

“New Understanding Plus New Faith Equals New Behavior”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 14, 2013

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Worship Theme: Coming to a New Understanding of God’s Loving Activity

Holy Scriptures: Acts 17: 16-34

Paul in Athens

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbling man want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

29 Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about

this.”³³ At that point Paul left them.³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Faith and Reason

Jordan and Dana bumped into each other in a hospital elevator.

Since they had not seen one another in a while, Dana asked what Jordan was up to.

Jordan said she had just visited with a member of her church,

and that they had prayed to God for healing.

Dana said, “I decided that I don’t believe in God.”

Jordan asked, “Would you mind describing for me the God you don’t believe in?”

Dana said, “I can’t believe in a god who is cruel, judgmental, and distant.”

“Yes, I see. I agree with you,” said Jordan. “I don’t believe in that kind of a god, either.

The God I know and follow is kind and loving, steadfast and true.

The God I have experienced is forgiving of my errors

and comforting in times of trouble.

I hope you come to know such a God of grace.”

Faith and Reason

Draw strength that in biblical times as in today,

when the love of Christ is shared

some scoff, some believe, and some let God's
love get to work in them.

We live in Christ, and Christ lives in us.

First Christian Church of Decatur cherishes the loving
activity of God

in your life in the here and now and in your life
everlasting.

This congregation is open and accepting of all souls,

affirming of each other's faith journey.

We have no creed but Christ;

each person is invited to believe in and follow the God
of love and grace.

The invitation to belong precedes the acceptance of belief.

For many of us,

belonging and knowing that you belong and are
welcome here as you are,

unconditionally,

precedes the formation of a system of
belief,

which then fosters and shapes
one's behavior.

This explains why being hospitable to friends and strangers
alike,

why the spiritual discipline of hospitality

has so much to do with spiritual formation.

Practicing Christian hospitality and healing and hope

have grown as a vital part of our collective identity.

We experience daily that being a host and home

to a wide range of ideas and insights and interests

is not for the faint at heart.

Such a faith walk by a diverse and intelligent and faithful
Body of Christ

takes courage and a lot of grace to agree to disagree,
for we invite ourselves and one another
to take a risk, to step boldly out on a
limb,
trusting in God to hold us
together as one,
and to become open to listening and
learning from people
who may think and believe
differently.

At the core of who and whose we are

is our willingness to draw upon God's gifts of faith and
reason.

We like to encourage each other, saying,

“Please don't check your brain at the door. Use it!”

Faith and Reason

The human condition are living and breathing and having
our meaning

at the intersection of faith and reason.

We find ourselves engaged fully in a time and place

that requires the best of our bodies, our minds, our

strength and our souls.

Please do not check your brain at the door!

Draw deep upon your mind, intellect, and ability to think.

Please do not neglect or cover up your soul!

Do not cover up your light or hide it under a bushel

or deny the world (or yourself) the joy of your beautiful soulful self.

Faith and reason are gifts from the holy, and when used in tandem give glory to God.

God gave to you the capacity and capability and ability to think,

and to act on your thoughts for the greater good.

God also planted deep within you the gift of faith,

the capacity to believe, to trust, to risk, to act boldly not knowing the end result,

and to act on your beliefs for the greater good.

Faith and Reason

Faith involves action.

Faith without works is dead.

Reason involves action.

We celebrate innate intelligence and intellectual stimulation,

theological discourse and philosophical debates

that lift us to a higher plane

and guide us to seek the divine around
us and within each other.

May the debates and dialogues of the meaning of life and life
everlasting

lead us to act, to serve, to be transformed, to be
engaged in the community

rather than become a cheap and self-serving
escape

from our ultimate responsibility:

to love God, to love another,

and to love ourselves as
children of God.

The 17th Century Saint Robert Bellarmine wrote:

“The school of Christ is the school of charity.

On the last day, when the general examination takes place,

There will be no questions at all on the text of Aristotle,

on the aphorisms of Hippocrates, or on paragraphs from Justinian.

Charity will be the whole syllabus.”

The ultimate act of charity, according to the Scriptures,

is the laying down of one's life for others.

This is a heroic demand, and also a test of Christian love.

Jesus Christ taught us the maxim, *“Greater love has no one than this,*

that a man lay down his life for his friends,

that a woman lay down her life for her friends.”

In the truest sense of the word, we are all called to be lay people:

people willing to lay our life on the line as an act of love for others.

You know, this is quite reasonable and faithful.

Paul quoted a poet who lived some 600 years before him,

the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, who said,

“In him we live and move and have our being.”

We live in Christ, and Christ lives in us.

Liken this to living inside an oxygen tent,

every fabric of our being is sustained by the love of God.

In an oxygen tent we live in the oxygen, and the oxygen lives and moves in us;

we live in Christ, and Christ lives and moves us, and in Christ we have our being.

There is one thing that really, truly matters.

God loves you.

The love of God undergirds all of creation,

and this love lives and moves, defines and embraces and gives meaning to us all.

“In God we live and move and have our being.”

Faith and Reason

For as long as we can remember churches and our overall society

have asked people to first alter their Behavior – “*Oh, behave!*” –

then to Believe in the creeds and crux of the matter,

which will then result in being told that then they may Belong.

Behave right according to our values and mores.

Believe as we do.

Then you may Belong.

However this is not the pattern of human transformation
as modeled and taught by Jesus Christ.

Christ invited people to Belong, then he invited people to
Believe,

and then he invited people to alter and change
their Behavior.

Belong – you belong to God and Christ wants you in His
circle

Believe – believe in the Good News and let the faith of God
move in your life

Behave – grow through the process of human transformation
and social responsibility

Faith and Reason

The Apostle Paul is a wonderful model of this natural,
spiritual progression.

Back when he was named Saul and persecuting Christians,
using his authority and power to murder and harm

and hurt people of faith,

the love of God transformed his life.

First God stopped Saul in his tracks on the Road to
Damascus

and let him know that the people being persecuted
belonged to God, as did Saul.

The light of God's love blinded Saul.

God sent a Christian named Ananias to minister to Saul,

to invite him into his home and take care of him.

May we be like Ananias!

We welcome all of you who are blinded by the Light or deaf
to the cries of the world,

all who are addicted and powerless of what has taken
over your life,

all who are lost and afraid, isolated and lonely,

wondering and wandering and
questioning,

angry and sad, hurt and hurting,

looking for direction or a
destination or a vocation,

seeking and
searching, happy and
joyful,

and we will

take you in.

You belong to God.

We are God's people.

Therefore you belong here, with us and we belong to you and yours.

Faith and Reason

First Saul was accepted and welcomed in by Ananias.

Then Saul accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior,

and then he changed his belief system

and then he started the long, slow, arduous journey

toward changing his life, his behavior.

He changed his name to Paul and changed his ways.

Because he was welcomed in by the same people he persecuted,

Paul came to a new understanding,

then he came to faith,

then he came to change his ways and his days.

Paul went about the Mediterranean, travelling by land and

sea,

sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and what God had done for him.

He initiated conversations, conversions, and communities of faith.

He wrote sermons, recorded the words of songs, and sent missives and letters.

He was a marvelous theologian and arguably not so great a sociologist.

He shaped and influenced the fledgling church.

He preached with passion,

protested abuses by the principalities and powers,

and taught with reason and faith.

He inspired us with these words in a letter to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 13: 4-7):

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

He who had been forgiven

taught us much about forgiving ourselves and one another.

Paul never forgot his past or the errors of his ways;

he stayed close to the love of Christ

and the love of his people in churches across the land.

He anticipated the glory of God,

dealt with a thorn in his side,

and kept his eyes on the prize.

Faith and Reason

So, when Paul went to Athens, and he encountered philosophers in the Aeropagus,

he welcomed them as he had been welcomed by Ananias.

He started where they were,

listened to their philosophies and teachings,

and considered their gods and idols and ways of life.

He ministered to their searching.

Paul acted just as Jesus Christ and God's people had done for him;

he met them where they were, and he loved them.

He appealed to their knowledge of creation.

He acknowledged their understanding of the commonality of humanity.

Then he opened for them the Logos, the Word of God.

23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship,

I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it,

he who is Lord of heaven and earth,

does not live in shrines made by human hands,

25 nor is he served by human hands,

as though he needed anything,

since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

Paul went on to speak with the philosophers and teachers,

seekers and searchers, wonderers and wanderers

at their level, but he did not stay there.

Just as Jesus meets us right where we are,

 makes us welcome and at home in the Spirit, lets us
know that we belong,

 God always calls us to reach for higher ground,

 to be lifted up and to serve with
unconditional love.

Paul took the conversation to another level.

He encouraged all who would listen to weave together their
faith and reason,

 to draw deep upon their gifts of the Spirit to think and
to believe, and then to act.

Faith and Reason

Faith involves action.

Reason involves action.

After the belonging comes the believing, and then the new
behavior, the transformation.

My wife Betty has a friend from Chapel Hill who took a class
in sign language.

She wanted to help give voice to the voiceless,

 and to hear what those who are deaf needed to say.

One day her friend was at an airport with a long wait in between flights.

She decided to practice her basic sign language lessons and went into the restroom to practice in front of a mirror.

That way she could see how it would look to a deaf person.

Two high school age girls walked in while she was practicing, and one girl said to the other, “What is she doing?”

“She is deaf. Leave her alone. Can’t you see that she is talking to herself?”

Listen again for the activity in this passage of Scripture.

Paul said, *“Since we are God’s offspring,*

we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,

an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,

now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

³¹ because he has fixed a day

on which he will have the world judged in righteousness

*by a man whom he has appointed,
and of this he has given assurance to all
by raising him from the dead.”*

*32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead,
some scoffed;*

*but others said, “We will hear you again about
this.”*

33 At that point Paul left them.

*34 But some of them joined him and became believers,
including Dionysius the Areopagite
and a woman named Damaris, and others
with them.*

Where the Word is faithfully preached and shared in the
community,

some believe, some scoff, some mock,

some will want to hear more, some will walk
away,

some will chose to follow Jesus Christ,

and some will seek other, less
challenging avenues,

for the Gospel of Jesus
Christ is offensive.

(William Willimon, Acts, Page 114 paraphrased and expanded)

Human transformation is the most frightening, awesome,
amazing, and challenging experience any of us will
ever have.

The first step is gain a sense of belonging and to make
welcome the children of God.

The next move is to share your faith and reason, to speak
from your own experience.

Share your story.

Share your searching and seeking, your finding and your
hope.

Speak your truth with love.

Speak and act out of your faith and reason,

for these gifts of God are living and breathing within
you in tandem,

partners in the dance of life.

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

Extra Material:

“What you don't understand is that it is possible to be an atheist,

it is possible not to know if God exists or why He should,

and yet to believe that man does not live in a state of nature but in history,

and that history as we know it now began with Christ,

it was founded by Him on the Gospels.”

“Now what is history?

It is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death,

with a view to overcoming death.

That's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves,

that's why they write symphonies.

Now, you can't advance in this direction without a certain faith.

You can't make such discoveries without spiritual equipment.

And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels.

What are they?

To begin with, love of one's neighbor,

which is the supreme form of vital energy.

Once it fills the heart of man it has to overflow and spend itself.

And then the two basic ideals of modern man—without them he is unthinkable—

the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice.”

--Boris Pasternak (from Doctor Zhivago)