

“A Very Social Gospel”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Fifth Sunday in the Season of Lent, April 2, 2017
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Holy Scriptures: John 11: 17-42 (NRSV)

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Do You Believe This?

THE TWINS by Henry Leigh

*In form and feature, face and limb,
I grew so like my brother,
That folks got taking me for him,
And each for one another.
It puzzled all our kith and kin,
It reached a fearful pitch;
For one of us was born a twin,
Yet not a soul knew which.*

*One day, to make the matter worse,
Before our names were fixed,
As we were being washed by nurse,
We got completely mixed;
And thus, you see, by fate's decree,
Or rather nurse's whim,
My brother John got christened me,
And I got christened him.*

*This fatal likeness even dogged
My footsteps when at school,
And I was always getting flogged,
For John turned out a fool.
I put this question, fruitlessly,
to everyone I knew,
"What would you do, if you were me,
To prove that you were you?"*

*Our close resemblance turned the tide
Of my domestic life,
For somehow, my intended bride
Became my brother's wife.
In fact, year after year the same
Absurd mistakes went on,
And when I died, the neighbors came
And buried brother John.*

Do You Believe This?

I've loved this poem about mixed up and mixing up twins for a long time.
I receive it as a reminder to keep one's humor, remember who defines you,
and that there are multiple sides to most everything.
Sure keeps life interesting and dynamic, if not calm and serene.
Today's biblical lesson from John 11 is multifaceted.

A beloved professor named Walter Wink (1935-2012)
once described the Bible to me as like a diamond.
Like a diamond, the Bible reflects light out in multiple angles and ways,
and all who see the light receive it in their own way,
finding unique kernels of truth and meaning.

We'll start our biblical analysis in general terms and then get specific.
Keep in mind that we think we are examining the Word,
only to learn the Word is examining us...

Do You Believe This?

There is a pattern in this Gospel that is unique to John,
yet speaks to our universal experiences of the Holy.

I'm sure you've noticed that in Gospel of John,
God in Jesus always has the last word.
Is that still true today, that God has the last -- and lasting -- word?

In this Gospel, we read of people from all walks of life encountering Jesus.

The Humanity in Jesus, Jesus as Teacher, the Rabbi, a Carpenter, a simple Man of God,
sees people, receives His neighbors, and He loves them just as they are.

Folks respond to this.

They sense His love, his compassion, and it stirs them to act.

People respond to Him with action; theirs is an active, tangible response.

Then the Divinity in Jesus, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God,
defines the moment; He determines the scope of the relationship;
He clarifies the communal happening with a God-focused
spirituality.

People encounter Jesus as the Holy One
in ways that are personal, practical, human, earthy.

Modern speak would call these holy encounters as organic.

Natural.

At least they start out naturally.

Then He shifts the encounter into the sublime, the supernatural, the spiritual,
transcending experiences that began with Chronos and became Kairos,
that start as a talk about water or birth or friendship,
and suddenly they are cosmic and all that is solid melts
into air.

In such biblical encounters

the folks speak and then respond with their whole selves, holding nothing
back.

Men and women, friends and newcomers,

each one acts then believes;

they wonder then grow, minds and souls expanded;

they pause for a moment in time

then go...they go on in life, changed and

transformed.

And in each instance, in every relationship,

Christ delivers a last and lasting word

to set the context of the actions, words, faith, situation, relationship.

Here are some specific examples, some food for thought from John:

When crowds asked for something to eat,
 Jesus gave them bread.
Afterward Christ offered Himself, saying,
“I am the Bread of Life.”

When the Samaritan woman asked for water at the well,
 Jesus gave her something to quench her thirst.
Afterward Christ offered Himself, saying,
“I am the Living Water of the Spirit.”

When the man born blind asked to see,
 Jesus gave him eyesight.
Afterward Christ offered Himself, saying,
“I am the Light of the World.”

When the disciples were afraid about what the future might bring,
 Jesus gave them words of comfort and hope.
Afterward Christ offered Himself, saying,
“My peace I give to you! I go away, and I will come to you.”

When Martha wanted assurance that her brother Lazarus,
 who was dead and buried for three days in the tomb, would have life
everlasting,

 Jesus arrived as a conduit of God’s resurrection power.
To ease Martha’s concern Christ offered Himself, saying,
*“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?”*

Do You Believe This?

There is a thin line between the essentials of life on earth
 and the essentials of a life in the Spirit.
Or is there a line at all?
Are the material and spiritual realms disparate or interwoven?
Do you value one higher than the other,
 bread or the Bread of Life, water or Living Water,
 or are they both necessary?

How long can you survive without bread or water?
How long can you thrive without the Holy Spirit?
Have you ever had to choose?
It is so easy to get caught up in choosing a side, an angle, a way, a “correct path.”

Without judgment or predetermined value or prejudice, I offer for our consideration:

For some of us the Gospel is about personal redemption.
Piety and prayer take precedence over all else.
The primary question is, *“Have you been saved?
Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?”*

One's personal faith and confession takes precedence above everything else.
There are Followers of Jesus who prefer a pie in the sky religion,
 who eagerly wait day-by-day for the great by-and-by,
 bravely enduring yet barely coping with life on earth,
all the while anticipating the Day of Judgment,
 Heaven's Great Banquet, Golden Gates, Chorus
 of Angels,
 and an eternity of being in the Kingdom of
 God.

They anticipate a life everlasting without pain or suffering, hunger or want,
 of bliss and wholeness and shalom,
 for all who are saved, redeemed, and at home with God, forever.
Amen.

Do You Believe This?

For some, spiritual beliefs must be put into practice to right society's wrongs,
 and religion is a powerful means of achieving social change.
Faith without works is dead.
At the Day of Judgment, the question asked won't be about confessions or creeds
 but rather about action that is conscientious, compassionate, concrete.
There are Followers of Jesus
 who are completely in the Now, in the Already, relaxed about the Not Yet,
 locked in on the Present, being where their body is,
 focused on creating the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in
 Heaven.

They see the pain and suffering, the hungers of the world,
 feel a sense of call to address and work and play together to make a difference,
 here, now, in this life,
 starting projects and programs and parishes,
knowing they may not see the end results
 but if they will help one soul, feed one child, bandage one wound,
 reconcile one relationship, liberate one who is bound,
 then whatever the cost of discipleship,
 it will all be worth it; all glory be to
 God. Amen.

Do You Believe This?

Isaac Asimov visited a church where he witnessed a peculiar exchange.
A fire and brimstone preacher said, "What a fearful thought it is
 that every member of this congregation must, sooner or later, die."
Everyone grew very sober,
 except for a gentleman in the front row who chuckled.
The preacher repeated the statement, and the man laughed out loud.
Thinking maybe the parishioner did not fully comprehend the gravity of the word,
 the preacher exclaimed, "I said, every member of this church is going to die!"
At which point the man in the first pew burst into laughter.
The preacher asked, "Sir, may I ask you what you find so amusing?
 Are you not concerned for your eternal salvation?"
"Oh, I am not amused at all," said the man. "I am, however, relieved.
 You see, I am not a member of this congregation."

Do You Believe This?

The raising of Lazarus, as great a miracle story as there is,
enlightens for us the power of love.
God's love was present to comfort and heal a grieving community,
for Mary and Martha and the friends of Lazarus.
Jesus came to them, in their hometown, to be present in the world they inhabited;
he wept alongside them;
and he acted with tender mercy and grace.
God's love was – is -- present to show us the way to live today
and to receive the gift of life everlasting.
Jesus prayed and God raised Lazarus from the dead,
to walk out of the tomb and live again, a great victory over death,
yet the price, the cost of discipleship,
was that for Lazarus to come out,
Jesus would choose to go in.
As Jesus said, one cannot give life unless one dies.
Willingly did He sacrifice Himself for Lazarus,
and willingly does He sacrifice Himself for you and me.
This is no pie in the sky religion;
this is called love.
Jesus of Nazareth, the embodiment of a Loving God,
fully human and fully divine,
came to show us the values, benefits, and essentials of both aspects.
He fed folks body and soul.
He filled minds with bold ideas and comforted the poor in spirit.
He sustained stomachs and psyches.
He healed the broken, reconciled the divided, and raised
the dead.
Sounds like God's love is Both/And.
Pius. Radical. Prayerful. Relevant. Personal. Social.
Jesus turned to Martha and asked, "*Do you believe this?*"
Martha responded, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,
the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*"
Now Christ turns toward you, and asks, "*Do you believe...*"

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

Extra material:

And so, my friends, we come to an ending, as well as a fresh start.
Today our Epiphany and Lenten series draws to a close.
We've shared 3 months of Sunday sermons and studies
on "Belonging, Believing, Becoming."
I've had a good time these past three months.
Learned quite a bit that I did not know before;

Got stretched personally and professionally.

Hit the mark 10 of 12 times, which is an .833 batting average.

Take that, Chipper Jones.

I trust you have gleaned new biblical insights, truths, hopes, & stories.

These past few months we have observed snippets and snapshots
of the history and polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

We have discerned what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ,
to be a part of the Disciples church movement,
and to be a part of this significant Disciples of Christ congregation.

“Belonging, Believing, Becoming” offered a nice flow and freedom to explore spirituality.

Having a sense of belonging

is tantamount to being connected with God and one another.

God wants to have a relationship with you,

because God loves you.

The first step, the first move,

the primary action of divine love is the insistence that you belong.

You belong.

You belong to God.

You belong in God’s family, in the circle of the faithful.

God in Christ insists that you be invited and included, informed and involved.

And if you, who were made in the image of God, belong,

then, *ipso facto*, so, too, does everyone else,

for we are all made in the image of God.

Believing is having trust, having faith in something and someone bigger than you,
trusting that you matter,

and that it matters what you believe and how you practice your faith.

God wants to have a relationship with you,

because God loves you.

Believe that you are cared for and loved, respected and recognized,

and that it matters that you reciprocate,

that you believe in the One and those who believe in you.

Becoming is life.

We are constantly changing, evolving, growing, maturing (hopefully!).

We are not the same being we were yesterday, or last week, or once upon a time. Thank
goodness!

In Christ we are new beings, new creations, lovingly made and re-made,

born again from above, again and again, with the help of God.

God wants to have a relationship with you,

because God loves you.

This is a good thing, becoming, forming, reforming, reorienting,

being a part of the movement of the whole people of God

who trust that the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing in us,

through us, for us, because of us, despite us, and all around

us.

Yes, this sermon and study series has been fun; it’s been a good ride.

Thanks be to God, today’s ending opens new windows, new vistas of a new way.