



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

OCTOBER 2, 2016
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Fan the Flames Luke 17:20-21; II Timothy 1:1-14

Our daughter Catherine told us about an experience she had the other night as she was making her way home at the end of a very long day. It was nearly midnight and she found herself on the subway with a dozen or so other tired souls, all presumably heading home as well. In typical New York fashion, each person kept to themselves, preoccupied with thoughts of the day just past or the one yet ahead, listening to music or a podcast, hiding in the tiny space of their cellphone screens. As the hypnotic rhythm of the train lulled a little boy to sleep in his stroller, the man beside her fidgeted and fought off sleep, afraid he might miss his stop. The only conversation was a monologue offered by a homeless man begging for money, for anything, but there were no takers—that is until he mentioned that he was a veteran. Then another man, sheltered in his seat, came to life and reached out to this homeless fellow. We was also a vet. He had been there, too. A connection was made. Stories were shared. Compassion was offered. Kindness was exchanged.

As the weary doors of the train car groaned open and they got up and walked out together, Catherine realized that in some unexplainable way, they all had shared something special in that subway car. In a poem which she wrote about the experience, she said:

we're all here for the same reason
unable to be satisfied elsewhere
so content with always striving
for more,
for better,
for different.
the same screeches, the same groaning of old doors
pulling apart
and we all shuffle out
one tired mass, wanting to be home
but craving that moment
when we touch a stranger

Catherine Grace Wright, "Stranger," © 2016

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you."

The stereotype of New Yorkers as uncaring and impolite is, I think, unfair and inaccurate. On our visits there, I have seen community pop up in surprising places from time to time just as I have seen happen in our own city where people can be just as preoccupied and self-focused. What happens all over Rocky Mount and what happened on that subway train the other night is exactly what Jesus told the Pharisees: the kingdom of God or, as I think we better understand, the *community* of God is already here, all around us. It happens when two strangers make a connection, when someone with resources encounters another person in need. God's community blossoms around us when tragedy occurs and people come together to help one another. We reveal God's way of doing things when injustice takes place and we unite to do what is right. We need not wonder when God's community is going to arrive. All we have to do is pay attention and watch it unfold around us. What we are called to do is to help make God's community evident to others.

Today, as we observe World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the fact that believers all over the world are ready and willing to help manifest God's community where they are. It can be as simple and spontaneous as making a connection with another human being as the two veterans did on the subway. Or it can be as planned and organized as gathering for worship Sunday by Sunday as we do here. In between and beyond there are myriad ways for us to help other people see God at work in the world and in their lives.

The Apostle Paul came to understand how God works. He had experienced it firsthand as a self-proclaimed defender of the faith determined to rid the world of the heresy preached by Jesus of Nazareth. Then, on his way to Damascus where a group of his followers operated, Jesus himself broke through the constraints of time and space to reveal himself to Paul. Through the kindness of a stranger named Anan'ias, God physically and spiritually healed Paul's blindness and opened his eyes to God's world. From that day forward, God's way of working in the world became the calling for Paul's life as he stopped persecuting the faith and began promoting it. Anger became compassion. Fear became trust. Persecution became protection. Hatred became love. Scripture tells us that no one else with Paul experienced what he did. Sometimes God's community happens that way. It is evident only to the ones who will pay attention, who will look, who are open to finding God in the world.

From that moment forward, Paul committed his life to helping others discover God in their midst. As we heard a few moments ago, he wrote to his young protege Timothy and reminded him that it was his grandmother and mother who nurtured him in the faith just as Paul had done for them. Paul urged Timothy to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you" because he knew that first and foremost, the community of God begins within us, within people who claim him as Lord and Savior.

Paul wanted to fan the flame of excitement and commitment which he had helped light within Timothy. This young man's faith was not something to accept and then admire as a treasured gift; rather, it was a way of being in the world that would help other people tap into what God is doing all around us.

Sometimes life does seem like a train trundling along the same tracks day after day with no change, no excitement, no hint that God is anywhere near. At other times, life feels very much like a train hurtling out of control as one did the other day in Hoboken, New Jersey. In those frightening moments, we cry out for God to be present, to reveal himself, to help us.

That is where we come into the picture. At times it takes nothing more than the acknowledgment that someone else is a valued human being, a person with whom we have some connection, some shared experience of life. At other times, it means providing comfort and help in times of crisis as people do every day around the world. At still other times, helping bring God's kingdom to light means working to bring change to the world that is good and right.

Many of us remember the folk song popular when we were growing up in the last century. In part, we sang:

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
And soon all those around can warm up to its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love: Once you've experienced it,
You spread your love to everyone.
You want to pass it on.

I wish for you my friend, this happiness that I've found.
You can depend on God, it matters not where you're bound.
I'll shout it from the mountain tops. I want the world to know:
The Lord of love has come to me.
I want to pass it on.¹

¹Kurt Kaiser, "Pass It On" ©1969 EMI Christian Music Group.

Today, Christians throughout the world celebrate the connection that we have as followers of Christ. Around this table, we acknowledge that we share a bond that transcends all of our uniqueness, our differences, our opportunities, and our challenges. We are one in Christ Jesus. We all also affirm that we are called by God to reach out to the stranger, to realize our connection with all people, to touch one another in such a way that we recognize God in our midst. Sometimes a word, a touch, a smile, a helping hand, a bold stand for justice, a gesture for peace, an act of love is all it takes to spark the flame that is the community of God in our midst. On many days, as we all shuffle about our business, we are:

one tired mass, wanting to be home
but craving that moment
when we touch a stranger²

That is God's community, God's way of being in the world that brings us together and shapes us into his people. We have been blessed. Let us also be a blessing to others. Fan the flame of God' love and watch in wonder as God is revealed all around us. Amen.

²Wright.

October 2, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

As we gather around this table where the bread of life was broken for us long ago, we come with grateful and trusting hearts, O God. We know that we do not deserve a seat at this table, but because of your merciful love, we are all invited to seats of honor. We thank you for your gracious welcome and for the life on which we feast today.

We also come aware that we share this table with sisters and brothers spread across space and time. We thank you for all of the saints who were courageous and faithful to carry the Gospel through the ages that we might receive this precious gift. We also thank you for believers the world over who pray for us as we do for them. Continue to bless your Church, O God, and work through us to continue the good work you began so long ago.

It is within this family of faith that we share our deepest concerns and greatest joys. Move among and within us, we pray, to meet the needs that we have. Health, happiness, justice, and hope are the longings of all hearts, and we ask that you provide these needs for all of your people. We live in challenging and often frightening times, O God. We need wisdom to make the right choices and strength to do the right things. We need compassion for those who are in need and courage to resist all who would oppress anyone. We need generosity for a hurting world and open doors to a joyful life for all.

Hear the prayers of your people, O God, and then tap us to help you answer them. Open our hearts and minds to notice your work in the world and use our hands and voices to join you at work. We thank you again for the salvation that is ours and for the host of the faithful who surround us at all times. To you be praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.