

***“Worthiness Isn’t Questioned”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Second Sunday in the Season of Lent, March 12, 2017  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Genesis 12: 1-4a

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...

***Will Work for Food***

We have all seen the signs, awkward letters etched on torn cardboard.

**“Will Work for Food”**

**“Homeless Please Help”**

**“Viet Nam Vet Please Lend a Hand”**

My college senior daughter the Theater Major

has a button that says, **“Will Act for Food.”**

We have all seen the hand-held signs,

on the curb, by MARTA exits, outside the supermarket door.

Some of us may have held our own handmade sign at some point,

trying to make eye contact with strangers, seeking help, seeking hope.

For the most part many of us are conflicted,

torn over what is the best thing to do, to be, to share,

how best to react,

how best to respond to a request for aid, for succor,

for help when we see...

***Will Work for Food***

I know solid Christians who tell me they never give because “it only encourages them.”

I know faithful Christians who carry change and single bills to give away, always ready.

I know dedicated Christians who carry granola bars, just in case asked for food.

I had a college classmate who was raised in the Church

whom I heard tell someone begging on the street, “Hey, get a job!”

I had a college classmate who was due to inherit from his Oscar Meyer family trust fund,

and when he turned 21 he asked for his full inheritance  
and then quietly gave away 100% to food banks and social action  
agencies.

Today Chuck Collins advises wealthy people how to divest and make a difference.

What would Jesus do?

For Jesus, worthiness was never questioned.

No biblical Litmus test, no theological exam, no proof of ID or residence or  
citizenship.

You belonged and that was all that mattered.

You are here, you need help, or say you do, so here is a helping hand.

He did say, "...the poor you will have with you always."

Maybe that was a reality check, acknowledging that this is the way of the world.

Give to those who ask, hand out a dollar or two, but sleep well at night.

Look around, the need is overwhelming, so surely we can' meet all this need.

Or, maybe Jesus was indicting us for our callousness.

"The poor you will have with you always" if you keep on like you are.

Just because there are people in financial plight

does not mean it is a permanent curse that must always be.

### ***Will Work for Food***

God said to Abram and Sarai: *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

We are the spiritual descendents of Abram and Sarai.

We who have been blessed are to bless one another.

*All the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

No conditions there in the fine print.

No questions of worthiness or value or relationship or history.

*"All the families of the earth shall be blessed,"* said God,

looking right at Abram and Sarai

and their descendents who are as vast

as the sands of the desert and stars in the night sky.

Speaking of vastness, in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area

there are 14,000 homeless people;

20%, almost 3,000 of them, are children.

Many of the adult men are veterans.

We have 14,000 neighbors -- children and teens and adults --

sleeping on the streets or under bridges or in cars,

bouncing from couch to couch or in hotels or extended stay  
motels,  
in shelters or secret residences for victims of abuse.

### ***Will Work for Food***

Jesus said, "The poor you will have with you always" if you keep on like you are.  
So don't.

Dare to change, to do something, be something different,  
let go of greed and vainglory and hopelessness  
and take on a cause, a mission, a common effort to make a  
difference.

Sometimes putting on a band aid is a good start.  
It works on boo-boos.  
It helps heal small cuts and bruises and incisions so much quicker.  
It is something most everyone can do, can offer and provide.

Band aids have their value.  
Most everybody can dole out a band aid, a granola bar, a cup of cold water.  
No one should be excluded from the opportunity to give, to serve, to love,  
to be a part of the grace that changes the world  
one soul, one home, one relationship at a time.

Our giving of ourselves is grounded  
on who God is, what God does,  
and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

To give oneself to God is to give oneself to other people.  
To give oneself to other people is to give oneself to God.  
The Gospel commands those who would follow Jesus  
to have empathy and compassion for one another.

Every social program, every fiscal policy,  
every church and temple and mosque ministry  
needs to be held up next to the measuring stick  
of whether it hurts or helps, harms or heals  
the widows, the children, the broke and  
broken in our midst.

There are no nameless or faceless children of God.  
No one is illegal.  
Language matters, and that is an offensive term for a child of God.  
Everyone is legitimate in God's eyes, and ours as well.  
Every plight and plea for mercy moves the heart of God.  
The Lord dares to command anyone who would listen to provide,  
and then to live into the trust  
that one day the recipient may well become the provider.

### ***Will Work for Food***

One day in the early 1950s  
my parents sent my eldest brothers David and Jonathan outside to play.  
We lived in one of a row of tenements in Spanish Harlem in NYC.  
There was a safe play area nearby,  
and our mother could watch from her window as the boys went down the  
street.  
David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

When they walked out the front door  
immediately a man on the street stopped and said, "*Let me take your  
picture.*"  
David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary and not take candy from strangers,  
so they shrank back, uncomfortable,  
and leaned into each other in the corner of the doorway on the  
stoop  
as he snapped away.

A short while later a poster was put up in churches and temples across the city.  
The poster featured two children in play clothes, with huge eyes and frightened  
looks,

huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.  
Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they saw the poster,  
and recognized their own children!  
The poster read: ***These Children Need Your Help! Please Give!***  
These days Jon laughs when he recalls  
that morning on the stoop and subsequent poster,  
and he says, "*Hey, it's still true. Send money! I can put it to good  
use!*"

The Lord does provide.  
We who have received a little or a lot have become God's providers.  
May we trust that at the intersection of scarcity and generosity, grace abounds.

### ***Will Work for Food***

In Christian divinity schools across the United States and around the world  
seminarians are assigned Holy Scriptures by their professors  
and instructed to exegete the texts.  
To exegete a passage from the Bible  
is to thoroughly examine and analyze the text from every possible angle:  
historical and cultural context, literary criticism, grammatical  
analysis,  
who wrote it and to whom, and its theological messages.  
Christian students return to their classroom  
to submit papers with ample footnotes that describe in detail  
what their exegesis reveals about the meaning of the text.

In Jewish seminaries, however,  
when a rabbinical student is handed a passage to exegete  
he or she is informed to return with not one understanding,  
but a dozen understandings of the same passage.  
The rabbis in training are learning to see the Word of God  
from other, often diametrically opposed, perspectives.  
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes this exegetical discipline to the next level  
when he applies it to the practice of living in community.  
Rabbi Sacks says, *"The supreme religious challenge  
is to see God's image in one who is not in our image."*

(The  
Dignity of  
Difference, p. 60)

*"Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror  
to the God we did not make up."*  
(Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, p. 100)

### ***Will Work for Food***

In August of 2013, our Chalice Thrift store opened with a song  
and much sweat and a prayer.  
Our prayer was that a soul might find here  
the black pants and white shirt needed for a job in a restaurant.  
We prayed someone might buy for a song a nice outfit  
to be presentable at an interview to get the offer to work and pay the rent.  
We prayed a child might be clothed so nicely  
that teasing from classmates would be left out of the equation.  
Who knew we would also have original Elvis records on sale for a dollar  
alongside Easter baskets for eager preschoolers  
and classic biographies shelved near delightfully trashy novels?  
Who knew we would raise 40, 50, 60,000 dollars in four and a half years,  
money for mission, money for ministries of meaning,  
money for social change in this city, region, nation, planet?  
Who knew we would be so blessed and a blessing?  
Who knew this would be an embodiment of our redemptive theology  
of seeing God's image in one who is not in our image?

### ***Will Work for Food***

There is a direct relationship between  
not getting hung up on whether Someone Else, a Them, an Other,  
is worthy of your attention or compassion or benevolence,  
and choosing to see past our own reflections in the mirror, to seeing Me in  
Thee.  
Martin Buber called this having an I/Thou relationship.  
Namaste means the God in me sees the God in you.

Maybe here in the South we simply call this hospitality.  
*Mi casa es su casa.*  
Welcome home.

### ***Will Work for Food***

We have sent out work crews from our congregation  
to minister to church members and friends.  
One of my favorite stories occurred the weekend  
we sent out crews to help church folks who were homebound  
yet needed a simple project or two done around their home.  
Johnny Lee and Jay Norton went to the home of a saint of the congregation.  
They repaired her leaky carport & adjusted and scrapped windows that were sealed  
shut.  
She said, *"Oh, the light fixture in the hall closet is broken. Could you fix it?"*  
So Johnny and Jay took the fixture apart and pulled it out the wall  
and then drove to the hardware store for a replacement.  
Upon returning they found that the replacement fixture was the wrong size,  
so back to the hardware store they went.  
After finally getting it installed and wired correctly,  
Johnny had this inkling of an idea.  
He screwed in the original bulb from the hall closet.  
You guessed it: the original bulb was kaput.  
The only repair the hall closet fixture needed was a new bulb.

Johnny and Jay can laugh and tell the joke on themselves,  
yet don't you know that in their heart of hearts  
they feel really good about their efforts  
to serve the needs of a widow in God's land.  
And we can join in the laughter because we are all a part of the story.  
When we serve, when we give of ourselves for the glory of God,  
when we collect offerings and share our grace in the church and  
community  
- near and far -  
then our stories overlap, hearts are warmed, and lives  
are changed.

This is our shared redemptive story of grace.  
We sent groups of church members and friends  
to rebuild homes after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.  
We commissioned a young man to serve for two years in the Dominican Republic  
as a Global Missions Intern, and this afternoon Henry Brewer-Calvert will  
ask  
our congregation to take him In Care for Ordination to the Christian  
Ministry.  
Last year we sent crews out to build a home through Habitat for Humanity,  
and will do so again this year in September.

We are sending church members out to local prisons to make a friend, to be a friend.  
We are in conversation with taking steps to become Open and Affirming,  
making it official that we are a loving congregation  
where hospitality is the word and all is the number.  
We have willingly and intentionally opened our doors and resources and hearts  
to programs and projects and people  
that make a difference.  
We reach a thousand lives a week that enter this physical plant on four acres in  
Decatur  
to experience the touch of the Spirit, the touch of love,  
to see and be seen as a child of God,  
in a safe place where worthiness is never questioned  
and all belong.

### ***Will Work for Food***

Recently a local pastor and I shared stories of church mission trips.  
He invited us to join his congregation by going with them to Nicaragua,  
and I invited them to join us next year when we go to the Dominican  
Republic.  
He said that the Year of Jubilee, the Acceptable Year of our Lord, is coming.  
The Year of Jubilee is when the debts of the poor are forgiven,  
when God's people prayerfully give families and entire nations a fresh  
start.

Our neighbor said, "Going on mission trips,  
doing community service programs are well and good,  
and they make a difference.  
You know, some of the world's countries are saddled with 40, 45% debts,  
debts that most likely they will never crawl out from under.  
Yet sometimes I think about the woman who went walking along a riverbed.  
She hears a cry for help,  
sees a soul floating by in the river's currents,  
and jumps into the cold water to safely haul him ashore.  
Just as she finishes CPR and he is breathing on his own,  
she hears another cry for help,  
and Lordy be, there is a second soul drowning in the fast moving  
current.

She leaps back into the water and rescues him.  
By now a crowd has gathered.  
She hears a third cry for help; except this time she starts to run.  
Some in the crowd ask her why she's running away, leaving this one to drown?  
*"I'm not running away," she says. "I'm running upstream.  
I am going to find out and then put a stop  
to whoever is throwing these people into the river!"*  
The people of God, united, will never be defeated.

We will work for food, work to feed our neighbor today and to break the cycles forever.

Wouldn't that be a blessing for all the families of the world!

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