

"Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 16, 2016

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Luke 17: 11-19; 18: 1-8; 2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4: 5

Luke 17: 11-19 (NRSV)

Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Luke 18: 1-8 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

2 Timothy 3: 14 - 4: 5 (NRSV)

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The first sister is Quintina.

Quintina Ortiz lived in the third floor apartment
 directly beneath ours in the four story walk up tenement.
Her family could hear my dad's footsteps above their ceiling;
 they called him the giant.
From age 8 to 18, I had to run to get past her door
 on the third floor landing
 thanks to Romeo and Pebbles.
You see, Quintina had two Chihuahuas named Pebbles and Romeo.
Don't ask.
All that matters – all that mattered to me –
 was that whenever those two creatures heard approaching footsteps
 they awoke from their slumbers
 and warned everyone in the building
 of encroaching danger in the hallway.
Without fail Quintina would open her front door to see who was there,
 as if she didn't know who walked by every school day at 3:15.
Romeo and Pebbles knew, and they could smell fear.
Out the door would scurry Pebbles and Romeo,
 toenails scratching the tile flooring,
 intent on attacking my ankles.
They chased me to the next stairway landing,
 snapping and yapping in the thrill of the hunt.
So, in order to survive, every day after school I ran past her door.
Sometimes I made to safety, and sometimes not.
I still have the scars, the vivid, physical, everlasting legacy of Pebbles and Romeo.

The first sister is Quintina.

Some people called her Tina.
I got to know her as well as an adolescent can know a senior church member.
She was one of my teachers and spiritual guides and encouragers
 in the Church of the Living Hope in NYC,
 not to mention the owner of the scallywags Pebbles and Romeo.
Quintina Ortiz taught Sunday School, served as the Church Treasurer,
 raised a fine family, provided arroz con pollo for church meals,
 and served on the Board of Directors of Hope Community,
 a nonprofit that renovated hundreds of homes
 for low income families.
In one Sunday School lesson about giving thanks, she said,
"During the Great Depression there were days when all my family had
was a meager pot of thin soup.

While stirring the soup my mother fervently prayed to Jesus Christ.
My mother prayed to Jesus to please stretch the soup
and make it as sufficient as God's grace.
She prayed so hard she cried.
I was a little girl in Puerto Rico," she said.
"As the soup's steam rose and my mother' tears rolled down,
the Holy Spirit mingled in the moisture and made itself known."

Tina told us in Sunday School that the Lord provided enough for their meal,
and her mother gave God thanks.

Two sisters immigrated

Two of the girls from that Christian family in Puerto Rico moved to NYC.
Two sisters brought with them the faith that the Lord provides,
that there is a holy response to perseverance in prayer,
that when we keep the main thing the main thing,
our focus and faith intertwine
and we are transformed and healed.

Mercedes stood tall and straight, with a regal bearing,
solemn and serious without being severe,
offering occasional flashes of warmth
that made you glad you were there.
She was consistent in her faith and reverence.
Some people in church like to shout amen;
Mercedes was more apt to say, "My Lord and my God!"

Mercedes was our acolyte in worship, the bearer of Christ's light.
I can still see the solemnity and joy she exuded
when she lit the altar candles and said,
"Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world!'"

Mercedes loved her sister Quintina and her sister's family.
Quintina was shorter than Mercedes,
rounder, solid, her feet planted on terra firma,
with a head for business and numbers
(hence our Church Treasurer)
and a welcoming smile and warmth that drew you in.
Quintina loved her sister Mercedes,
and they both loved Tina's son Luis.

Quintina's son Luis grew up to marry Elsie,
and they had three beautiful children.
Luis was a mechanic who worked at the city bus garage.
He repaired and maintained city buses,
often working underneath them
while their engines were still running.

Sad to say, he became very ill with cancer.
During Luis Ortiz's illness he was taken to the OR for emergency surgery.

Afterward, in the Recovery Room
with his mother Quintina and his wife Elsie at his side,
his heart stopped and he was whisked back to the OR.

Quintina and Elsie prayed fervently for his life.
They trusted that God,
who loves us and wants to be in relationship with you and yours,
grants justice and mercy
to those who call out to the Lord day and night.

Luis said later that he saw a beautiful beckoning light
and was going toward it
when he (heard? felt?) being called to return.
His heart revived, he returned to his mother and wife.
Luis said his resurrection was a mixed blessing.
On one hand,
Luis awoke to find that he was back in a body wracked with pain.
On the other,
Luis said after that he never feared dying.

Quintina's first act

Quintina decided she needed to express her gratitude to God
for Luis' amazing resurrection.
Our congregation and sister churches shared a spiritual ministry
called The Healing Community
under the direction of the Reverend Peg Eddy.
Participants learned Biblical stories by heart
so they could use them with those in need,
concentrating on the healing stories in the Gospels.

For example,
a member of the Healing Community memorized then told
the tale of Jesus and the ten lepers
and Jesus' parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

Remember the tale of ten lepers.
They begged and pleaded for mercy from those passing by.
Jesus looked at them and loved them.
Jesus healed one and all of their leprosy.
My, how they danced and pranced and rejoiced!
Healed and happy they went on their way,
so relieved, so free!
And yet only one turned around,
turned and went back to return to God and give thanks.
Only one gave God the credit and glory and expressed gratitude.

Remember Jesus' story, a parable, if you will,
about a widow who went to the local judge to ask for justice.
There was a judge who neither feared God nor was a respecter of people.
Yet the blessed widow returned time and again
to demand that justice be done.

She returned so often, in fact, and with such persistence that he relented, saying,
"Even though I fear neither God nor any person,
I will grant her justice so that she will not wear me out
by continually coming."

Then Jesus paused and added a follow up question:
"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones
who cry to him day and night?
Will the Lord delay long in helping them?"

Yes, yes, yes.
"My Lord and my God."

We the members of God's healing community know this question.
We know this wondering, this wrestling, this prayerful conversation,
this longing in the night and the darkest of days.
Will not God, who loves you and wants to be in relationship with you and yours,
grant justice and mercy to those who call out to the Lord day and night?
Will God delay long in helping me and my plight,
you in your need,
you and me and our prayers for help in this and every time of need?

With the Psalmist
we look to the hills from whence our help comes.

With the whole people of God
we look to one another for succor and support,
for grace and mercy and comfort.

With fear and faith, with doubt and despair and questions galore
we look to the Church
to find a hand, a healing, a word of hope.

We trust the One who called the Church into being to be a healing community.
We follow the One who inspired and empowered the first church to be hospitable,
to welcome in everyone, to administer justice at the gate,
to minister unto the sick and the suffering,
the widows and orphans,
the lost, the last and the least.

We listen and learn and lean on, literally lean on Jesus
who loves you, you, & you.

When Jesus finished the parable of the widow and the judge,
he mused aloud, asking,

"When the Son of God returns, will he find faith on earth?"

Jesus wondered,

"Will there be a healing community that welcomes and serves,
believes and blesses in the holy name of Jesus?"

Two sisters standing in the need of prayer

The Healing Community in East Harlem

put out the word for a service of thanksgiving.

At the service arranged by Quintina,

her sister Mercedes played the part of Jesus.

Tina had recruited nine others to join her, including Buffy Calvert, my mother.

The nine additional people

were to pretend to be lepers on the side of a dusty road.

Mercedes retold the biblical story of Jesus and the ten lepers.

Then Mercedes, as Jesus, walked by on the way to Jerusalem.

Tina and Buffy and the other lepers stood at a distance,

a broken community in need of healing and wholeness.

When the lepers saw Jesus walking by they called out,

"Help me, Jesus! Jesus, Master have mercy on us!"

They rushed toward Mercedes and received God's healing touch,

and then they leapt in the air,

clapped and shouted, "I'm healed!"

Buffy Calvert experienced an electric feeling of gladness.

She and the other healed lepers returned rejoicing

to their seats in the sanctuary.

All returned to their seats except for one, that is.

Focused and faithful,

keeping her eyes on the prize,

determined to give God the glory,

one leper returned to Jesus.

The two sisters looked at each other and held hands.

Then Tina knelt at Mercedes' feet and said, "Thank you, Jesus!"

And Jesus said, "My Lord and my God."

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