



Lakeside Sermons

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

OCTOBER 14, 2018
THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Are You Perplexed, Too? I Chronicles 29:10-18; Mark 10:17-31

Do you like watching illusionists? Are you amazed at the way in which they can make something disappear and then reappear right before your eyes? Are you fascinated with their ability to trick you while you are watching their every move and perhaps even helping them with the trick? Are you awed by the ease with which they keep you looking over here and then suddenly make you realize that you should be looking over there? If you like illusionists, then you ought to love Jesus because he had an uncanny way of revealing the truth like pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

In the story we just read from Mark's Gospel, a man came running up to Jesus just as he was leaving town. Not even pausing to catch his breath, the man asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

You have to watch and listen carefully because Jesus immediately begins to distract us. The man asked about eternal life, but Jesus focuses on the fact that the man had called him "good." Now he has everyone thinking about the goodness of God and, if you had been there, you probably would have recited in your mind that little blessing that you learned as a child: "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food." At least now you're thinking about it but you're not thinking about what the man asked Jesus in the first place. Jesus is.

He reminds the man of what the man already knows which is that he should keep the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." Now you're thinking about the Ten Commandments and mentally counting how many you have broken when you hear the man say, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." And you are thinking, "Wow, this guy is pretty good." But then you remember that only God is good and God is great and you think about the breakfast you ate.

Now you are trying to remember where this conversation started when Jesus says, "You lack one thing." And you think, "O good, maybe that's the one thing I need to know." And you listen carefully so you don't miss a word

and you hear Jesus say, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Abracadabra!

The man in the story turns away sad and we understand why because we, too, have a lot of possessions and we never thought that we would have to give away everything in order to get into heaven. Jesus looks around at his disciples to explain the illusion and says, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Mark throws in the most telling line in the whole story: “And the disciples were perplexed at these words.”

Of course they were perplexed—astounded—mystified! How could this be? They had been taught all of their lives that all good things—riches included—came from God (who is good, after all). Their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all worked hard and gathered land, animals, and crops to become wealthy and influential. Kings Saul, David, and Solomon were known for their wealth and for all they did for God and their people. Certainly they were welcomed into eternal life. They were perplexed and let Jesus know it. “Then who can be saved?” They asked. That’s when Jesus pulled the rabbit out of the hat for the man had asked about eternal life but Jesus answered about the kingdom of God.

Jesus came to live among us so that we might understand what the kingdom of God is. It is not a place in the cloud with a pearly gate and streets of gold. It is where we live day by day but, more important, it is how we live day by day. The kingdom of God is the way that God is in the world. It is here and now. It is how we relate to God and how we interact with one another. It is what we value now and how we value the life of another person. You will remember that on another occasion Jesus told the parable of a successful farmer who had a great harvest one year. Instead of selling or sharing his crop, he built bigger barns to hoard it for himself. Just as the last of the harvest was stored away, he died and received no benefit from his good fortune. Jesus’ point in telling the story was that if you want to store up anything, store up treasure in heaven—love, faith, kindness, empathy, tolerance, patience, generosity, helpfulness. Letting our resources grow moldy with age benefits no one. Using what God gives us to help make life better for another person makes life better for us all.

There’s the trick. We start off asking about how we can gain eternal life when we die and Jesus waves his hand and reveals that what is more important is how we live right now.

Over the weekend, Deborah and I rented the video documentary of Fred Roger's life.¹ I highly recommend it. As a young man, Fred Rogers was captivated by the new phenomenon of television and decided to put off seminary in order to work on a children's television show. He worked for several years, developed a few characters that would become famous later on, and became passionate about working with and for children.

He did attend seminary and was ordained, but he returned to television and immediately began his own children's program. Bit by bit, he used his own childhood experiences and what he learned from his youngest friends to develop *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. It was a place of welcome, acceptance, learning, support, encouragement, and love. It was a place for children to explore their imaginations and to ask the silliest and the most serious questions that were on their minds. It was a place for children to look at some of the issues confronting their parents.

In one of the most powerful episodes, Mr. Rogers invited Officer Clemmons to join him and cool his feet in a wading pool. Other than the fact that a grown man was sitting in a chair with his pants rolled up and his bare feet in a child's wading pool, nothing seemed odd about the invitation. This episode appeared in the early 1960's at a time when some White people were aggressively chasing Black people out of public pools. A Black man and a White man in the same pool and sharing the same towel without anything ill happening was a lesson for children—and adults. As you know, there were many more profound lessons of life that Mr. Rogers taught us over the years. What is amazing is that what happened in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was what Jesus had in mind when he talked about the kingdom of God or, we might say, God's neighborhood.

Our calling as a family of faith is to live as God's neighborhood in the world. We are to love and care for one another, to share faith and help each other better understand who God is. We are to be accepting and caring and encouraging. We are to work for justice and model kindness. We are called to do the things the man who asked Jesus about eternal life was called to do. We are called to live rightly—to obey the commandments—but also to live generously just as God has been generous with us.

A few weeks ago, several of our former members returned to worship with us. As I often hear when I talk with someone who has been a part of

¹*Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Morgan Neville, director, Tremolo Productions, 2018.

Lakeside and moved away, each one spoke about what a special place this is and what a unique congregation we are. I don't doubt that former members at other churches say those same things, but the fact is that we are all here because this is a very special family of faith. We have wonderful ministries and strong relationships and a vibrant witness to God's presence in the world.

If we are to continue fulfilling that call, if we are to be open to whatever new ventures God might call us, if we are to remain vibrant in the challenging years to come, we must do it together. We must live as God's neighborhood in this place. And we must have the resources to do so.

Jesus did not condemn the wealth of the man who ran to him to find out the secret of eternal life. He did, however, note the sadness of the man who walked away upon learning that his wealth must be shared. On this point, there is no illusion, no slight of hand, no trick: God's call is our call. God's kingdom is our neighborhood. God's ministry is our responsibility.

Are you perplexed? I am. I am perplexed that a congregation known for its excessive generosity in so many ways struggles every year to meet its budget goal, a ministry plan we all approved a year before. I am perplexed that any of us could believe that our support of our ministries does not matter. I am perplexed that our gratitude for what God has done for us and through us over these past sixty-three years does not spark even greater generosity for the years yet to come. I am perplexed that the Gospel which declares that we are the children of God, forgiven and free, does not also invigorate us to share that same good news with everyone else. I am perplexed that we would spend valuable time and energy reminding ourselves of what is required to support our ministries rather than using our time and talents in ministry. I am perplexed that we might sometimes focus more on our reward in heaven than on our calling here on earth.

As with the man who came running to him and the disciples who followed him, Jesus catches us looking up and worrying about our eternal reward. He reminds us to look around us, to focus on the here and now, for he will take care of the future and heaven. We already know how to gain eternal life because it is a gift God has given us through Jesus Christ. The trick is learning to live fully, completely, and generously in God's neighborhood today. Amen.

October 14, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Our hearts abound with gratitude, Generous God, for gifts that flow from you with such extravagance that we cannot keep track: for unfailing love that refuses to abandon us to a frightening world; for the promise of life that challenges the finality of death; for joy in community that we share; for your stubborn grace that pursues us and calls us to be agents of your mercy; for blessings not counted because we lose sight of them in the midst of our plenty; for all these and every good gift we receive from you, O God, we offer our thanks and praise.

Our hearts also bow in humility, Lord, because we, like David, recognize that all that we have and all that we are come to us as gifts from your gracious hand. In response to your generosity toward us, then, help us, like the Israelites, to give freely and joyously of our time, talents, and resources so that your purposes might be accomplished in our world. Remind us that any gift we can bring already belongs you, and teach us to offer the same measure of compassion and mercy toward others that you have so extravagantly given to us.

When we experience good health, help us to remember those who suffer. When we gather with those who love us, help us to remember those who are lonely. When we have enough to eat, help us to remember those who are hungry. When we are tired from our work, help us to remember those who are without a job. When we come in out of the cold, help us to remember those who are homeless. When we enjoy moments of quiet rest, help us to remember those whose nations are filled with the sounds of war. When we experience security and contentment because of the comforts and privileges we enjoy, help us to remember those who live in fear. But may we not stop at remembering each of these, your beloved children. May we work to ensure that all our brothers and sisters in the human family have enough, not just to survive, but also to flourish and to become all that you have created them to be. May we create in our world, in our community, and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of your light and hope and peace. And may we raise our hearts and voices to join all creation in praise to you, O God, who is the gracious donor of all our days. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister