



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Finding Your Voice
1 Peter 2:4-10; Matthew 22:34-40

It was on All Hallow's Eve in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany, seeking to reform the Catholicism in which he served as an Augustinian friar. Highlighting the widespread greed and abuses he had observed, his call for the Church to return to the doctrine and practices of Scripture and for individual believers to take more responsibility for their own faith set off an avalanche of responses, rebuttals and even violence. It led ultimately, of course, not only to reform but also to entire new movements within Christendom, an examination of conscience and allegiances in many individuals, and a fresh understanding of the ways each believer relates to God, Scripture, and the Church.

On a day like today, as we sit in this comfortable and familiar place celebrating Luther's courage and giving thanks for the life and work of the Body of Christ, it is easy for us to forget the tumultuous, sometimes even bloody, history of the Church. And if we are honest, we would all probably rather forget the less-than-Christlike ways that those professing Christ's name have treated one another, not just hundreds of years ago, but even up to this present day. The Christ who is the Incarnate Word, the Prince of Peace, has been used far too often as a justification for hateful speech and divisive or destructive actions, not just to those outside the fold but also to those we call brothers and sisters in Christ.

And because we have followed in the path of Luther and other reformers after him, we are also apt to forget that, while his ideas may have given rise to the Church's most dramatic transformation in theology and practice, what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation was certainly not the first shift in the foundations of the Church. Author and theologian Phyllis Tickle has pointed out that Christianity has undergone a major realignment about once in every 500 years. From our humble beginnings as small clusters of house churches and local congregations made up mainly of converted Jews, to the religion of the Empire under the rule of Constantine, to the Great Schism of 1054 dividing east and west into the Orthodox and

Catholic faiths, to Luther's great reforms, the Church has had to wrestle with new ideas and decide which old ones to discard, to make decisions about how it would accommodate shifts in knowledge and culture. Since we now stand 497 years after Luther's courageous act, it would seem we are due for the next of what Tickle calls Christianity's "semi-millennial rummage sale of ideas."

One doesn't have to look very far or for very long to realize that we seem to be right on time! Even with an untrained eye, it is hard to miss the shifts we are seeing in the institutions of the Church today—denominational realignments, mainline churches shrinking dramatically, evangelicals dividing over social issues, a significant increase in people who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and a recent surge in the much-talked-about group known as the "nones"—those who identify themselves with no religion at all. There are many who are excited about the possibilities for what is known as the emerging church movement, a category of Christian communities which defy definitions of traditional denominations, sometimes even refusing labels like "liberal," "conservative," or "evangelical."

The truth is, we don't really know what to call this movement or how to predict its impact yet, but its growth has left many in more traditional ecclesiastical circles, especially in those groups heavy on denominational bureaucracy and structure, wringing their hands, cutting budgets and closing church doors.

As with many of the institutions around which we have built our lives, "the times they are a-changin'" as technology, communication, cultural assumptions, institutional loyalties, family structures, and long-accepted norms are called into question, leaving us, in so many areas of life, feeling as if the sands are constantly shifting beneath our feet.

So then, what are we to do? For those of us who invest our time, talents and treasure in an institution that is changing so rapidly, how do we keep up? How do we maintain a community of faith that is vibrant and relevant and healthy, not just in terms of its numbers, but, just as important, in the ways it nurtures its members and ministers to those beyond its walls?

I wish I had a simple answer, a magic pill or crystal ball that would tell us all what to do, but I don't and neither does anyone else who may claim that the solution is crystal clear.

On the other hand, maybe a simple answer is not desirable after all, if by that we mean an easy way to return to some nostalgic view of the

"organized religion" of decades gone by. For if we remain stuck in the past, if we refuse to reshape and reform ourselves, whether as individuals or as a community, then we are stagnant and, even if stable numerically, are withering already.

Perhaps we are measuring ourselves by the wrong yard stick, then, believing the messages of our culture which tell us that the best ways to gauge value and growth are by numbers and comparisons, by grading ourselves on a curve, or by accumulating power and status and wealth.

As Luther called followers of Christ to do in all matters of faith, we look first to Scripture for the guideposts to navigate these uncertain paths, and both of today's lessons offer important words about our identity as the Church.

The First Epistle of Peter is written as a word of encouragement to the churches in Asia Minor, relatively new converts who are experiencing oppression and hostility from their neighbors. The letter reminds them that they are not just an institution but are the Body of Christ, chosen by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. They are not just a collection of individuals but are a house built from living stones, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (v. 9). They are to remain courageous and faithful, even in the midst of challenges or suffering, because they have been chosen to demonstrate the living hope of Christ to those around them and to the world. In the darkness surrounding them, they provide light. In the face of destruction and death, they offer life.

Over and over throughout Jesus' teachings and the writings of the New Testament, we find that our call as the Body of Christ is not to accommodate or assimilate the powerful influences around us but to stand with the powerless, to offer hope to the hopeless, to bring light to the darkness.

But how are we to accomplish such monumental tasks when we as individuals are so small in the face of such enormous challenges and when the influence of the Church seems to be waning?

Time after time in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, we find Jesus taking on the powerful and challenging our assumptions about what is most valuable. He stood toe-to-toe with those who had the ability to silence him and spoke truth to their power, often turning their own attempts at entrapment back on them and astounding them with his wisdom. In Matthew's Gospel, much emphasis is placed on Jesus' "Jewishness," especially his place as the "New Moses" and his fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies concerning the Messiah.

In today's Gospel lesson, we find Jesus involved in yet another confrontation with the Pharisees, the keepers of the Law, who demanded rigorous adherence to all of the laws recorded in the Torah and to the detailed interpretations of the Law called the Midrash. The Pharisees are often portrayed as misusing their knowledge of the Law to entrap people and misusing their power for personal gain. Here we find the Pharisees trying to test Jesus, asking him to choose as most important just one of the 613 laws, all of which, according to these same Pharisees, had to be followed strictly in order to be considered righteous.

Jesus did not hesitate, however, when he quoted from Deuteronomy, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." Then he likely shocked them all when he added the charge from Leviticus, but equated it with loving God: "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And just in case they missed that he thought these the most important, he added, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love God, and love your neighbor. All of the law and the prophets boil down to these. The entire witness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection come down to this: Love God, and love your neighbor. And here he says that this is the foundation of our life of faith as well.

We might be tempted here to say, then, that we can just throw out the rest and keep these two. "Keep it simple, stupid," right? But when given the chance here, Jesus didn't say for us to discard the rest, rather that these two provide the framework for everything else. "Love God, and love your neighbor" sounds simple enough, but the wisdom gained from experience tells us that there is nothing simple about it. Learning to love God and neighbor is a life-long endeavor, one that will require all of the energy, focus, discipline, and prayer we can muster. Loving God with our whole selves means continuing to have faith when life gets hard and God seems so far away. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means loving those who are lovable but also those who are hard or inconvenient to love: those with whom we disagree, those who offend us, those who have committed offenses that have landed them in prison, those whose lifestyles or opinions or languages or religions seem foreign to us.

So, having examined these two texts, we return to the question—In light of the cultural shifts around us and the resulting challenges, even deterioration, we are witnessing within the Church, and in light of our uncertainty about the future of an institution we love, what are we to do?

Many important thinkers about church matters, among them names like Hauerwas and Willimon and Douglas John Hall, have, in recent years, begun calling the Church to remember that we not simply and institution, a civic group, or a reflection of the particular culture we inhabit. Echoing the ideas from 1 Peter, Matthew, and many other New Testament writers, they remind us that we are the Body of Christ, God's own people, God's representatives of the living Christ on earth and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are not just a collection of individuals with a common interest or goal, however noble it might be. We are, individually and collectively, call to love God with our whole selves and to demonstrate that love by loving others.

Lakeside is a vibrant and healthy congregation, nurturing the lives of those who are a part of us through worship, education, and fellowship, and meeting vital needs in this community and beyond. And because we are a Baptist congregation which is not as closely tied to large denominational bodies as many other mainline congregations, we may be tempted think that we are relatively unaffected by the shifts in the religious landscape. But we would do well to pay attention to the work of these writers and others like them, for there are changes and challenges ahead for all of us who are involved in the work of the Church.

Lest we find ourselves in a place of despair, however, these writers also offer a word of hope. It is natural for us to mourn the apparent decline of denominations and congregations that have shaped our identity for generations, to fear the uncertainty of such enormous changes in these once-reliable structures, and to worry over their futures. But we might also begin to see these challenges as an opportunity for the Body of Christ to become vibrant in ways we have never imagined, or at least haven't imagined since the first century. Perhaps this latest "rummage sale" of the Church will allow us to discard structures and assumptions that have hampered our true calling to love as Christ loved, to speak prophetically to the powers of this world, to live out our call to transform ourselves and our culture into the image of Christ.

We are not at our best when we are aligned too closely with structures of power and politics, whatever their form. Jesus stood against those power structures, and when the Church has most effectively been the Church is when it has been free of such entanglements as prevent us from speaking truth to power and holding it to account for excesses and abuses. Jesus demonstrated this kind of courage when he dwelled among us, and Martin Luther called us back to this example of Jesus when he challenged the abuses of the 16th-century Church. It just may be our turn take up the cause

of continuing to examine and re-form our faith and the Church in which we live out that faith as the Body of Christ.

Almost 400 years before Luther pursued his reforms, another German, a Benedictine abbess named Hildegard of Bingen was challenging the Church in her own way. She is counted among the great Christian mystics of the Middle Ages for her accounts of vivid, personal visions which she believed to be direct messages from God. Recorded in her visionary accounts, as well as letters, poems, and music, Hildegard also challenged the idea that Christ is available to us only through the mediation of the Church.

In her own spirit of reformation, Hildegard wrote, "We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light."

Beginning with Christ and through the centuries of those faithful souls who have born his name, we hear the call to be the Church. It can be a difficult, even terrifying work, for in so doing, we just may find ourselves being re-formed as well. But it is the important, life-changing, culture-shaping, transforming work to which we are called: to listen and interpret for ourselves, to find our own voice and have the courage to speak the truth of the Gospel, to discover the light of Christ and by it, to dispel the darkness.

Let us pray: May we live our lives, Holy God, loving you with our whole selves and sharing that love with those we encounter. And may we, as so many saints who have come before us, build our lives upon a foundation of faith that is "a living, daring confidence in your grace, so sure and certain that [we] could stake [our lives] on it a thousand times" (Martin Luther). Amen.

Holy God, Creator of all things, we come to worship this day realizing that we have so much for which to be thankful. The bounty of the earth rises to meet us with but little of our labor. The prosperity and freedom we take for granted are the envy of nations. Our lives are overflowing with relationships which bring us joy and fulfillment. We are flooded by opportunities to work, to worship, to study, to travel, to enjoy. O God, may the extent of our gratitude never fall short of the vastness of your blessings. And may our thankfulness also be the occasion for our confession that everything we have that is good and beautiful and joyful is the product of your love and grace. Then we will acknowledge that were our entire lives devoted to acts of thanksgiving, your generosity would be infinitely greater still.

On this Reformation Sunday, we also offer our thanks for those great saints who had the courage and the wisdom to bring renewal to your Church. For their steadfast conviction that our redemption comes through your grace and not by any work that we might perform to earn it; for their faith in believing that we could communicate with you and be called by you without the need for a human mediator; and for their courage to stand against the abuses of government and church hierarchies, we are grateful, O God. Give us the courage to live this faith and to preserve these principles that our children might continue to enjoy these cherished freedoms and practices.

Even as we offer our praise and gratitude, Loving God, we understand that ours is a world where many suffer more pain than we are likely to experience and have needs greater than we can comprehend. For those who live under the shadow of illness and death, we pray for your healing. For those whose homes and families are not safe havens but rather places of fear and violence, we pray for your peace. For those whose minds and bodies and futures are stunted by a lack of food and education and hope, we pray for your compassion. For those who are imprisoned, we pray for the light of your grace to pierce all that binds them in body and spirit so that their lives might be transformed. Bless the work of the Tar Roanoke Chaplaincy Ministry and all those who minister in challenging circumstances, that they might offer hope and healing to those who are often forgotten.

Forgive us, O Lord, when we do not see, when we do not speak, when we do not care for all of your children. May we speak for those who have no voice. May we stand for those who have no strength. May we make in this congregation and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of light and hope and peace. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.