

“Agree to Differ”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 30, 2013

Recognition of Independence Day

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Ephesians 2: 13-22

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But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure

is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you also are built together spiritually into a
dwelling place for God.

Today – and everyday -- our congregation celebrates and recognizes

that we are Christians, followers of Jesus Christ,
who are also citizens of the United States of
America.

We love God and we love our country.

We're ambassadors for Christ, and we are proud to be
Americans.

We live in the land of the brave and the home of the free.

We cherish our freedoms;

we will defend to the death if need be
the right of all citizens and neighbors to
experience and practice them.

Fiercely independent,

we choose practice our religion and spirituality as we
so choose.

Freedom of Religion is both a divine gift

and a right protected by the First Amendment to
Constitution.

Our nation and this congregation are intentional about our faith practices.

In many ways our experiences in this Body of Christ

is a microcosm of our life in community and in our country.

Consider the following.

The mantra that runs across the church letterhead and worship bulletin

and boldly decorates the backs of our church t-shirts reads:

**resolve to love - agree to differ - unite to serve -
break bread together**

Resolve to love:

decide to treasure and cherish one another,

friends and strangers alike, in the name of
Jesus Christ,

who's perfect love is made manifest in
us.

Agree to differ:

Recognize that not everybody will be of the same
mind

or have the same opinions or share the same
values.

Decide now to agree beforehand not to take your ball
and go home,

to quit the church over not getting your way;

Decide now to respect and recognize everyone,

practicing tolerance and celebrating the
diversity God has created.

Unite to serve:

Decide to sacrifice and serve Christ in community as
one body,

each person bringing his or her own unique
gifts to the Table.

Set your sights on that which makes us
one.

Come together for a common
purpose.

Come, let us unite to be and share
the Good News of the love
of Jesus Christ!

Break bread together:

Decide to come to the feast of life and hope and
salvation God offers.

Decide to bring yourself to the table

and to arrive in a spirit of receptivity.

Decide to worship and praise, to pray and repent,

to be commissioned by the blessed sacrament
in which we share and receive of the
Body and Blood of Christ.

Let's make the effort and energy

to explore together our call as Christians and citizens
to agree to differ.

Allow me to thank you formerly for empowering me

to represent you and do ministry at Camp Christian.

Each year I serve you and this church by serving Christ

as a church camp director or counselor or keynote
speaker.

What a hoot!

In 2003, I enjoyed my 4th year in a row at church camp with a
young man named Trey.

On the third day of church camp Trey looked up at my profile
for a couple minutes,

then said, "*Mr. James, your nose is longer than I
remember from before.*"

That year I adopted a small group of four highly energetic
boys to be my snack crew.

Each night at 9pm we went to the EMT's trailer to pick up the camp's evening snacks.

Each night the EMT on call said the same thing to Bryan, age 12.

He said, *"Son, you need to tie your shoes. You could trip and fall."*

Well, truth be known, Bryan never tied his shoes all week.

On the last night of camp we held a talent show.

Josean, also 12, said to Bryan,

"You know what you could do in the talent show?"

You could tie your shoes in front of everybody.

You stand on stage and we'll say,

'Bryan will tie his shoes for the first time in 10 years!'"

Our camp theme was "Under God's Roof."

In the midst of living in Camp Christian in Gordon, Georgia for a week

we sought to connect body and mind and soul.

In the midst of small groups

there was Bible study, trust exercises, and arts and crafts.

In the midst of all-camp gatherings

there was singing, faith-sharing, Bible knowledge challenges, kick ball games,

water balloon tosses, capture the flag, and worship.

Such beautiful worship;

each service was entirely planned and lead by young people.

After the talent show we prepared ourselves for our final evening vespers.

When we were ready and focused,

worship began with a drama.

A boy named Nick walked up the aisle with a small stone in his hand.

He placed it on a Bible atop the communion table and said,

“I am a doctor under God’s roof.”

He was followed by a girl who placed another small stone next to it and said,

“I am an attorney under God’s roof.”

One after another came a long line of 12 and 13 and 14 year olds,

placing stones atop a Bible and saying,

“I am an engineer... I am an accountant... I am a cook... I am a teacher... I am a minister... I am a

truck driver... I am Disciple of Christ..."

and each one claimed a spot under God's roof.

Suddenly the last person, a 13-year-old named Jeremiah,

strode up to the table and shouted, *"I don't want to live under God's roof!"*

and he threw his rock onto the floor

and then knocked all the stones off the table.

Agree to Differ

Life in the church brings with it the joys, responsibilities,

heartaches, and challenges of living in community under God's roof.

Life in the church can make you strong,

fill your life with meaning, purpose and a solid sense of fulfillment.

Life in the church can drive you crazy,

because it's rarely easy or simple or clean and neat

when seeking to find common ground with people from all walks of life.

Sometimes folks quit, leave, and get the heck out of Dodge.

Sometimes folks watch churches from a distance and see fights and disagreements

and ask, *“How can they preach love to me
if they can’t practice love with each
other?”*

Churches, especially family sized churches,

require a great deal of patience and the practice of active listening skills.

We need to be able to laugh together,

and to laugh at ourselves.

We are called to do community service and to serve one another.

We have to have fun in the midst of ministry,

lest we die from boredom.

And we are commissioned to learn how to differ in opinion and ideas,

without ever losing sight of our common mission:

to be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

How many times has someone joined a community of faith,

all excited and enthusiastic and filled with optimism,

only to leave soon afterward?

She left because they wouldn't do things her way.

He left because they did things he didn't support.

She left because they changed.

He left because they wouldn't change.

She left because they were too inclusive, too open minded.

He left because they were too exclusive, too narrow minded.

She left because she didn't get her way.

He left because he didn't get his way.

What it all boils down to is control.

Folks like to be in control.

Our deep need to be in control is the fly in the ointment.

And yet, my friends, Jesus' call to Christian discipleship is a call to relinquish control,

to give our lives to God and allow Christ to enter in and direct us.

The call to the church is the same:

the community of faith is to heed the call to discipleship,

to go down to the river and meet Jesus at the

water;

we are to go down to the river

and do ministry amongst the hurt and hurting;

let's go down to the river

and celebrate the diversity of people and ideas,
dreams and ministries.

Let's go down to the river

and put up a canopy as wide and open as the love of
Christ.

Thanks be to God, through the Cross of Jesus Christ

that God gave the world God's greatest reconciling
gift: love.

God's love overcomes all differences;

God's love helps us to see beyond the arguments, whether
petty or weighty,

and our need for control and to have our own ways.

God's love brings us ever closer to the peace we seek and
reconciliation we crave.

Agree to Differ

Under God's roof too often people differ first and then
resolve to break up.

We see it in marriages, in friendships, in families,
in community, in civic discourse, and across our fair
land.

We hasten to walk away so quickly,
when with a bit of effort and compromise
we could find common ground and common
cause.

Not so long ago Paul saw church people in conflict,
and he very gently yet persuasively told his listeners
that Jesus' resurrection has already overcome
all that separates them from God and
one another.

Paul said, *"For Jesus is our peace;
in his flesh he has made both groups into one
and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the
hostility between us.*

*He has abolished the law with its commandments and
ordinances,
that he might create in himself one new humanity
in place of the two, thus making peace,
and might reconcile both groups to God in one body
through the cross,*

thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off

and peace to those who were near;

*for through him both of us have access in one Spirit
to the Father.*

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,

*but you are citizens with the saints and also members
of the household of God,*

*built upon the foundation of the apostles and
prophets,*

with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together

and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

*in whom you also are built together spiritually into a
dwelling place for God.”*

Agree to Differ

Under God’s roof we find we are transformed into a dwelling
place for God.

As the final evening of church camp drew to a close

and the vespers service was about to end,

suddenly Josean walked slowly up the aisle.
Around his neck was a name tag that read, “Jesus.”

Jesus approached the communion table, and then stooped
down low.

Jesus knelt down and began to pick up all the stones

that children had put there and that Jeremiah had
scattered,

carefully, slowly, methodically placing them
atop a Bible.

Last but not least, Jesus picked up Jeremiah’s rock and then
turned to us and said,

“Everyone lives under my roof.”

Everyone lives under God’s roof.

There is room under God’s roof,

under the canopy of Jesus’ love,

for all people.

There is room enough for you, and you, and you, and all of us
together.

There is room in our nation for all viewpoints and opinions.

The moment we seek to control

or dominate

or insist on our own way,

then the room gets very small, indeed.

Diversity is diminished and tolerance takes a vacation from reality.

In the church, in the community, in the country

we can make room in our hearts and minds for those with whom we differ,

for those with whom we disagree,

for those whom Christ insists we practice tolerance and grace.

Come to the Table where everyone is invited to live and breathe and have meaning. Decide to dedicate your life right now to the God of grace,

and may the reconciling peace of Christ become the cornerstone of your life.

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