

“Fostering Community That Transforms, Not Conforms”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 10, 2022

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*“The freedom of the congregation shall not be understood
as ground for isolation or withdrawal
from the common life and work of Disciples everywhere.”*

–Dr. Fred Craddock

Scriptures: **Colossians 1:1-14**

Salutation

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Creator.

Paul Thanks God for the Colossians

In our prayers for you we always thank God the Creator and Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk with God, fully pleasing to our Creator, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Creator, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the domain of Christ, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Catch a Fire

One November morning, just before Thanksgiving
someone called the Butterball Turkey company.
The caller said that she found in her freezer a frozen turkey
with an expiration date 15 years old.
She asked the Butterball Turkey Company representative
whether it was safe to cook the turkey,
and then serve it to her family.
The company rep highly recommended
that she toss out her 15-year-old turkey.
"Oh, that's okay. I'll just donate it to my church."

True story.

Is the Church of Jesus Christ a place to dump our leftovers?
our least desirable goods?
or a desirable home for the least...the lost...the last,
a welcome center for the broke and broken,
a source of transformation for the hurting and the hopeful?
What do you think, does it matter?
How much?

They say a young pastor went to visit with an elder in the church,
and in the midst of their conversation
the young pastor broke down and confessed,
*"I am at a loss of what to do.
I don't understand why people don't come to church anymore."*
The elder paused and looked upon the young preacher with compassion.
"When you preach," said the elder,
*"let God set you on fire for the Gospel.
People will come out to watch you burn."*

Catch a Fire

The Apostle Paul was on fire for the Gospel,
and people came out to see him burn with love for Jesus.
To this day we study Paul's story of redemption,
read his words and teachings,
acknowledge his faults and shortcomings,
recognize his call to human transformation,
and realize that to this day

he serves Christ by turning up the heat,
setting us ablaze for the God of limitless love.

Paul introduces himself to the Christians in Colossae, saying,
"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."
The Apostle Paul poured out his faith to the Church in Colossae.
We are blessed to have his letter, which is included in the Bible,
entitled the Epistle to the Colossians.

In the 1st Chapter, after his opening salutations,
Paul offers this prayer for God's people.

*"...we have not ceased praying for you
and asking that you may be filled
with the knowledge of God's will
in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
so that you may walk with God,
fully pleasing to our Creator,
as you bear fruit in every good work
and as you grow in the knowledge of God."*

Paul continues:

*"May you be made strong
with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power,
so that you may have all endurance and patience,
joyfully giving thanks to the Creator,
who has enabled you to share in the inheritance
of the saints in the light.*

*God rescued us from the power of darkness
and transferred us into the domain of Christ,
in whom we have redemption,
the forgiveness of sins."*

In the 3rd Chapter, vs 16 and 17, the Good News flows on:

*"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom,
teaching and admonishing one another.
in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,
singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.
And whatever you do,
in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Creator through him."*

Catch a Fire

Three key aspects of these verses in Colossians
speak directly of our relationship with Christ,
who calls us to be transformers of the church and community.

First, we are to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly.
The Word of Christ refers to the teachings of Christ as found in the Bible.
As we saturate our hearts and minds with Jesus' teaching and preaching,
and seek to walk in obedience to it,
then the word of Christ is really at home in our hearts.
The word dwells in us, is living and breathing and residing in us.

The second thought is that
in all wisdom, with grace and gentleness,
we are invited to be about
teaching and admonishing one another.

Teaching has to do with doctrine,
whereas admonishing has to do with duty.
Every Christian has a moral and communal responsibility
to one's siblings in Christ
concerning the matters of doctrine and duty.

We owe it to our brethren
to share our knowledge of the Scripture with them,
and to seek to help by practical and godly counsel.
When teaching and admonishing are given in wisdom, given in love,
they are more likely to find acceptance
than when we speak...unwisely or without love.

A modern method is to offer a compliment sandwich.
Offer first a compliment, then lift up the concern, and then offer another compliment.
Somehow, someday,
hearing two compliments
helps us to hear and receive
the teaching or the admonishment
which might otherwise cause consternation.

Third, Paul encourages us to share the Good News
with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.
Sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord.

Music has the capacity and power to transform, to set our souls ablaze.

Message music melodically speaks truth to power.
Praise music lifts our hearts and minds to the holy.
Spirituals release the deepest yearnings and lamentations of our souls.

In the context of worship we sing religious poetry,
 poems that express our shared Christian experience.
Psalms describe those inspired utterances
 which were sung as part of Israel's worship and our's today.
Hymns are songs of worship and praise
 addressed to God the Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

An illustration of this might be found in the words:

*O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

—Joseph Scriven

Together, with hope in our hearts and poetry on our lips,
 Disciples of Christ sing with gusto and grace,
 with thanksgiving and in time,
 lifting our hearts to the Lord. ([1])

Catch a Fire

This is the church I fell in love with, like, as John Denver sang,

*He was born in the summer of his 27th year
Coming home to a place he'd never been before
He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again
You might say he found a key for every door*

At age 28, I fell in love with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

I fell in love with a church
 that welcomes one and all to the Lord's Table,
 with no strings attached, unconditionally,
 re-memembering, re-introducing me and you
 every Sunday to a God of limitless love.

I fell in love with a church that harmonizes,
 that sings prayerfully and rings out justice.

I fell in love with a believers' baptism at an age of understanding

– it just makes sense to the soul
of this preacher, teacher, shepherd, sinner.

I fell in love with a movement
that is adamant about justice and mercy,
about being engaged in the wider community,
uninhibited, unafraid, unabashedly proud,
called to work and play alongside folks ecumenically,
in interfaith circles,
in the unique circles we frequently find ourselves in
that include those with some faith and no faith and creative faith.

I fell in love with a faith community
that recognizes that it matters that we seek to change the world,
and of we are to do so,
the first step is to change ourselves,
and here in this beloved community
is a loving context
in which to experience real growth.

I fell in love with a church that sticks together,
even when the going gets tough,
even when we differ,
even when we are broke,
even when we sense more despair than hope.

Even when we are unsure of which way to turn,
we gather, we sing, we pray,
and we trust...we trust that the Lord will provide.

I love that about us!

I fell in love with a Body of Christ that encompasses the earth,
blessed with a spark,
a spark of a call to serve, and that ember still glows.

Catch a Fire

Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens
is our General Minister and President
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA and Canada.
She speaks of our Disciples covenantal relationship,
preaching as if she was on fire,
testifying about our relationship with God,
one that transforms us into a community on the move,
a faith community that makes a difference.

“...Why does any of this matter?” asks Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens.

*“Why does it matter that we understand ourselves
as a people in covenant with God and with one another?
Why does it matter that we have a shared narrative set of shared values
that allows for the diversity in our context
and in our communities?
Why does it matter that we have the right tools to help us do our work,
not only effectively and well,
but faithfully?
And why does it matter that we spend time individually and collectively
in building up our inner spiritual beings
in order to do the work that God has called us to do?”*

It matters because we are the church.

*It matters because we have confessed that Jesus is Lord.
And it matters because we believe that God has called us
to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.
And we need to live that out each and every day,
making decisions that will move us to action,
giving ourselves frameworks within which
we can understand what our work is
in a particular context.*

*It matters because we want to be a "want to" church
and not a "have to" church.
It matters because there is a world out there
in need of justice,
in need of our witness to the limitless love of God.*

*It matters because Jesus has called us
to go into all the world and make disciples.
It matters because Jesus has also said
that when we feed the sick,
and clothe the naked,
and shelter the homeless,
visit those who are in prison,
that we're ministering to him as well.*

*It matters because food pantries and homeless shelters
cannot do the work alone
of dismantling systems of poverty and racism
and other forms of oppression
that make those services needed.*

It matters because we need to move from mercy to justice.

It matters because this is what God is calling us to do as church.

So, Disciples, what are we going to do well in a fragmented world...?

We are going to be a church

that lives in covenant with God and with one another.

We are going to lead and live with compassion and care,

--not because we have to--

but because we want to.

We're going to bear the good news of the limitless love of God

because there are people who are literally dying without it.

That love makes itself known

in the way that we address injustice in the world,

and the way we welcome and create

radical and open hospitality for all whom God has created,

and in how we treat the rest of creation.

God's limitless love is where it all begins,

so we must start there.

We're going to be 'a movement for wholeness church' --

one that acts to dismantle systems of injustice and oppression,

not because it's a political endeavor,

but because it's a moral endeavor.

And God calls us to that work

as part of bearing witness of God's limitless love.

We're going to be bolder, not afraid of change."

We will not be conformed

by the world within and around us.

Empowered by God's limitless love,

a love that sends out sparks to ignite our souls,

we will transform the world.

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