



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

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## Foundations

Romans 1:16-17, 3:22-24; Matthew 7:24-29

Each morning during Vacation Bible School, a minister from one of the participating churches leads storytelling, using creative methods like role plays, videos, or hands-on activities to teach the day's Bible story. On Thursday, our own Anna Anderson, dressed as a first-century witness to Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, told the children what she saw that day when Jesus rode into the city on a lowly donkey, how it was no ordinary parade, and how Jesus was a different kind of king. Anna's costume was pretty convincing, complete with a full robe and head covering. She reports that all was going well until one of the older children asked, "If you're a first-century woman, how come you're wearing a FitBit?"

If you have ever had a child or worked with them, you know that nothing gets past them and that with some especially curious children, you have to be prepared to answer just about any question. I am told that I was that child, often peppering my parents and teachers with questions. When I was younger, my father frequently accused me of "wearing him out" with my curiosity, but my parents always encouraged my inquisitive nature, and it is a trait that has, for the most part, served me well. And now I am happy to report that I have two such inquisitive children of my own.

One thing I hear frequently from people here at Lakeside is that many of you love this congregation because it is a safe and nurturing place to ask questions, often tough and probing questions, about life and faith. A significant part of our life together here, as we worship and study and serve alongside one another, is confronting the issues and challenges that stretch and perplex us, and allowing for, even encouraging, a rich diversity of opinions and experiences as we explore this journey of faith together. Here we have come to realize that an authentic faith lived out in community requires a shared identity and foundation built on the teachings of Christ, but also plenty of room to question and adapt and grow, and wide margins of grace for a one another along the way.

In today's Gospel lesson, Matthew records the final words of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. It is curious that Matthew's Gospel leaps from the

return of Mary and Joseph with the two-year-old Jesus from Egypt after Herod's death straight to Jesus' baptism by John and the beginning of his public ministry at about the age of thirty. We know nothing of his childhood, save the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple as told by Luke. But Matthew tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to fast and pray and face temptation for forty days, and when he emerged, he called his first disciples and immediately set out teaching and healing so that his fame spread throughout the entire region of Galilee and beyond.

It is telling, then, that the first record of Jesus' teachings, other than his repetition of John's call to repentance, is this lengthy collection of sayings and parables which we call the Sermon on the Mount. Delivered to the throngs of people who had begun to follow him, Jesus' words are a challenge to the conventional wisdom and to interpretations of the Law which have been taught by the religious establishment: Blessed are the poor and meek and persecuted, not the rich and powerful and popular. You, he says to the gathered laborers and lepers and commoners and sinners, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He dares to claim that the letter of the Law doesn't go far enough when it tells us not to murder or commit adultery or swear falsely or when it allows for equivalent retaliation. Instead, he teaches that the root of our sin is found in our hearts with hatred and lust and deceit and vengeance. Jesus calls his hearers to pray for their enemies, to practice faith in secret so as not to seek accolades for themselves, to avoid judging others or worrying about the future, and to treat others as they would want to be treated.

In the span of three chapters of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus touches on nearly every aspect of life and turns the expectations and assumptions for the life of faith completely upside down. And we know that it won't take long for Jesus' words and the responses they inspire in the crowds, to become such a threat to both religious and political powers, that they will attempt to entrap him and will eventually seek his life.

It seems a bit ironic then, that Jesus would end a series of teachings that appears to shift the very religious ground in which their faith is rooted by comparing his words to rock and then calling his hearers to establish a firm foundation for life and faith by acting on them. How is it that Jesus can claim a total shift in interpreting the Law and a radical change in how we relate to God and to one another to be the solid foundation for faith?

I suspect that Jesus' method here, just as in his use of parables to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is like, and his selection of tax collectors and zealots and Samaritan women as leaders and role models, are for the

very purpose of shaking things up and causing the religiously comfortable to squirm in our seats just a bit.

We humans, maybe especially we religious types, have a tendency to become quite sure of ourselves, don't we? We like black and white expectations, often prefer clearly defined lists and laws, and feel much more secure when we can contain God and one another in the categories we've created. We're uncomfortable with too much mystery, too many unanswered questions, too much gray area. We can see it in abuses of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, in the horrific attempts to purge and purify the Church throughout history, in the actions of zealots and fundamentalists of every religion, and even in current attitudes which seek to identify "true believers" and exclude those who question or doubt or disagree.

In his book *Benefit of the Doubt*,<sup>1</sup> pastor and theologian Greg Boyd considers whether, in our current religious context, Christians have made an idol of certainty. We have built a faith, he says, on a foundation of uniformity and having "correct" answers to all the questions of faith, and a false view that God loves particular theological positions more than he loves people. Boyd says that the opposite of faith is not doubt, reminding us that faith requires of us a humility which admits we don't possess all the answers and which trusts God when our understanding is inadequate. Instead, he says, the opposite of faith is being too certain, and that we make an idol of our own ability to "know" when we insist that, in matters of faith, we have all the right answers and that those who confess to having doubts lack faith.

This understanding of faith can become confusing for us perhaps when we read other passages of scripture, such as Paul's words which Madi read earlier from the first chapter of Romans, words which many believe to be the thesis for the closest thing we have to a theological treatise from Paul: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek . . ." We often interpret Paul's words to be rigid and exclusionary, when, in fact, to his original audience, Paul was arguing for a faith far more inclusive than the legalism of his Pharisaical roots and more inclusive than many in the early church wanted. Paul's understanding is that faith in Christ is based on a grace which outranks law; a compassion which include Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; and mercy which is available to all with no regard for bloodline or station, nationality or gender, theological camp or political

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<sup>1</sup>Greg Boyd. *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI. 2013.

party, or any of the other divisions we have created to define and rank one another.

One of the features of this year's *Mighty Fortress* Vacation Bible School curriculum was an emphasis on teaching the basic tenants of the Reformation, as later this year we will celebrate the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing of his *95 Theses* to the door of the Wittenburg Church. Through daily lessons about Martin Luther's life, the children were taught how he sought to reform the abuses of the Church and to refocus its doctrine on salvation through God's grace and not works, on the centrality of the Bible in the teachings of the Church, and on the call of each believer to take responsibility for his or her own life of faith. Luther did not seek to start a new movement but rather wanted to call the Church back to its foundations based on the teachings of Christ. His was not a rigid, exclusive faith which insisted on one acceptable interpretation of belief and practice but a questioning, seeking, growing faith which flung open wide the doors of the Church for the priesthood of all believers to follow one's own conscience in living out faith in Christ.

This kind of questioning, seeking, growing faith is not always popular because it does not provide easy answers or quick fixes for life's problems or the challenges facing our world. Building a faith that will confront critical issues and questions with compassion and openness while remaining true to the teachings of Christ requires the hard work of prayer and discernment, of engaging those with differing perspectives, of serving those in need, and sometimes of speaking truth to power. It takes courage and resolve and a large measure of grace. And it calls for us to employ heart, soul, mind and strength as we seek of love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But ultimately, we call it faith because it requires a sturdy reliance upon and trust in the Christ who has called us to hear and live his words and invited us to follow him along this journey of faith.

It is a faith which doesn't align itself with any singular issue for our time but which proclaims the good news of God's radical grace for all time. It is a faith which asks tough questions, seeks understanding, and embraces mystery; which demands justice, extends kindness, wages peace, and walks humbly with God. It is a faith built on a stubborn hope and nourished by an abiding love, one that seeks to know God for oneself and not rely on the expectations and experiences of others. Above all, it is a faith built on the solid foundation of the mercy of Christ which reaches out beyond itself, extending grace to all, even those with whom we disagree, even those who doubt and question and don't have all the answers, even you, and even me. And that is very good news for us all. Thanks be to God! Amen.

## **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

**June 18, 2017**

God of grace and truth, who is our Creator, Redeemer and Friend, your word tells us that you are like a parent who guides and corrects, who protects and nurtures. We praise you, O Lord, because we have been called to be your children, heirs of a covenant you established so that we might live in loving relationship with you. You have offered us your mercy and surrounded us with your love. You have filled our lives with gracious gifts that bring joy and abundance to our days. You have granted us opportunities for work and play, for worship and service, which bring meaning and purpose for us and for those whose lives we touch. For these and all of your generous gifts, O God, we offer our thanks and praise.

God of mercy, on this day when we show appreciation for our fathers, we are thankful for those who have loved and nurtured us, for the fathers who have helped to prepare us for the living of this life and have taught us well the lessons we will need for the journey. We mourn for those fathers and children who suffer broken relationships and pray for healing to begin. We pray for mercy for those who watch their aging fathers struggle and feel helpless to relieve their pain. We ask your blessing for those whose fathers are no longer with them, that they might find comfort in wisdom shared and memories held dear. May we all seek ways to strengthen our bonds, and with your guidance, build relationships that will be a secure and positive influence in our lives, in the lives of our children and in the life of this community. Guide us now for the facing of this hour and for the living of our days, that we might reflect your love to all who need to know of your goodness and grace. In the name of our Triune God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--we make this and all our prayers. Amen.