

***“Come to the Table”***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Decatur, Georgia  
Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 15, 2017  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 49:1-7 & John 1: 29-42**

John 1: 29-42

<sup>29</sup>The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup>This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ <sup>31</sup>I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

<sup>32</sup>Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. <sup>33</sup>And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup>I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

<sup>35</sup>The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. <sup>36</sup>When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” <sup>37</sup>When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” <sup>39</sup>“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

<sup>40</sup>Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. <sup>41</sup>The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). <sup>42</sup>And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

***Come to the Table***

August 1963

Americans gathered together in Washington, District of Columbia.

Hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life

descended upon the nation’s capital,

having traveled by bus and train, cars and aeroplanes,

so that they could walk.

The peaceful event raised awareness

of our country's desperate, profound need  
to overcome racial inequality  
and the denial of millions of citizens of their right to  
vote.

The March on Washington spoke to healing  
our nation's broken and fragmented landscape of scattered souls.

Full disclosure: that day my father George E. Calvert was present and accounted for,  
as well as possibly your own family and friends, preachers and teachers.

That day the collective experience  
for both those present in the streets and those watching on television  
was an act of remembrance of the past  
and a statement for transformation of the present.

It was also hope for the future.

Participants had a hope that remembered the past,  
that transformed the present,  
that envisioned a new day for the whole people of God.

Each one, in his or her own way,  
prayed for that sacred moment in time and place  
when the moral arc of the universe points toward justice and  
mercy

and everyone will feast at table in the kingdom.

Some were looking for hope they had lost long before.  
Some found hope by being there, in the August sunshine and sweltering heat,  
by simply being among the gathering of the faithful.  
Some had high hopes for a new future.

The sea of people who gathered in our nation's capital  
had responded to an audacious invitation that said they belonged.  
They belonged to this nation; they mattered.  
Their voices of all tones and tenors mattered;  
their bodies, their souls, ideas, sweat, and very presence mattered.

A young man from Atlanta stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.  
He walked over to the podium and began to speak.

In August 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
preached from his manuscript for several minutes  
and then he went off-script.  
He talked about a dream he had, a dream for us, a dream for the U.S.

King shared:

*"I say to you today, my friends,*

*that even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow,  
I still have a dream.  
It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.  
I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up  
and live out the true meaning of its creed  
-- we hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal.  
I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia,  
the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners  
will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.  
I have dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation  
where they will not be judged by the color of their skin  
but by the content of their character.  
I have dream today!*

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted,  
every hill and mountain shall be made low,  
the rough places shall be made plain,  
and the crooked places will be made straight,  
and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together."*

As we gather today, 53 years later,  
in this sacred space and holy place in downtown Decatur,  
gathered by God's audacious invitation  
to contemplate the divine invitation to come to the Lord's Table,  
to sit beside Jesus Christ and one another,  
to do so in remembrance of Him,  
cognizant we might very well be transformed,  
gathered in anticipation of the Not Yet,  
we are in awe with how close these  
words strike  
our hearts and homes.

Sit up taller, lean a little closer and listen once more:

*"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia,  
the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners  
will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."*

My Lord and my God.  
Today this dream, this hope, this vision,  
this living prayer, this plea for common sense  
is made manifest in our hearing.  
Sit down together at the table...  
Come to the Table.

Here in this sanctuary,  
sanctified and sanctioned by the One Who Created and Creates,  
folks from all walks of life  
shall be able to sit down together  
at the table of brotherhood, of sisterhood,  
here, now, this day, on common ground,  
without conditions or restrictions, tokens, tests or trials.

In this Christian Church of Jesus Christ all are free to be.  
All souls matter.  
All are invited and made welcome, all are served and all belong.  
Here all means all.  
This is no small thing.  
This is no small matter.  
Knowing you belong makes a world of difference.  
Knowing you belong makes the world different.

### ***Come to the Table***

The Prophet Isaiah prayed and proclaimed,  
*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."*

*"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it."*

Preacher Bill Goodin shared a story about night fishing with a college buddy.  
He and a psychology major were catfish fishing late one night  
by the light of a lantern on a lonely lake in Oklahoma.  
Bill's friend knew that Bill was a Christian and wanted to challenge his faith.  
So he asked,

*"Bill, do you realize that 70% of the people in mental institutions  
are there because they got some kind of religion?"*

Just as quickly, Bill answered,

*"My friend do you realize that 100% of the people in hell  
are there because they didn't?"*

Bill felt so good about his quick retort that he leaned way back  
and fairly gloated – and in doing so promptly knocked the lantern  
their only light, off the boat.

They watched their light sink like a rock.

Later Bill decided that the moral of the story was:

*"Witnessing is great fun, but gloating seems to go better in darkness."*

(Goodin, God Laughs, Too, P. 96)

Gloating and trying to best one another, we can do without.

We can do with less gloating and more grace.

We do so much better when we commune with Christ and build community.

People of faith are called and encouraged and empowered  
to touch and change the world around them, to make a world of difference.

Consider the day Jesus, the Lamb of God,  
called forth Andrew and Simon Peter to follow God.

The Gospel teaches us that:

*Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter)."*

Jesus called two brothers to Him who were imperfect, flawed, goofy,  
hard working, occasionally brilliant, occasionally insightful,  
and occasionally mistake-prone.

In time these two brothers were joined by tax collectors and sinners,  
the cast off and castigated,

the refuse and refugees of the world,

the kind of folks who, up close and personal,

looked like they don't fit well together,

yet when seen from a distance

they radiated a beauty and sense of purpose

we call the church, the Christian

community,

the whole people of God.

These same followers of God were with Jesus in the Upper Room.

He made them welcome;

he washed their feet;

he spoke the truth in love.

That night He gave to them, and in time to the world and us, a ritual,

a sacrament, a rite for remembering who and whose we are.

He gave to them, to us the Bread and the Cup.

Here was an act of communion, of reconciliation, of sacrifice, of redeeming love.

Here we are served and here we serve one another.

Here we are loved and here we love one another.

For many years I heard other clergy say and I myself spoke these words  
when presiding at the Lord's Table.

*"All who believe that Jesus is the Christ  
and accept Him as Lord and Savior  
are invited to partake of Holy Communion."*

I no longer say those words because that is not what Jesus did.

Careful study of the Holy Scriptures reveals  
that Jesus broke bread with anyone and everyone,  
and he did so lovingly, freely, openly, happily and prayerfully.  
He did not ask what folks believed or asked them to behave in a certain way.  
Jesus did not require anyone adopt a creed in order to be fed by Christ.  
He just, he simply, he absolutely let them know  
they belonged to God, to Him, to us all.

### ***Come to the Table***

Here we gather for communion  
-- a present engagement, not solely a memory of the past.  
Our weekly remembrance of Jesus' last supper  
helps us to remember who we are as Christians.  
Communion helps to give us identity.  
In a sense, we re-live the last supper in a way  
that transforms our lives again and again.  
The Lord's Supper then is remembrance of the past  
and transformation of the present.  
But it is also hope for the future.  
We are pointed to a time when God's reign will come  
and everyone will feast at table in the kingdom.

We feel strongly that it is the Lord who invites us to the table  
so it is not our place to judge who shall come.  
This has been true since the early days of the Christian Church.  
Alexander Campbell was one of our spiritual founders.  
When Alexander Campbell lived in Glasgow, Scotland,  
he belonged to a Presbyterian church  
which required a person to be examined as to orthodoxy  
before being permitted to share in communion.  
If the person was thought to be in line with the beliefs of the church,  
the member would be given a token  
to be presented at the Lord's Table before partaking.  
One Sunday, Alexander Campbell held the token in his hand  
and started wondering what sense that token made  
in the light of the one he was to meet at the table, Jesus Christ.  
After everyone else had partaken, he went forward,  
placed his token on the table, and walked out.  
To Campbell, Christ's church was bigger than that.  
His father, Thomas Campbell, had a similar experience in Pennsylvania.  
These experiences broadened their understanding of the Lord's Table,  
and helped to shape our own.  
The Lord's Supper is a central part of worship in the Christian Church.  
Everything we do in worship should lead us to communion.

That doesn't mean that we mention the Lord's Table throughout the service,  
but everything we do should help bring us to the frame of mind  
to partake of the bread and cup.

Even the sermon is not the center of worship.

The sermon helps us to meet Christ at His table.

### ***Come to the Table***

Belong; then you may come to believe; afterward your behavior may be altered.

Over the centuries we the Church have flipped this around and got it backwards  
by asking folks to first behave a certain way and then to believe as we do,  
and then after they passed the behavior and belief tests  
proclaiming that they can belong.

But that is not the way of God.

God through Jesus showed us the value and import  
of first and foremost inviting folks to belong  
and then living out our dreams, together.

In time, with grace and love and patience and teaching and shared missions,  
we can and probably will sort out our personal behavioral changes  
and our personal creeds and tenets of faith.

Christ never asks us to cleanse or change anyone else.

We are fisher folk, fishing and casting nets for God;  
God in Christ will do any cleaning.

Most important aspect is knowing that you and I are loved,  
that someone loves us, just as we are.  
God loves you, and so do we.

So many of our neighbors in the neighborhood want and crave  
what is being shared here,  
here in this significant faithful congregation of amazing folks.

I dare say that folks are sick to death of polarization.

Our neighbors crave this elusive thing called community.

[According to Disciples minister Holly McKissick]:

Unchurched people want a spiritual faith community  
but they are not interested in churches

that "are all hung up on gays or straight, black or white,"

but rather churches that celebrate the range of God's creation  
and help each other through the difficult complexities of life.

Many of our unchurched neighbors say,

*"If I could find a church that isn't trying to own Jesus,  
but simply follow him, I would go."*

What they mean is that they dream of a sacred place, a safe place,  
a spiritual home and community

where they could go with their questions and doubts  
and still be accepted, like us.

If only they could find a church that was not trying to divide the world  
but found a way to live together,  
like Disciples gathered at the Lord's Table.

If only they could find a church that wasn't trying to own Jesus  
but simply follow him,  
like where *the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners  
are able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*"

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