, "I am astonished that you wish to consider me your brother." Then he and his fellow German Christians said to the Swiss Christians, "You

do not belong to the communion of the Christian Church. We cannot acknowledge you as brethren.”¹

What sad and tragic words for one Christian to speak to another, especially over the Lord’s Table which is intended to bring us together. Yet, in ways subtle and even more direct, we often find ourselves at odds with sisters and brothers who also claim Christ as Lord. Instead of listening and talking and working together to find the truth or the best path to it, we swell up our chests, lift our noses in the air, and pull back from the hand extended in fellowship.

Luther himself learned this lesson. The last trip he took was to visit two friends who were estranged from one another and seek to reconcile them. On his return trip, he stopped to rest in his home town of Eisleben and died there. Reportedly, his last words were those of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son”²

We live in challenging and increasingly dangerous times. There are critical issues in our community, our nation, and our world that must be addressed. We have differing, sometimes polar opposite, opinions about the solutions to our problems, but that is okay. It simply means that somewhere between my ideas and yours, or perhaps somewhere else altogether, lie the answers that we are seeking. What we cannot allow to happen, however, is for our fellowship in Christ to be disrupted by our unwillingness to be open to other people and the options they might offer. What we must not allow to happen is to jettison the teachings of Christ in favor of our own desires for the world. We must allow Christ to break down the walls we erect between us and ask the Master Craftsman to build us all into a new temple where God might dwell and offer blessing to the world. As Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi and to us:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than

¹James A. Weaver, in *A Cloud of Witnesses*, C. Douglas Weaver, ed., (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993), 72.

²Penrose St. Amant, in *A Cloud of Witnesses*, C. Douglas Weaver, ed., (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993), 73-4.

yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. Philippians 2:1-7

Perhaps if we allow Christ to be our Master Craftsman, we can truly be built into a holy temple suitable for the dwelling of God. Amen.

October 1, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We have gathered in your presence once again, O God, for worship and praise. We come from varied backgrounds and perspectives to gather around this table, to share this meal which unites us with one another and with believers in all times and places. Our hearts are filled to overflowing with gratitude for the abundance of your gifts to us. We thank you for relationships and opportunities which give our lives meaning and purpose. We thank you for the beauty of your creation which testifies to your power and your love for us. We thank you that you invite us into your presence around your table and call us to live as your children.

Today we are especially grateful for the fellowship we share with others who have claimed the name of Christ. Working and praying alongside our brothers and sisters, we answer your call to build your kingdom here on earth as we heal the sick, feed the hungry, speak for the voiceless, free the captives, and stand against injustice, all as we proclaim your great love for all the world.

As we celebrate our communion with your saints of every nation and language and culture, we pray especially for those who risk their security or even their lives for the sake of their faith. From our places of comfort and abundance and in our land of safety and peace, we too easily forget those who pray for bread to feed their hungry children, for peace in their war-torn lands, and for the liberty and dignity to speak and to worship freely and to pursue the dreams you have for their lives.

So as we approach your table, make us mindful, we pray, of our brothers and sisters who worship in secret, who offer their prayers in whispers, who dare not sing or proclaim their faith for fear of persecution or even death. Give us courage to speak and to work for a world where all your children know freedom and justice. Give us faith to claim our highest devotion to you above any creed or ideology or faction or allegiance. And give us hope and trust that your peace can heal our divisions, your mercy can forgive our sins, and your love can overcome the hatred and cruelty of this world. As we fall on our knees in humility and praise, Holy God, have mercy on us, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the Savior of the world and the Redeemer of our hearts. Amen.

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