

*“Ministry is About Relationships”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 11, 2015  
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Holy Scriptures: Acts 2: 43-47

*Life Among the Believers*

<sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>[a]</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>[b]</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous<sup>[c]</sup> hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Footnotes:

- a. Acts 2:45 Gk *them*
- b. Acts 2:46 Or *from house to house*
- c. Acts 2:46 Or *sincere*

During the sugar shortage in World War II,  
a man at a Washington, D.C., lunch counter called out  
loudly, “*More sugar!*”  
The waitress across the diner shot back, “*Stir what you got!*”

Everyone has been born with some natural aptitude,  
some natural ability, some talent, some gift.  
However great or small, each of us has been born with some  
“sugar”

– something that can be used and developed,  
multiplied and shared to the glory of God. So,

folks, *“Stir what you got!”*

George Calvert, my father, always worked with whomever God sent.

He stirred what God provided, and he stirred up people to live into the fullness of their being.

George was an ordained pastor, and he also worked full-time jobs

so our East Harlem congregation would not have to pay him a salary.

At one point George taught junior high school for 15 years. More often than not there would be a couple kids in a class who were very challenged to sit still for 45 minutes, much less six or seven hours a day.

George’s colleagues would moan in the teacher lounge, saying *“My class would be perfect if only I didn’t have so-and-so in the room!”*

My dad would reply, *“Work with whomever God sends into your classroom.*

*That particular child really needs your love.*

*Besides, if so-and-so left, another would take his place!”*

He reminded them and us that we have the capacity to encourage people in the church and at work and in our homes

to *“stir what you got.”*

Just as God was at work and play in the first churches, God works in and through churches of all shapes and sizes and backgrounds,

imperfect, wrestling, struggling, sweating, praying, studying,

seeking daily to find our way to home and healing and hope.

Surely God loves congregations like this one,

where people know and remember your name,  
where you are much more than a face in a  
crowd.

You are a child of God, a seeker, a parent, a child, a student,  
a teacher,  
a faithful follower with gifts and talents to offer,  
provide, and shine!

Personally, my family chooses to be a part of communities of  
faith

that are authentic and genuine in the reality of life's  
unevenness,

our need for grace and healing,  
and are filled with people who seek  
positive relationships.

We seek and choose to be involved in a church that "stirs  
what it got."

Decatur First Christian Church has always been a  
congregation

that cares deeply for people,  
ministers to and alongside families of all shape  
and size and form,  
and seeks to serve just as Jesus Christ  
served us.

We don't have swimming pools and spas,  
but we have a baptistery and healing words of hope  
and comfort.

We may not have a multi-million budget,  
but we also aren't afraid to step out on faith that the  
Lord provides.

We may not have a television program,  
but we do have word-of-mouth,  
which communicates far more effectively.

We are blessed with so much  
we all have a full-time job to simply "stir what we

got.”

Thank you for your generosity of spirit,  
your faith sharing,  
your prayers, your presence, your hope, and  
your grace.

Thanks for sharing your talents and gifts of the Spirit,  
given to you by God to be used for the glory of God.

Thanks for offering up to God the talents that you have  
and for being willing to work and play alongside those  
whom God sends.

There is a particular aspect of our relationships  
at work and church, in our families and communities  
that has become a stumbling block, a thorn in  
our side,  
a deep chasm and an intimidating,  
seemingly impervious wall.

We speak of disappointment.

Resolve this week in your Christian journey  
to bear your relationships through  
to the other side of disappointment.

What is on the other side?  
Hold on, we'll get there together.

God calls us to build bridges across the chasms sunk deep by  
disappointment.

Addressing the ones you are disappointed by  
or have lost faith in  
or been hurt by  
is never easy nor to be taken lightly or

slightly or blithely.  
Such an endeavor takes courage and resolve, fortitude and  
faith,  
and a spectacularly huge dose of grace.

The Good News is that God's grace is sufficient.  
One day the Lord said to the Apostle Paul,  
and today God's Word reaches you and me, saying,  
*"My grace is sufficient for you,  
for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Plowing through the rough terrain of disappointment  
in any relationship takes grace.  
Ministry is all about relationships.  
So take a risk.  
Let go and let God's grace go to work and play in this  
Christian context, and elsewhere.

Nadia Bolz-Weber said:  
*"God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us  
even though we sin.  
Grace is when God is a source of wholeness,  
which makes up for my failings.  
My failings hurt me and others and even the planet,  
and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final  
word  
...it's that God makes beautiful things  
out of even my own shit [sinfulness].  
Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings  
and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail  
and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace  
-- like saying, "Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive  
you."  
It's God saying,  
"I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be*

*the final word.*

*I am a God who makes all things new.” [1]*

Become channels for the power of God to be made perfect in our weakness,

in our imperfection, in our sinfulness and senseless pride,

in our flaws and mistakes and the errors of our ways.

Rather than allowing personal disappointment

to destroy or divide or disrupt the flow of our spirits,

we can choose to allow the grace of God to strengthen our coping skills.

Eliza Stephenson said,

*“Disappointment to a noble soul  
is what cold water is to burning metal;  
it strengthens, tempers, intensifies,  
but never destroys it.” [2]*

On the other side, my friends and fellow Noble Souls,

just ‘round the bend from disappointment, is reconciliation.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the tattooed Lutheran pastor

of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver,

a church where a chocolate fountain, a blessing of the bicycles,

and serious liturgy come together.

She's a face of the Emerging Church,

redefining what church is, with deep reverence for tradition. [3]

In Krista Tippett’s interview of Bolz-Weber, Tippett said,

*“One thing I really like that you name and elaborate on in your book*

*...is a real reality check about churches, even your church,  
as a place that is going to disappoint people,  
where people will get hurt,  
because it's full of human beings.*

*And we know that these things happen and they take us by  
surprise*

*and they're so devastating because it's church.*

*You're very clear that this community will disappoint  
people.*

*[You write:] "It's a matter of when, not if.*

*We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt  
their feelings."*

*Nadia Bolz-Weber replied, "And experience has proved that  
this is true, yes.*

*...I'm completely idealistic about God's ability to redeem our  
stuff and our mistakes,*

*but I think if we aren't open about the fact that we've made  
them,*

*that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness  
and ...redemption and ... grace.*

*So I think in a way what might sound sort of cynical about  
...don't trust us, don't be idealistic about this community or  
about me,*

*to me that just opens a door for grace in a sense.*

*Because what I say to people,*

*...I'm glad you love it here, but...at some point,*

*I will disappoint you or the church will let you down.*

*Please decide on this side of that happening*

*if, after it happens, you will still stick around.*

*Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace  
comes in*

*and fills in the cracks of our brokenness.*

*And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it.*

Speaking personally as a Christian of 54 years  
and professionally as a pastor for 29 years,  
I resonate with Nadia Bolz-Weber faith journey  
and in confessing that my congregation  
*“is not unfamiliar with me apologizing for being wrong.  
And [you] have forgiven me many times  
for mistakes that I have made.  
And I'm exceedingly grateful for that.  
Also, I will say that I think that the fact that I don't find it a  
threat to my authority  
to say that I've made a bad call or that I've made a mistake,  
I think that actually allows this population  
to let me have authority  
for [the congregation and in the wider community].*

*“By...pretending that we didn't [mess up]  
does not in any way keep other people from knowing  
that we made a huge mistake.*

*So, if you're somebody who just has that transparency,  
people tend to just trust you more  
rather than resent you for making mistakes.”[4]*

Out of Appalachia comes this tale of Old Joe and the  
Carpenter. [5]

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one  
good neighbor.

They'd been friends all their lives.

And now that their spouses were buried and their children  
raised,

all they had left were their farms... and each other.

However, for the first time, they'd had an argument.



It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed.  
It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe's neighbor's  
land

and so he claimed it as his own.

But Old Joe said, "No. That calf has the same markings as my  
favorite cow,

and I recognize it as being mine."

Well, they were both a bit stubborn,

so they just stopped talking to each other.

That happened about a week before,

and it seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old  
Joe...

until there came a knock at his door.

As he opened the door, he saw a young man with a box of  
tools on his shoulder.

He said,

"I'm a carpenter, and I'm looking for a bit of work."

Old Joe brought him into the kitchen and sat him down

and gave him some stew that he had on the back of  
the stove.

While they were eating and talking,

Joe decided that he liked this young fellow.

He said, "I do have a job for you.

Look right there through my kitchen window.

See that farm over there? That's my neighbor's  
place.

And you see that [creek] running right down there

between our property lines?

That creek wasn't there last week.

My neighbor did that to spite me.

He took his plow up there,

and he dug a big old furrow from the upper  
pond and flooded it.

“Well, I want you to do one better.  
Since he wants us divided that way,  
you go out there and build me a fence – a big,  
tall fence –  
so I won’t even have to see his place no  
more!”

And the carpenter said,  
“Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I got my  
tools,  
and I’ll be able to do a job that you’ll like.”

Old Joe went into town for a bit, so it was about sunset when  
he returned.

When Old Joe pulled up in that wagon,  
his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open...  
because there wasn’t a fence there at all.

It was a bridge!  
A bride now went from one side of the creek to the other!

His neighbor was just starting to cross the bridge with his  
hand stuck out,

and he was saying,  
“Joe, you’re quite a fellow to build this bridge.  
I’d never been able to do that.  
I’m so glad we’re going to be  
friends again!”

And Old Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor  
and said, “Oh, that calf is yours. I’ve known it all the  
time.

I want to be your friend, too.”

About that time,  
the carpenter started putting his tools into the box

and then hoisted it onto his shoulder and  
walked away.  
And Joe said, “Wait, come on back, young fellow.  
I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”  
The carpenter just smiled and said,  
“I’d like to stay on, Joe. Really, I would.  
I can’t, though.  
I got more bridges to build.”

Ministry is about relationships.

Relationships need the grace of God, each and every day.

The God of Grace and Glory answers our prayers of  
confession, saying,  
*“I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be  
the final word.  
I am a God who makes all things new.”* [6]

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

[1] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*

[2] Eliza Tabor Stephenson

[3] “On Being” Krista Tippett, October 23, 2014, Interview of Nadia Bolz-Weber. “[Seeing the Underside and Seeing God: Tattoos, Tradition, and Grace](#)”

[4] “On Being” Ibid.

[5] “OLD JOE AND THE CARPENTER – A Tale from Appalachia” Pleasant DeSpain. Found in [Peace Tales](#) by Margaret Read MacDonald, 2005.

[6][6] “On Being” Ibid.