

"Continuing Ed"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
First Sunday in the Season of Lent, March 5, 2017
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Genesis 2: 1-4a; 3: 1-17

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Today's message draws upon the well of Suzanne Johnson's teaching in her seminal book, Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom. Enjoy!

Continuing Education

Recently the Lydia Circle of Disciples Women in our congregation studied the Creation story in Genesis 2 and 3. The bible study material by Dr. Marti J. Steussy found in "Just Women" magazine asked challenging questions and lifted up invaluable study material. Disciples women met in the Church Parlor where they found themselves at the intersection of faith and reason, encountering God and the Word and one another.

Dr. Steussy's material explored in depth the biblical story from Genesis 2 and 3
where we find the second Creation story.

The Lydia Circle were spiritually transported
to witness God and Adam and Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden,
where planted in the center
are the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the
Tree of Life.

The Lydia Circle discussed and wondered,
analyzed and examined questions lifted up by Dr. Steussy such as:

*"Is this history?
If not, why bother with it?
If so, was Cain's wife his sister?"*

*"Why doesn't God want humans to know "good and evil"?
Aren't we supposed to make the distinction?"*

*"Didn't God know that humans would disobey?
If God knew, isn't God partly responsible for what happened?"*

"These questions arise because the story" of Creation and How We Came to Be
are "told as if God did not know everything."
This is an old story, a good story, a story of original blessing,
a story handed down from ancient times to today,
a story revealing the possibility that
even God doesn't know for sure what we will do"
with our freedom and free will "until we do it."

Continuing Education

There is a tendency amongst many in the Church
as well as those who observe from a safe distance
that Christian education is for children and other people.

See if any of this sounds familiar:

I graduated from Sunday School and
(A) got my perfect attendance pin and a certificate to prove it;
(B) got baptized,
or (C) know just enough to get by.

So please don't ask me again to go to another boring Bible study or topical class
that I can't – or won't – apply to my daily workaday life.

We all have stories to share about going to Sunday School,
some of which simply speak to our spiritual formation
and some are simply hilarious.

When Pastor Bill Goodin was teaching a Confirmation Class,
he invited the young people to discuss
how the world would have been different
had Adam and Eve not eaten of the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the
Garden of Eden.

The boys were "getting a handle" on the idea
that Adam and Eve and all their relations
would still be alive today.

Two girls had their heads together during the discussion and seemed troubled,
until finally one said, *"We'd all be naked!"*

The other said, with equal dismay, *"There would be no shopping malls!"*

Pastor Goodin reflected, *"I love confirmation class.*

They always give me new perspectives." [1]

New perspectives like the child who said he could not complete his religious
homework

because the zipper on his bible was stuck.

Why didn't I ever think of that when I was in confirmation class? [2]

On another occasion, Pastor Goodin was teaching confirmation to a deaf class.

By using American Sign Language,

he was sharing the concept of God as our Heavenly Father.

One student became almost violent in opposition to the lesson.

"He was furious that I would try to teach him such a lousy idea!" said Goodin,

"But I was the teacher, and I had a lesson plan.

God was his Father in Heaven, and he had better get used to the idea."

Later, in private, the supervising minister helped Bill Goodin process the experience.

He asked, *"Did you ever ask him about his father?"*

State law required deaf students to be sent home on weekends.

This boy's father was the man who came home drunk on Friday nights

and beat him because he was deaf.

In this case, God was not like his father.

God was like his house parents at school.

The boy forgave Pastor Goodin for confusing his faith in God.

The pastor learned to listen. [3]

The education continued for both pastor and parish.

Continuing Education

Professor Suzanne Johnson writes:

"The intent of Christian education is to form Christians.

We are not forming people who are religious in general

(in fact, there is no such thing).

This is not to deny the truthfulness of other religious narratives;

[this is] to reaffirm that we reach the universal truth
through our own particular existence.” [4]

We make the conscious choice to reach for the truth
in and through the love of God in Jesus Christ.
We have decided to accept the call from God to form disciples of Jesus Christ.
The call and need for the formation of Christians
is as great today as ever before.
We live in an age of a great awakening of spirituality.

“Membership in mainline churches in the United States
has been on steady, precipitous decline for several decades.
The question pressing the church
is not so much whether our children will have spirituality
but whether Christianity will have our children.”

Christianity has no grandchildren.
We do not inherit our faith or our salvation through anyone else.
Each one of us must make the personal choice
to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, and
soul.
Even so, this does not absolve us of our joy and responsibility to pass it on.
We who are so blessed to connect with Christ and Christ’s people
are empowered to share the Good News.
Receiving the love of God
as well as being and sharing the Good News
are equal parts of the package deal of Christian spirituality.

Continuing Education

The word spiritual is cluttered with multiple and hazy definitions.
You have observed as well as I that we are in a time and place
where new-age spirituality, esoteric cults, and spiritual psychologies
dominate the landscape.
Just in case you should require hard evidence and definitive confirmation,
go visit a local bookstore
or peruse the internet for books and blogs on spirituality.
Chances are you will find what we are discussing on a bookshelf labeled Self-Help.

*Did you hear of the gentleman who could not find the Self-Help section in a
bookstore? He eventually left unfulfilled because he refused to ask for directions.*

We yearn for a sacred connection,
for affirming relationships with God and one another and our Self.
We yearn, yet we are torn and tossed about where and to whom to turn.
We are inundated with spiritual tomes

that are based on the secular and the spectacular and contemporary culture,

making it quite a challenge for the seeker
to determine the authentic from the bogus,
the theological from the secular,
the Biblical from the whimsical.

“Too much contemporary spirituality has lost its historical moorings.
Modern Christians are largely content to swim in the warm stream of the immediate.

Recasting an Old Testament image,

Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us that spirituality in the life of the church
can continue to exist
only when it sends us back to our decisive sources.
We must drink from our own wells (Proverbs
5: 15).

[Emory University and Decatur's own] Don Saliers reminds us, in this respect,
that Christian worship and spirituality
must center in the common memory
of those who gather around the [baptismal pool],
the [Holy Bible] and the [Lord's Table].

If and when we are to take on the name Christian, or Disciple, or Follower of God,
it does our Faith and Reason good to learn more about that which we claim.

Suzanne Johnson wonders aloud whether

Christians “take on the name “Christian” without appropriating the Story,
the living memory that determines the meaning of the name they
bear!

Hence, [Christians] cannot see their lives in continuity
with the redemptive history into which they have been adopted,
namely, the whole biblical story of God's work “for us”
through Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”[5]

Our spirits are in a continual process of formation and reformation,
of learning and unlearning and relearning, of growth and maturation.
We are invited and inspired to deepen our spirituality
through Bible study and prayer,
through questioning and listening,
through examining the Word
and experiencing the Word as it examines us.

Continuing Education

In the spring of 2014, at the beginning of Lent,
I had my very first banjo lesson,

having finally tapped into the courage to dust off a banjo
I'd owned and stowed away for thirty years.
The next day I bumped into an accomplished master guitarist.
I tentatively shared with him my new adventure,
to which he quietly responded, "*We all had our first lesson once.*"

His gentle recognition that we have all had to start sometime, somewhere, somehow
made me feel so good and so encouraged.
Who needs to hear you say to them, "*We all had our first lesson once*"?

We are always a bit raw, a bit ginger, a mite hesitant
when starting something new, when admitting we don't know everything,
when daring to trust the Spirit of God
to move us in new directions and missions and
learnings.

Continuing Education

The Good News is that Christ meets us wherever we are,
including at the intersection of Faith and Reason.

As many of you know,
our own Emily Smith and Henry Brewer-Calvert
graduated from Lynchburg College in Virginia.
At Lynchburg College paths crisscross a field in the middle of the campus.
They call the field the Dell.
On one side is the chapel, where the first worship service was held.
Directly across is the first building for classrooms and administration.
Circling the Dell are a library, housing, gymnasium, and classrooms.
Paths cross the Dell and link body and soul, heart and mind, faith and reason.

Disciples of Christ celebrate and affirm the intersection
of faith and reason,
of Christian spirituality and education,
of believing and thinking.
Rather than seeing these as mutually exclusive, we choose to bear witness
that Faith and Reason balance, enhance, inspire and inform.

Faith is a journey outside of our selves.
Reason draws upon our intelligence and looks within as well as around us.
This is what educated believers do, my friends.

Educated Christians are comfortable with living the questions.
We are living the questions.
You know, my friends, some churches are answer churches.
They will tell you everything they think you should believe.

Answer churches hand out quick solutions like candy,
offering easy, pat answers to life's complex problems and troubling concerns.
Thinking is not required.
We seek instead to be a question church.
Here Disciples help each other to learn the questions we need to ask;
together we will walk this journey of faith whilst seeking God's guidance.
Who is helping you to lift up questions and seek guidance?
Are you putting yourself in position to be a guide, a listener, a helper?

Continuing Education

Educated Christians are comfortable with the dance of faith and doubt.
The opposite of faith is not doubt; faith's opposite is fear.
Educated Christians use our minds to say "No" to the fear
that is peddled and promoted on the airwaves and internet and social media.
We will not be fooled by fear-mongers that seek to separate and divide,
dissuade or distract us
from that which is life-affirming and community-minded.
We know what follows closely on the heels of fear: ignorance.

Two friends got to visiting.
One shared that she was an atheist.
Her friend asked if she had read any of the Gospels.
"No," was the answer.
"Have you read the Bible, the Torah, the Holy Koran, or the Bhagavad-Gita?"
Again, the answer was no.
"My friend, you are not an atheist.
What you are is ignorant. And that is okay because ignorance is treatable.
Go and read, study and ask questions, practice the spiritual disciplines.
I'll join you, if you like.
Only after you expand your heart and mind
can you make an educated assessment of your belief system."

Continuing Education

*"The question pressing the Church
is not so much whether our children will have spirituality
but whether Christianity will have our children."*

Since the Garden of Eden the descendents of Adam and Eve
have been given this blessed opportunity and shared responsibility
to be informed, inspired, and intentional followers of God.

We meet the Holy One and one another at the intersection of faith and reason.

One day Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes* marched up to his mother.
She was sitting in the living room doing the crossword puzzle.
Calvin was wearing a large space helmet,
while a huge cape hung from his shoulders.
She asked him, "*What is up today?*"
"*Nothing so far,*" he said.
"*So far?*" she asked.
"*Well, you never know, something could happen today.*"
He strode off and said,
"*And if anything does, by golly, I'm going to be ready for it!*"
She went back to her puzzle and said to herself, "*I need a suit like that.*"

We have one.
We have a cape and helmet like that: they are called Faith and Reason.

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