



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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Outrageous Faith  
Acts 2:1-17; Matthew 6:25-33

So, are you Team Laurel or Team Yanny?

If you've been anywhere near the Internet this week, you've probably been sucked into the latest debate that's taking the country by storm. In case you haven't been, here's the story: Last Friday, a Georgia high school student was working on a project for her literature class and looked up the word "laurel" on [vocabulary.com](http://vocabulary.com). When she clicked on the audio button to hear the word, she heard "yanny." Perplexed, she listened several more times, and it was always the same—yanny. So she shared the clip on Reddit and asked people to vote whether they could hear "laurel" or "yanny." A heated debate ensued, and within days, the post had been shared millions of times on multiple social media platforms. By Tuesday, major news outlets had picked up the story, and the New York Times had developed an audio tool to explain that what you hear depends on whether you tend to hear higher or lower sound frequencies more prominently.

Much like the 2015 debate over whether the dress was blue and black or white and gold, the entire phenomenon has divided and baffled many homes, offices, schools, and neighborhoods. How can any sensible person hear "yanny" when I clearly typed the letters l-a-u-r-e-l and hear "laurel"? Or what is wrong with those crazy people—The screen may say "laurel" by the recording clearly says "yanny"!

Knowing that our eyes and ears can deceive us so easily, just imagine what the Jews gathered in Jerusalem must have experienced on that first Day of Pentecost! Actually, it wasn't the first Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish festival Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, which commemorates the revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and coincides with the spring harvest festival. Since it is one of the three pilgrimages commanded in the Torah, Jews from around the world had gathered in Jerusalem to fulfill their ritual obligations.

What most of them didn't know, or if they did had heard only by way of rumor, was that fifty days earlier, the Jesus who had been crucified was raised to new life and had been walking among his disciples proclaiming God's defeat of sin and death! Maybe they had heard hints and whispers, but they and the rest of the world were about to be transformed by the news. For when the disciples began to proclaim God's deeds, in a rush of wind and fire, it was no optical illusion or auditory manipulation but the power of God's Holy Spirit which caught hold of their ears and their hearts. No, the disciples weren't drunk at nine o'clock in the morning, and no one was scrambling the audio frequency in the streets of Jerusalem, but as these Galileans told of the good news of Christ's resurrection, perhaps in Greek, but more likely in their local Aramaic dialect, people from around the world heard the message in their own native languages. "What does this mean?" they began to ask. How amazed and perplexed they must have been!

And with that, God's Spirit continued the amazing, perplexing, seemingly outrageous work begun when that Spirit first hovered over the face of the deep at creation, speaking order out of the chaos. This is the same Spirit who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and to Elijah in a still, small voice; the same Spirit who purified Isaiah's unclean lips, emboldened Jeremiah's young heart, and sang through Mary's courageous song; the same Spirit who blessed Jesus at his baptism, bolstered him against the temptations of the wilderness, shook the foundations of the earth on Good Friday, and breathed re-creation in the Garden of Resurrection on Easter morning. This Holy Spirit danced in wind and flame around Jerusalem that day to empower yet another new work of God through the birthing of the Church. Or perhaps it was not new at all, but instead was the next chapter in the unfolding of God's eternal story of grace for all heaven and earth, a fulfillment of God's eternal promise to pour out God's Spirit on sons and daughters who would speak bold words and dream big dreams and make evident God's vision of a new creation.

But here we are two millennia later, and sometimes I have to wonder if God's dreams of renewal and hope were just an illusion after all. With yet another school shooting weighing heavy on our hearts; with inadequate resources to educate our children, protect our communities, feed and house our citizens, and care for our sick, or at least an unwillingness to cooperate in order to garner those resources; with threats of war to our east and to our west; with racial division in our own community and political division across our land, sometimes I wonder if God's wind of change has managed to change very much at all.

Of course, these are the words of one whose heart and soul are worn out and bruised from a constant stream of troubling news in recent days,

because surely we would acknowledge and celebrate that, despite its imperfections and even in the face of ongoing suffering and division in our world, the Church has been a powerful channel for God's love and mercy and a source of great strength and hope for many. As in every age, then, our challenge, as Christ's Church in our own time and place is to be attentive to the Spirit's continuing work among us and to discern the ways God is calling us to participate in that work of redemption and renewal. This is our calling as ones who claim faith in the Risen Christ and seek to follow him.

It was in our desire to discern that calling that the youth and I set out on a journey of discovering the "Outrageous Faith" modeled and taught by Jesus in our Bible studies and activities this year. Using the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7 as our guide, we delved into the radical nature of Jesus' teachings for his followers to live counter-cultural lives of mercy, forgiveness, generosity, humility, courage, peace, and simplicity.

Ours is a world, after all, which tells us that we are blessed if we are wealthy, powerful, healthy, and comfortable. We often count our blessings by enumerating our successes, possessions, relationships and other measures which are given high value in our culture. When someone says "have a blessed day" or when we pray or wish for someone to receive God's blessings, we likely mean those circumstances and things that will bring ease and comfort to our days, confer status, or offer pleasure.

Indeed, these things are blessings in the sense that they are among the gifts God provides in the good life I believe he intends for all of us. The problem comes, however, when we begin to believe that we have received these blessings because we are deserving of them and that those who lack such gifts are less deserving.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus emphasizes that in God's Kingdom, the values of this world are turned upside down. We are not to assume that those who lack the world's riches and power—the poor, the outsider, the outcast, and the persecuted—are excluded from God's grace and blessing, but instead are welcomed into the Kingdom of God and are blessed in ways the world may not even recognize. Jesus' sermon teaches us that grace is to be found not in following the letter of the Law of Torah but in living the law of mercy (an outrageous idea for followers of Torah, indeed!). Love and prayers are extended not only for family and friends, Jesus says, but also and especially for enemies and for those who would persecute us. We are to fulfill the duties of our faith to give alms, pray, and fast, not for the sake of seeking honor and recognition but are to do so in private, as a matter of the heart, between us and God. And, as we read in today's Gospel passage,

what may be most difficult of all, we are not to worry about things that, for many of us, plague our thoughts and fuel our anxieties every day—the temporary things that are most valued in this world. Instead, we are to trust those things to God's provision and focus our energy and attention on seeking all those things Jesus has told us are most valued in God's Kingdom, things like mercy, forgiveness, generosity, humility, courage, peace, and simplicity.

The Sermon on the Mount is filled with words that have become so familiar to our ears that perhaps we no longer hear them as a radical call to an outrageous faith that would often set Christ's followers at odds with the priorities and values of this world. If we take this call seriously, ours will be faith that will lead us to give sacrificially, work tirelessly, and speak courageously, not for our own self-interest or comfort but for inclusion, justice, and mercy for those are the last and the least, those who are utterly different from us, and even those the world tells us are supposed to be our enemies.

Now, this may seem like an odd, even an outrageous, message to offer on a day set aside for celebrating with our graduates and preparing to send them off into the world. Perhaps on this day, we should be offering to our young people a rousing summons to go out and make their place in the world by gaining all the knowledge they can, making a name for themselves, and working to be successful at everything. There is certainly nothing wrong with knowledge, notoriety, or success. And the voices that will call you to those goals are many, and they are loud.

But here, in the words of Jesus, we hear a different call, a call that may cause us to wonder if our ears are deceiving us and to ask, "What does this mean?" When we listen closely to this call, we just might hear the outrageous claim that men and women, black and white, rich and poor, Nash County and Edgecombe, can lay down our various agendas and find ways to work together for the sake of ALL members of this community. When we open our eyes to what God is doing among us, we might begin to see an outrageous vision of gun owners and gun-control advocates pulling their chairs into a circle of respectful dialogue about how they can work together to protect our children and decrease violence. When God's Spirit moves among us, we may hear the voices of young people speaking with wisdom well beyond their years and acting with courage that has thus far eluded their elders. When we feel the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing in our midst, we may even recognize the powerful image of a black North Carolina preacher standing in the pulpit of St. George's Chapel proclaiming the Gospel as British royalty marries a biracial American and the whole world tunes in to celebrate—an image that would have been impossible even a generation ago and which gives us all hope that love truly does have the power to change the world.

To our graduates, and to those young people who are not far behind, you step out into a world that is uncertain and complex and sometimes frightening. There will be many voices calling, many choices vying for your attention, and many messages trying to convince you what is most valuable. Among the noise and chaos, I encourage you to tune your ears to the amazing, perplexing, outrageous words of Jesus which have been taught to you in this place and modeled for you in the lives of those gathered here who love you.

Carry with you the assurance that you are surrounded by the prayers of these people and empowered by the God who has created you lovingly in his image. Step out in the hope that wherever the journey of life takes you and whatever you do with the days you are given, you are nurtured by God's love and sustained by God's Spirit.

And wherever we are along our journey of this amazing, perplexing, outrageous faith, if we listen carefully, in the words of Jesus we can hear the eternal yet still-fresh words of God's Spirit telling us that it is in losing our lives for the sake of Christ that we will find our true selves, that in humbling ourselves we will be exalted, that in valuing the things that are rejected by the world we will find the greatest riches, and that when we seek God's Kingdom above all else we just may find not only that but everything else thrown in as well. Thanks be to God! Amen.

**May 20, 2018**

**Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

We witness the beauty and power and terror of a volcano that erupts in torrents of fire and we are awed, O God. Our world is a wondrous place that often blesses and sometimes wounds but always amazes us. We witness anger and confusion and cruelty unimaginable at the hands of a bright and quiet young man with a hopeful future and we are sickened and sad, O God, that your own children can bring such pain and death to their sisters and brothers. We witness the celebration of marriage which testifies to the power of love to bring people together and hold them for a lifetime and we are amazed, O God, that we all hold that kind of love in our hearts because you have showed us this love. We witness the wind and fire of your Spirit taking hold of our lives and assuring us of your presence with us, and we are blessed, O God. Thank you for the world you have given to us, a world which holds far more beauty and wonder than ugliness and pain. Thank you for your Spirit which never leaves us and gives us the joy and courage to celebrate life at every turn. Teach us to see and promote the good and to transform all that is not good, we pray.

Today we celebrate our young people and the gift that they are to us all. We are grateful for their enthusiasm, their creativity, and their many gifts which they share with us. Bless them with a deep desire to know you better and to live out the love and grace you have given them. Help us to keep them safe, we pray, and to offer them a world of goodness and hope. Bless our graduates and guide them to study and work which will bring them satisfaction and will better the life that swirls around them. Bless their families during a time of excitement when holding on and letting go are daily routines. Work your wonder through these young people, we pray, and bless us all.

We witness the wonder and struggle, the successes and failures, the blessings and curses, the love and the hate that make up our lives and we are awed, O God, that you do not abandon us but breathe your Spirit over and around and within us. Ignite the fire in our lives, we pray, and send us into life proclaiming your goodness and grace in all that we do and say and are; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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