

***“Together, the Courage to Connect”***

Summer Sermon Series on Fearless Faith (Part 7 of 7)

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 7, 2016

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Matthew 28: 16-20 (NRSV)**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the [Creator] and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Congregational Call to Worship

*The Great*

*Commission Based on Matthew 28*

*According to First Christian Church of Decatur*

One: Go out in the neighborhood.

**Many: Empower people to love each other.**

One: Help them listen for their call to be the people God created their souls to be.

**Many: Teach them by your actions about God’s unconditional love for each and all.**

**All: And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the age. Amen!**

Sermon

***Together, the Courage to Connect***

No long ago this significant congregation  
met in small groups in homes and in various rooms in  
the church,

and then altogether as one body  
to connect and listen to each other.

We put in the time and effort to assess our call from God to  
serve, to love, to belong.

We honestly, humbly evaluated our gifts, resources and  
talents,

our challenges and growing edges,  
and our mission as a Body of Christ.

What are we good at?

Where do we need to grow or change?

What have we to share?

What does the neighborhood have to offer that we need to  
learn, hear, understand?

We boiled all this down and declared we are: *Living Into  
Our "Sweet Spot" for Mission*

We identified our strengths as:

--*Being Together*

--*Helping Others*

--*Creative, Generous Funding Practices*

--*Short-Term Projects*

--*Raising Up Disciples/Leaders of All Ages*

We then looked closely at Jesus' Great Commission to the  
Church, in Matthew 28.

We were in the

Fellowship Hall when we studied this message of Jesus.

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing  
them*

*in the name of the [Creator] and of the Son and of the Holy*

*Spirit,*

*and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*

*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

As I said, we were in the

Fellowship Hall when we studied this message.

We then broke up into small groups without leaving the room.

Each table of church members and friends

was given a different sentence to unpack and explore.

When we reconvened we put together our shared insights,

and suddenly we had a divine mission that looked and sounded like this:

*“Go out in the neighborhood.*

*Empower people to love each other.*

*Help them listen for their call to be the people God created their souls to be.*

*Teach them by your actions about God’s unconditional love for each and all.*

*And, lo, I will be with you until the end of the age.”*

We came up with a title for this calling to connect with the city

and to help folks connect with God and one another.

We call this: “The Great Commission Based on Matthew 28

According to First Christian Church of

Decatur.”

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

This process and product was on my mind on Friday

when I walked to the Old County Courthouse.

Every Friday at 12 Noon I walk there to attend the Decatur Rotary meeting.

One of our pastoral predecessors here, the Rev. Dr. Charles Schwab,

did the exact same thing every Friday. And he did it for 30 years.

I bet Charlie Schwab never talked on a cell phone.

On the way to Rotary I call my mother to check in.

This Friday I told Buffy that I was asked to offer the invocation for the meeting.

I told her that the keynote speaker was Dr. Alan Abramowitz, a political science professor at Emory,

who was going to give a presentation called:

*“An Election Like No Other:*

*The Outlook for the 2016 Presidential and Congressional Elections.”*

“Mother,” I said, “what should I pray?”

Without a moment’s hesitation she said, “Lord, deliver us!”

Yes.

Lord, deliver us.

Lord, help us. Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us.

My friends, open your ears to listen and consider

a few of the points Dr. Abramowitz shared.

Listen not for the political value or to take a side or make an argument,

but rather for the spiritual essence we, the Body of Christ,

may glean to help us to be delivered,

to connect us with God and one with

another.

If and when and as we connect with God’s people across the spectrum of Creation,

to *“Go out in the neighborhood. Empower people to love each other.”*

then we had better do our homework  
and figure out together a plan that is a  
little more detailed,  
if you will, than to ask for  
deliverance.

Although praying is a very  
good place to start!

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

Dr. Abramowitz spoke about voting in an age of polarization  
and the outlook for November 2016.

Years from now we will look back at 2016, he said, and tell  
our kids all about it.

The stakes are high and the differences are striking.

In addition to the White House

there are 435 House seats and 34 Senate seats up for  
election.

At stake is control of the US Supreme Court,

which is deadlocked with 4 conservatives and 4  
liberals.

We are in a new era of electoral competition,

with a closely divided national election

with one party dominating the majority of local  
districts and states.

Why is this? he asked.

He answered his own question, giving three main reasons.

First, the electorate is highly partisan.

Further, there is a high rate of straight party ticket voting.

Finally, many independent voters tend to lean toward one  
party or the other.

They are really what he called “closet partisans.”

He pointed out that there are deep divisions in the American  
society.

(1) There is the racial divide.

Political parties have divided over racial lines.  
Almost one third (28%) of the electorate are not listed as white.

(2) There is the cultural divide.

We are talking about lifestyles and morals here.

62% of the highly religious are Republican.

63% of the highly non-religious are Democrat.

(3) There is the ideological divide.

One central concern is the role of government.

84% of Republicans

believe there is too much government  
regulation of businesses,

as opposed to 22% of Democrats.

47% of Republicans say they get their news primarily from  
Fox News

and 40% cite mainstream media,

while 74% of Democrats get their  
information

from mainstream media.

The effect is a growing polarization in America.

Each side has increasingly negative feelings about the other,  
leading to real animosity.

As a matter of fact, anywhere from a third to a half of  
American families

would be displeased if their child married someone  
from the other party!

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

That is the crux, isn't it.

It's not about whether you are a Republican or Democrat  
or Independent, closeted or otherwise;

it's not about being one race or another,  
one ethnicity or another,

one gender or orientation

another;  
it's isn't about more or less or jus' the right amount of  
government;  
it isn't about where we get our news or views,  
or our information and ammunition for  
our tweets.

It's about fear.  
We are afraid we are going to lose.  
We are afraid the other side might win, might get more,  
might get ahead, might leave us behind.  
We are afraid of one another.  
Guess who is coming to dinner?  
It used to be that parents were afraid their child  
might date and bring home an Irish Catholic or a  
person of another color  
or a same sex companion;  
now we are afraid they might fall in love  
with someone  
from the "other party."  
Heavens, what would we  
talk about?

It's about fear.  
Dare I say it, we are afraid of God.  
We are like Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden,  
ducking and avoiding God who is walking by in the  
cool of the day,  
knowing we have done wrong,  
calmly waiting for us to admit out  
shallowness and selfishness,  
our greed and vainglory, our  
refusal to reconcile,  
our unwillingness to  
confess, "Lord, deliver us."

So we blame someone else: “Must be Eve, Lord!”

“Must be the other party, Lord!”

“Must be another race or ethnic group or social class or one of Them, Lord!”

So we don't talk.

We don't relate.

We don't connect.

We don't look each other in the eyes,

tearing our selves away from our phones and screens  
long enough

to look up and look around

and see the light that sparkles in each  
other's beautiful eyes.

If we would only choose, claim, dare, explore each other's  
souls we would find we have far more in common than we  
think.

Our differences are so minute; our commonalities immense.

When we look at each other we discover we have something  
to share, to say, to hear.

When we look around and find one another

suddenly we want to share our stories

or maybe explain how we came to where we  
have arrived

or to articulate where we might like to  
go, together,

with courage, connected in Jesus.

Lord, deliver us so we stop clamming up and holding tight  
to our small attitudes and opinions (that someone else  
invented and gave to us),

only expressing them to show others how right  
and righteous,

religious and rambunctious we really  
are.

Living in fear is no way to live.

That is no way to live, to choose to not relate or reconcile,



to not belong or connect with God and one another.  
That is how we die.  
Lord, deliver us.  
Free us from fear and give us fearless faith!  
It's about faith.  
God gives to us a fearless faith to make the effort to connect  
so that everyone knows he or she belongs to God, to  
us, to one another.

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

So many of our neighbors in the neighborhood want and  
crave  
what is being shared here,  
here in this significant faithful congregation of  
amazing folks.  
I dare say that folks are sick to death of polarization.  
Our neighbors crave this elusive thing called community.

[According to Disciples minister Holly McKissick]  
Unchurched people want a spiritual faith community  
but they are not interested in churches  
that “are all hung up on gays or straight, black  
or white,”  
but rather churches that celebrate the  
range of God's creation  
and help each other through the  
difficult complexities of life.  
Many of our unchurched neighbors say,  
“If I could find a church that isn't trying to own Jesus,  
but simply follow him, I would go.”  
What they mean is that they dream of a sacred place, a safe  
place,  
a spiritual home and community  
where they could go with their questions and

doubts

and still be accepted, like us.

If only they could find a church

that was not trying to divide the world but found a way to live together, like us.

If only they could find a church that wasn't trying to own Jesus

but simply follow him, like us.

If they could find a church like that, they would go!

We are a church like that, and you know this and feel this because you live this.

We've have experienced it firsthand, and we can share this discovery, like so.

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

In the Great Commission in Matthew 28

Jesus invites us to be disciples, to make disciples, and to grow disciples.

We know that it all starts with telling our story, our faith, our witness,

and trusting in God to make the reconciling connections.

Jesus is not asking us to make cold calls,

to start knocking on the doors of unknown folks

and suddenly inviting them to have a

relationship with Jesus Christ.

The first and most crucial step to belief is to know that you belong.

How are we as a church at making folks feel welcome, that everyone belongs?

When I served as pastor in Jackson TN

I made 500 cold calls on newcomers in two years, and it netted one visitor.

Kathy Jenniges was the lone visitor.

She not only visited, she joined, became an elder,  
and then as a mid-wife helped birth our daughter  
Katie.

There is a legendary story in my family from my childhood  
days  
about the day my mother Buffy was in a back room of  
the house

and she heard a knock on the door.

My brothers answered the knock, and being only 5 or 6 or 7  
years old,

said loudly, "Daddy is not home!" and then promptly  
slammed the door.

Buffy hustled to the front and reopened the door

and helped to smooth a church member's ruffled  
feathers.

That afternoon she taught her sons how to open the front  
door very wide

and then say, "Won't you please come in and have a  
seat?"

My mommy or daddy will be right with  
you."

A few days later she was taking a bath when she heard a  
knock on the door,

and then a young voice said, "Won't you please come  
in and have a seat?"

My mommy or daddy will  
be right with you."

She hustled to get dressed, and when she walked to the front  
of our home

she found the living room full of Jehovah's  
Witnesses.

Two hours later Buffy was silently wishing

she had qualified the hospitality lesson she taught her  
sons.

## ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

The point of the Great Commission is that we are not in control,

yet we still need to make the effort, the effort to connect.

We are not in control of anyone else's faith choices or responses to our faith stories.

We still need to make the effort, the effort to connect, to let someone else know they belong.

The first step to making and growing disciples of Jesus Christ is to be one.

Be one.

Your living faithfully may be the only sermon your neighbor experiences.

Love someone. Serve somebody. Do justice.

Seek to connect your passion and skills and resources to make a world of difference.

Then, for goodness' sake, tell someone!

We may inform from a distance but we impact from up close.

When you get a chance – and trust me, God will give you plenty – use it.

Take two minutes to make an impression,

to tell your story, to share your passion and hope.

Practice opening the door, the conversation, the window of possibility

and inviting someone in.

*My Lord and my God!*

We are richly, deeply blessed to be given a few minutes to make a world of difference,

and sometimes that's all we get.

So let's use every second to drive home our passion,

our creativity and resourcefulness, our love for  
humanity,  
our hope that there are others, thousands and  
millions of others who care  
and want to make a world of difference as well.

Imagine what we will look like and sound like and feel like  
down the road  
because we dare to share our own personal and  
communal stories.

Imagine what this sanctuary and the city of God will be like  
because you and I decided on Sunday, August 7, 2016,  
that we are going to take a risk  
and stand tall in front of someone else's  
eyes  
because we want to make a real,  
live connection.

### ***Together, the Courage to Connect***

The point of sharing your story and listening to your  
neighbor's  
is not only so the Body of Christ will grow.

The point is about helping the homeless and hungry  
just outside our sanctuary and along the city streets.

The point is giving another soul, another family, another  
home  
the same gift of God that you have:  
the gift of hope, healing and hospitality.

The end of the story is the new beginning:

We testify of the love of God because we have seen

the lame walking and the blind seeing,

the thirsty drinking and the stranger  
being made welcome,

and the polarized, divided  
nations discovering anew

*“by your actions about God’s unconditional  
love for each and all.*

*And, lo,” we say, “Jesus will be with you until the end of the  
age.”*

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