



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What Pulls Us Together? Joshua 4:1-9; Luke 9:10-17

During a Sunday School discussion last week, we talked about neighborliness—how it once was for many of us and how it has changed for most of us. At one time most people in our country lived in neighborhoods where they knew everyone and shared a great deal in common. Today our neighborhoods are diverse and constantly changing. Communities, at least in the South, came together often for celebrations and other special events. During the discussion, Brian Scott remarked that as someone who lived during the Second World War he remembers how that great struggle unified our nation and brought people together in a common cause. Some people remember a similar experience during the Great Depression when almost everyone was suddenly poor and struggling together. Most everyone here recalls the flood that accompanied Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and how our community came together to rebuild our city. Two years later, our nation and, in some sense, the world came together to mourn and respond to the attacks on 9/11.

That discussion started me to think about what pulls us together? Is it always tragedy? Certainly tragic events do pull us together. Last June this sanctuary was filled as our community united in prayer for the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina following the killing of nine people during a Bible study there. Mass killings or natural disasters often result in prayer vigils that bring people together, but so do other, happier events. Yesterday, college football games pulled tens of thousands of people together in stadia all over the country. When Rocky Mount was attempting to be declared an All-American City about fifteen years ago, the community came together to achieve the necessary goals for that honor. This fall, in order to support Rev. Richard Joyner and the wonderful program he has developed with the Conetoe Family Life Center, our community has come together to promote him as a CNN Hero. Bad things pull us together, but so do good ones. We come together when we have a common interest and we need each other's help and support.

Early in the first century in Palestine, something positive was happening. To be sure, there were plenty of difficult and even tragic things happening.

Economically it was a challenging time for most people and poverty was rampant. Politically, the nation of Israel lived under the oppressive rule of the Roman Emperor and his appointed authorities. They had very little freedom. Religiously, the Hebrew people were divided by a class system that favored certain religious leaders over the common people. Faith was a refuge but not a very safe one. It was a difficult time for the Hebrew people.

But something good was going on, something that pulled people together and excited them. There was Good News being declared by a carpenter-turned-teacher from the hillside village of Nazareth. He talked about concern for the poor and opportunity for the wealthy to share their riches. He talked about justice for all people and an end to oppressive attitudes and activities. He spoke about salvation, redemption, and the ever-present love of God for all of God's children. There was excitement, energy, eagerness, curiosity, and a willingness to find this Nazarene wherever he was.

When Jesus left one town to begin his journey toward another one, people often followed him from village to village. He would heal people of various diseases and infirmities and talk with them about the things God wanted to see them do. There were rumors that he might be the Messiah. It was good news to them. What was he saying?

Jesus connected with the people who listened to him teach. He offered comfort and encouragement to people who were poor, whether they needed to have their spirits lifted or a better paycheck. He blessed people who were in mourning for all the various reasons that we grieve. He encouraged everyone who was committed to do what was right but warned them that not everyone was on their side. He honored people who were confident without being self-obsessed and congratulated those who sought to bring peace and wholeness to the people around them.

At times Jesus taught in parables and explained that the kingdom of God is not a territory but a way of life. He offered mercy and second chances while stressing repentance and personal responsibility. He talked about neighborliness being both helpful and risky. It was good news to all who would listen. It was what we have come to know as the Gospel.

Jesus and his message pulled folks together in sometimes dramatic ways. One such experience is told by the Gospel writers in various ways. Listen to the story as Luke recorded it:

On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured. The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each." They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. Luke 9:10-17

The people who had traveled from the surrounding towns apparently soaked in all that Jesus had to say, but the disciples did not quite get it. At the end of the day, when they were obviously tired and hungry, they suggested that Jesus send the crowds away to find their own food and lodging. Jesus saw a teachable moment and told the disciples to feed the people. Like the other gospel writers, Luke tells us that there were 5000 men there but not how many women and children were present. Feeding 5000 people would have been a monumental task, but considering that the number might have been at least double, the disciples were stymied.

In a very patient way, Jesus said, "Let me show you how this works." He told the disciples to group the people by 50. He offered blessing over the five loaves of bread and two fish that the disciples had discovered and told them to pass the food among the people. Right then and there a miracle occurred. Everyone was fed and twelve baskets of food were left over.

Was there some supernatural multiplication of the bread and fish or did another type of miracle occur? I think what happened was a miracle of generosity. The disciples looked at the task before them and said, "We have so few resources. There is no way we can do what Jesus has asked." Jesus, on the other hand, knew that the people were hungry for more than food. They were eager to see God at work in their world. Jesus knew that there

was more than enough food for that crowd. He simply had to create an opportunity for people to share it. The food was passed around. Everyone shared. There was food left over. That is Good News! That is kingdom excitement! That sense of community and purpose pulled people together in Jesus' day.

What pulls us together today? Sixty years ago the excitement of a new ministry powered by a fresh vision pulled people together. The earliest members of this congregation established a foundation of meaningful worship, beneficial programs, helpful service, a beautiful and functional place in which to do these things. They created a legacy of ministry that is awe-inspiring. Like the Hebrew people entering the Promised Land and all of the unknowns that lay ahead, our forebearers here at Lakeside left their own markers to remind us of their ministry and faith and to guide us into the future. When we look back at our history and ask what it means, we will always discover a faithful people responding to God's Good News in their day and time. Thousands of people have been a part of Lakeside over the past sixty years. They heard and responded to the Gospel. Their lives were changed. Their faith was focused.

One of the blessings of this congregation is its young families and their children. When we dedicate one of these little ones, I see the delight in your eyes. You sit up a bit straighter. You stand a little taller. Your voices sing with hope.

Sometimes young people who grew up here but settled elsewhere return to have their children blessed by us. One of these young mothers commented that standing before the congregation reminded her of when she stood on the chancel and sang in the children's choir. She was grateful for her Lakeside experience and the ways in which it shaped her. She wants a similar experience for her daughter. Claiming our faith and exploring it together is a hallmark of this congregation. Worship is the most important thing we do. Discipleship is our calling. Responding to the call of Christ on our lives pulls us together.

This past week you received in the mail a listing of all of our committees and the people who will serve on them for the next three years. Service in and through the church pulls us together. "Church" doesn't just happen. Our ministries require commitment and involvement. Our charter members and those of you who joined soon after the congregation was organized all wanted to chip in and help. Our first pastor, Clarence Godwin, often commented on

how there were so many people eager to get involved that every committee had to have co-chairs. Everyone shared the work of the young congregation.

A sense of unity and commitment were essential for starting this congregation and they have been critical for continuing our ministry for sixty years. We care about this church because we understand that it enables us to be the Body of Christ in the world. We honor God with our worship and our lives. We serve within the church and throughout the community. We enjoy being together.

From time to time, like Jesus' closest disciples, we worry that we cannot do what God is calling us to do. We fear that we will not have enough people, enough time, enough money, or enough faith to do God's bidding. Yet, as we see in the story of Jesus feeding the multitude, the people come, the money comes, our faith is strengthened. We discover that God is able to do whatever needs doing. We are the ones who have to come together and respond.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is about faith and involvement and, yes, money. Outside of the church, we put our money into personal needs and desires. We spend our money on homes, education, vacation, cars, and "toys." We put our money into clubs and groups and sports teams. We also need to invest our money in our ministry.

In that same mailing last week there was the listing of our Ministry Plan, the manner in which we will fund all of our ministries next year. There is no excuse for any of us not to invest his or her time and talents in our ministries. There is always a way to be involved here. And there is no excuse not to invest our money in support of our ministries. Lakeside is a generous congregation. You are very generous. Whenever there is a special need, you respond. Light bills, paint, Sunday School books, musical scores, insurance, paper, and salaries do not excite us. Jesus never mentioned such things, but he did recognize that people get hungry and said to his disciples, "You give them something to eat." Our spiritual hunger is often greater than our physical appetite, but is not often satisfied in a nourishing way. We are called by Christ to meet the spiritual needs of this congregation and community in a variety of ways. No one of us can do it alone. No small group of us can begin to meet such needs. Together, however, we discover abundant resources that can be used in ministering to one another and this community. It takes everyone of us participating in order to make ministry effective. It is

essential that we all financially support the ministry to which we have committed ourselves. Nothing less than full commitment will do!

Jesus proved to the disciples that together he and his people can do anything. A couple of fish and a few loaves of bread eventually fed thousands of people. Jesus pulled them all together. If they had left and gone their separate ways, some would have been fine but many would have had no food or place to stay. Jesus pulled them all together and showed them what they could do when powered by love.

We do not have to wait for another tragedy to come together and do something good. We have Good News to share, news that will change people lives and bring them peace. We can do it together, but all of us must join in. Our commitment to God in Christ pulls us together. Our desire to share the Good News compels us to act. Our love for God and one another urges us to be generous. Our faith reveals what God can do through us. When God pulls us together, amazing things can happen. I can't wait to see what God has in store for us. I hope you won't wait either.

We have come, O Lord, thankful people each and every one: thankful for the goodness that has come our way this year; thankful for the gift of rising each morning and resting each night; thankful for health and well-being; thankful for comforting family and encouraging friends; thankful for this church and the inspiration she provides to life; thankful for your love and the grace which you give us so freely. Like the falling leaves that pile endlessly at the base of a tree, so too have the blessings of life fallen our way and swirled around us in a colorful gift of love. We are thankful people, O Lord, and we know that all good gifts come from you.

We enter a season when we focus all we do upon the good things that are ours. We celebrate family and friends, community and country, bounty and prosperity. Enable us to lift up our hearts from time to time while in the kitchen or around the table or in front of the television to remember why we celebrate and to whom we offer thanks. As we ponder our good fortune, let us remember all who do not enjoy those same gifts and pledge within our hearts to extend the gift to them.

We offer our prayers today for everyone who is ill. We may not be able to offer medical care, but we can offer care of the soul. We pray for everyone who grieves. Death and disappointment bring voids into our lives that are deep and painful. While we cannot fill those voids, we can offer consolation and affection, and we pray that we may offer these gifts freely. We pray for everyone who has spent the night cold or hungry or frightened. While we cannot ourselves cure every problem in our society, we can offer positive solutions and we can offer a helping hand. We pray that we may give generously of what we have so graciously received. We pray for all who have waked this morning to an uneasy feeling deep within them, who find neither joy in life or comfort in companionship. We know that anxiety and depression can alter the entire world for us, and we pray that we may find ways to support any who no longer find joy in life. We pray for ourselves, O God, for none of us is immune from the difficulties of life.

Bless our community and our nation, we pray. As citizens of both, we are concerned about violence and invasion of privacy. We are angered by abuse and hatred. We are grieved by the feelings of vulnerability and fear with which we live. May we discover ways to make this community a safer place in which to live, a more cooperative environment, a more peaceful haven. May we see in each other's eyes the fear that is present and be willing to acknowledge that we fear the same things and have within us the strength and resources to rid our community of the threats that cause them. Unite us in the love that conquers all ills and is redemptive of all evil. For this gift we are truly thankful and offer praise and adoration through Jesus the Christ. Amen.