

## **“Common Grounds”**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2016

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**Holy Scriptures: Psalm 137: 1-4 Luke 17: 1-10 2 Timothy 1: 1-14**

### **Psalm 137: 1-4**

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. <sup>2</sup>On the willows there we hung up our harps. <sup>3</sup>For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” <sup>4</sup>How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

### **Luke 17:1-10**

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent”, you must forgive.’

<sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!”’

### **2 Timothy 1:1-14**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, **2** To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

**3** I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. **4** Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. **5** I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. **6** For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; **7** for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

**8** Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, **9** who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, **10** but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. **11** For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, **12** and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

**13** Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.**14** Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

***“God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone.”***

Stop me if you have heard this one before.  
Well, if you have, enjoy the details and pass it on.

In 1968, Charlie Schwab was sitting in his office when he heard breaking glass.  
The Rev. Dr. Charles Schwab was the Senior Minister  
here at First Christian Church of Decatur.  
He had been serving this congregation since 1940,  
so he was only 28 years into his tenure  
when a church window got shattered by a rock.  
Well, Dr. Schwab jumped up and hustled out to the alleyway behind the building,  
where he saw some boys on the run.  
He gave chase and followed them to their home.  
When he arrived he knocked on the door and was admitted inside.  
He visited with the family, and learned that the cupboards were bare.  
Literally.  
The family had no food to eat, and no promise that any was on the way.  
What had started as a matter of vandalism grew to a greater concern of justice.  
Charlie Schwab left their home bound and determined to do something.  
He understood that God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone.  
He called together people of faith from across the city,  
representatives from sister churches and temples in the City of Decatur,  
Baptists and Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians,  
Jews and Catholics and more.  
Together they formed the Decatur Cooperative Ministry, aka DCM.  
It's first act was to open a food bank  
by collecting and then distributing food for families in need.  
In time Decatur Cooperative Ministry expanded  
to collect and share funds for utility bills and rental support,  
then a clothing closet, job training and placement services,  
and so much more, more for neighbors in need.  
We know who our neighbors are;  
do we know what they need?  
Dr. Schwab and the members and friends of this church,  
including some who are here today,  
joined hands with sister congregations from all walks of life  
to pool energies and resources and expertise  
that launched Decatur Cooperative Ministry in 1968.  
Go to American history books and you will read about 1968, the  
assassinations,  
the conventions, the war, the upheaval, the polarization, the fear.  
Yet consider the historic ramifications of an ecumenical venture in 1968:  
people of God in the deep south, irrespective of their differences,  
got together to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked,  
to release the addicted, to empower the lost, the last & the least,  
to proclaim the acceptable year.  
  
Consider what happened next.  
DCM begat the Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry  
as well as the Hagar's House shelter for women and children.  
This week we will be feeding families in Hagar's House,  
providing three evenings of dinners for the 7 women and 17 children living there.  
(If you can help cook and serve on Wednesday, see me or Lynn Trapp after church!)  
There are so many sister churches and temples and mosques  
supporting DCM and Hagar's House today, in October 2016,  
that we get only three nights to serve meals.  
Just three nights.  
Out of 365 nights a year.  
Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

***“God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone.”***

This summer,  
when we as a congregation chose to share our resources  
and sent 10 members and friends over two weeks  
to help build a home through Atlanta Habitat for Humanity,

I had a chance to speak with the new homeowner.  
I asked him what he had observed from this experience,  
and he said, *"I had no idea there were so many people who cared."*

"I had no idea there were so many people who cared."

This is the loving activity of God:  
God calls us to follow the God of love and life;  
God fills us with compassion so that we care,  
so that we care for one another,  
and then God compels us to unite to serve  
when we can't – and shouldn't! -- do it by our self.

When Christians decide to unite to work and play and  
worship as one,  
whether for an hour or for a weekend or for the long term,  
we call this being ecumenical.

On this World Communion Sunday,  
we affirm what yokes us in life together in Christ.  
Ecumenical ministries like Decatur Cooperative Ministry and Habitat for Humanity  
are never easy nor without hitches and hiccups and speed bumps along the way.

Sometimes folks get peculiar or prickly  
when it comes to crossing lines and boundaries and seeking common ground.  
Reminds us of the time a Methodist pastor  
was asked to do a funeral in the community.  
Before agreeing to do so  
he called his bishop and mentioned that the deceased citizen was a Baptist.  
He requested permission to preside.  
The Bishop responded, *"Bury all the Baptists you can."*

My faith experience in local and regional and national church ministry  
informs me that clergy tend to be less ecumenical than lay people.  
A lay person is a faithful child of God who is not a minister, priest or pastor.  
Painting here with a broad stroke,  
regardless of the denomination  
clergy folk tend to be protective of their flocks,  
their parishes, their congregation,  
so are less inclined, generally speaking, to want to share.  
Lay people, on the other hand,  
tend to be more open to working and playing  
alongside folks from other walks of life.  
Consider that Disciples and 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists,  
Baptists and Bahias and so forth work side by side each and every day.  
Every day the whole people of God show up to work clean and sober and on time  
as teachers and nurses, waitresses and bank tellers,  
nannies and construction workers,  
and what matters most is their vocation, the job,  
the project, the classroom, the patient.  
So my point on this World Communion Sunday  
is that theological differences are set aside daily,  
daily while folks focus on the big picture, the work at hand,  
and, thanks be to God, unite to serve and share common ground.  
I am not saying that clergy aren't committed  
to working ecumenically and along interfaith lines,  
because so many truly are concerned and active and engaged  
in bringing people together for common causes.  
I am saying that lay people from churches and temples and mosques  
already are.  
Seen in this light,  
World Communion Sunday is a blessed reminder that Christ is leading the way,  
our laity, Jesus' folks in the pews and parishes around the world,  
are manifesting daily what it means to be ecumenical,  
and clergy persons are running to catch up.

***"God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone."***

All this takes a lot of trust.  
Trust in God.  
Trust in the person whose hand you are reaching out to hold.

Trust in the vision and the mission and cause of common grounds.  
Trust that we do not walk or serve or love alone.  
Trust that the hand of God will be with us  
    through thick and thin, in good times and lean times, in love and loss.  
    Simply trusting for a moment, an hour, a day, a lifetime  
    that God's hand is with you to have and to hold,  
        to comfort you, to heal you, and to push you into a new day  
        will increase your faith.  
        Remember when the apostles said to the Lord, *'Increase our faith!'*  
        Do you remember what Jesus Christ said?  
        The Lord replied,

*'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,  
you could say to this mulberry tree,  
"Be uprooted and planted in the sea",  
and it would obey you.*

It's perfectly okay if your faith is the size of the smallest of seeds.  
Have the faith of a mustard seed,  
    as Jesus said, trusting and obeying God's will for you.

***"God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone."***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer shared in his remarkable book, Life Together,  
    what a blessing, what a divine gift it is to be in Christ's Church.  
    Bonhoeffer said:

*"Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.  
It is by the grace of God  
that that a congregation is permitted  
to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament.  
The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely,  
the proclaimers of the Gospel in [unchurched] lands stand alone.  
They know that visible fellowship is a blessing.  
They remember, as the Psalmist did,  
how they went "with the multitude...  
to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise,  
with a multitude that kept holyday." (Psalm 42: 4) [1]*

In this blessed and beautiful life together,  
    God calls us to practice unity in the context of our uniqueness,  
        to practice inclusion despite the temptation to be exclusive,  
        to be a movement for wholeness in a broken world.  
        God's temple is called to be a source of unity,  
    an oasis of cosmic grace in our human-made desert of division.  
    Christ's Church is called to be holy,  
    a home for all God's children, a safe haven for us to rub shoulders.  
    Bonhoeffer said,

*"The physical presence of other Christians  
is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer." [2]*  
God's temple is purified by the fires and frictions of life and love.

Dr. Bonhoeffer, we know something about fires and frictions.

We are not afraid to face the facts:

    folks today aren't much different than we were 20 or 200 or 2,000 years ago.  
    Having access to more information at our fingertips  
    does not mean that we are any wiser.  
    So many churches get caught up in tensions and divisions and self-righteousness.  
    While we can speak here of the communal success of DCM and our Chalice Thrift store,  
    of the camaraderie in our Chancel and Bell choirs,  
        of the healing and hospitality and hope that are made real here,  
        this is not a message that is making the news or history books.

Churches are like cats.  
With all that hissing and scratching and yowling,  
folks think they are fighting when in fact they are multiplying.  
Well, all this spitting and splitting and dividing and going our separate ways  
over pettiness and wedge-issues  
    has damaged the Church of Jesus Christ in the eyes of the world.  
    I wonder aloud whether lay people need to take the point  
and show the world – and the Church -- how ecumenism really works...

Meanwhile there is nothing more oft-putting to our neighbors than fussy people of faith.  
Fussiness, and fanaticism.

Are you like me, finding it most difficult to discern anything holy  
 about religious fundamentalism,  
     whether its Islamic, Jewish, Christian, or any religion or sect?  
 Jim Wallis observes that today's prevailing attitude is: *"I'm right and you're evil."*  
 I don't recall Jesus telling me or you or anyone  
 to pull up the drawbridge after we were across. Do you?  
 The determining factor for the way forward is the love of Jesus Christ.  
 Let us in our life together as God's followers  
 dare to boldly stand up and express that we refuse to allow  
     hard-hearted, narrow-minded, judgmental so-called religious leaders  
     to speak for us!  
     Honestly, does anyone here know the God  
 that fanatics speak with, or speak of, or speak for?  
 The God y'all know loves kindness and mercy, is slow to anger and quick to forgive.  
 The God y'all love is the one who picked you up when you were down  
 and then showed us how to do the same for one another.

***"God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone."***

And then a glimmer of light shines in 2016 here in Georgia:  
 According to a brief article in the *Post Register* (August 29),

*"There are two First Baptist churches in Macon, Georgia,  
 one black and one white.  
 Until 1845 they were one congregation made up of slave owners and slaves.  
 The pastors of each congregation met two years ago  
 to explore ways their congregations could become friends.  
 Their first joint activity was an Easter egg hunt in the park  
 that separates their properties,  
 followed by a book drive, a Thanksgiving Day pot luck,  
 and a trip to Orlando for black and white youth.  
 Congregants were surprised to discover  
 that their sanctuaries have nearly identical designs.  
 The congregations next plan to hold conversations about racism."*

***"God calls us to do some things together we cannot do alone."***

After Hurricane Katrina blew through and tore apart the Gulf Coast ten years ago,  
     our congregation took three mission trips to help rebuild homes and lives,  
     staying in Christian Churches and sharing God's love and labor.  
     Over the course of three years we travelled  
 to Moss Point, Mississippi; Gulf Port, Alabama; and Slidell, Louisiana.

On the August day in 2005 that Hurricane Katrina bore down on Moss Point, MS,  
 Ann Pickett took shelter.

After the storm, Ann Pickett emerged and looked around at the devastation.

*"She thought about her wedding, only three days away.  
 ...She went to church, but not just to bow her head and pray.  
 She took [to church] her wedding food from her own freezer and,  
 in the church kitchen, she started to cook for her neighbors.  
 Ann and her fiancé cooked up their wedding feast for any who came.  
 They prepared that meal on their own initiative,  
 offering it up to the Spirit of God.  
 The location for the meal of grace was in a temple that bore the name:  
 Jesus Christ, Moss Point Christian Church.  
 Truth be told, disasters often bring out the best in human beings.  
 After flood and tornado and hurricane,  
 ...people [are] putting aside differences*

*and reaching out to help their [- our -] neighbors." [3]*

In God's time Ann Pickett got married; she is now Ann Pickett-Parker.  
 She served faithfully as the vice president of our  
 International Disciples Women's Ministries.

*"One day she launched into action because she calls herself a Christian.  
 She set a table out in Christian love for her neighbors,  
 any and all, following the example of Jesus." [4]*

We can well imagine her neighbors saying,  
     "I had no idea there were so many people who cared."

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

*World Communion Sunday – celebrated the first Sunday in October – is one of the most venerable of “special Sundays.” The day has taken on new relevancy and depth of meaning in a world where globalization often has undermined peace and justice – and in a time when fear divides the peoples of God’s earth. On this day we celebrate our oneness in Christ, the Prince of Peace, in the midst of the world we are called to serve – a world ever more in need of peacemaking. World Communion Sunday (originally called World Wide Communion Sunday) originated in the Presbyterian Church (USA). In 1936, for the first time, the first Sunday in October was celebrated in Presbyterian churches in the United States and overseas. From the beginning, it was planned so that other denominations could make use of it and, after a few years, the idea spread beyond the Presbyterian Church. The Department of Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches (a predecessor body of the National Council of Churches) was first associated with World Wide Communion Sunday in 1940 when the department’s executive secretary, Jesse Bader, led in its extension to a number of churches throughout the world.*

[1] Life Together, P. 18

[2] Life Together, P. 18

[3] “Whole: A Call to Unity in Our Fragmented World” by Sharon Watkins, 2014. Page 29.

[4] Ibid. P. 30.