

“Access Confirmed”

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

Holy Scriptures: Psalm 100, Romans 5:1-5

Psalm 100

- ¹ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
² Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
³ Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
⁵ For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Happy Thanksgiving!

One November morning just before Thanksgiving
someone called the Butterball Turkey company.

She said that she found in her freezer a frozen turkey
with an expiration date 15 years old.

She asked the Butterball Turkey Company representative
whether it was safe to cook and serve it to her family.

The company rep highly recommended that she throw away the 15-year-old turkey.
“Oh, that’s okay. I’ll just give it to my church.”

True story.

Access Confirmed

True fact.

25% of the New Testament was written by the Apostle Paul,
including Romans, Corinthians I and II,
Galatians, Philippians,
1st Thessalonians, Philemon.

Scholarship is divided over the original authorship
of Colossians, 2nd Thessalonians, and Ephesians.

We do know for sure that each of Paul's epistles was occasional,
meaning that they were occasioned by particular circumstances
in particular Christian churches.

Scholar Leander Keck points out:

*“None of Paul’s letters was written simply as a means of self-expression
and then shared with friends,
the way some persons write poetry as a hobby.
Nor were they written for the general public...
Rather they were written for particular congregations (small house churches)
who had particular problems.”* (Keck, “Paul and His Letters” Page 15)

One may choose to argue with Dr. Keck
that the lone exception of occasional letters is Romans,
because Paul had not yet been there.

Portions of the letter to the Romans are stiff and formal,
like any letter one writes to someone you haven't met.
Even so, Paul's passion for God and God's people bled through.
Paul addressed joys and concerns
particular to these Christians' city, church, and circumstances.
Paul connected, through God, with the Roman Christians' own story.

I wonder what Paul had heard about the Roman Christians
that touched Paul's own experience so much
that he encouraged them--and us--that divine access is confirmed.

*“Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand,
and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”*

Let's cut to the chase.

We—you and I--have fears, concerns, hesitations,

moments and times of what we may call being stuck, helpless, hopeless,
when we convince ourselves that we've been denied access to God;
denied restoration; denied empowerment; denied love.
We may fear being denied access to the love of God
because of what we've done or not done,
said or left unsaid,
professed or not confessed.
Well, I testify to you today, here in this sacred space and safe place,
what the Apostle Paul proclaimed in 57 A.D.:
Access to the love of God is hereby confirmed.

*“Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have obtained access
to this grace in which we stand;
and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”*

You have direct and unfettered access
--direct contact, right of entry—
direct and full accessibility to the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit!

This is what we call Good News.
And it gets even better.

What could be better, you may ask,
than knowing you have access to God,
just as God has access to you,
that you have a relationship with the Creator
who wants, seeks and craves to have one with you?
We whose access is confirmed and are in relationship with the holy
are invited to invite others to commune as well with the holy.

As Paul said, *“...we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”*

People who have the greatest hopes,
the deepest faith,
the brightest lights
are those who have been there, done that, bought the t-shirt;
those who've suffered & survived,
come through the heat and heartache scarred, alive;
those who've discovered, uncovered and recovered
after God made them strong in the broken places.

Access Confirmed

Recently around a table at a church fellowship meal,
a beloved senior was sharing some of her life story.
We asked where she'd gone to school. “S.H.K.”

“What’s S.H.K.? Never heard of that university.”
She paused and looked around at her circle of friends.
“I graduated from the School of Hard Knocks.”

Wounded healers have scars, whether visible or hidden; they speak to us of hope.

Walter Brueggemann speaks of *“that hope [which] is rooted precisely
in the midst of loss and darkness, where God is surprisingly present.”*

*“I guess I’m drawn to theology that takes seriously
the experience of weeping at night...
And doesn’t let [a seemingly absent] God off the hook.
But in the anger and agony of experiences of disorientation,
[our faith] keeps talking with God,
even if it is to raise a fist and voice in protest...
Somehow in that action...that action of refusing to give up on a God
who seems to have given up on us...
somehow... there is a new experience of the presence of God;
a rushing in of new wonder, gift, gratitude.”*

Brueggemann says that it’s *“because this One [God]
has promised to be in the darkness with us,
we find the darkness strangely transformed,
not by the power of easy light,
but by the power of relentless solidarity.
Out of the ‘fear not’ of that One [God] spoken in the darkness,
we are marvelously given new life, we know not how.”*

Access Confirmed

In our suffering, God is relentlessly present.

Suffering impacts us; we’d be numb or already gone if it didn’t.
Suffering alone, unfettered, unattended, ignored or shamed or shut out or shut in,
such suffering may lead to stuck-ness,
which leads to feelings of helplessness,
which leads to despair and hopelessness.

There is no miracle drug for solving stuck-ness,
no escapist theory, no wonder oil, no balm or cream,
no fantasy utopia or sinking into dystopia.
When we hurt and ache and feel awful and alone and as if access has been denied,
all too often we want to focus on the tangible,
focus on the suffering,
on what causes it, on what might alleviate it.

Encounter the God of relentless presence.
Encounter the whole people of God who can show us access to grace.

Access Confirmed

Paul invites us to look to the intangible.

Look to the Source of Love that gives you and me
the *grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed.*
Paul, like Christ, like the prophets, like the saints, like our elders,
helps us to look up and look beyond and look around,
to cast our vision higher and around at one another,
to see the beyond and act as if it is already here, among us,
connecting us every darn day with the holy, with help, with hope.

Paul said to the Church:

*"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."*

Access Confirmed

Earlier this year a statesman left us his fond farewell that spoke to this truth.
The late Senator John McCain (1936-2018)
addressed this in his farewell statement to the land and people he loved, saying:
*"I have tried to serve our country honorably.
I have made mistakes, but I hope my love for America
will be weighed favorably against them.
I have often observed that I am the luckiest person on Earth.
I feel that way even now as I prepare for the end of my life.
I have loved my life, all of it.
I have had experiences, adventures and friendships
enough for ten satisfying lives, and I am so thankful.
Like most people, I have regrets.
But I would not trade a day of my life, in good or bad times,
for the best day of anyone else's.
I owe that satisfaction to the love of my family.
No man ever had a more loving wife or children he was prouder of
than I am of mine.
And I owe it to America. To be connected to America's causes
--liberty, equal justice, respect for the dignity of all people--
brings happiness more sublime than life's fleeting pleasures.
Our identities and sense of worth are not circumscribed but enlarged
by serving good causes bigger than ourselves.
--John McCain's Farewell Statement, 2018.*

Access Confirmed

Every week women, men, teenagers,
families and friends, long-time neighbors and brand newcomers
gather together in this sacred place and peaceful space
to connect with the Holy and one another in the hopes of change.

In addition to our Sunday morning gatherings,
we also host Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Al-Anon.
On Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday folks enter this physical plant
so we can sit and commune with each other and listen to their own souls.
We seek the wisdom of the Changer and the support of the changed.

AA and NA and Al-Anon meetings begin with the prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:
*“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor and teacher of pastors, including my father.
While teaching in New York, Niebuhr pastored a small church in Connecticut.
Reinhold Niebuhr offered directly to God --in whom he had access--
the following prayer which he wrote for worship and has been shared widely.

Some or all may sound familiar.

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*

Living one day at a time,

Enjoying one moment at a time,

Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,

Taking, as Jesus did,

This sinful world as it is,

Not as I would have it,

Trusting that You will make all things right,

If I surrender to Your will,

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

--The Full Original Copy of the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Neighbors begin personal statements with honest and authentic introductions,
saying, as I do, “Hello, my name is James and I am a recovering addict.”

Some say, “I am an alcoholic.”

Some say they are loved ones or allies of addicts or alcoholics.

However one introduces oneself is less important
than the fact that one is present,

that we remember and affirm that we’ve access to the holy & community
& to one’s deepest sense of Self,

With this faith, we seek to be both held accountable
and a part of the process of God’s healing, hospitality, & hope.

In the out pouring of our stories and surrounding words and show of support,
folks discover together the courage to change,

to draw deep upon a Higher Power,

to get psyched to walk out these doors with heads held high

and a renewed determination to be clean and sober
for the next hour, the next day, for one more week.
To a great degree spirituality works best when we look to the intangible,
which in turn and in time helps us to address the tangible.

As the meetings draw to a close,
hands are held, heads are bowed, the Lord's Prayer is offered,
and then we go into the night to their neighborhoods,
emboldened and embraced by the Spirit of God.

Who better than folks who post hard-earned diplomas from the School of Hard Knocks,
from enduring life's highest mountaintops and deepest valleys,
to show us the way back, the way through, the way ahead?

Who better to teach us and preach to us,
sing to us, ring bells for us, sit with us
than those who stand foursquare on a foundation of grace,
lifted up by the *chiasm* ("KY-asm")
of God's gifts of love, peace, and hope?

We look to and need people who have been around the block,
who've seen a thing or two and come out the other side,
different, changed, grown and growing by the grace of God,
trusting in the power of love and redeeming grace.

We seek trustworthy souls who confirm that they have direct, divine access
to the Christ who is always and also been there through thick and thin.

Access Confirmed

At Thanksgiving, Bart Simpson offered up the prayer:
"God, we paid for all this ourselves, so thanks for nothing. Amen."

When we gather around the Lord's Table of Bread and Cup,
we call it Eucharist, which means thanksgiving.
When you get right down to it,
everyone has access to the Creator, to the Changer and the Changed.
This is something for which we can be thankful today and every day.
We can give God thanks for the gift of access,
that we may be strong in the broken places for one another,
building bridges over moats,
overcoming obstacles, sharing hope.

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

Mike Yaconelli said in his book, The Door:

*"The spiritual life is not so much progress as it is process.
It is not a continuous climb upward*

*as much as it is a continuous climb.
It is not the victories that matter
so much as the going on after the defeats.
The longer the erratic dance of faith goes on
the less you care about what God is doing
and the more you want to know about God.”*