



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Becoming Church Matthew 16:13-20; I John 3:1-2

This summer, my brothers and I have been going through a lifetime of treasures and trash in the home where we grew up. Over Labor Day, I went down and spent some time sorting through my own boxes of personal mementos. Yes, I said “boxes”—plural! I inherited many fine traits from my parents. I also inherited the inclination to keep just about everything I have ever touched. I pity my children when they have this task!

As I examined every item that I once considered priceless, I came across a cartoon I had clipped a long time ago. It was a *Ziggy* cartoon. Do you remember Ziggy? I think he still exists in some newspapers. It became one of my favorites when it first appeared in the 70's. This short, round, incredibly unlucky guy became the poster child for everybody's worst bad day. The cartoon from May of 1972 shows Ziggy standing with several rocks at his feet. He says, “To some people a rock is a stumbling stone . . . to some it is a stepping stone . . . to others it is a milestone . . . or perhaps a millstone . . .” Then he adds “. . . rocks are very versatile!”¹ I thought, “I don't think I have ever heard a more succinct and accurate description of the Church.”

Before you conclude that I have slipped into the deep end of the pool, let me explain. A little earlier we listened to the passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus quizzed his disciples about his public image and then turned the question on them. “Who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter, most likely always the first one to speak up, said, “You are the Messiah—the Christ, the Son of the living God.” “You're right!” Jesus exclaimed as he pointed out that Simon did not come up with that answer on his own; instead, God revealed it to him. He went on to say, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”

What is this rock on which Jesus was determined to build his church? Was Simon Peter himself the rock as the Roman Catholic Church believes

¹Tom Wilson, *Ziggy*, © May 25, 1972, Universal Press Syndicate.

which led to the claim that Peter was the first pope? After all, Jesus does a little word play with Peter's name which is a derivation of a Greek word meaning rock. Or is the rock, the foundation on which the Church was built, actually the confession of Simon Peter's faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God?

I believe Jesus was referring to Peter's profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Truly, this belief is the bedrock of the Church. The fellowship which encompasses believers across time and space would not exist apart from the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, God's unique Child.

It is true that the Church can be rock-like. The faith of believers around the world and across time is strong, sturdy, and a sure foundation. The Church Universal has made the world better. It is also true that the Church as an institution of believers can be rock-like in the sense of being heavy, dense, and immovable. I think Ziggy was right about rocks and, without knowing it, quite a theologian to boot. Like a rock, the Church can be a stumbling stone, a stepping stone, a millstone, or a milestone.

To some people the Church is a stumbling stone. Because it is comprised of imperfect people, the Church is imperfect. Throughout history, the Church as an institution has not always been on the side of what is right. In some instances, the Church has supported, encouraged, propagated, and covered up horrible acts against our brothers and sisters in the world. Rather than call for repentance, it has, at times, actually encouraged sin. While these transgressions do not characterize the Church as a whole, any failure to fulfill our calling to protect and care for one another out of compassion and grace is an affront to God and humanity. It is no wonder some people have stumbled at the door of the Church and decided to pass on by.

On the other hand, for many people the Church has been a stepping stone. It has provided a safe path over troubled waters. It has opened doors to opportunities otherwise unavailable. It has been a means of personal growth and maturity. It has been a haven of salvation and a path of escape from the brutalities of life. Through ministries like children's homes, hospitals, schools at all levels, shelters, soup kitchens, disaster recovery, home building, counseling, and other programs that meet just about any need that exists, the Church has provided a safe pathway that has enabled many people to step into a better, safer, enriched life.

Sadly, for other people, the Church has on occasion been a millstone, a heavy weight that dragged them down. Many of us remember the days when the doors of the church were not fully open to welcome anyone who might walk through them. I remember the Sunday in my home church when a vote was taken as to whether or not Blacks would be accepted into the congregation if they requested membership. The majority of people voted in the affirmative, but I can still feel the chill of those three no votes that somehow determined the outcome of the decision. Through the centuries, depending on the place and time, women were not fully valued in the Church. Their gifts were relegated to certain areas that carried no authority. Some people in the early Church depended on adherence to the Jewish law as a litmus test of faith. Of late, the Church has used other markers such as sexuality and gender identity to determine who is welcomed to cross the threshold into fellowship. At times throughout its history, the church has ignored the divinity within some of God's children and has actively supported their oppression. Power, wealth, and prestige can be just as alluring within the family of faith as outside its doors. The rock that the Church was intended to be has, at times, been like a millstone, pulling people down and crushing their spirits.

Fortunately, for many of us, the rock of the Church has been a milestone, a marker on the way of life that has helped to put life in perspective. The Church gives context to life and offers direction for how best to live. How many of us mark our lives by particular experiences in the Church? Infant dedications, baptisms, graduations, weddings, funerals and other significant events are celebrated among the people of God. The Church is a guide along the way, a place of rest when weary, a source of strength when weak. Many times throughout history and certainly in personal experience, the Church of Jesus Christ has been the beacon that offered guidance along the way of life.

Cartoon Ziggy is right—rocks are versatile. The rock on which the Church is built is also versatile and can tilt toward good or evil depending on how we the people who are the Church understand our foundation of Jesus Christ as Lord. We know that the Church, this gift of God, is intended to be a strong foundation for life and not a weapon that destroys life. For that reason, the Church has most often been a rock of refuge, stability, and possibility. It is a gift of God.

Peter's confession caused me to think about the foundation of our faith, the fact that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. I remembered the words

from the Letter of I John: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” The Church that is built on the foundation of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God is comprised of the children of God. That is who we are.

Have you ever received a card in the mail, particularly when it was not a special occasion like a birthday, that simply reminded you that you are special and loved? How good something like that makes us feel! I think that is what the writer of John wanted to do. He wanted to remind the early believers of how special they were. “See what love the Father has given us,” he gushed.

Many are the stories of parents’ sacrificial love for their children. We all know of parents who toil away, sometimes working more than one job, in order to provide a home, food, clothing, and education for their children. We know of parents who stand courageously between their children and harm’s way. We know parents who provide their children with valuable opportunities to learn and experience and grow. We know parents who share their faith and encourage their children toward faith in God. Many of us had such parents. If we have had or will have the opportunity, I hope each of us aspires to be that kind of parent.

The concept of God as Father–Heavenly Parent–was strong among Jews and early Christians. It was natural for the writer of this letter to rely on this image and relationship to convey to his fellow believers how special they were to God: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” Children of God–it doesn’t get any better than that! Not only to belong to God, but to be claimed by God, is very special.

There is more. “Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” What more could there be? What more could we want than to be the children of God? John’s speculation is that we will become more like Jesus.

What intrigues me is John’s notion that God is not done with us. We are not finished. We have not arrived. We are not complete. Instead, we are becoming. We are becoming like Jesus.

I like to reach goals, to find a stopping place, to accomplish something I can point to as complete. I feel satisfied when *The Link* is published every

Wednesday, when the order of worship is printed for use on Sunday, and when the final amen is said in worship. There is great satisfaction in looking at my yard after I have trimmed and mowed the grass and blown away the debris, even if I have to do it all over again next week. Something has been done. Something is accomplished. Something is complete. Yet, what a shame if I stopped there. How sad if there were no more news to share, no more opportunities for worship, no grass to grow or flowers to blossom. Life is not static. The only time we cease to change is when we die. And that truth, I believe, pertains not only to our bodies. I believe that our spirits continue to experience and grow and change in the full presence of God.

Life is dynamic. There is always change. Since the Church is made up of people like you and me, both the Church Universal and every local church like Lakeside—change. Because you and I, the children of God, are becoming something better, our church is also changing and growing, becoming more like Jesus.

If anyone likes tradition, I do. There are a lot of things that I want to keep just as they are. I find something that works and I stick with it. If done well, it holds purpose and meaning in place. If not, however, it becomes worn and lifeless and irrelevant.

In one of the previous churches I served, there was the tradition of always having two women deacons. The positive side of that guideline was that it guaranteed there would always be two women on the Diaconate. I learned, however, that the original purpose of this rule was not so much to guarantee that the church had benefit of the spiritual gifts women had to offer. It seems that when communion was served, two people were needed to remove and neatly fold the linen cloth that covered the plates and cups. Apparently none of the men in the church could handle that simple task, so two women were elected to do it for them. Fortunately, over time, the tradition led to greater appreciation of the gifts of women in the church and the limits on the number of women serving and what they could do were removed. The church was becoming more like Jesus and open to the gifts and abilities of all people.

We are the children of God. We are the Church, Christ's body on earth. We are also still becoming something special, something strong and sturdy and good. Granted, we are not perfect and we do not always get it right. Sometimes we are a stumbling stone, sometimes a stepping stone, sometimes a millstone, and sometimes a milestone. The call of the Gospel

and the versatility of the Church enable us to move and shift and grow and change as the needs of the world around us change. What we will be has not yet been fully revealed. We do know we are becoming more like Jesus.

I would never have imagined that there would be an extended period of time when Christians all over the world would be unable to physically gather together to worship and serve God. I would never have imagined that week by week we would worship together through the gift of technology and that even though we are not in the same space, and even though we will not actually all worship at the same time, we are still worshipping together and God is honored and pleased. I would never have imagined that we could be physically apart for so long and still maintain the strong ties that bind us together. I should not be surprised, however, because we are the Church and the Church is versatile because it is built upon a strong foundation, faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

I do not know what we are becoming, but I do know that we will never be the same. There was nothing wrong with the Lakeside of February 2020, but the Lakeside of the future, near and far, will be stronger, more agile, more creative, and more relevant to our community than we have ever been before. We are becoming what God wants us to be. We are becoming more like Christ and discerning the needs around us and within us and finding creative ways to meet them through the Good News of the Gospel. As the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the church at Philippi which was so beautifully sung for us a few minutes ago, "For I am sure that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:6). What we will be has not yet been revealed but what we know is this: we will be like Jesus because we will see him as he is. I don't know exactly what we are becoming as a family of faith, but I can't wait to find out! Let's do so together! Amen.

September 13, 2020

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is natural and good for us to wonder about your work among us, O God. The more we think about you and what you are doing in us and through us, the closer we come to you and the better we understand you. We are grateful that you sent Jesus to live among us and to reveal your immense love and profound desire that we live as Christ in the world.

Work in us, O Christ, and teach how to better care for one another. There are so many needs around us: hungers of the body and mind, physical and mental illnesses, lack of food and shelter and health care, a thirst for the refreshing waters of the Spirit. Help us to become more aware of the people around us and stir our compassion so that we respond in ways that are helpful and life-affirming.

Work in us, O Christ, and show us how to get along. There are so many divisions that separate us, so many petty concerns that raise our ire, so many critical issues that put us at odds instead of uniting us to work toward helpful solutions. Teach us humility and respect so that we might honor the Christ who dwells within each of us and demonstrate to the world that you are the Messiah of all.

Work in us, O Christ, and soothe the pain that is burrowed deep within us. Comfort us in our sorrow, ease our disappointments, heal the wounds that debilitate us, and bring us your peace.

Work in us, O Christ, and bring health where we are ill and wholeness where we are fractured. Bless everyone who toils on our behalf and grant safety to those who willingly jeopardize themselves for our sake.

Work in us, O Christ, to be better stewards of the earth and of the Spirit. Remind us that you inhabit all life and that injury to life is an attack on you. Stir our sense of wonder and gratitude for this world that you have given us and enable us to protect it for all of your children yet to come.

On a weekend when we remember one of the worst tragedies and atrocities to befall our nation, continue to bring healing and hope to us all. Lead us to the path of peace and give us the courage to walk it.

Work in us, O Christ, and make us whole, through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.