

September 2014 Worship and Sermon Series

Focused on Christian Education and Spiritual Formation:

Sept. 7: “Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church & Classroom” Luke 2: 41-52

Sept. 14: “How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?” Acts 8: 26-40

Sept. 21: “Thinking Is Believing” James 1: 1-8

Sept. 28: “Disciples Higher Education, Then and Now” 1 Timothy 4: 6-16

“Thinking Is Believing”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 14, 2014

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Ephesians 4: 1-16 and James 1:1-8

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

The Wisdom to Know

Professor Reinhold Niebuhr taught for decades (from 1928 – 1960)

at Union Theological Seminary in NY.

He had previously served as pastor of a Detroit congregation;

while teaching at Union he served part time as pastor

of a congregation in nearby Connecticut.

Here is a pastoral prayer he offered to God in the context of worship:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

courage to change the things I can,

and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

enjoying one moment at a time;

accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.

Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;

that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

The Wisdom to Know

A friend has a small, one word sign above her professional office door.

The sign reads, "THINK."

When asked for the most common responses to the sign,

she said that most people look at it and remark,

"Think. Now what do you mean by that?"

Experiencing the holy in our daily lives can and often does have a thinking component,

an intellectual, reasonable, thoughtful component.

For lo these many years we who have taken up residence in the Church

and staked our claim have come to believe in the Living God

because of an emotional experience, a relational experience,

a missional experience,

or possibly a life-altering transformational experience.

Who is to deny that souls among us and our neighbors

come to believe, accept and follow the same Living God

because of an thought-filled experience,

a experience steeped in reason, logic, and hard-nosed analysis?

Backing up to my assumptions, I start from the theological premise

that all good gifts are a present from above, from within,

having as their genesis an almighty Spirit of Love.

From this source of infinite goodness and grace

we -- the whole people of God --

receive the gifts of wisdom, clarity of insight,

logical analysis, capacity for research,
and gleanings of knowledge.

Clearly the divine gift of Logos, Logos with a capital L, the
Word of God,

and the divine gift of logos, logos with a small L,

the logic which helps us to reason and think
clearly, systematically,

may both be used by God to reconcile
and redeem souls

for the salvation of the world into
a Living Hope.

The Wisdom to Know

Today's passage from Ephesians is a clarion call to work
toward unity in the Spirit.

The will of God is for humanity to work and play and serve
together,

with each person encouraged to bring his or her gifts
to the table

for the building up of the common good.

Today's periscope in James opens the book for the listener,
introducing us to the generosity of the Spirit of God.

In the opening lines we are welcomed, recognized, prayed
for, empathized with,

and then inspired by the author's testimony

about the inclusive nature of Christ and His
Church.

All are to be included; no one is to be left out,

for the generosity of the Spirit is given to all, without a
grudge,

without finding fault, without assessing blame
or laying guilt.

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God,

who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,

and it will be given you.

The author perceives our collective and individual need
to tap into the wisdom God offers and provides.

We need wisdom.

Lord knows we need wisdom to believe,

wisdom to discern,

wisdom to solve problems,

wisdom to cope with life,

wisdom to know the way to go.

The Book of James teaches that if you sense you are lacking

in wisdom,

lacking in clarity of insight, ask, and it will be given you.

The Wisdom to Know

Wisdom is gained by listening.

We are all pilgrims, all searching and growing and learning

as we move and dance our way

across the universes of our lives and communities.

At the core of growing wiser is the willingness to listen.

Put value in what someone else has to say, has to offer, and has to bring to the table.

This is a value which is in short supply these days.

Stevie Wonder sang that “love is in need of love today.”

Well, willingness to listen is similarly in need today.

Let’s pay attention to how we actually listen to one another.

This morning we commission one of our own to be a Global Ministries Intern.

Everyone Henry Brewer-Calvert meets in the Dominican Republic

and elsewhere on the beautiful island of Hispaniola

will contribute to his own understanding of life.
Every time Henry listens,
he will grow wiser in the world,
wiser in the ways of God,
wiser in the esteem of his community.

This anticipation is no different for those of us
who remain to play and sing, to work and serve.

Wisdom is gained by listening.

The first source to whom we must listen is God.

Reinhold Niebuhr nailed this so well that a pastoral prayer
he offered to God

is now offered daily around the world
by millions of souls as the Serenity Prayer.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot
change,*

courage to change the things I can,

and the wisdom to know the difference.

The Wisdom to Know

A good rhetorician – a person who uses rhetoric well –

when making an argument draws deeply upon Ethos, Pathos, and Logos.

Ethos – ethics; moral choices;

determining the morally right thing to do

Pathos – passion, emotion, feeling deeply;

displaying the heart of the matter

and Logos -- logic, wisdom, discernment, critical analysis;

discerning how best to solve the problem

There are some of us whose gifts and skills

are more apt to be in one of these three areas, and that is fine.

We can't all be rhetoricians.

Yet let's be honest.

For as long as we can best determine or remember

the Church of Jesus Christ has leaned heavily on recruiting and connecting

with those whose gifts lay greatly in the arenas of Ethos and Pathos.

What this means is that those whose primary functional gifts are in Logos,

in critical analysis and research and philosophical knowledge,

often are left out or sense they are not included
in the community.

Pondering out loud, I wonder whether many of our
neighbors and family members

who claim an affinity for atheism or agnosticism are
intelligent folks

who have yet to be intellectually challenged by
the Church.

We've asked church members and friends to please not check
their brains at the door.

We've mentioned here a time or two about meeting God and
one another

at the intersection of faith and reason.

Who is to say that the road to reason is godless?

Is not God at the core of wisdom?

Was it God of the Wizard of Oz who gave you the gift of
brains and deep thoughts,

common sense and the ability to think our way out of
trouble?

Once again, my friends, who is to deny that souls among us
and our neighbors

come to believe, accept and follow the Living God

because of an thought-filled experience,

an experience steeped in reason, logic,
and hard-nosed analysis?

One of my favorite cartoons shows a man sitting in a living
room chair.

He is staring fixedly at a blank wall,

surrounded by open books and drink cans strewn on
the floor.

His wife is standing at the doorway, talking on the phone,
and saying,

*“One of the problems with being married to a
philosopher*

is you never know when he is working.”

The Wisdom to Know

There is room at the Table of the Lord in Christ’s faith
community

for all God’s dreamers and doers, empathizers and
thinkers.

Building a community that is inclusive

is arguably one of the toughest things to do in this day
and age;

how do you do so in such a way that no one

feels excluded?

Yet try and try again we must, because we must.

It's not our idea;

this Christ's idea, that we might be one.

This is the will and prayer and hope of the Spirit for the salvation of the world.

Imagine how much richer and vibrant our life together will be

as we become ever more diligent and intentional
to build an inclusive, generous congregation,
one in which all souls find hope and
home.

Imagine the faithful merging of a Body of Christ rich in
Ethos, Pathos, and Logos.

Imagine having God

*grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot
change,*

courage to change the things we can,

and the wisdom to know the difference.

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