

## ***“Signs and Wonders”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Hearts Unbound Sermon Series

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 5, 2016

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Holy Scriptures: Acts 13: 13-35 and Amos 5: 21-24

Acts 13: 15-35 (RSV)

<sup>15</sup> After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.” <sup>16</sup> So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

“Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen. <sup>17</sup> The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. <sup>18</sup> And for about forty years he cared for them in the wilderness. <sup>19</sup> And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance, for about four hundred and fifty years. <sup>20</sup> And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. <sup>21</sup> Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. <sup>22</sup> And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.’ <sup>23</sup> Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. <sup>24</sup> Before his coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. <sup>25</sup> And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’

<sup>26</sup> “Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those

among you that fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. <sup>27</sup> For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him. <sup>28</sup> Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. <sup>29</sup> And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb.<sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead; <sup>31</sup> and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. <sup>32</sup> And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, <sup>33</sup> this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm,

‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.’

<sup>34</sup> And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he spoke in this way, ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’

<sup>35</sup> Therefore he says also in another psalm,

‘Thou wilt not let thy Holy One see corruption.’

The prophet Amos said:

*<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,*

*I will not accept them;*

*and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals*

*I will not look upon.*

*<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs;*

*I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*

*<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. --Amos  
5: 21-24*

***“Let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”***

Today’s biblically-based message on social action, social justice, and the social gospel begins, naturally, with the question, “*What is acceptable worship?*”

Starting from a premise that we are born from original blessing,  
that all people are made and created in the image of God,  
authentic worship is a spiritual discipline  
that reconnects, re-engages and  
reorients us  
to the divine power of love that  
created and creates.

When we gather together to ask the Lord’s blessings  
worship happens and transforms lives.  
Authentic worship may be experienced  
through prayer and praise of God.  
During worship we focus on divine gift of life and life  
everlasting.  
True worship serves the purposes of God  
by comforting the afflicted and afflicting the  
comfortable.

I followed a car a little too closely so I could read the bumper sticker that said,  
I DON’T KNOW ABOUT YOUR CHURCH, BUT MY CHURCH

DISTURBS THE COMFORTABLE & COMFORTS THE  
DISTURBED.

We know what it is like to be comforted in worship, to  
receive mercy and compassion,  
and we know how it feels to be afflicted, disturbed, to  
have our buttons pushed.

During worship one Sunday morning a family had a little boy  
who got so squirmy and wiggly in the pew that his  
father picked him up.

As they moved down the aisle, the little boy looked over his  
father's shoulder

and shouted, "*Y'all pray for me now!*"

He may have thought he was about to be afflicted;

what better saving power is there

than the prayers of a faith community?

Authentic Christian worship connects people with God and  
one another.

We worship *so that* and *until* we are ready and raring to go  
forth

into the world to be the living Word

God needs us to become and our neighbors  
need to experience.

With this understanding

we turn to the Scriptures for a Living Word.

In Acts we find the rulers of the synagogue turning to the  
Apostle Paul

for interpretation and application of the Word.

He speaks to them of the prophets, their truths and visions  
and hopes,

of their foretelling of signs and wonders,

and how the whole people of God in the past

and in Paul's lifetime

did not take to heart their prophetic  
message and mission.

Paul and those in the synagogue would have been familiar  
with these passages from Amos,  
which are the earliest collection  
of the words of a prophet into a book.

Your spiritual insight from these words of Amos  
is that these words may transform your life.

While listening to the preaching and teaching of Amos,  
we won't find a man of faith who, before he spoke,  
used a thermometer to check the temperature  
of his cultural climate.

He did not take an opinion poll to see which way the political  
wind was blowing,  
in order to craft a popular message.

Amos was more of a thermostat kind of guy.

Amos stood up in front of the worshipping community of  
faith

and called for the people of God to live into *mispat*  
and *sedaqa*.

He called for justice, *mispat* in Hebrew, and for  
righteousness, *sedaqa*.

Righteousness may be defined as those standards for  
what is right,  
standards by which God has instructed Israel  
how to live.

Justice is the realization of those standards of life.

Amos linked mispat and sedaqa beautifully and  
powerfully.

He said to his beloved community:

*<sup>14</sup> Seek good and not evil, that you may live;  
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,*

*just as you have said.*

*<sup>15</sup> Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5: 14-  
15)*

*<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain  
offerings,*

*I will not accept them;*

*and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals*

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*<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters,*

*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:  
21-22)*

Amos made his point: God was more than just a little bit  
upset;

the Lord was about to bring down judgment  
upon Israel.

The people of God had sacrificed concern for the poor and  
afflicted at their own gates

in exchange of worship services that were ultimately  
meaningless.

Karl Barth taught his students to preach and worship God  
with the Holy Bible in one hand and a daily  
newspaper in the other.

Worship and social action are inseparable.

They go hand in hand; each one feeds and is fed by the other.

Worship without social action is empty,

full of platitudes, plenty of nothing.

Social action without worship, without a spiritual foundation,  
without looking to the hills from whence our help comes,  
is void of prayer and praise for the one from whom all blessings flow.

Amos's charge echoes across time and space:  
worship God and practice a social Gospel.  
This, he says, is the setting that God calls for in order to  
***“let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”***

A friend recently called from the Southwest.  
She had just moved and was looking for a church.  
She visited one called The Sanctuary of Saintly Light.  
The pastor showed her their lovely stained glass windows,  
and pointed to a new pipe organ.  
My friend noticed in the sanctuary that there was a dusty box  
on the side radiator,  
covered in cobwebs, with a small sign that read,  
*Missions.*  
She also visited a congregation called Community Fellowship  
of Good Deeds.  
She was invited to get involved in their soup kitchen and  
protest rallies,  
then handed her a petition to sign and a church  
activities list.  
Emblazoned across the front was their mission statement:  
*“No matter how much you're doing it's not enough.”*  
She called afterward, saying, “What I'm looking for is a  
congregation  
that connects hospitality with social action, worship  
with justice.

I read once where Henri Nouwen said something about  
the role of the church in the world is that of  
“hospice”.

Henri Nouwen recognized that the church  
is to take all that we experience as threatening and  
hostile,

and transform it into “hospice,” a place of  
shelter and rest.”

She said, “I have this nagging in my heart that God is calling  
me

to connect having church on Sunday with the rest of  
my week.

It’s like what that prophet Amos meant when he said that  
what happens inside the sanctuary and outside in the  
community

should inform and engage each other.”

Could this be what God calls for in order to

***“let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing  
stream?”***

Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas finds most Christians  
far too spiritual in the practice of their faith.

Hauerwas points out that

Christianity “is not a set of beliefs or doctrines  
one believes in order to be a Christian,”

but rather

“Christianity is to have one’s body shaped,  
one’s habits determined,

in such a way that the worship of God is  
unavoidable.”

In An Alter in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor said,

“In our embodied life together, the words of our

doctrines take on flesh.” (p. 45)

Taylor points out

that the greatest danger to the life of the church  
is not, as some folks love to point out,  
inept clergy, mean congregations, bad  
music,  
or preoccupation with  
institutional maintenance.

Our greatest danger, she says, is “the intellectualization of  
faith.” (p. 45)

We don’t need more information about God;  
we need incarnation.

We don’t need more raw data to employ;  
we need to Christ to be embodied.

Taylor said, “Not more *about* God. *More* God.” (p. 45)

Embody Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Become the living Spirit with some skin on it.

This is the setting that God calls for in order to

**“let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing  
stream.”**

A word of caution, my friends:

We have a cultural and Christian tendency  
to set the words and meaning of justice, of *mispat*,  
as something “out there,” as something  
unattainable, unreachable, ever.

Have we accepted the religious perception or political  
attitude

that social justice is a fantasy?

Is God’s demand for mispat and sedaqa, for justice and  
righteousness

unpractical, unrealistic, imperceptible, unattainable

in our presence or lifetime?

Do we perceive our social responsibility to practice social justice as a concept,

an amorphous idea, a far-off vision,

a calling which we can too easily dismiss

due to its difficulty and distance from

reality?

Or is the practice of justice that God calls for

as simple and realistic as addressing the needs of the neighbor at our gate?

Remember, the question is not, "Who is my neighbor?"

The question ever before us is, "What does my neighbor need?"

Seen in this light, the practice of hospitality

is the first – and greatest – step to

**“let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”**

In 1962, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

under the guidance of its president, the Rev. Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr.,

were invited to Albany, Georgia to help make social change.

Persecution and oppression along racial and class lines were a regular part of life.

Dr. King met with the Albany Ministerial Association,

whose president was a young Christian Church pastor named Don Brewer.

From 1959-1965, Nancy and Don Brewer served at First Christian Church

in Albany, Georgia, raising Betty and her brother Robert,

who, by the way, was named after Robert

Boyte, pastor here from 1987-97.

Soon after they settled in the Albany Movement began.

There were large demonstrations and many arrests, yet little change.

Well, some lives were changed and altered, and were never the same again.

One hot summer day Nancy was washing dishes in her kitchen.

She thought about her neighbors in jail,  
arrested simply because they walked downtown to register to vote.

She imagined them in jail being served cold grits and tepid tea.

[Lord, in the south surely that is a sin!]

She thought, *“What is it Southern women do when they see someone in trouble, sick, or grieving, and they really don't know what to say but they want to do something?”*

*You know what they do. They cook!*

*My husband and I wondered if some of my United Church Women friends*

*would be willing to fry some chicken to send to the jails.*

*“It took only a couple of calls to get a calling chain going.*

*Almost to a woman, the answer was, “I'd like to do that.”*

*And almost to a woman, the firm statement was added,*

*“But let's not tell my husband.”*

*It wouldn't be a problem NOT to tell the men.*

*They wouldn't even ask,*

*for they were used to their wives frying chicken,*

*or baking cakes, or assembling casseroles for somebody they knew.*

*“By Tuesday morning*

*there were trays and baskets and boxes of fried chicken gathered,*

*the pieces wrapped individually, and ready for delivery.*

*The logical place to find out how to deliver the chicken was*

*the police department*

*...which turned out to not be logical at all, since the response was,*

*“Now, little lady, why would you want to do that?”*

*Fortunately we knew the name of a prominent [African American] minister,*

*from newspaper write-ups when Dr. King had been there the week before.*

*And my pastor husband asked his help*

*and he said he'd be glad to deliver the chicken for us*

*...and I'm sure he did.” (Nancy Brewer, “What Does Fried Chicken Say?”)*

My friends, what is it we do when we see someone in need of comfort?

Or in need of a companion?

Or in need of support and kindness?

We cook.

We empathize and we act.

We yoke ourselves to their blessed soul.

We wipe away their tears.

We see ourselves in one another's shoes, and we seek to ease pain and loss. [\[1\]](#)

At the Christian core of our acts of hospitality

is the offering of empathy.

When we do so, we **“...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”**

God gives strength and stands with those who do justice,  
who love mercy, who walk humbly with their Lord.

This is what it means to be the Word incarnate, a living sign and act of wonder.

We can do this.

We can be this.  
We can build and become the beloved community,  
one radical act of hospitality at a time.

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

### Communion Invitation

In 2008, First Christian Church of Decatur posted on YouTube a video of our church's mission work in downtown Atlanta. 200 Disciples from across the city had just shared God's love and joy in a day of street ministry called More Hands for God, and we had the digital evidence to prove it!

My brother David Calvert saw the video on the internet, and wrote an email to First Christian Church, saying:

“Nice job, [Disciples of Christ]. In a [new] world -- and oh let it come raining down on us and refreshing and healing -- one can already see connections across racial lines, class lines improving...the old divisions falling away.

I remember the brilliant theme song of the World Council of Churches, from back in my Geneva days, and its catchy tune and chorus: *“Break down the walls that separate us and unite us in a single body.”*

And I recall also the refrain of the climactic ditty from the classic musical “Purlie” ...the one my character, Charlie, sang with a guitar on the Church of the Living Hope stage 35 years ago in East Harlem:

*“The world ain't coming to an end, my friend,  
The world's just coming to a start...  
I feel it in my heart...  
The world is coming to a start!”*

This year, HOPE, which has been around but at times barely alive, is making a major comeback! Keep up the good work...First Christian Church, [and] the world just might keep pace!” --David Calvert, Email, October 2008.

Come, one and all, just as you are, to the Lord’s Table, where Jesus Christ invites us to partake of His Bread and Cup, to take into your daring bodies the hope that God’s mercy and justice is not an unreachable, unattainable pipe dream, but a real and tangible possibility we can build on today, together, moving forward from this holy place into God’s sacred lands, united to serve until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Deep suffering makes theologians of us all. The questions people ask about God in Sunday school rarely compare with the questions we ask while we are in the hospital. This goes for those stuck in waiting rooms as well as those in actual [hospital] beds. To love someone who is suffering is to learn the visceral definition of *pathetic*: 1) affecting or exciting emotions, especially the tender emotions of pity or sorrow; 2) so inadequate as to be laughable or contemptible.” (Taylor, An Altar in the World, pp. 42-43)