

“A Still More Excellent Way”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 28, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 12: 4-13, 27-31

Now you see why we are the way we are.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Body of Christ to serve, saying:

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., encouraged the Body of Christ to serve, saying:

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.

You don’t have to have a college degree to serve.

You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.

You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve.

You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve.

You don’t have to know

the second theory of thermodynamics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”

You know, a good place to start serving God
is by doing everyday common chores,
pitching in and doing what needs to be done.

Recently we hosted a Fellowship Dinner following worship.
After filling my plate with a sampling from every dish
(which is required to be able to compliment every cook)
I went into the kitchen, rolled up my shirt sleeves,
and started to wash the pots and pans.

Someone walked into the kitchen to get a to-go box,
witnessed yours truly arm deep in soap suds, and said—and I quote --,
“Pastor James! You should not be doing the dishes!”

You know, God doesn't ask us to seek greatness, to do things we think are great.
God asks only that we be available,
available for whatever chore or responsibility is laid before us,
that our availability is due to unconditional love,
to having hearts generated by love.

To get to that place in life,
where our souls are generated by love,
it sure helps if we have role models,
folks who model a life of service above self,
who grasp that life begins at the edge of where comfort ends.

Now you see why we are the way we are.

I leaned out the middle of the three living room windows,
checking out the scene from the 4th floor of our tenement,
not caring for ten minutes that my long hair was uncombed
or not yet blown dry and sprayed.

My beagle Val joined me,
putting his front paws on the low sill,
peering out from between my knees
to gaze straight down at the street below.

We were quite a sight if you looked up at us from the stoop.

Val was full grown with a broad chest, regal white, brown and black markings,
and pinkish jowls,
a sensitive, visible reminder of the cruelty of his previous owner.

I was not yet full grown,
changing daily from being the smallest kid in Mr. Bitterman's sixth-grade class
to one of the tallest and skinniest and longest-nosed sophomores
in the Class of '77 at Park East High School.

Val and I had a great view.

Last night's rain, which had cleaned the sidewalks, stoops,
and cars parked on both sides, was still drizzling.

One of the key responsibilities of 15-year-olds
is to sleep in on Saturday mornings and then chill out watching *Soul Train*.
Based on the number of faces Val and I recognized in windows up and down the block,
our neighbors preferred to stay inside as well, out of the rain.
Every set of eyes across the street stared unwavering to their right.

When I looked left,
I saw waves of brown water
rippling across the intersection of 104th Street and Third Avenue.
A gigantic lake of dirty water dotted with floating debris
forced three lanes of honking traffic to merge into one lane
on the far side of the avenue.

In a flash I knew the problem's source.
Last night's torrential downpour,
which had so nicely cleaned the sidewalks
(and watered our block's five maple trees
rooted in dirt squares topped by cobble stones),
had been guided by sloping asphalt toward a corner drain,
which was now clogged by loosened trash.
Until the corner storm drain was cleared, traffic would be snarled.
Unlucky pedestrians would have to reroute or grow wings.

I said to Val, "Someone should do something about that."
He wagged his white-tipped tail in agreement.
Then I saw the second abnormality of the morning.
And this was more likely what demanded my neighbors' undivided attention.
Two bright blue rain ponchos were moving,
their backs to me,
walking with purpose toward the immersed corner,
one carrying a broom, the other a rake.
Someone was about to do something.
Below the two blue ponchos were four very bare calves and four bare feet.
Lord, have mercy.
I did not need to be any closer to know they shared the distinction of having high arches.

I knew who was inside those two ponchos.
Val did, too, and happily wagged his tail.
I was mortified.
One of the key responsibilities of 15-year-olds is to be cool,
which requires never being shamed or ashamed.

Did my parents not care that by going down the street barefoot,
then wading knee deep in the gutter,
on the main drag,
in daylight,
then unclogging disgusting trash,

scooping it up and out of the way,
again and again depositing the soggy refuse into nearby cans,
by hand,
that they were embarrassing me?

You see why I am the way I am?

Now you see why we are the way...

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