

***“One Church. Three Manifestations”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Third Sunday in the Season of Lent, March 19, 2017

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**Holy Scriptures: John 4: 5-15, 28-30, 39-42**

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”<sup>2</sup> —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—<sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee.<sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria.

<sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”<sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,<sup>29</sup> “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”<sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to him.

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.<sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word.

<sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for

we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

## Sermon

### ***Undivided Attention***

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is one church, three manifestations.

We are one in Christ, one in vision, one in love,

yet we embody this union with three manifestations.

The first manifestation is that we are 3,600 local congregations with 500,000 members.

The second manifestation is we're subdivided into 32 regions across the USA & Canada.

The third manifestation is we are one General Church ministry

charged with the responsibility of supporting 3,600 local congregations,

serving 32 regional ministries,

and speaking the truth in love to the principalities and

powers.

Hold that thought.

We'll come back in a bit to the structure and systemic meaning of

a significant church that gives the whole people of God our undivided attention.

### ***Undivided Attention***

Consider an event here in this local manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Last summer our church was approached

by the director of the Atlanta Science Festival.

Meisa Salaita, PhD, a local resident in Oakhurst and scientist,

coordinates a festival that includes 100 events spread around the city of

Atlanta.

Once a year for ten days in March

free events and workshops and lectures

that encourage & engage people of all ages to connect with science.

So last summer Meisa came by the church

because Daren Wang recommended she do so.

Daren Wang manages the Decatur Book Festival,

and his office is here on our second floor.

He told her that this church is a terrific host; that our ministry of hospitality is real;

and maybe we could find some space for her planning team like we had for

him.

So when Meisa Salaita approached our Church Trustees

and requested a meeting room once a month for a couple hours,

we proposed an equal exchange of services.

You see, we – First Christian Church of Decatur – meet God and one another

at the intersection of Faith and Reason.

We invite folks to open their hearts and souls,

but please don't check your brains at the door.

God gave you a brain and intellectual curiosity;

God gives you empathy and a passion for justice;  
God in Jesus has modeled how to use both to make a difference.  
So we said to Meisa, how about your planning team use a room here once a month,  
and in exchange the Atlanta Science Festival  
sponsor a panel discussion on Science and Spirituality...right here.  
We'll gather scientists and theologians to be on the panel;  
you promote it.

Deal!

The event was held in our sanctuary last Thursday evening.  
88 church members and city neighbors sat in these pews for two hours.  
Our panel included a Tenzin Topden, a Buddhist scientist from Tibet;  
Arri Eisen, a Jewish biologist with a focus on ethics;  
Steve Kraftchick, a Christian theologian  
with expertise in technology and mathematics;  
and this pastor who served as moderator.

*Sounds like a joke: a Buddhist, a Jew and a Christian walk into...*

The first hour was heady.  
The panelists addressed prepared questions,  
pondering the intersection and divergence,  
tension and collaboration of science and spirituality.

The second hour was personal.  
We took questions from the audience.

*"I'm a medical doctor. I have an intellectual approach to life, yet my heart is full as well. Is there a place for someone like me who is both a thinker and a believer?"*

*"I am a Christian and a scientist but how do I talk with my fundamentalist parent who refuses to acknowledge evolution?"*

*"I grew up in a mosque that only deals with matters of faith; now I am a biologist and my colleagues only deal with matters of science. How do I reconcile the two?"*

Afterward participants said the first hour was okay; our second hour was profound.  
The difference was the Q & A talk was personalized.

At 9:30 PM Russell and I flipped the sanctuary lights off and on  
because people wouldn't leave.

It appeared that our neighbors wanted to stay here, in the church,  
to talk and share in a safe space.

Folks here and all around us have questions and are looking for answers.  
We provide a venue to live out our questions, together.  
This is what we do; this is who we are; this is where we are going, together.

One recommendation for next year's Science and Spirituality:  
consider break-out rooms for people to gather in afterward to be heard  
and to know they have someone's undivided attention  
in personal matters that matter.

### ***Undivided Attention***

John's Gospel paints for us a picture with words we appreciate and understand.

*Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard,*

*"Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"*

<sup>2</sup> *—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—*  
<sup>3</sup> *he left Judea and started back to Galilee.*

<sup>4</sup> *But he had to go through Samaria.*

<sup>5</sup> *So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar,*

*near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.*

<sup>6</sup> *Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well.*

*It was about noon."*

Jesus and the Disciples must leave Judea, pronto.

The Pharisees are upset.

Folks are loving God,

dedicating themselves to Christ, being baptized by his disciples,  
preaching in the Temple and synagogues, starting house churches,  
healing and helping and welcoming all sorts of folks and  
families.

So for their safety and sanity and sake of their spirituality

Jesus and his followers depart from Judea and head back to Galilee.

In order to get to Galilee they must pass through Samaria,

the land and people with whom Jews have little -- if anything --  
to do with each other.

As they enter the vicinity of Samaria, they come to the city of Sychar.

*Traveling into **Samaria**, the Lord Jesus came to a little village **called Sychar**.*

*Not far from that village was a **plot of ground***

***that Jacob had given to his son Joseph (Gen. 48:22).***

*As Jesus journeyed over this territory,*

*all the scenes of its past history were constantly before His mind.<sup>[1]</sup>*

They are only passing through, but they know of at least one local attraction.

Jacob's Well is there.

Surely this would be holy ground, worthy of a visit, a moment of silence and a drink.

The disciples and Jesus stop at the well, which is a mile and a half from town.

There are wells closer to town, but this one is sacred space.

This is Jacob's Well.

*This ancient well can still be seen by visitors,*

*being one of the few Biblical sites*

*which can be identified quite positively today.*

*It was about noon (Jewish time) or 6 p.m. (Roman time)*

*when Jesus reached the well.*

*Jesus was weary as a result of the long walk He had had,*

*and so He sat down by the well.[2]*

Jesus sends the Disciples to go into town for supplies,

to scout out what is going on, maybe to find a place for the night.

Jesus sits and waits in the early evening sun.

It is hot. He is thirsty. Someone approaches. It's a woman with a water jar.  
There were three wells along this road to Sychar.  
Jacob's well was the farthest out from town.  
She walked right past the first well, the one closest to home.  
"*She is feeling shame and guilt for having had 5 husbands,*" observed a scholar,  
"*and for living with one who is not her husband.*"  
Maybe, maybe...  
Every felt guilty? Ashamed? Embarrassed? Does guilt motivate you to do better?  
Or does it make you freeze? Or fight? Or want to take flight?  
When shame clouds your vision  
do you want to draw closer to people? Or God? Or do you seek to be alone?  
This well of fresh water is too close to town.  
She moves on to the next.  
Another Biblical scholar John Claypool said, "*She isn't feeling guilt; she is grieving.*"  
Every grieve for a deep loss?  
Living with loss is so hard, so tough, so painful.  
When our beloved feel a sense of loss, are in deep grief, we go and sit with them.  
Sometimes we don't say one word.  
Your presence is enough.  
The presence of God in a friend  
has the power to overcome the overwhelming one's desire to isolate.  
This well is also too close to town.  
She moves on to the next.  
Biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine said,  
"*She isn't grieving or feeling guilt; she needed water!*  
*She wasn't an outcast,*  
*because later folks listened and accepted her story of meeting Jesus.*  
*The essence of this story is that the Samaritan woman,*  
*unlike Nicodemus, gets it. She listens and understands.*"  
Every need something, and were willing to go a little farther, to meet your need?  
A story in my family has been passed down from one generation to the next  
that an ancestor refused to pass by one church in order to get to another,  
which explains how they became Presbyterian.  
You and I drive by countless congregations to be here with God and one another.  
We do so because deep down we want to be here.  
Each of us has a different reason, yet all of us seek an encounter with the holy.  
Welcome to holy ground.  
Welcome to Jacobs Well.  
Here meet Jesus and a woman of Samaria.  
Here we remember and cherish a sacred encounter between God and humanity.  
Here we receive...

### ***Undivided Attention***

This month our Disciples women and Disciples men are gathering  
from around the region of Georgia for retreats and spring conferences.  
Our men are meeting for worship, bible study, and spiritual formation.

Our women are assembling for worship, bible study  
and to discern how to break the cycles that oppress, repress,  
and regress our personhood and community.  
This is what regional ministries do:  
we bring people together from a wide range of areas and expertise  
and make things happen;  
we make good things happen.  
Look what God can do when people come together to break the cycles.  
Life gets exciting in the mix of human free will and the Holy Spirit,  
especially when we meet over barbeque and cold refreshing beverages.

Students of the Bible know that when a man and a woman meet at a well,  
life gets exciting.  
Things happen. People are changed. Relationships are never the same.  
Isaac's servant met Rebekah at a well.  
Jacob met Rachel.  
Solomon didn't meet anyone, and that meant he was bound to be in trouble.  
Jesus and his followers knew this.  
So too would the Gospel writers.  
What would Jesus do...if he met a woman at a well?  
He would give her his undivided attention.  
Whether you are grieving a loss in your life,  
or feeling guilty for something you did do or did not do,  
or something has led you to seek isolation, separateness,  
to set yourself apart from the whole people of God,  
or maybe you simply thirst for truth and righteousness and a holy encounter,  
Jesus will meet you wherever you are.  
God is present in our guilt and grief and gumption  
and whatever ground we suddenly find ourselves resting upon.  
God gives us God's complete and undivided attention.  
Encounters with Jesus will happen, will occur, will transpire  
in the routine events of the day and night.  
While sitting beside the well,  
Jesus and the woman talked of water and living water,  
of the thirst for life and the spirit that quenches the soul.  
Ask yourself this one day when you make time to think and pray and meditate.  
What is essential for my life to continue?  
Will you list water, food, family, friends, shelter,  
steady source of income, television, internet access...?  
What is essential for your life to have meaning and purpose?  
What is essential for your life to make a difference in the world?  
What feeds and sustains your soul?

### ***Undivided Attention***

Our General Church is all about making time and energy for relationships.  
One program that was launched a short time ago and is flourishing is called Xplore.

Young adults between 18 and 25

apply and are chosen to live together in an urban home,  
where they build a small community in a large city.

The Xplore-ers connect with a host Disciples church who covenant to support them.

The young adults serve and work and do internships of community service.

Over the course of a year they discern their own calls from God

while making a difference in a specific metropolitan context.

Day and night they are giving neighbors and God their *undivided attention*.

Isn't that what Jesus and His followers did?

They connected with people in their own communities;

they loved them as they are;

they shared the Good News that everyone belongs to God;

and we belong to each other.

Jesus Christ encountered people in the everyday patterns of life and community.

He used common examples to explain the uncommon,

the ordinary to point to the extraordinary.

In the Gospel of John he spoke of Living Water when he stood beside a well;

of sheep and shepherds when by fields and flocks;

to speak of the connectedness of God he pointed to vines and good

fruit;

to speak of the nature and nurture of God he said I will be your Friend,

to show how to lead a life of service above self, he washed their feet;

to help them to remember God daily he used a loaf of bread and a common cup;

to point them toward life everlasting he raised Lazarus from the dead;

to assure us of the forgiving, redeeming love of God

he said we must be born again, from above.

All this points us to a God

who loves us so much that he came unto the world in human form,

an ordinary person whose will is for us to be extraordinary.

What did Jesus give to her that she did not already have?

She had a longing to be known, to be understood, to be remembered, to be close.

Jesus gave to her his undivided attention.

What did she give to Jesus that he did not already have?

He had a hope and a prayer that someone might get it, might understand,

might hear the Word and take it in, savor the Word,

become the Word, apply it and share it in the community.

Jesus stayed two days in a town

they may have expected to only pass through

on their way someplace else.

Two days...two days of healing and hearing;

two days of breaking bread and feeding spirits.

You know Jesus' spirit was fed as well.

Not only did the Samaritan woman become and share the Good News,

so too did her neighbors.

They trusted her, and believed because she believed.

She welcomed Jesus into her life, and so they welcomed Jesus into their lives.  
They feel his spirit, and it made them feel good. New. Hopeful. Empowered.  
They gave to God their undivided attention.

I shared this message with a neighbor this week and she said,  
“*What would it take for us to give God our undivided attention?*”  
Now, that is when life gets exciting.

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

[1]William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.  
[2] Ibid.