

*“Where Spiritual Maturity Leads: Beware and Be Aware”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Hearts Abound Sermon Series

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, May 29, 2016

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## **Holy Scriptures: Acts 10: 1-16, 34-43**

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. <sup>2</sup> He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. <sup>3</sup> One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” <sup>4</sup> He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; <sup>6</sup> he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” <sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, <sup>8</sup> and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup> About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” <sup>15</sup> The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for

God was with him. <sup>39</sup> We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;<sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,<sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.<sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

### Sermon

My Georgia preacher buddy Bob Browning now lives in Kentucky. He shared that a former high school classmate of his is now a grandmother. She posted a story on FaceBook about the day she had her 4-year-old grandson with her when she dropped by a local funeral home for visitation with the deceased’s family. The little boy took in everything, from the flowers to the casket to the mourners. Afterward, as they walked outside, he looked up at his grandmother and asked,  
“*Was that man dead?*”  
“Yes, he was.”  
“*Did you tell the family you were sorry?*”  
“Yes, I did.”  
“*Did you kill him?*”

Clearly he assumed that saying you are sorry is necessitated by having done something wrong, especially something terribly, terribly wrong. As we grow up, as we mature in age and experience, we hopefully also mature in wisdom and spirit, like this charming four year old will.

As we mature we evolve to have fuller, deeper understandings. As a society we like to celebrate passages from one stage to another. For example, we have ceremonies and rites of passage that signal academic maturity.

This is the season of graduations, commencements, and academic advancements;  
this is the time of year we honor and congratulate those who have learned much and passed with muster their tests and classes and grades.  
Families and friends pose for photos with happy and relieved graduates. Tassels are taken off of mortarboards to decorate rear-view mirrors. Diplomas get framed and placed on walls of honor. Aunts, uncles, and the nosy neighbor from across the street call out “What’s next?”

Maybe we need some rites or rituals that point to the evolution of spiritual maturity.

It is one thing to fill our brains with facts and data, with trivia and information, and then to be commended, applauded and rewarded for successful absorption, assimilation, and regurgitation of the facts. It is quite another thing to grow spiritually and devoutly in wisdom and compassion, commitment and grace, and then to be asked to be humble, to be modest about it, meek and unassuming and self-efacing, to accept there are no ceremonies in packed auditoriums to applaud and proclaim that you have grown, grown in spirit and wisdom and understanding. And yet, my friends, that is both the goal and the process, the recognition and renown.

Our progression of spiritual maturity requires that we suspend our understanding of the truth so that we can see beyond what we did not see before. A deeper understanding of God will lead us straight to people, to welcome and sit with and see the Christ in one another, and that is where true hospitality is found. Religion has gotten a bad rap for being so inhospitable, and too often deservedly so. Yet religion at its core should be the epitome of unbound hearts and homes. Religion is the search for truth and the God beyond our gods. Religion provides a liturgical and lyrical pathway for spiritual growth. Religion creates permission-giving communities of faith that empower us to serve together, united in Christ. Religion, while saying yes to love, simultaneously reserves the right to say no, no, it is not acceptable to harm or hurt, insult or exclude one another in any way, shape or form, or name, especially God's!

So welcome home into a religion that engages us to grow in the spirit, no matter where we are in life, regardless of when or how or why we climbed aboard or stumbled in. Welcome to the Church of Jesus Christ, a Living Hope of seekers & searchers, a congregation of saints & sinners mixed up together like mixed nuts. Welcome to a spirit-filled body of believers and doubters, questioners and backsliders, hypocrites and perfectionists, Bible thumpers and readers of many words. The Church is called and commissioned by God and filled with the Holy Spirit to help us maintain balance, to be a cultural countermeasure, to be a justifier and place of belonging, a spark of intelligence with a down home feel, a provider for the guidance we require for life in the human context.

Yet...yet...yet none of this can ever come to be  
if and when we announce aloud or to ourselves that we are done, finished,  
graduated and completed  
with our Christian education and spiritual maturation.

Bryant Gumbel interviewed the late Maya Angelou on a number of occasions.  
There are a couple exchanges that caught my ear. Here is one introduction:

GUMBEL: *Maya, how you doing? Good morning.*

ANGELOU: *I'm doing well. And you're looking good.*

GUMBEL: *Oh, that's good of you to say. Thank you.*

ANGELOU: *That's the truth. As my sister said, "The truth is a stubborn fact."*

Another interview included this insight:

GUMBEL: *So, you are a Christian.*

ANGELOU: *Oh, my goodness, no, I'm not there yet.*

*I am working toward being one. It's a lifetime process.*

'Are you a Christian?' 'Not yet, not yet; I'm working toward being one.'

It takes courage to admit that we are work in progress.  
It takes faith to let God in to rearrange your spirituality.  
It takes strength to let yourself to be weak so the power of  
God can mold and shape you.

Religion, as its best, connects us to God and one another so  
we can move closer.

The resurrection and incarnation of Jesus into today's  
culture lead us

not away from our human context but more deeply into it.

We assume that what God places before us  
is ours to judge and cleanse and categorize.

Yet this is not anywhere close to what God asks us to do and to be.

The Apostle Peter had made this same assumption all his life.

Then one day he was so hungry while waiting for dinner  
that he went into a trance

and had a vision of the Lord offering him food to eat,  
food that he had previously considered unclean.

Then God said not once, not twice, but three times,

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter awoke from his trance transformed.

He realized that this vision of food

was actually a metaphor,

a holy metaphor to teach him to love, accept and include  
people whom he had previously judged and excluded.

Later when Peter was united with Cornelius and his

household,

Peter began to speak to them, saying,

*"I truly understand that God shows no partiality,*

*but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what  
is right*

*is acceptable to him.”*

I now realize...

I now understand... I can see clearly now,  
whereas before I was wrong and did not know it.  
Now I have a fuller, more divine understanding and grasp of God's  
will for my life.  
Talk about spiritual maturity, about baby steps of grace toward living  
graciously!

Peter's past experience and grasp of a truth he once held near and  
dear and clear  
was overruled and overwhelmed by the grace and goodness  
of a God beyond his own god.

Change like this can be frightening, mind-blowing,  
disturbing, fun, fantastic, and even a welcome relief.  
Long held truths and expectations are hard to let go, to let go and let God,  
to relinquish to the Spirit.

Peter had set himself up as judge and jury,  
as catcher of the fish and cleaner, too,

a speaker of the truth as he saw it,

yet here was a divine vision saying 'not so fast!'

It took three knocks, three statements, three repeats  
for God to get through to Peter,  
to tell him to not call profane what God had created.

Where are you on this question of the progression of spiritual  
maturity?

Is your mind all made up, set in stone, firm and solid and inflexible?  
Are you malleable so the heavenly Potter can reshape the clay of your  
soul?

Are you all finished, mind made up for all time?

Are you a work in progress?

Or, maybe a little bit of both, depending on your mood and who's  
asking?

When Pastor Bruce McKay shared in the pulpit at Church of the  
Living Hope

that he had doubts, this 21 year old looked up  
to see if lightning would crash through the ceiling  
and totally wipe out the preacher.

When it didn't then my eyes and mind expanded a bit;  
if Bruce could doubt and still be a faithful servant leader,  
maybe there was hope for me, too.

When Scarsdale Congregational Church called and invited me  
to be their Seminary Intern, this 24 year old thought

he would be ministering to America's wealthy elites  
who knew nothing about suffering or hurt or pain.

When the members and friends in Scarsdale shared their  
lives with me,  
my heart was unbound as I gleaned that everyone suffers

and that every child of God is in need of healing and hope.

When I began to serve as a pastor I thought that Holy Communion was so special that it should only be taken on high holy days, like Easter and the first Sunday of the month and Mother's Day (smile).

When I worshiped with the disciples at East Dallas Christian Church over four years, it slowly, surely dawned on me how much I looked forward to our shared weekly celebration of grace at the Lord's Table, and how much we grew together in spirit and truth.

When Park Avenue Christian Church in NYC called Rev. Allen Harris to be their associate pastor, maybe 25 years ago, I was happy for them but deeply concerned when I learned that this openly gay man would be teaching children in Sunday School. When I got to know him and assessed the prejudicial source of the clenching muscles in my belly, the light of God illumined my mind, for who was I to call profane whom God had created?

When I had been standing behind the blessed Communion Table here in this significant congregation for the first half of our 18 years together,

I would say, "All who believe in Jesus Christ and proclaim Him to be Lord and Savior of their lives are welcome to partake of Holy Communion."

When I went home and re-read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,

I could find no examples of Jesus putting a condition on who He fed

and with whom he shared cups of Living Water, so I stopped making communion conditional, and explained to you my spiritual growth,

and we have watched as the walls and barriers around the table

and the church itself came-a tumbling, tumbling down.

There is so much more to share from this 56-year long journey of growth:

- learning to stop being so controlling and to trust the whole people of God;
- learning to appreciate the spirituality of thinkers and philosophizers;
- learning to let go of judgmental attitudes and foster skills in perceptivity;
- learning that when you get cancer and go through chemo, suddenly life on earth is so precious you treasure every

relationship and every breath you take;

· learning that sometimes adults want and need to be baptized again, and who am I do deny their joy and hope and connection with God and the church?

The progression of spiritual maturity leads us to unbind our hearts,  
to grow in understanding and discover new truths,  
which opens the door to the sacred practice of hospitality.

There is a profound and meaningful poem that speaks to such growth in Christian love.

*“When I say I am a Christian,”* written by [Carol Wimmer](#), in 1988.<sup>[i]</sup>

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not shouting, “I’ve been saved!” I’m whispering, “I get lost sometimes that’s why I chose this way”

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I don’t speak with human pride I’m confessing that I stumble – needing God to be my guide

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not trying to be strong I’m professing that I’m weak and pray for strength to carry on

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not bragging of success I’m admitting that I’ve failed and cannot ever pay the debt

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I don’t think I know it all I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I’m not claiming to be perfect My flaws are far too visible but God believes I’m worth it

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I still feel the sting of pain I have my share of heartache which is why I seek God’s name

When I say, “I am a Christian,” I do not wish to judge I have no authority I only know I’m loved

We rejoice in your progression toward spiritual maturity!

We applaud and proclaim that you have grown,  
grown in spirit and wisdom and understanding.

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

[1] “When I say I am a Christian,” written by [Carol Wimmer](#), in 1988, and first published by Hi-Call Gospel Magazine in 1992. ©1992-2016 Carol Wimmer All Rights Reserved