

“Pettiness Detracts, Mission Attracts”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 16, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 22: 15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹ They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

This week's issue of The New Yorker magazine

features a cover drawn by Barry Blitt that he calls "*The Book of Life*".

The artist's rendering imagines Steve Jobs at the Pearly Gates,

standing patiently before St. Peter,

who is searching for Steve Jobs' name in an iPad.

This reminds me of the story of the Georgia preacher

and the New York City cab driver

who arrived in Heaven at the same time.

The preacher was sent off to live in a shack in the valley

while the cabbie was escorted up a hill to a mansion with a view.

The preacher went to St. Peter to complain,

for after all, he had given his entire life to Christ and sacrificed much.

St. Peter said, "*Listen, Buddy, when you preached*

your sermons were so dull that you put people to sleep,

whereas that single cab driver saved countless souls.

His driving was so exciting it lead passengers

to shout and pray, 'O God! Save me!'"

Whether your spirit has been touched and inspired to be present

because of by dire circumstances or a dramatic conversion
experience

or by slow and steady spiritual formation over a lifetime,

let us prayerfully consider the lessons and gleanings

of those who have gone before us,

and see what the Living Word, the Logos, the
Wisdom of God

has in store for us in the here and now

and in the hereafter.

Once again the Holy Scriptures

open our eyes and hearts and imaginations

to envision ourselves with Jesus Christ in the Temple in
Jerusalem.

This is the same temple where Jesus stayed behind when he was 12,

visiting with the elders and awing them with his questions.

This is the temple where, 21 years later,

Jesus and his disciples approached on the eve of Passover,
immediately after arriving in Jerusalem
to a festive celebration of branches and Hosannas.

This time, however, the chief priests and elders
were not so happy with his return.

Upon entering the temple of God

Jesus drove out all who bought and sold in the temple,
and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers
and scattered those who sold pigeons.

He quoted Isaiah 56, *“My house shall be a joyful house of prayer.”*

And from Jeremiah 7, saying, *“but you make it a den of robbers.”*

In the temple, while the moneychangers fled from his wrath at injustice,
the blind and the lame approached Jesus for healing,
and he healed them.

The people cried out, *“Hosanna to the Son of David!”*

The chief priests were indignant at the healing
and scowled at the joyful response.

Suddenly -- with Jesus now present and a new Spirit of Joy –
the temple had become a joyful house of prayer!

Jesus called the words of the children of God, "*perfect praise.*"

He promptly left the temple,

and did not return until the next day.

The next morning the people in the temple discovered that Jesus came back.

This time the rabbi set about teaching and proclaiming

the Good News of the love of God.

Once again, as they had done so the day before,

the chief priests and elders approached him, interrupting his lessons,

and asked him questions about his authority.

Bless their hearts -- *(In the South after you say, "Bless her heart..."*

you can say anything you want about anybody.)

Bless their hearts, the Pharisees have sworn allegiance to the Lord,

yet their loyalty is limited to the law

for they have neglected the Spirit of God.

They know the rules and regulations

but appear to not know the Spirit that inspires and empowers.

Bless our hearts, my friends,

if and when we see the law but miss the Spirit.

Sometimes we get so focused on being right

that we forget or neglect or reject the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if this is akin to believing that the Law of Moses

gives us permission to do violence in the name of God?

I wonder if this is akin to American Christians

who see children of God but call them “illegals”?

I wonder if this is akin to the Tennessee congregation

that beat and cast out a young couple for being gay?

So the Pharisees attempt to trick

the young rabbi teaching in the temple of God.

Jesus deflected their obvious attempt to entrap him,

and deftly turned the tables.

He spoke to them in parables.

“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,

they realized that he was speaking about them.

They wanted to arrest him,

but they feared the crowds,

because they regarded him as a prophet.” (Matthew 21:

45-46)

¹⁵ *Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*

¹⁶ *So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians...”*

This could have been the first Halloween trick or treat

except that it was during Passover.

They start the conversation with a compliment.

They offer a disingenuous comment, a treat meant to butter up

the same one they seek to trick,

slick, empty words that seek to hide their true intent.

They say, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere,

and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,

and show deference to no one;

for you do not regard people with partiality.

¹⁷ *Tell us, then, what you think.*

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Before we go any further, let us be perfectly frank and up front.

Their question is no more about taxes

or being a law-abiding citizen

or the separation of church and state

than it is about whether the moon is made of
cheese.

“The Pharisees and other religious scholars more often than not

would ask Jesus technical questions that served no real purpose.

Their intent was to trap Jesus.

In making him choose a side

they hoped to prove or disprove that he was the Messiah.

Focusing on the minutiae diverts our energy

from seeing the bigger picture.”

(Jason Gottman, [The Journal of Worship Resources](#), Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)

Strictly focusing on the minutiae and negating the mission

takes the edge off the power of the Christ we have within,

a mighty Spirit strong enough to save us and save the
world.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians

have the same Holy Spirit of God within themselves

as Jesus Christ and you and me,

yet they choose to use that power, that force of love,
that divine gift of divinity,
to entrap, overshadow, and control God
rather than to live into being the image of God
in the midst of the human community.

Recorded history testifies that there is a longstanding religious tradition

that in the temple of God

it is not permissible to show a coin with a graven image,

which is why the money changers and pigeon sellers

were just outside the temple gate.

Even if Jesus had a coin, he would not have pulled it out,

because anyone who did so would break Jewish law.

The Ten Commandments are clear:

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...” (Exodus 20: 3-4)

Once again the tables were turned.

¹⁸*Jesus, aware of their malice, said to them,*

“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?”

¹⁹ *Show me the coin used for the tax."*

And they brought him a denarius.

You can imagine the congregation gasping at their faux pas,

maybe even laughing and pointing,

saying to one another, *"Can you believe these guys?"*

²⁰ *Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"*

²¹ *They answered, "The emperor's."*

Then he said to them,

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,

and to God the things that are God's."

Separation of church and state,

to pay or not to pay taxes,

these are mere tools they use or, should we say,

abuse and misuse in their discourse with God.

We may be fools for Christ, but Jesus is no fool.

God is wise to the ways of humanity.

Who made who? Who is the Creator here?

How many of us have thought we were fooling our parents,
when they knew all along which way was up and what we were up
to?

Christ is perceptive and receptive, awake and aware,
larger than life, full of joy and driven by hope,
having fun and building relationships,
and because of this attitude grounded in grace

Jesus is not easily dissuaded from the bigger
picture

and a mighty vision of the kingdom.

His eyes are on the prize; the Way, the means and the goal are the
same: love.

Alas, minefields are everywhere.

Christian ministry – and we are all ministers –

requires dancing and plodding along despite distractions and
detractors.

Dig down deep into the soil of God's love,

and let your roots drink deep from the living water,

because ministry as you will live it and engage in it

will require of you a commitment level

that will persevere in good times or bad.

In good times or bad, God is present.

Keep on keeping on.

Run the race that is set before you.

Dance when you can and rest when you must.

Remember that you and your journey belong to God.

Remember who you are, and whose you are.

At the same time,

Christians also need to keep our own eyes on our vocation

as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

Like the Herodians before us, we can get distracted

by the small and insignificant

and lose sight of the glory of God.

The effect is nothing less than disastrous.

We can see the disastrous impact of pettiness in our family relationships,

in our work relationships, and in the political arena.

For the sake of focus and as a common example, let's consider the spiritual realm.

Pettiness is the number one cause cited

by pastors who leave the pastorate

as well as by Christians

who chose to leave the Church of Jesus Christ.

We can relate.

It's hard to forget the Sunday I preached and prayed and listened and served,

and as a member was leaving

she pointed at my chin and said, "*You missed a spot shaving.*"

Petty.

Or the Monday an Elder came by

to share that folks were upset with me

because while wearing these same clergy robes

I had knelt to tie my three-year-old daughter's shoes.

He said that when I put on pastoral robes I ceased to be a father or husband.

Funny, I thought my mission as a Christian was to model and embody

loving parenthood, marriage, and friendship no matter what I wore.

Petty.

Or the Sunday morning our Deacon Chairman

who was a lineman for the county (really, he was)

dropped by the church while making his work rounds

in order to check that we had four deacons for communion.

Another church member missed the love

and saw only blue jeans and county-issued work shirt

and promptly scolded him for his attire.

The deacon left, and his family never, ever returned.

Petty.

You get the point.

Disciples pastor Zena McAdams once told me,

“In the ministry there are a 1,000 lashes, except they come one at a time.”

How many are willing and able to endure such pain for the sake of Christ?

Why in the world do we subject one another to such harm and hurt?

Again, this challenge is not unique to the church;

we find it in our families and work and world.

While being petty may make one person feel superior,

it hurts like a bee sting, except the sore lasts a long, long time.

Being petty comes from pickiness, from being focused on the small things,

from shrinking our world view

down to only that which we can see or imagine,

and then to expect others to share our own perception of reality.

Pettiness is a result of a loss of vision or hope.

Pettiness is grounded in fear.

Pettiness is born from a deep need to control,

grounded in a desperate attempt to hold on to what little

we think is in our control

at the expense of

the vastness of God's creativity and
boundless grace.

Do not be afraid.

We cannot afford the luxury of one single negative thought.

Trust God and one another.

We must not be distracted or diverted or have our mission distorted

by small mindedness or fears or a need to put God or one another
in a box.

They say that one Sunday a young woman walked down front after a
sermon

and invitation to join the church.

She asked the pastor, *"How do I unjoin the church?"*

"Pardon me?" asked the preacher.

She said, *"I went to a church meeting and all anybody talked about were petty differences and minute details that seemed to me to have nothing to do with making and growing disciples of Jesus.*

So how do I unjoin the church?"

True story.

She got it.

She saw the bigger picture and was not to be distracted.

Her faith testimony served to awaken a sleeping giant...the church.

You see, a unified church, an engaging church, a permission-giving church,

a faithful, fun-filled, lively experiment of God

can't be distracted from its purpose.

This Body of Christ is planted here to make and grow disciples everywhere.

This church is to be and share the Good News of God's love

from "our doorsteps to the ends of the earth." (Acts 2)

We are to serve and care for the broken and the wounded,

the lost, the last and the least.

We are to be a sanctuary and safe place,

living witnesses and the Living Word.

Whenever we practice ministry as God wills for us

then we are continually amazed and delighted

at how many lives we can reach and impact,

and how God will touch and change us in the
process.

For the sake of building the Kingdom of God

you and I will put aside our pettiness, lose our fear of loss

and sacrifice the sacred cow called control.

Once our hands and minds and hearts are free of these burdens

we shall take on the mantle of brotherhood and sisterhood

and begin to see one another as the Imago Dei,

the image of God.

Our voices will sing, "*Hosanna!*"

Our actions will imitate the mighty works of the Healer,

Our lives will communicate, "*Namaste, the God in me sees the God in you.*"

The Bible says, "*When they heard this, they were amazed;*

and they left Jesus and went away."

Well, not everybody went away.

Some stayed around for the feast.

Some stayed for the Last Supper in the Upper Room.

Some stayed because they believed,

or wanted to believe,

or once believed,

or hoped to believe one day

that this, indeed, is the Messiah.

The Messiah walked among us fully human, fully divine,

fully engaged in the mission

of making and growing disciples of God.

And so are you.

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

Communion Invitation

“When we come to the Lord’s Table,

we are meant to see the bigger picture of God’s love and sacrifice.

This meal represents a welcome table

that is set for all who confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

It is also set for those who want to meet Jesus, even for the first time,

and discover for themselves the goodness of God.

Jesus invites us all in, saints and sinners alike,

and then uses this meal to bring us together.

Our Savior doesn't worry about the little details of our life.

Jesus is concerned about the bigger matters,

like forgiveness and salvation, like reconciliation and redemption,

like being love and sharing grace upon grace,

that are offered in this Bread of Life and Cup of the New
Covenant."

The Table is set. Come to the feast, and know that the Lord is God.

(paraphrased from Jason Gottman, [The Journal of Worship Resources](#),
Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)