

*Dear Friends,
At the conclusion of this sermon is a story that uses coarse language,*

the kind not often heard in polite company, especially in church.

I do hope you are not offended, and if you are that you will forgive me.

The point to be made is not the earthy language

but the love that runs underneath

and through the lives of those whose story we give voice to

here and now in this sacred space.

Shalom, James

“Radical Hospitality, Part III: Practice Community”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 19, 2012

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Psalm 30 Luke 10: 1-12

Psalm 30

1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,

and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.

3 O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

5 For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

6 As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."

7 By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain;

you hid your face; I was dismayed.

8 To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication:

9 "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

10 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

11 You have turned my mourning into dancing;

you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

The Mission of the Seventy

Luke 10

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ ¹² I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

The View from the Other Side

The native mountaineering guides in the Himalayas,

known as sherpas,

are intimately acquainted with the face of
Mount Everest.

However, they know it only from one side

– the view from their home valley.

They have been known to respond in disbelief

to images of Everest taken from the other sides.

Their disbelief changes to amazement

when they realize that something with which they
were so familiar

can have other sides to it.

(From Jacob Bronkowski's Science and Human Values, reprinted in
Christian Century, May 17, 2011)

The View from the Other Side

In Christian divinity schools across the United States and around the world

seminarians are assigned Holy Scriptures by their professors

and instructed to exegete the texts.

To exegete a passage from the Bible

is to thoroughly examine and analyze the text

from every possible angle:

historical and cultural context,

literary criticism, grammatical analysis,

who wrote it and to whom,

and its theological messages.

Christian students return to their classroom

to submit papers with ample footnotes that describe in detail

what their exegesis reveals about the meaning of the text.

In Jewish seminaries, however,

when a rabbinical student is handed a passage to exegete

he or she is informed to return with not one understanding,

but a dozen understandings of the same passage.

The rabbis in training are learning to see the Word of God

from other, often diametrically opposed, perspectives.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes this exegetical discipline to the next level

when he applies it to the practice of living in community.

Rabbi Sacks says, “The supreme religious challenge

is to see God’s image

in one who is not in our image.”

(The Dignity of Difference, p. 60)

“Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, p. 100)

The View from the Other Side

While the shadow of the Cross was still fresh on the ground

and echoes of our Messiah's last words still rang
across the land,

the first few churches of Jesus Christ

were formed and shaped by the practice
of hospitality.

In the church's first days and through to today,

the practice of hospitality is a "cardinal virtue".

Apostles then and followers today discern the practice of
hospitality

from the Master himself.

One day Jesus sent the disciples out, seventy strong,

nervous, excited and eager, to do ministry in his
name.

Jesus sent them out ahead of him, telling them to travel in
pairs,

to listen and learn and share the Good News with
their neighbors.

In a nutshell, Jesus sent the disciples out

from the security of his fold

into the world all around them,

into the communities that he himself
was about to visit.

If Jesus was here today in Atlanta he would say,

“Go on, git, tell your story and listen to other folks
stories.

Build relationships.

Say ‘peace be to this home’!

Eat whatever you are served, even if it looks
kinda funny.

Cure the sick. Give to those who ask of
you.

If you don’t get welcomed, if folks are not
hospitable to you,

then shake the dust from your feet, and
jus’ move on.”

Nothing fancy or complicated.

They were instructed to do exactly what they already knew
how.

Tell their story.

Listen to other people’s stories.

Be present in someone else’s life.

Invite someone else to have a relationship with the holy.

Be the presence of the holy in the community.

See that the holy is already present in the community in the lives of other souls.

If you have ever been on the receiving end of an encounter
in which someone listened to you?

Remember when some child of God cared for you enough
to stop what s/he was doing and listen?

In that moment of kairos did you catch a glimpse of
koinonia, of community?

Did you change somehow, in some way great or small?

I wonder if our soul are touched and shaped
more by being heard by someone else,
or by having someone else
seek to persuade us of their ideology?

I wonder which helps us most – listening or persuading –
to get over our self and practice community?

The View from the Other Side

An elder living alone in the desert undertook a seventy-week

fast.

He ate only once a week in order to be more receptive to God.

When he was little more than bone and vapor

he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain passage.

God would not do it.

The elder, disappointed by how little good the fast had done for him,

decided to go ask one of his brothers in Christ the meaning of the passage.

The minute he closed the door to his home,

an angel appeared and said,

“Your seventy-week fast did not bring you one step closer to God,

but now that you have humbled yourself enough

to go to your brother,

God has sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage.”

Then the angel told the elder what it meant and went away. (Taylor, p. 90-91)

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, An Alter in the World, she

says:

“The wisdom of the Desert Fathers [and Mothers]

*includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual
work in the world*

is to love the neighbor as the self

*– to encounter another human
being*

*not as someone you can
use , change, fix,*

*help, save, enroll,
convince or control,*

but simply as someone who can spring you

from the prison of yourself,

if you will allow it.

*All you have to do is recognize another you “out
there”*

– your other self in the world –

*for whom you may care as instinctively
as you care for yourself.*

To become that person,

even for a moment,

*is to understand what it means to die to
your self.*

This can be as frightening as it is liberating.

It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.” (p. 93)

“At the most basic level,

the everyday practice of being with other people

is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self.

More intricately,

it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being,

preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital “O” Other –

and at least entertaining the possibility

that this is one of the faces of God.” (p. 94)

She goes on to gently remind us

that *“the world’s great religions*

have always required communities of people

to make them work.

Whether they call themselves congregations, covens, ummas, or churches,

*these communities are the places where
the concrete teachings of the religion
are tested.” (p. 93)*

There are other arenas

in which we find ourselves

exploring and enjoying community and
kinship.

Quilting circles (bees?), sports teams, social networks, chat
rooms,

trivia nights, choirs and choruses and bands, political
committees,

civic clubs and dinner clubs and book clubs,
and so on.

The challenge, of course, is sameness.

Homogeny.

Uniformity.

A gathering together of like-minded people

with similar convictions or commitments,

ideology or theology,

standards or disciplines. (p. 94,
adapted)

“On the one hand, this is what keeps them together.

On the other hand, this is what keeps other people out.”
(Taylor, p. 94)

The challenge for Disciples of Christ, of course,

is that Jesus intends to visit those who are on the
outside looking in,

and he is sending us ahead of him.

3 [His] voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40: 3-5)

The View from the Other Side

I am going to tell a story that uses coarse language,
the kind not often heard in polite company, especially
in church.

I do hope you are not offended, and if you are that you will
forgive me.

The point to be made is not the earthy language
but the love that runs underneath
and through the lives of those whose story we
give voice to
here and now in this sacred space.

Do you know who Will Campbell is? He's a Baptist
preacher,

but I promise you, he's not like any Baptist preacher
you have ever known.

He's one of a kind. If you've ever read the cartoon Kudzu,

Will Campbell was the inspiration for the preacher
Will B. Done.

Around here in the south in the early 1960s,

"...on one of the Freedom Rides,

*Campbell was challenged by newspaper editor
P.D. East*

*to sum up the Christian faith in 10
words or less.*

Campbell replied, "We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway."

Not long after, [Campbell's] good friend and fellow activist Thomas Coleman

was shot and killed by a police officer named Jonathan Daniel.

After the shooting, Campbell was devastated;

[however] P.D. East wouldn't leave him alone,

challenging him on his definition of Christianity.

He demanded Campbell to answer

whether both Thomas Coleman and Jonathan Daniel

-- the victim and the murderer-- were bastards.

Campbell feebly replied that they were.

"Which of those two bastards did God love the best?" asked P.D. East.

This question changed the course of Campbell's life,

when he realized that

God loved the bigoted, wrong-doing Ku Klux Klan members

just as much as He loved the victims of the bigotry.

He left the civil rights movement,

*and began ministering to white supremacists,
sharing God's love and hope
to the very people he had been fighting
against.*

The thought of reaching across both lines...

sounds dangerous, frightening...and beautiful.

*After P.D. East heard Will Campbell's answer to his
question,*

*he responded, "You've got to be the biggest bastard of
us all...*

*because damned if you haven't made me a
Christian,*

and I'm not sure I can stand it."

*Campbell used to say, "I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-
human being".*

He explained that being pro-Klansman

is not the same as being pro-Klan,

and being capable of making that distinction

*might be the only hope for civil
discourse.*

*So my goal is to be able to say that I am both pro-Gay and
pro-Fundamentalist.*

***Taking sides is one thing,
standing in the middle is another,
but reaching across the line is
something completely different.***

*Reconciliation-- both to God and to [humanity] –
was the purpose of Will Campbell's life and ministry,
and I hope that someday, someone could say
the same of me.”*

(Christine's Blog "On
the Wings of a Pig" July
18, 2009)

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