

## ***“Home of the Brave”***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Independence Day Weekend, Sunday, July 3, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Romans 7:15-25a

### **Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

*Jesus said, "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."*

*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

### **Romans 7:15-25a**

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.*

*For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

### ***Are you the one?***

The 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew moves from one blessed encounter to another,  
and the common thread is the love of Christ for the whole people of God.

The love of God is not always understood nor welcomed nor appreciated;  
yet Christ smiles upon us and loves us and offers Himself to one and all.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew concludes with Jesus offering a word of grace,  
offering to take on the burdens and weariness of all

because he cares, without prejudice or partisanship:

*“Come to me,  
all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you,  
and learn from me;  
for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

The 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew begins, however, with Jesus standing in the crosshairs.

One day Jesus of Nazareth found himself surrounded  
by the disciples of John the Baptist  
and the local members from the temple  
as well as the men and women who had followed Jesus across thick and  
thin,  
listening and heeding his teachings.

Jesus found himself being put on the spot.

The disciples of John the Baptist had come to Jesus bearing a message:

*Are you the one?*

You see, John the Baptist had been locked up in prison.

When John got wind of what Jesus was doing, since he was not free to go himself,

he sent his own disciples to ask Jesus,

*“Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?”*

Jesus told them, *“Go back and tell John what's going on:*

*The blind see, The lame walk, Lepers are cleansed, The deaf hear, The dead are raised, The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.*

*Is this what you were expecting?*

*Then count yourselves most blessed!”*

Yet even still, despite the cosmic, loving activity of God in the community,

some folks chose to criticize the transformative power of God.

Leadership can be a lonely place.

Jesus was hammered from the right and the left,

from those in places of power and authority

and from those on the outside looking in.

He was condemned by believers and nonbelievers, by adversaries and followers alike.

Leadership can be lonely.

It's a common experience for leaders to be misunderstood.

It is just as easy for us to misunderstand.

Leadership takes courage.

Bravery is called for when one is anointed

to stand up for God

and the ways of justice, mercy, and righteousness.

To do so will take courage.

Recently a beloved senior member of our church

was listening to her friend recount her list of ailments and aches and pains,

and she smiled and said, "*Growing old is not for sissies.*"

Authentic, faith-based leadership is not for sissies, either.

It takes courage to stand against public opinion,

courage to stand firm against the rising tide of popular prejudices,

courage to stand for the hard work of spiritual disciplines,

courage to stand up for the broke, the broken, and the broken-hearted.

After John's disciples leave to return to John

in order to tell him what they have seen and heard,

Jesus gazes upon the remaining crowd and begins to teach.

We are blessed to have before us in this morning's Holy Scriptures

not only an example of one who models courageous, faith-based leadership,

we also have his teachings on the subject.

Jesus cannot remain silent in the face of injustice, false piety, or plastic religion.

So he takes on those in position to do something -- anything! -- for the benefit of all.

Jesus drew inspiration from children playing games,

and then used their playtime as a parable.

He said, "*How can I account for this generation?*

*The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents,*

*'We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired;*

*we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.'*

*John came fasting and they called him crazy.*

*I came feasting and they called me a lush,*

*a friend of the riffraff (a friend of tax collectors and sinners!).*

*Opinion polls don't count for much, do they?*

*The proof of the pudding is in the eating."* (The Message)

Jesus points out that the prophet John the Baptist

was criticized for neither eating nor drinking,

and the critics said, 'He has a demon.'

Jesus observes that he himself has been criticized for eating and drinking,

for breaking bread with tax collectors and sinners,

for joining in the feast and having joy,

and his critics said, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard.'

God's wisdom is proved in the results.

You won't get the results you seek or pray for if you only play at religion.

Let's put it another way.

If you want to grow,

if you want to change,

if you want your blindness and lameness,

your deafness and spiritual death to be in your past,

because instead you seek a life of hope and purpose,

then stop playing around and put in the work.

Practice the spiritual disciplines.

*Study the Word;*

*Rejoice, and worship the Lord your God;*

*Commune and break bread together;*

*Pray without ceasing;*

*and*

*Serve those in need in the community.*

Are there some aspects of religion and religious practices and disciplines

that speak louder to you than others,

that resonate more in your soul?

In what ways do the spiritual disciplines sustain your faith walk?

How can we, as your congregation, support and encourage your faith practice?

No one says you always have to be alone, all by yourself, in the dark of your closet,

as you study and pray and serve in the name of Christ.

Let's walk the walk together.

There is power and grace in this faith community.

If it takes courage to stand up for Jesus and to make the necessary sacrifices,

then may this significant church

be a home for the brave

and a sacred land for those freed to be new lives in Christ.

Sometimes I think we make life far more complicated than we need to.

Sometimes we need to remember the essence of who we are,

and why we love God and God's creation.

*Soon after her brother was born, little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby.*

*They worried that like most four-year-olds, she might feel jealous and want to hit or shake him, so they said no.*

*But she showed no signs of jealousy.*

*She treated the baby with kindness and her pleas to be left alone with him became more urgent.*

*They decided to allow it.*

*Elated, she went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack-enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen.*

*They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly,*

*"Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget." -- from "Chicken Soup for the Soul"*

Jesus, in his infinite wisdom, uses a parable involving children to make an adult point.

Jesus draws an example from the small children in the vicinity who are playing games.



You know how kids love to play at being grown-ups.

As a child I dreamed of being a veterinarian.

Childhood games revolved around pretending to be a vet.

Consequently my stuffed bears were often covered in band aids;

their splints were No. 2 pencils, complete with toilet paper casts.

As a matter of fact, in our home if my animal hospital was open for business

and you had an emergency that required a band aid, a writing utensil, or TP,

you were out of luck.

Why do you think Jesus pointed out

that some folks prefer the game of religion

rather than the work of the spiritual disciplines?

Games involve keeping score,

comparing numbers and statistics,

measuring abilities,

trying to control the outcome or one another,

winning at all costs,

and may involve thinking that the ends justify the means.

It is so easy to make religion a game,

something we do by simply going through the motion,

something that excites or entertains or fascinates for a moment,  
but quickly fades away.

Religion that is all fun and games and shallow

simply does not, cannot have the power

to feed the soul when your suffering zaps your strength,

nor can it sustain you when you're parched and thirsty,

nor satisfy your needs in body, mind or soul.

Anyone can fill an arena with 10,000 people and sing, "Glory! Hallelujah!"

yet if the gathered body does not serve the hunger in people's tummies and  
souls

please, please, please do not call it a church!

We are here in church

because we have some sense that it is important; we've made the effort to  
be here.

We don't want to play at it;

we are here because we seek to be connected to God and one another.

In *The New Yorker* this week is a cartoon of a funeral.

A woman is speaking from the podium beside a casket.

She says, "*Mother wouldn't want us to feel sad – she'd want us to feel guilty.*"

Good humor, shared laughter and the incredible lightness of being

are blessed means for expressing ourselves

and enjoying one another's company,  
as well as for lessening our wear and tear from the burdens  
we bear.

My call to serve and share the Gospel is to be and do so with sincerity and joy.

As much as I love to play games and clown around, tell jokes and juggle,

as important as it is to have fun

and dance to the music of the church,

at its core the practice of being a follower of Christ takes work.

Jesus Christ calls for us to have the courage of our convictions.

This requires moving past going through the motions of religious practice,

or, as He describes it, playing at religion.

Spiritual growth demands putting in the work and effort required of a disciple of Christ.

The practice of the Christian religion calls for courage.

Christianity requires time and energy and resources.

Christianity demands sacrifice.

Christianity promises revelation, redemption, reconciliation, and resurrection.

When the work of the spiritual disciplines are followed,

when we study, worship, commune, pray, and serve,

the fruits of the Spirit are visible, tangible, manifested, celebrated.

When people question and wonder what the heck is going on,

Jesus himself testifies what he witnesses in our midst:

*The blind see,                      The lame walk,                      Lepers are  
cleansed,                      The deaf hear,                      The dead are  
raised,                      The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.*

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew, when followers and adversaries criticized Jesus Christ,

he stood up and spoke up and lifted up

the core values that make Christianity a gift to humankind.

By practicing the disciplines of study, prayer, worship, and community service,

like Jesus Christ,

you can embody the faith that is given to those who walk closely with God.

Jesus stood up and spoke up with the courage of his convictions.

You may find yourself living in the crosshairs,

but don't be discouraged or afraid. Jesus is there, too.

Have the courage of your convictions, gleaned from your practices.

It takes courage to be a servant leader,

courage to speak truth to power,

courage to live in diversity and practice tolerance,

courage to rebut totalitarianism and fundamentalism,

courage to love,

courage to comfort,

to take on the burdens of your neighbors,

to lift your voice and share your faith.

Thanks be to God, you have this courage, this brave faith, this conviction of love!

Where do you believe a brave voice need to be heard today?

Who do you think will speak the truth in love?

Are you the one?

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