

**Spring 2016 Sunday Morning Bible Study and  
Sermon Series  
At First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of  
Decatur**

**“HEARTS UNBOUND”**

**Engaging Biblical Texts of God’s Radical Love  
Through Shared Readings,  
Conversations That Matter, and in Worship**

Teacher and Preacher: Sr. Pastor James L. Brewer-Calvert  
Continental Breakfast in Fellowship Hall, 9:00 – 9:30 a.m.  
Bible Study in Church Parlor, 9:30 – 10:15 a.m.  
Worship in Sanctuary, 10:30 a.m.

April 17	The Book of Ruth
April 24	The Book of Jonah
May 1	Jesus and the Sabbath
May 8	Jesus and the Canaanite Woman
May 15	The Parable of the Good Samaritan
May 22	Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch
May 29	Peter and Cornelius
June 5	The Gentiles and the Council of Jerusalem
June 12	Paul’s Argument for Extravagant Welcome
June 19	The Tale of Sodom and Gomorrah

***“Choosing Up Sides”***

**Hearts Abound Sermon Series**

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 24, 2016  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Scriptures: Jonah 1: 1-3, 11-17; 2: 1, 10; 3: 1-5, 10**

**Jonah 1: 1-3**

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

### **Jonah 1:11-17**

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup>He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” <sup>13</sup>Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. <sup>14</sup>Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” <sup>15</sup>So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup>Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

<sup>17</sup>But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

### **Jonah 2:1**

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.

### **Jonah 2:10**

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

### **Jonah 3:1-5**

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

### **Jonah 3:10**

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

## Sermon

The Bible speaks to us of Jonah,  
a parable in four chapters.

*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai,*

saying,

*“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it;*

*for their wickedness has come up before me.”*

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh

and to proclaim God’s judgment against them.

Now, Jonah was well aware that the people of Nineveh

had been beating up the Israelites for a long time,

Apparently God had it in mind

that what the people of Nineveh needed to do was to repent,

to turn 180 degrees away from doing evil and toward the love of God.

To repent is to turn away

from all that separates you from God, one another, and yourself.

To repent is to turn toward God,

acknowledging with every fiber of your being that wherever God goes, you follow.

To repent is to repurpose your life,

yoking two of God’s greatest gifts to humanity: re-creation and faith.

As you may well imagine Jonah wasn’t too keen about going into enemy territory,

especially enemies he thought didn’t deserve God’s grace and mercy.

Why should Jonah make welcome

those whom he deemed to be the unchosen?

Unchosen is not in my dictionary, or in any dictionary, but it is an apt word.

Without even considering a thesaurus we know what unchosen means and how it feels.

Dick Hamm tells a story from his childhood.  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm is a husband, father, author,  
Disciples pastor, and mentor.  
He is also the former General Minister and President  
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US  
& Canada,  
and currently is a Legacy Partner of The  
Columbia Partnership.

Dick Hamm tells a story from his childhood.  
Early on he was tall and athletic.  
Whenever he found himself on the ball field, basketball court  
or school playground  
and teams were being chosen by two captains,  
not only was he always picked to be a  
teammate,  
he was often chosen among the first  
selected.

Then one day after Dick Hamm was chosen early in the  
process,  
instead of goofing around or practicing his baseball  
swing,  
he looked over and saw, for the first time,  
the outward responses and feelings of his friends and  
classmates  
who got picked later, the last ones called over,  
and those not even chosen, the  
unchosen.

He felt a painful something in his heart;  
later he identified the sensation as the birth pangs of  
compassion.

When we see people with the eyes of Christ, with hearts of  
love,  
and we intentionally connect with the experiences of  
the unchosen,

our hearts are unbound.  
Our hearts go out to them,  
changing the language and attitude from “them” to  
“us”,  
seeing the unchosen as a part of our self,  
as an extension of our own life, faith  
community, world.

Martin Buber would call this the spiritual formation of an “I  
– Thou” relationship.

How far a leap is it to move from a place of feeling  
compassion

to dedicating one's life to being a servant of Jesus  
Christ?

That day Dick Hamm's heart was unbound.

The natural athlete accepted God's call to be a servant leader,  
to model and mentor and minister to the chosen and  
unchosen.

The day, the hour, the moment, the second  
the birth pangs of compassion convict us with God's  
love

our hearts are unbound and set free to be,  
to live in the here and now and for  
eternity.

Jonah, it appears, did not have such a birth pang.

Jonah went in the opposite direction of Nineveh, sailing by  
ship toward Tarshish.

The Bible says, “*Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the  
presence of the Lord.*”

Tell me, how does one get away from the presence of the  
Lord?

And yet, how many of us had heard the call to go to Nineveh,  
only to respond, “*You know, Tarshish looks a lot  
easier and more lucrative,*

*and it has swimming pools and an open bar.”*

Jonah headed to Tarshish on a small ship.

A great storm came up; all seemed lost.

Jonah sought to persuade the sailors that the storm was his fault.

The sailors threw lots and Jonah lost.

They threw him overboard, which was what he thought he wanted.

Allow me to offer a pastoral statement, one gleaned from a lifetime of love:

Suicide is a permanent solution to what is most often a temporary problem.

For example, Jonah is wrestling with his call, his sense of Self,

his identity as a child of God.

We witness him struggling with his relationship with those whom God is calling him to love,

calling Jonah to reach out to with grace and compassion,

yet this temporary problem is dealt with in a way that could have

had a disastrous, tragic, permanent conclusion.

Praise God that instead of drowning in the sea Jonah was saved.

*“The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah...”*

Is God calling you to be a lifebuoy, to be a lifesaver,  
to be a saving, redeeming presence

in the stormy seas of someone’s life?

Is God asking you to meet someone where they are,

not to judge or try to clean up or fix or correct or  
change?  
Especially since the only one we can truly change is our self!  
Is God calling out to you to simply welcome into the presence  
of the holy  
the hurt and hurting,  
the broke and the broken?  
Are you to be sent forth to be a balm of Gilead in moments of  
personal turmoil,  
times of questions, or confusion, or fear, or anxieties?

The story continues:

*“The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah;  
and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three  
days and three nights.”*

While he was in the fish’s belly he prayed.  
The prayers Jonah lifted were ones that Hebrews at the time  
most likely learned as children.  
Jonah took advantage of this journey in the dark and dank  
fish belly  
to relent, and repent, and redirect his life,  
to do God's will rather than only his own.

Three days later Jonah was delivered unto dry land.

A second time God told him to go to Nineveh.  
This time he listened and moved as directed,  
straight into the land of those whom he considered his  
enemies.

A friend told me about the time his small daughter ran into  
the living room  
and gave him a great big hug.  
He could see in the mirror on the wall that while she  
was hugging her father

she was sticking out her tongue at her brother.  
The dad didn't know what to do; the mom sure did.  
She said, *"Child, take your arms down from around your father's neck.  
He loves your brother as much as he loves you.  
You cannot love your father  
and stick your tongue out at your brother at the same time."*

By sending Jonah to Nineveh, God was saying the same thing:

*"I love your neighbors as much as I love you.  
You cannot, you must not, you shall not love your Creator  
and hate your neighbor at the same time."*

So Jonah strode into the heart of the city and said,  
*"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"  
"And the people of Nineveh believed God;  
they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,  
from the greatest of them to the least of them."*

The Good News of this conversion is that Jonah met them where they were.

By simply loving the people,  
daring to bring mercy and hope to the unchosen,  
Jonah introduced a city full of folks to the  
radical love of God.

A woman here in Decatur was excited to tell me about a  
bumper sticker she had seen:

It's a quote from Glen Hike's book, The Shelter of Each  
Other:

"THE MOST RADICAL THING WE CAN DO IS  
TO INTRODUCE PEOPLE TO ONE ANOTHER."

Jonah made the introduction, made the invitation, made an  
intentional effort,

and then made himself get out God's way!

We can see Jonah letting God do the claiming and the cleaning.

And isn't that exactly why this and any and every conversion takes place!

The kicker of the parable of Jonah is that afterward,  
when Jonah should have been rejoicing,  
when the parable could have wrapped up like a  
fairy tale

with a "happily ever after" ending,  
Jonah got angry.

Once again he attempted to go away from the presence of the Lord.

Jonah stomped off, sat a good distance away,  
and sulked under an unpredictable plant.

God found Jonah sitting just outside the city limits,  
clearly upset that mercy had been extended to the  
unchosen.

So the Lord said to Jonah, "You do well to be angry."

Do you know any souls who "do well to be angry"?

Sometimes folks don't feel truly alive unless they are angry,  
acting like anger defines them,

makes them feel more important,

or more worthy, or better able to define  
themselves

over and against and above the  
folks they are angry with.

Know anyone like that?

Sometimes an enemy? sometimes a friend? sometimes the  
face in the mirror?

So Jonah sulked,

unable or unwilling to sense the joy,

to let his heart feel the joy of what God's love  
can do.

Clearly Jonah reveled in his anger, nursing and feeding it

and loving on it.

Clearly Jonah wanted God to waste the people of Ninevah,  
not to have mercy on them!

We can well imagine his thoughts: *God's mercy spoils everything.*

Biblical scholar and Christian David Weiss said that many a time we "*try to narrow God down to those we are comfortable loving.*"

[David R. Weiss, "Hearts Unbound," Institute for Welcoming Resources, 2013.]

What do you think, can the human will for selective love, for choosing up sides,

be overcome by our God-given capacity for mercy and compassion?

In Jonah 3: 10 we read: "*When God saw what the [people of Nineveh] did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which God had said [the Lord] would do to them; and [God] did not do it.*"

God changed.

That what the Bible says.

Not only did the king and the townspeople, women and men and children repent,

God repented as well,

choosing to save and redeem the community

rather than lay desolation upon the land.

You see, God practices what God preaches.

God chooses to love all.

President Abraham Lincoln responded to a concerned citizen who wondered whether God was on the side of the

Union.

Lincoln said, *“My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.”*

“Bridge of Spies” is a remarkable film about the true story of the attempt

to exchange a Russian spy for an American spy in 1962.

James Donovan was an attorney who was tapped to represent America,

to take the point in the negotiations with the East Germans and Russians.

In one scene in the movie Donovan is asked by a member of the CIA

to leak whether his client, the Russian spy named Rudolf Abel,

has revealed any secrets to Donovan.

CIA Agent Hoffman: I'm sorry if the way I put it offends you, but we need to know what Abel is telling you. You understand me, Donovan? Don't go Boy Scout on me. We don't have a rule book here.

James Donovan: You're Agent Hoffman, yeah?

Hoffman: Yeah.

Donovan: German extraction.

Hoffman: Yeah, so?

Donovan: My name's Donovan. Irish, both sides. Mother and father. I'm Irish and you're German. But what makes us both Americans? Just one thing. One. Only one. The rule book. We call it the Constitution, and we agree to the rules, and that's what makes us Americans. That's all that makes us Americans. So don't tell me there's no rule book...

My fellow Americans,  
what holds us together isn't land or money;  
what binds us one to another isn't language or  
personal backgrounds,  
or our racial or cultural heritage.

The only thing -- and the best thing --  
that makes us Americans and holds us together  
is the U.S. Constitution.

Americans get classified and boxed up, categorized and  
selected for one side or another.

Yet no matter what side you think you stand on,  
no matter your views or alliances or affiliations,  
we are one nation under God,  
indivisible, with liberty and justice for  
all,

united, chosen and claimed and  
connected by these words:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more  
perfect Union,  
establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility,  
provide for the common defense, promote the  
general Welfare,  
and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and  
our Posterity,  
do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United  
States of America.*

As Christians, as people of faith and hope and mercy,  
what holds us together is the radical love of God.

This speaks to who and whose we are.

We are people of the Book; we are God's beloved, chosen,  
blessed, called.

We are all chosen by God to be loved, saved, redeemed,  
welcomed into the banquet.

And so are the unchosen.

God loves and includes in the ever-expanding circle our  
enemies in Nineveh,  
as well as the sailors who throw passengers  
overboard,  
and also the prophets who stomp and sulk and  
sputter,  
as well as the ones who marched yesterday at Stone  
Mountain in favor of racial hate,  
and the ones who call your phone  
and try to trick you, to con you out of  
your hard earned dollars.

When the phone rings and a voice says he or she wants to fix  
my computer,

I have taken to lying (help me Jesus),  
telling them a whopper that computers are  
inherently evil,  
tools of the devil, and that they need to  
hang up

and turn theirs off immediately or  
their life is in peril.

Don't know from a distance if they cease their devious  
actions;

I do know that Jesus loves them, if not their conniving  
behavior.

If you were to Google the "100 Best First Lines from Novels,"  
number one on the list is: "Call me Ishmael." —Herman  
Melville, Moby-Dick (1851)

"Call me Ishmael," says the narrator, who then promptly  
takes the reader to church.

On a Sunday morning Ishmael goes to church in Whaleman's  
Chapel,

where he hears a memorable sermon by Father  
Mapple,

who was once a whaler himself.  
Father Mapple preaches on Jonah.  
The theme of the sermon, which is also the theme of the  
novel Moby Dick, is:

*“If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”*

As sure as dawn follows the night,  
    there will be times and experiences in your life  
        when it will appear that the ways of God,  
            the ways of love and grace, mercy and  
            truth,  
                                are contrary to what you and I  
                                want to do and say.

Many a time we *“try to narrow God down to those we are  
comfortable loving.”*

The time will come when God’s will is contrary to your will.  
When that moment, that crossroad, that experience rises up  
before you, stop.

Find a quiet place.

Find your quiet center.

Pray.

Speak what is on your mind and in your conscience.

Meditate.

Listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit

    as well as the counsel of those whom you deem to be  
trustworthy.

Then – and only then – act.

Act in accordance with the will of the One who created and  
creates,

    who loves the chosen and the unchosen,

        who meets us where we are,

            yoked as one around the Table of the

    Lord.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy  
Spirit. Amen!*