

A Confusing Church  
Psalm 1; Luke 6-30  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, (May 16) 2025  
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Last Sunday, it was our great privilege to host Rev. Peter Johnson from Dallas. At age 23, Rev. Johnson was the youngest member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) working under Martin Luther King, Jr. and others like Andy Young. Rev. Johnson told us about being sent to Dallas in 1969. He had already been undergoing training in the nonviolent way of doing things under Dr. King, and when he went to Dallas, Andy Young reminded young Peter Johnson of his nonviolent training because Peter tended to fire back at his racist opponents and be ready to fight.

Rev. Johnson reminded us of the nonviolent way. When someone attacks us or criticizes us or threatens us, we don't fight back like they are expecting. Instead, we respond with love and patience. Rev. Johnson said, "When we respond with nonviolence, it confuses them. They don't know what to do."

I'm here to tell you this morning, that is our calling. We are called to be a church so rooted in Jesus Christ and his Way, that we confuse people. We especially confuse those with power whose lives are based upon fear and anger, coercion and domination. We confuse them with mercy and love, grace and suffering servanthood.

Let me be clear. Our goal is not to be confusing. Our goal is to root our lives in Jesus Christ so that our actions and attitudes reflect Christ. The practical result is that it confuses people who think everything is about power or wealth or control.

So, rooting ourselves we learn to discern what is important from what is not, what is Christ centered truth from what is manipulation and falsehood.

Last week, Vice President J.D. Vance said in a Fox News interview: “You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.” Then he pointed out that the concept is “basic common sense” because one’s moral duties to one’s children outweigh those “to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away.”

Vance is referring to the teachings of Augustine in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> who said that our loves and desires are messed-up and disordered because we do not love God more than anyone or anything else. When we learn to love God first, then all our other loves begin to get in order. Or as Jesus puts it, we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus also says we are to love our enemies.

The Vice President gets both his loves and his theology messed-up, and then he said, it’s “basic common sense.” To love like Jesus is not basic common sense. To love like Jesus – loving both our neighbors and our enemies – is not common sense. In Christ, we are to be trained to love like Christ loves. It’s called discipleship. Loving like Christ loves can be very confusing to others. Christ’s Way is upending, revolutionary, and confusing.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (I Cor. 1:20).

Our Gospel reading this morning is from what’s called the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. Like the entire book of Luke, the sermon is full of paradox. On one

hand Luke is perhaps the most attractive of the Gospel writers. He writes with an elegant and beautiful style yet is perhaps the most revolutionary of the four Gospel writers. His parables are down to earth, with hospitality around a table everywhere.

At the same time, Luke is full of disruption and upheaval. God is turning the established order upside-down, stripping power from dominating tyrants and lifting up the poor and the weak.

New Testament scholar Tom Long suggests that reading Luke, and reading the Sermon on the Plain, is something like seeing Jesus at the top of a mountain setting up tables and putting out folding chairs and inviting everyone, and I mean everyone, to a lavish meal where there is wonderful food and plenty of it, where there is joy and laughter and conversation. You get to the tables where everyone has a place and discover that the tables are set up in a prime viewing area on the lip of a volcano about to erupt with social upheaval and revolution. There is great joy and there is fear and trembling. There is the joy of those on the bottom being lifted up while the high and mighty are about to be cast down.

So, do you see why Jesus in Luke is confusing? Common sense has nothing to do with it.

<sup>20</sup> *Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."* <sup>21</sup> *"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."* *"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."* <sup>22</sup> *"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Human One."* <sup>23</sup> *Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets."* <sup>24</sup> *"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."* <sup>25</sup> *"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."* *"Woe to you who are laughing*

*now, for you will mourn and weep. <sup>26</sup> “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

*<sup>27</sup> “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again.*

Our reading from Psalm 1 says, “Blessed are those who are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. ... but the wicked are not so, they are as nothing, like chaff that the wind blows away.”

The 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm is very clear, to make it and survive, we must be rooted like a tree beside the living waters in God. What the New Testament tells us, and this morning, specifically Luke, is that we are called to root our lives in Jesus and his Way that we hear about in the Sermon on the Plain.

What you’ve heard from me for 35 years is that it takes practice, practice, practice rooting our lives together in Christ, so that when the hard times comes or the unexpected shocks us, we will discern what to do, and further, we will have the strength and courage to do it.

Now I’m reaching the time where I believe we need new leadership, with new vision, and new energy. Nine months from now, Sunday, November 16 will be my last Sunday as your pastor. Nine months gives us time for transition, for discernment, and preparation. For instance, we are already involved in Thriving Congregation Initiatives with the CBF and Fellowship Southwest. Next Saturday

and Sunday, our own Rev. Jillian Farmer Hankamer will be here to talk with us about what's out there in the world of young clergy and innovative churches who have to be quick on their feet. I urge you to be here on Saturday and Sunday morning to hear her and dialogue with her. In the months to come, we will have further opportunities. And in the months to come, we will talk more about what I'm going to do, including writing a book about a tall, slim pastor who was pastor of a small congregation for 35 years.

Like everything else we've done over the past 35 years, we will do this together because we are rooted together in Christ.

I've told some of this story before, so perhaps you will remember back to August 2013, when Antoinette Tuff the bookkeeper at an elementary school in Decatur, Georgia found herself sitting at the front desk facing a 20-year-old white man, named Michael Hill, armed with an AK-47 and five hundred rounds of ammunition. Throughout the day, she talked to Michael Hill who was out of his head, keeping him calm so he would not start killing the 800 students in attendance. At the same time, she was talking to the 911 operator on the phone and trying to get the police to arrive but not kill the young shooter. Through it all, she was able to talk the shooter into laying down his weapons and surrendering before anyone got hurt.

Later in interviews, she said, "I had just lost my husband after 33 years, a man that I had been with since I was 13 years old, a man that I put before myself, a man that I love before myself." So, on this day when she confronts this shooter getting ready to shoot everyone he can, including her, she had recently discovered that her husband had left her for another woman.

But that's not all. She had just received a phone call telling her she did not come up with \$15,000 her car was about to be repossessed. She said, "And I knew that I didn't have that kind of money. And I knew that I needed my car to be able to get to work every day. ... And it was overwhelming, because not only did I lose my husband at that time, I also lost his salary too. So, before I even got to the front desk that day, I got that call, and it was very overwhelming for me. I was in tears and screaming out, 'God help me!'"

So, with all that going on, what made her so skillful and so compassionate when confronted with a heavily armed man who told her he wasn't afraid to die? What allowed her to see him as a child of God? What made it possible for her to speak to him as if he were a member of her own family, to call him "baby," to tell him she loved him, to promise to stay with him until the police arrived and to make sure they didn't shoot him? "I've never been so scared in all the days of my life," she told the 911 operator when it was all over.

When she was asked to explain how she did it, she talked about a contemplative practice that she had been taught at church. The previous Sunday, she told Anderson Cooper, her church had begun a series on how to anchor yourself in God as you move through your life. And it inspired her so much that she got up early on Monday morning so she could study and practice before she went to work. By the time the gunman walked into her school on Tuesday morning, she had been practicing anchoring herself, rooting herself in God, praying on the inside no matter what was going on around her, for three days. When the shooter walked into her office and pointed a gun at her, she could pray for him and talk to him at the same time. And that's what she did, rooting herself in Christ in the midst of chaos, keeping the gunman in view as a struggling human

being as clearly as she could see the danger he posed. What she did was confusing to the gunman, it confused the media, and it confused the entire world.

The practice of praying on the inside, of rooting oneself in God, so one is able to do the right thing, the Christ-like thing, the confusing thing, has a long history. The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fifth century knew how to do it. St. Francis in the 13<sup>th</sup> century knew how to do it, so did St. Julian of Norwich in the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Swiss Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup>, and Roger Williams in the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Antoinette Tuff learned the practice at church, from her pastor and her fellow church members who practiced, practiced, practiced together, so that when the moment came. She was ready.

And Austin Heights Church, we have practiced, practiced, practiced together for a long time. Now the time has arrived, and we are ready.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.