

“Conversions”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 18, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51: 1-12; John 12: 20-33

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 51: 1-12

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be cleaner than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.

John 12: 20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--"

Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon

Metanoia

Our word for the day is *metanoia*.

Metanoia is Greek, meaning a transformational change of heart;

especially a spiritual conversion;

a change of mind, of attitudes, and of behavior

Popeye the Sailor Man, a cartoon character from back in the day,
was famous for eating spinach, fighting with Bluto over Olive Oyl,
and saying, "*I yam what I yam!*"

This is a part of our common vernacular and a common attitude.

I am who I am.

What you see is what you get.

I can't – or won't – change.

And yet we choose to follow and dedicate our lives

to a loving, living God who,

when we are in need of changing, converting, transforming,

when we have fallen short or fallen away,

this loving God calls out to us to repent,

to turn away from sin and all that separates us

from the holy and one another,

to turn 180 degrees toward the ways of God.

Metanoia

This Word serves to guide us toward our hope for Grace Together.

The Psalmist prayed:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Be open to a transformational change of heart;

especially a spiritual conversion;

a change of mind, of attitudes, and of behavior

When the Bible speaks of repenting and returning to the ways of God,

this is what we are being asked to be and to do:

change our minds, our attitudes, and our behavior...usually in that order.

The Holy Scriptures' point is clear; painfully, graciously, hopefully clear:
The faithfulness of God is everlasting and unchanging.
The occasional flare ups and errors of the Divine were corrected and reconciled.
Since God can change – and God already has –
then we who are made in the image of God
can change our hearts and minds as well.
One of the toughest Christian challenges is to be other-centered.

They say that a mother was preparing pancakes for her sons Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3.
The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake.
She saw the opportunity for a lesson in morals and loving our neighbor.
She said, *"If Jesus was here, He would say,
'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'"*
Kevin turned to his little brother and said, *"Ryan, you be Jesus."*

Metanoia

A change of heart.
Life changing, life altering conversions
impact our sense of belonging, our behavior, our beliefs.

When it comes to conversion,
conversation is a good way to go.
Conversations with the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
Conversations with people whom you trust,
folks who have your best interest at mind.
Conversations which are based on truth, grounded in love, anointed by grace.
Healthy, wholesome conversations
pave the way for positive social and personal change.
There are other ways to convert folks.
Fear. Guilt. Lies. Force. Imposition of will. Abuse of power.
Fear is a lousy motivator. So, too, is guilt. Abuse and violence, as well.
Over the long haul, over the moral arc that crosses the universe,
the best conversions are those that bubble up from deep inside,
when inspiration and information, change and transformation gel,
when a soul has a change of heart, a ***metanoia***.

National Public Radio airs "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" on Saturday mornings.
It's a radio game show with call-in contestants.
Three years ago, in the spring of 2015,
radio host Peter Sagal said to a contestant: *"Here is your last quote:
'Honest to God, if you engage me in conversation about race
before I've had my morning coffee, it will not end well.'*

*That was PBS's Gwen Ifill talking about whose plan
to have their baristas talk about race with customers?"*

"Starbucks," said the contestant.

*"You are right!" said Peter Sagal, "It seems strange to think
that the coffee chain could end racism in this country.*

But then again, they did manage to convince us all to spend \$6 on a cup of coffee.

So, why not use that power for good?

*The idea is that apparently, in addition to your name,
they will write, "Race Together" on your cup.*

And then they'll hand it to you in the hope that you will say, "Oh, what is this?"

And the barista can explain, "It is about racism. Racism is bad."

And the customer says, "Wow, I never realized racism was bad."

*"Maybe it's just 'cause I live in New York," said Faith Salie,
but do you ever go into a Starbucks where there's not a line 20 people long?"*

Mo Rocca chimed in, *"Can't we all just get a latte?"*

The best time and place to have conversations that matter
could be while standing at a coffee shop counter to get something to go;
and maybe it isn't, especially with 20 caffeine-starved java hounds
lining up behind you.

The culture-healing effort of Starbucks was well-intentioned, if not expertly executed.
It offered a laser-like focus on a real need.

Our community cries out for positive ways and means
to have conversations that matter,
conversations which connect the folks
who are in this circle called Here & Us
with neighbors in another circle called There & Them.

What do you say that this is where the Church of Jesus Christ
steps in, steps up, steps out, and joins in a widening circle.

My friends, you and I are good at this.

We do this well.

We can do more of what First Christian Church of Decatur did
a couple years ago when we took the point to bring 90 Christians from 8
churches

to see the film "Selma" together.

Afterward we sat together in a food court and shared our names and stories.
We do this on a regular basis in our Chalice Thrift store,
when church and community folks share our stories and love of
shopping, swapping joys and concerns and sales while re-purposing goods and souls.
We will do this soon over brick-oven baked pizza,

when our friends in the Decatur Makers build the oven on our land
in order for citizens to break crust and break the ice, together.
We do this when we Break Bread Together in fellowship meals, worship,
and Disciples Women's circles, in Wisdom Weavers
and Christian Youth Fellowship, in our choirs and church park
and Thursday evening seminars, and so much more.
We will do this in May and June.
Let's back up a half-step before moving forward.

We are totally, absolutely inspired by teenagers in our city and across the country.
Teens are speaking out for change that is substantive.
"Love me more than you love your guns," said a young woman on the news.
We are hearing their voices that demand to be heard, respected, recognized.
We hear young voices clear as day, voices stating they have had enough.
They have had enough of the gun violence.
And not enough of action that addresses the problems.
Enough of being victims, and mourners, and living in fear.
Not enough of adults taking responsibility.
Enough of public policy being crafted
by those who profit or benefit from or control access to the means of violence.
Not enough adults are visibly looking out first and foremost for our children.
On Wednesday, thousands of youth walked outside their schools
to stand in silence for 17 minutes, one minute for every victim in Parkland.
On Wednesday, thousands of adults had a moment of silence, or took a knee,
or offered a prayer, or rang a bell,
a clarion call for justice to roll down like an ever-flowing stream.
Rather than giving up or giving in or giving out,
our youth are lifting the best of American and Judaeo-Christian values:
we are being called into **metanoia**.
From where I stand, this very much looks
like our youth are calling America to be converted.

50 years ago, in 1968, America's youth called America to be converted.
The status quo and the main line church basically dug in with both heels.
How'd that work out?

Bob Dylan prophesized:

*Come senators, congressmen, Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway, Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt Will be he who has stalled
There's a battle outside And it is ragin'.
It'll soon shake your windows And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'. (Dylan, 1964)*

In 2018, are we going to "block up the hall," or are we going to "heed the call?"
How do we want to see this work out? And we can; we can work it out.

So, we are going to have conversations in May and June.
We call it "GRACEFUL ENGAGEMENT."

Our publicity states:

*YOU AND YOURS ARE WARMLY INVITED TO JOIN IN A CIVIL & OPEN
CONVERSATION.*

*LET'S SHARE, TALK, LISTEN, & GRACEFULLY CONSIDER GUNS, VIOLENCE, FAITH,
RIGHTS, WRONGS, & MORAL CHOICES WE MAKE DAILY WHILE LIVING, TOGETHER, IN
COMMUNITY.*

1 Hour Per Week for 5 Weeks – Free (No Charge)

Each Session is Offered Twice Weekly – Study Materials Available in Advance

Sunday Mornings, 9:15-10:15 AM -- May 6, 13, 20; June 3, 10

--or--

Monday Evenings, 7-8 PM -- May 7, 14, 21; June 4, 11

I hope you can be either present or keep us in your prayers
as we gather to listen to God and one another.

We may not be writing "Race Together" on paper coffee cups,
yet our conversations and our actions are writing "Grace Together."

What was it that God said to Jeremiah?

Wait, wait, don't tell me...

*"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,'
for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...;*

for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Jer. 31: 33-34

We dare let God write the law and love of Grace Together on our hearts.

To be Grace Together requires tapping into three gifts from God:

the gift of listening;

the gift of sharing;

and the gift of being willing and able to change.

We are the Church of Jesus Christ, and we have these gifts to offer to our fair city.

When we share our stories, and when you and I listen to someone else's journey,
we reach out from a world focused on Here & Us,

and extend our souls to connect with another life that is There & Them.

Together is where we find God and one another.

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

EXTRA MATERIAL:

Recently our fair city hosted a remarkable gathering in Atlanta.

The Global Purpose Summit featured Bernice King,

daughter of Martin Luther King,
and Arun Gandhi,
the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi,
a leader in India's independence movement.
King and Gandhi spoke at the Cobb Energy Center.
King's father and Gandhi's grandfather
were advocates for nonviolence and peace.
Arun Gandhi, an author and noted speaker who turned 80 last year,
lives in Rochester, N.Y.,
and runs the Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute.
He said he inherited his purpose to make a difference
and to teach nonviolence in the world from his grandfather.
He was sent by his parents to live with his grandfather in India
when he was 12 for a couple of years
and left just a few months before
[Mahatma Gandhi] was assassinated in 1948.
Arun Gandhi said, "*You have to make a conscious effort to say every morning
that I am going to be a better human being today than I was yesterday.
It's not a switch that you can turn off and on.
Despite being born into that philosophy,
I still have to work on it myself.*"
No matter what has happened in our past,
God loves us right here and now, as we are.
No matter what has happened in our past,
God is changing our hearts, our minds, our attitudes, our behavior
to be a better human being today than we were yesterday.
No matter what has happened in our past,
God is preparing us for a mighty future of Grace Together.
So, my friends, why not use your power for good?