

## **Peace Works: A Spring-Into-Life Worship Series for Such a Time as This**

Sunday, May 5	-- Meeting the Holy at the Table -- Aloha
Sunday, May 12	-- Interwoven into the Body of Christ -- Ubuntu
Sunday, May 19	-- Act Out Love, Like a Good Samaritan -- Si Se Puede
Sunday, May 26	-- Jacob, Esau & Conflict Resolution -- Shalom
Sunday, June 2	-- Emptying Oneself is Most Fulfilling -- Agape
Pentecost, June 9	-- Pentecost Spirit is Engaging -- Heiwa
Sunday, June 16	-- God's Long-Term Plan for Peace -- Aloha

### ***"Peace Works: Emptying Oneself is Most Fulfilling -- Agape"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, June 2, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

#### **Holy Scriptures: John 13: 1-17; Philippians 2: 5-11**

John 13:1-17 (NRSV)

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. <sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

<sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." <sup>12</sup>After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup>You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants<sup>[d]</sup> are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the [Creator].

### **Autumn 1982.**

Sunday morning on Broadway.

Bitter cold.

We were three seminarians, our backs to the wind,  
their backs to me, waiting for the crosstown bus.

I recognized them from around Union Theological Seminary.

The one who wore a plaid skirt to New Testament 101  
was easy on the eyes, no doubt about it.

The M-4 finally arrived, a welcome respite.

I made a point to sit across the aisle from Ms. Plaid Skirt.

Turned in my seat to face her.

She had green eyes.

Clear. Intelligent. Steady.

Startled, I introduced myself.

I flashed back to the previous summer in Nigeria,  
where this 22-year-old met so many people  
that introductions became a daily litany.

My roommate in Nigeria chided me for talking in my sleep.

"What did I say?" I asked.

"You said, 'Hello, my name is James.'"

I refocused on what was going on in the crosstown bus.

Ms. Plaid Skirt with Green Eyes was speaking.

Her voice was self-assured, smart, subtly Southern.

"I'm Betty Brewer."

"Where're you two headed?"

"Park Avenue Christian Church."

Never heard of it.

I turned to stare out the window.

We traveled east on 110th Street,  
along the northern rim of Central Park.

I gazed at the Harlem Meer,  
remembering early morning runs with my father.

Dad and I used to jog around the small lake.

Weekdays we circled the Conservatory Garden;  
Saturdays included a longer route 'round the Meer.

I had a nice finishing kick.

Dad was all about endurance, drawing deep upon his well of energy,

picking up and putting down his thick thighs forever.

The bus went south on Fifth Avenue.

I mused about Park Avenue Christian Church,

imagining an exclusive congregation filled with yuppies and fear-of-the-other.

I was headed toward Church of the Living Hope,

a multicultural faith community in the heart of Spanish Harlem.

“Don’t put a clock on the Lord,” we’d say with a chuckle

as worship put a down-payment on a second hour.

By the time the bus slowed at 104th Street,

I had convinced myself of my spiritual superiority.

I zipped up my coat, gave them a curt nod, and,

feeling justifiably self-righteous,

stepped out onto familiar territory.

Over the course of the next year

Betty and I spotted each other around campus but did not converse again.

### **Autumn 1983.**

Professor Ardith Hayes distributed in class

the findings from our Myers-Briggs Type Indicators.

Initials across the top of my results announced *E S T/F J*.

Confirming what everyone I knew already knew,

the *E* for Extrovert score was almost off the charts.

The *S* for Sensate, tie scores for Thinking/Feeling aptitudes: no surprise here.

*J* for Judgmental hit hard.

While she expounded on why most pastors are *I N F P*,

--Introverts, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceptive –

my mind reeled:

Was I really so quick to judge, so intent on being right,

so harsh on my neighbors?

Troubled, shaken, I withdrew into my shell until class ended.

### **Winter 1984.**

Ten seminarians take off from JFK.

A week in Puerto Rico.

A week in the Dominican Republic.

Coconut oil.

Salty air.

Latin beats.

We met with bi-vocational preachers and labor leaders

who shared their hurts and hopes.

Holding hands as Betty and I walked barefoot along beaches under soft sunsets,

we found ourselves falling in love.

Our Santiago base was a convent.  
I offered a blessing for our supper.  
Grateful for our fellowship of Dominican Catholics and American Protestants,  
I prayed for Jesus to “come into the table.”  
No sooner had I said amen  
than Betty rapped her knuckles on the table,  
saying, “Are you in there, Jesus?”

Nuns served soup.  
I stirred a yellow bowl, scooping up an object of indeterminate origin.  
“Does, um, anybody know what this is?”  
A classmate knew.  
“It’s tripe. Cow intestines. Probably goat guts, since I saw a herd out back. Dig in!”  
I forced down every bite,  
clenching my jaws so hard my eyes watered.  
Nothing came back up.  
Pushed away the empty bowl.  
Betty noticed something, pointing.  
I looked over there but didn’t see anything remarkable.  
When I turned back,  
before me was a full serving of tripe soup in a blue bowl.  
My empty yellow bowl was at Betty’s place setting.  
Green eyes sparkling, she grinned.

When we tell that story, people respond, “And then you married her?”  
“Yes, I did.”

Friends back in New York expressed concern  
over the differentia between her Steel Magnolia and my Citykid4ever.  
Undeterred, tuned in to the soundtrack of each other’s lives,  
ever since our marriage at Park Avenue Christian Church (!)  
we’ve focused on shared tenets.  
We’ve tackled risks and relished joys of parenting and pastoring in various climes.  
We did not think that we got married  
as much as we’re continually marrying each other.

### **Autumn 2003.**

My Sunday School class at First Christian Church of Decatur  
completed the Myers-Briggs test.  
For the second time I completed the questionnaire,  
confident Myers-Briggs would reconfirm what I already knew.  
However, after seeing the results a gentle breeze could have knocked me over.  
*E S T / F P.*  
Thanks to almost two decades of pastoral ministry,

the Holy Spirit marked me with the letter *P* for becoming perceptive.  
*P* for listening, for learning, and for loving all of God's folks  
in the church and wider community just as they are.  
I'd grown to appreciate ministry as pregnancy,  
rebirthing souls via a time-lapse of grace,  
providing sacred, safe space for re-creation,  
gifting folks with room to experience transformation  
over an eon of beats and measures.

When we empty ourselves as Jesus Christ did for our sake,  
taking on the form of a servant, humbling ourselves,  
making room in our lives, our hearts, our minds and souls, for each other,  
we discover that the Holy Spirit fills us up to overflowing.

Emptying oneself is most fulfilling.

When we serve one another as Christ first served us, God is praised.

When we wash feet with no thought to our own vainglory, we too are cleansed.

When we forgive, we experience life's renewal in all its glory.

With each moment, each relationship, each act of mercy and kindness,  
the Holy Spirit builds us up and fills us up,  
leads us in the dance of life and love,  
gifting us with the unbearable lightness of being.

The Spirit affirms this takes time; it takes effort over time;  
it requires constant practice with the passing of time.

We may think the lapse of time is empty.

My friends, the lapse of time in the practice of agape, unconditional love,  
is full, pregnant with possibility, potential, power to change and transform  
my soul and yours, one at a time, over time.

The reward is out of this world.

Apparently, God's gift of the Spirit over time  
has worked on me as well via the whole people of God.

The Spirit connected me  
with the stories, tragedies, and triumphs of beloved parishioners,  
a vast array of relationships that softened my being,  
gradually smoothing the sharpness  
of my once deep need to be right,  
replacing it with a deep desire for reconciliation.

### **Spring 2019.**

Atlanta streetlights are on.

Tree shadows crisscross our lawn.

Putumayo tunes on shuffle.

While loading the dishwasher,

I ponder the smiles and miles from NYC to ATL.

Betty removes leftovers from our kitchen table,  
moving toward a fridge masked with photos of our now adult children.  
I smile, imagining her tapping on our kitchen table, "Are you in there, Jesus?"

37 years after the Holy Spirit partnered with this judgmental Self,  
Jesus Christ has channeled the magic of family and the mystery of ministry,  
purposefully, gradually transforming a *J* into a *P*,  
honing my corners and yours as well,  
spiraling us forward to a lapse dance beat.

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