

*“Unifying the Cities of God”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 18, 2015  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Ephesians 4: 1-6, 11- 14

*Unity in the Body of Christ*

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

<sup>11</sup> The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. <sup>14</sup> We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

Sermon

Recently I bumped into a neighbor in downtown Decatur. We got to talking about the similarities in our churches.

The longer we talked the clearer it got we had more differences than similarities.

As a matter of fact, it dawned on us that we had very little in common.

My neighbor started to get exasperated with the gulf in our faith expressions.

To ease the tension I quoted the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4, saying,

“The Good News, my friend,

is *“there is one body and one Spirit*

*...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one*

*God and Creator of all...”*

My neighbor exclaimed, “Thank goodness for that!”

After we parted to go our separate ways,

I got to thinking that we share more in common than one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

We also share the gifts Christ gave.

The next sentence that Paul wrote reads:

*“Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.*

*Therefore it is said,*

*“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;*

*he gave gifts to his people.”*

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets,*

*some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,*

*to equip the saints for the work of ministry,*

*for building up the body of Christ,*

*until all of us come to the unity of the faith*

*and of the knowledge of the Son of God,*

*to maturity, to the measure of the full*

*stature of Christ.”*

This month our spiritual worship is focused on unity.

There is unity of the faith

– and that can be a good thing, yet difficult to establish.  
And then there is unity in the city  
– and that can also be a joy to behold, yet very tough to  
create and sustain.

Let's share together our ideas, hopes, visions, and gifts for  
creating unity in our fair city.

I will start the conversation, but let's be clear: a sermon is  
not a lecture or a speech.

A sermon is a spiritual expression of faith, one that is an  
ongoing conversation.

In the synergy of a sermon,  
there is a spiritual dialogue that incorporates you, me, all of  
us together,  
and especially the Holy Spirit.

So think of this morning's message as a launching pad for the  
good rocket Unity.

Here are a few points from which to begin:

1. Shop Locally

When you spend a dollar or \$10 or \$100 here in our fair city,  
the funds rebound and resound and redound across our local  
economy.

When we shop on the internet for goods and services,  
we may save a few dollars at the convenient click of a mouse  
or the punch of a button.

However, the effect is detrimental – neigh, disastrous! -- to  
our local shopkeepers.

Ask any bookstore owner -- if you can find one –  
about the challenge of competing with Amazon.

Yet who employs more of our neighbors, or even you and

me?

(We'll come back to this point in a minute.)

Make a conscientious effort to support local shops and restaurants

that give back and give into our fair city.

Farm Burger is a prime example of a local restaurant that provides a quality product which uses goods and services

from w/in 100 miles of Decatur,

thus lowering energy and transportation costs

as well as supporting our local urban and rural economy.

Think this is a pipe dream?

Think that even a large scale, multi-neighborhood effort won't make a difference?

Look at DeKalb County's second largest employer,

Emory University as well as the far-reaching City Schools of Decatur.

Both Decatur City Schools, from elementary to high school, and Emory University

are committed to providing cafeteria fare for students, faculty and staff

that are as "homegrown" as possible,

meals that are nutritious and delicious.

## 2. Reward Entrepreneurs

Who employs workers in America?

Part of our mythology is that the bigger a corporation or factory is,

the more people they employ.

However, the real story is that small businesses, taken together,

hire and keep hiring more people than multinational corporations.

Next time you go into a shop or fast food restaurant or small business,  
take a moment to count the employees.  
Don't forget the ones in the back, the ones you don't see outright,  
like the invisible dishwashers, shelf stockers, bookkeepers, and attorneys  
who are unseen yet essential.  
Recognizing that we have evolved into a service-oriented economy,  
let's do what we can to reward entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, our congregation's experience is that local entrepreneurs are more apt to be aware of community needs  
and more responsive to local requests for support.  
For example, when our church asks for a coupon or a gift card for a church raffle,  
we receive maybe a 10% support rate from those that are owned by a corporate headquarters in a far off state;  
yet locally owned shops and stores support us at a 100% rate, (yes, 100%!)  
because they know us, they care about community life, and they give back to the city that gives so much to them.

### 3. Create Affordable Housing

I am convinced that the biggest detriment to helping and empowering families  
to rise up and experience quality of life is the lack of affordable housing.  
Graduates emerging from high schools and colleges and grad schools  
may get a job but cannot find an apartment, condominium or

house  
that they can afford.  
Working families are spending far too much of weekly and  
monthly income  
on their rent or mortgages,  
often having to choose which bill to pay  
-- Food? Clothing? Medical? Electricity or Gas? –  
so they can make rent.  
Habitat for Humanity testifies that 58% of Americans  
acknowledge  
that a family of four with an income of about \$50,000  
have a hard time finding affordable quality housing.  
That number skyrockets to 88% for a family of four with an  
income closer to \$24,000.[\[i\]](#)

Don't think for one second that the problem before us  
is unattainable or beyond our scope or sphere of influence.  
We can either make a difference directly or we know  
someone who can.  
Speak up and speak out and speak for the need for affordable  
housing.  
Encourage local and city and state policy makers  
to insist that every new housing development  
include at least 20% affordable housing units.  
Tell them and one another that our city needs inclusionary  
zoning laws.  
Over a thousand new housing units have been built  
in downtown Decatur in less than 10 years.  
If 20% were established as affordable for low and moderate  
income families,  
what difference do you think that would make  
in addressing economic disparity in Decatur and beyond?

#### 4. Be Neighborly

Being Neighborly begins with becoming engaged alongside your neighbors.

People become engaged in their church, their community, or their wider environment when one of three things happens:

- Presence of Danger;
- A sense that something is Relevant;
- Or an Awareness that “Hey, I Can Make a Difference.”

We get involved due to Danger, Relevance, or Making a Difference.

Regardless of what motivates you to get involved, trust that God will give to you the gifts that you need and can offer to the city.

Being Neighborly begins by Choosing to Look Up, Look Around, and Look Out.

Look up to God,  
who warmly invites of you to look within, to look around,  
to look up and out and around at your surroundings,  
to see clearly the needs, hurts, hopes of people in your midst.  
Bloom where you are planted;  
plant seeds of grace wherever you are blooming.

While my wife Betty was preparing for her spring class on “Simple Living” she read a story about a woman reflecting on people spending their lives looking down, looking down at their phones or iPads or laptops. She recalled once when she was standing on a street corner waiting for the light to change so she could safely cross. A gentleman waited next to her for the light to change. He carried on his shoulder a rolled up carpet.

They made eye contact.

He smiled a funny smile and said that his mother had sent it to him.

She responded and they had a funny conversation while crossing the street.

In time they became good friends,  
got married and now have three beautiful children.

She reflects back on that fateful day.

She said that if she had been looking down at her phone and not looking up,

she would never have noticed the carpet,

or the nice man's face and demeanor,

or even spoken to this stranger-soon-to-be-a-friend,  
soon-to-be-husband and mate for life and love.

Let this be a gentle reminder for we disciples of Jesus Christ  
whose phones or iPads or screens

have become biologically connected to the ends of our hands  
and merged with our brain cells

that these tools may serve to enhance or expand,

to engage or—at times – to expunge

authentic human communication and relationship building.

### Being Neighborly requires that we avoid the Danger of a Single Story

In her remarkable Ted Talk,

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks of The Danger of a Single Story. [\[ii\]](#)

Adichie said, "*I'm a storyteller.*

*I like to [speak about] what I call "the danger of the single story."*

*I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria.*

*I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family.*

*My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator.*



*And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help,  
who would often come from nearby rural villages.*

*So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy.*

*His name was Fide.*

*The only thing my mother told us about him was that his  
family was very poor.*

*My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his  
family.*

*And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say,*

*"Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's  
family have nothing."*

*So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.*

*Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit,*

*and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned  
basket made of dyed raffia*

*that his brother had made.*

*I was startled.*

*It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could  
actually make something.*

*All I had heard about them was how poor they were,  
so that it had become impossible for me to see them  
as anything else but poor.*

*Their poverty was my single story of  
them.*

*Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria  
to go to university in the United States.*

*I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me.*

*She asked where I had learned to speak English so well,*

*and was confused when I said that Nigeria  
happened to have English as its official language.*

*She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal  
music,"*

*and was consequently very disappointed*

*when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.  
She assumed that I did not know how to  
use a stove.*

*What struck me was this:*

*She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me.  
Her default position toward me, as an African,  
was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity.  
My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of  
catastrophe.  
In this single story,  
there was no possibility of Africans being similar to  
her in any way,  
no possibility of feelings more complex than pity,  
no possibility of a connection as human  
equals.*

*So that is how to create a single story:*

*show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over  
and over again,  
and that is what they become.*

*The single story creates stereotypes,  
and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are  
untrue,  
but that they are incomplete.*

*They make one story become the only  
story.*

*It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking  
about power.*

*There is a word, an Igbo word that I think about  
whenever I think about the power structures  
of the world,*

*and it is "nkali."*

*Nkali is a noun that loosely translates as "to be greater than  
another."*

*“Like our economic and political worlds,  
stories too are defined by the principle of nkali:  
How they are told, who tells them, when  
they're told,  
how many stories are told, are really  
dependent on power.”*

In Christ we have the power and the grace to see and receive  
our neighbors holistically;  
to witness the lightness of one another  
not as single stories  
but as beautiful children of God with complex lives,  
with burdens that we do not know,  
and with an abundance of gifts.

#### 5. Seek After Wholeness One Effort at a Time

One at a time.

I grew up hearing loud politicians proclaim, “We are going to  
rehabilitate the city!”

Meanwhile my church and local community organization  
spoke louder with actions  
that said, “We are going to rehab one tenement, one family,  
one soul at a time.”

Half a century later, the proof is in the pudding:  
the church and community organization have together  
rehabbed literally hundreds and thousands of apt.s, homes,  
and families.

As they say, where be the politicians?

In the end we will all be made whole, complete, blessed in  
the presence of God.

The question is:

why wait until we are dead to become unified in the eyes of  
God?

Why not start now, here,  
where we are planted and given to one another as blessings?  
Rather than moan and weep  
and say “all is broken” and “woe are we” and “alas, poor  
unity, we never knew ye”  
why not start from a place of unity, and see where it takes  
us?

Martin Luther King, Jr. gave us God’s gift of a launching pad  
for unity in our city  
when he wrote from a Birmingham jail:

*“In a real sense all life is inter-related.  
All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of  
mutuality,  
    tied in a single garment of destiny.  
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.  
    I can never be what I ought to be  
        until you are what you ought to be,  
            and you can never be what you ought to  
        be  
                    until I am what I ought to be...  
This is the inter-related structure of reality.”[\[iii\]](#)*

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

[\[i\]](#) According to the 2014 How Housing Matters survey:

- Forty-seven percent of adults surveyed experience unstable or insecure housing situations at some point in their lives. That number rises to 59 percent for families whose income is less than \$40,000.
- In every region of the U.S. — Northeast, South, Midwest and West — anywhere from 53 to 69 percent of those surveyed classify the purchase of affordable housing as challenging in their community.
- Fifty-eight percent say that a family of four with an income of about \$50,000 would have a hard time finding affordable quality housing. That number skyrockets to 88 percent for a family of four with an income closer to \$24,000.

- Most survey participants believe that friends and family who are getting older will face challenges meeting their housing needs. Sixty-five percent highlight affordability as a top issue, second only to an individual's physical needs as they age.

[ii] Ted Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, The Danger of a Single Story, 2009

[iii] Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*