

“Our Polar Star”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA
Season After the Epiphany, Sunday, January 22, 2017
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 4: 23-25; 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

Matthew 4:23-25 (NRSV)

Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

²³Jesus^[a] went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news^[b] of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Footnotes:

a [Matthew 4:23](#) Gk *He*

b [Matthew 4:23](#) Gk *gospel*

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (NRSV)

Divisions in the Church

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.^[b] ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God^[c] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Footnotes:

a [1 Corinthians 1:10](#) Gk *brothers*

b [1 Corinthians 1:11](#) Gk *my brothers*

c [1 Corinthians 1:14](#) Other ancient authorities read *I am thankful*

Sermon

Coexist

A man was stranded on a deserted island for years.
At last a sailboat came into view.
The man frantically waved, jumped and shouted until he captured the skipper's attention.
The skipper deftly landed near the beach
then jumped out to greet the stranded man. After a while the skipper said, "I see you have three huts. Tell me about them." "Well, I live in the one with the nice view," said the islander. "What's the next hut for?" asked the sailor. "I built that one to go to church." "What about the other hut?" "Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

Coexist

In January of 2002 our congregation commissioned and sent our Director of Music William Garner and me to Memphis, Tennessee. This significant church of the Christian Church in the heart of Decatur bought two round trip plane tickets and asked William and me to be representatives, to be witnesses at a ground-breaking, heaven and earth moving event. We were there for the inauguration of Churches Uniting in Christ. The nine member churches of Churches Uniting in Christ are: [1]

the African Methodist Episcopal Church,
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church,
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),
Episcopal Church,
International Council of Community Churches,
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
United Church of Christ and
the United Methodist Church.

This was no small thing; this was neither small talk nor a casual covenant. After more than 40 years of talk of Christian unity – four decades from the '60s to the 2000s, generations of church servant leaders listening, arguing, disputing, conversing, compromising, and building consensus – nine churches (and here we speak of nine church bodies, nine denominations) that have talked about Christian unity inaugurated a covenant agreement that sealed them (us) together as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC).

You see, my friends, for 40 years
Christians had searched for ways
in which churches could establish closer ties
without giving up their own identity.
Clergy and laity in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
from Barton Stone to George Beasley to Paul Crow,
from our former pastor Robert Boyte to Robert Welsh
to today's Seung (Paul) Tche
have taken up the mantle to bring Jesus'
followers

together around Christ's Table.

Praise God!

Disciples of Christ were and are and will be in the mix.
You will find us in the middle, in the messiness of ministry,
in the midst of authentic dialogue with faith communities,
leading in Word and Deed to unify and unite.

In 1999, Churches of Christ Uniting proposed to its member churches
a covenant relationship
based on eight “visible marks” of unity among the churches,
most notably 'mutual recognition of each other
as authentic expressions of the one church of
Jesus Christ.

The covenant relationship lifted up mutual recognition
of members and ordained ministry;
agreements to worship together and celebrate the Eucharist
together;
and to cooperate in mission in our cities and towns;
and the shared pledge to work to eradicate racism.

So in January 2002, William and I went as ambassadors on your behalf,
where we joined with several thousand Christians
from all walks of life, including from all nine church bodies.

We pledged to love Jesus and one another;
to serve God alongside each other;
to break the Bread and share the Cup together;
and to seek to eradicate racism together.

In an emotional two-and-a-half-hour worship service
at Mt. Olive Cathedral of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in
Memphis,

... Bishop McKinley Young of the African Methodist Episcopal Church
called our shared covenant “*an ecumenical epiphany.*”

Just as the disciples were transformed by their encounter with Jesus,
so are the nine member churches changed
by [our] new covenant with each other, said Bishop Young.

“It won't be the same as it was before,” he said.

“It's not our doing either

--but Christ's presence is with us in a new way—

an epiphany, a new understanding of what it means to be disciples.

...This is our finest hour.

Don't blow it.”

Coexist

We've seen the bumper stickers and t-shirts.

COEXIST

Each letter is a different religious symbol,
a subliminal – or outright – message
that people from different faiths and beliefs, traditions and spiritualities
can and should and ought to get along,
to learn to share our common space,
affirm our common denominators,
celebrate our diversity, identity & uniqueness,

and play nice in the sandbox known as Mother Earth.
Easier said than done.
Yet if it doesn't get said it will never, ever get done.
So let's say it, and then let's do it, together.
Disciples have taken the point, invested our souls and selves,
offered up our resources, talent and time,
and have diligently worked and played for Christian unity
since our inception after a spirit-filled revival in the early 1800s.
You see, Christian unity is in our DNA.
This is who we are.
We say that Christian unity is our polar star.
We back up these platitudes with practice.
We respect, accept, other traditions and expressions of the Christian faith,
without suspicion or condition.
Christian unity is both a process and an aspiration;
it is a way of being in community and a sacred destination.

Don't think for one minute that unity in Christ
is not worthy of our efforts, our love, our gifts, our hopes.
The people, united, will never be defeated,
whether by disease or despair, denominational pride or prejudice,
by oppression or the opposition to love and mercy.

The best part is unity is it's not our idea.
Jesus thought it up and showed us how.
Jesus showed us the Way, and "all we have to do" is follow in His footsteps.

*²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee,
teaching in their synagogues
and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom
and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

*²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria,
and they brought to him all the sick,
those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains,
demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.*

*²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis,
Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

Jesus unified the Middle East!
Are you kidding me?!
For one shining moment people forgot to hate.
Rather than the folks from Jordan to Jerusalem being polarized,
they took on Christ as their polar star.
He was their hope, their light, their salvation.
For an hour, a day, a month, a stretch of time
crowds sought the love of God, together.
Jesus pointed people to God.
What he did was a political act.
If politics is the act of deciding and directing resources,
Jesus' political actions were to direct God's people's energies and efforts
on healing for the least and the lame in their society.
Look what happened when people stopped focusing on what divided them

and intentionally focused instead on what united them.
They were healed.
They had renewed purpose.
They loved, and were loved in return.
Look what happened when they looked and saw God in one another.
The sick and suffering, sinners and saints alike,
the warring factions and nations and tribes and townships
put down their arms and arguments
and followed the Man from Galilee.

Coexist

Focus on our polar star of being one, and suddenly healing happens.
Being one doesn't mean being the same.
Far from it; being one in Christ, in God's love,
means affirming and accepting one another as we are,
without judgment or conditions.

Polarization need not be the norm.
It's not Christ-like.
It's not unifying, or becoming, or uplifting.
It's not healthy for children or anyone made in God's image.

We can coexist without always agreeing.
We can get along and serve together and still differ.
We can do this when we choose to listen to each other,
to speak from our hearts, to be real,
as opposed to presenting a façade or putting on a mask.
We can choose to focus on the issues and not the personalities.
We can make a conscience choice to care about matters that truly matter.
Part of what divides and destroys community
is we allow ourselves to become distracted and divided
over the insignificant and incidental.
We get bent out of shape about a Tweet in 144 characters or less while
our next door neighbor is hurting for a friend,
our schools are struggling,
and creation cries out for relief.

An example on our collective and immediate horizon in Georgia:
The Georgia legislature is about to invest precious public resources and time
on the Religious Liberty Bill.

Again.

You know as well as anyone that the Religious Liberty Bill
is about neither religion nor liberty
but controlling and ostracizing the powerless in our midst.
If we know that this or any bill or a book or a budget
would damage families and unity,
do we have a moral obligation to speak up?
Imagine all that legislative energy redirected
to ensure that our schools have sufficient resources,
so music and art and languages are not cut, but rather enhanced.
That is the politics of Jesus.

Jesus was a beautiful political, social, salvific force of love,
walking with His disciples into the community and nations
and drawing people together around the common cause of mercy
for God's people.

We claim Him as our model and our messiah.

In turn He calls to us in our hearts and minds to advocate and fight, stand and speak up
for the children, the lame,
our neighbors who fear for their civil rights,
our seniors who are unsure of their future,
and the ones who are the last hired and first fired
because the Word must be fulfilled in His hearing.

Today, in January 2017, we have a chance and a choice,
right now, right here, in such a time as this
to bring people together to be lifted and to lift up a beloved community,
so that we can commune, in unity,
in the loving embrace of God and the whole people of God.

*"It won't be the same as it was before.
It's not our doing either
--but Christ's presence is with us in a new way--
an epiphany, a new understanding of what it means to be disciples.
...This is our finest hour.
Don't blow it."*

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

Quote for Communion Meditation

Annie Dillard, in her book Teaching a Stone to Talk
says that Christians conduct ourselves
as if did not really understand the implications
of following a living, present, active God.

She writes that, "On the whole,
I do not find Christians sufficiently sensible of conditions.
Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?
Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?
The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,
mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.
It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church;
we should all be wearing crash helmets.
Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;
they should lash us to our pews.
For the sleeping god may wake one day and take offense."**[2]**

[1] Churches Uniting in Christ is born with worship, anti-racism march
Episcopal Church, January 22, 2002, by Jerry L. Van Marter

[2] Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, NY.
HarperPerennial. 1982. P. 58.