

Summer Series: *Wrestling with Tough Texts, With God, Together*

At First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

9:30–10:15 AM – Open Forum and Bible Study with the Pastor

10:30 AM – Worship the Living Christ, with Open Communion

July 7	Matthew 22: 15-22	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“Render Unto Caesar...”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: One Nation...Under God	
July 14	Genesis 22: 1-19	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“The Sacrifice of Isaac”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Priorities and Providential Care	
July 21	I Timothy 2:8-15	Rev. Anna Strickland
	Sermon Title: <i>“As Is Proper for Women”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Proper Roles for Women: Wife & Mother?	
July 28	Judges 19:1-30	Rev. Anna Strickland
	Sermon Title: <i>“Has Such A Thing Ever Happened?”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Brutality and Silence in Scripture	
Aug 4	Amos 7: 1-6	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“The Lord Repented”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Talking God Out of Vengeance	
Aug 11	Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“So-Called Clobber Texts”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Human Sexuality and the Holy Bible	
Aug 18	Job 2: 1-10	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“Skin for Skin, Said the Adversary”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: God Made a Deal with the Devil	
Aug 25	Matthew 19: 1-12	Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert
	Sermon Title: <i>“Is There Life After Divorce”</i>	
	Subject to Ponder: Jesus Weighs In On the Matter	

“Render Unto Caesar...”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 7, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 22: 15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹ They answered,

“The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

What Holds Us Together

Our story starts in the Temple.

In this temple Mary and Joseph found 12-year-old Jesus, whom they believed lost,
calm and very much at home,
talking with the elders, awing them with his questions.

21 years later, on the eve of Passover,

Jesus of Nazareth and His disciples arrived in Jerusalem to a festive celebration.

Folks welcomed Jesus and with waving branches and shouts of

“Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

They made their way to the Temple.

This time, however, Temple elders and priests were not so happy with Jesus.

Upon entering the Temple,

He overturned the tables of the moneychangers,

scattering those who sold pigeons in sacred space.

He quoted the prophets Isaiah (56): *“My house shall be a joyful house of prayer.”*

and Jeremiah (7) saying, *“but you make it a den of robbers.”*

The moneychangers fled the temple to escape Jesus’ wrath.

The blind and lame, however, approached Jesus for healing,

He healed them with the radical love of God,

touching the untouchable and welcoming the unwelcome.

Again, people cried out, *“Hosanna to the Son of David!”*

Cleansed, renewed, focused on mission and healing and hope,

the temple became a joyful house of prayer!

Jesus called the words of the children of God, *“perfect praise.”*

Temple Pharisees were indignant with such help and healing,

scowling at the joyful response.

He promptly left the temple,

and did not return until the next day.

What Holds Us Together

The next morning Jesus returned, this time to teach.

Jesus the Healer shifted gears, focusing on being a Rabbi, a Teacher.

Just as the Pharisees had done so the day before,

they approached the Christ, interrupting his lessons, questioning His authority.

Bless their hearts.

*Fact: In the South, if you start with "Bless her (or his) heart"
you have permission to say anything you want about anybody.*
Bless their hearts, the Pharisees swore allegiance to God,
yet from all appearances, their loyalty is rigid,
limited to the Law of Moses
while disregarding the saving, redeeming power
of the Spirit of God.
Rules, regulations and healthy laws
enable safe guidelines and boundaries for communal living;
have their place and value in both religious life and citizenship.
What the presence of the Living Christ in the Temple
vividly points out to the Elders and Pharisees, the blind and lame, to you and me
is what happens whenever we know the Law of Moses
but miss the Spirit of Love.
What holds us together is both.
We live and breathe and have our being
with God's sacred guidelines and God's radical love side by side,
like two train tracks, in balance, justified, perfectly parallel.

What Holds Us Together

Frustrated, determined to one-up this young rabbi,
the Pharisees step up to attempt to trick Him.
Jesus deflected their obvious attempt to entrap him,
and deftly turned the tables.
He spoke to them in parables, in homespun stories with hidden meanings.
*"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,
they realized that he was speaking about them.
They wanted to arrest him,
but they feared the crowds,
because they regarded him as a prophet."* (Matthew 21: 45-46)

¹⁵ *Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*

¹⁶ *So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians..."* (Matthew 22)

They are good.
Today we might call this a "compliment sandwich,"
when you slide a criticism in between compliments.
They start the conversation with a compliment.
They offer a disingenuous comment, a treat meant to butter up
the same one they seek to trick,
polished, empty words that seek to hide their true intent.
*They say, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere,
and teach the way of God in accordance with truth,
and show deference to no one;*

for you do not regard people with partiality.
¹⁷ *Tell us, then, what you think.*
Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Let's be perfectly frank and up front.
Their question is no more about taxes
or being a law-abiding citizen
or the separation of Church and State
than it is about whether the moon is made of cheese.

*"The Pharisees and other religious scholars more often than not
would ask Jesus technical questions that served no real purpose.
Their intent was to trap Jesus.
In making him choose a side
they hoped to prove or disprove that he was the Messiah.
Focusing on the minutiae diverts our energy
from seeing the bigger picture."*

(Jason Gottman, Journal of Worship Resources, Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)

Strictly focusing on the minutiae and negating the mission
takes the edge off the power of the Christ we have within,
a mighty Spirit strong enough to save us and save the world.

Recorded history testifies that there is a longstanding religious tradition
that in the temple of God
it is not permissible to show a coin with a graven image,
which is why the money changers and pigeon sellers
set up shop outside the temple gate.

Even if Jesus had a coin, he would not have pulled it out,
because anyone who did so would break Jewish Law, the Law of Moses.

The Ten Commandments are clear:

*"Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image..."* (Exodus 20: 3-4)

Once again, the tables were turned upside down by the wisdom of God.

¹⁸ *Jesus, aware of their malice, said to them,*
"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"
¹⁹ *Show me the coin used for the tax."*
And they brought him a denarius.

We can well imagine folks gasping at the Herodians' faux pas,
maybe even laughing and pointing,
saying to one another, *"Can you believe these guys?"*

²⁰ Then [Jesus] said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

²¹ They answered, "The emperor's."

Then he said to them,

*"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
and to God the things that are God's."*

Separation of Church and State,

to pay taxes or not to pay them,

these are mere verbal tools the Herodians use, abuse and misuse
in their discourse with the Son of God.

God is wise to the ways of humanity.

Who made who?

Who is the Creator here?

What on earth belongs to rulers, principalities and powers?

What things are God's?

We may be fools for Christ; Jesus Christ, however, is no fool.

How many of us have thought we were fooling our parents,

when they knew all along which way was up? and what we were up to?

Jesus makes His point in the Temple.

What are your priorities?

What is most important in your life?

What priorities do you think God wants you to focus on, to carry out, to embody?

I remember what it felt like the first time someone said to me,

"Show me your checkbook and I will tell you what your priorities are."

Still get the chill down my spine.

Every budget, whether private or public, is a moral document,

proclaiming to the world what we believe is most important.

What Holds Us Together

When Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana,

he traveled across the state preaching his share the wealth plan.

He was out in the bayou one hot afternoon at a town crossroads.

When a crowd gathered from the farms and diner and country store,

he began to deliver his populist message.

He wanted folks to know that he believed the common family

was being plundered by the organized wealthy interests in the state.

Looking out into the crowd he saw a man he knew.

"Brother Jones," said Huey Long, *"if you had three Cadillacs,*

wouldn't you give up one of them so we could gather up the children

and take them to school during the week and to church on Sunday?"

Brother Jones said, *"Sure I would."*

"And if you had \$3 million, wouldn't you give up just one million

*so we could put a roof over somebody's head
and make sure folks had decent food to eat?"*
"Sure I would," agreed Brother Jones.
Huey Long was on a roll now. *"And if you three hogs..."*
"Now hold on a minute," interrupted Brother Jones, *"I've got three hogs."*

Now hold on a minute; you've quit preaching and done got to meddling!
Hold on a minute 'cause you are getting personal.

That, too often, is the limit,
regardless of whether you are progressive, moderate, or conservative,
consider yourself among the haves, have-nots,
or the have-some, want-some-mores.

It is what we do with what we've got
that reveals our personal priorities
regardless of whether we have it or not.
It is what we do with what we have to offer
– our lives, our resources, our time and talent and treasure,
our incredible capacity to love and to be loved in return –
what we do with the offerings of our lives
that reveals our priorities, reveals our faith, and reveals our future.
It is how we love with the love we have to offer
that reveals our deepest sense of Self,
that will determine the quality of our life on earth
and be the final grade upon our reception
in Heaven when our days on earth are done.

What Holds Us Together

Love.

Love is the tie that binds.

Our congregation is focused on embodying love and compassion.

From our public statement of hospitality and hope for all of God's people,
to our daily walk with Christ
--whether side-by-side or apart one-from-the-other,
what holds us together

is living out a shared commitment

to God's guidelines --the Law of Moses--

yoked with the radical Love of Jesus,

whose Spirit of Grace and Truth is in one and all.

What Holds Us Together

This week of July 4th, the appointed anniversary of our Nation's independence,
we are constantly reminded that

we were founded and still stand on a solid platform
of shared freedoms and social responsibility,
a platform we call the Constitution of the United States.

“Bridge of Spies” is a remarkable film about the true story of the attempt
to exchange a Russian spy for an American spy in 1962.

James Donovan was an attorney who was tapped to represent America,
to take the point in the negotiations with the East Germans and Russians.

In one scene in the movie Donovan is asked by a member of the CIA
to leak whether his client, the Russian spy named Rudolf Abel,
has revealed any secrets to Donovan.

CIA Agent Hoffman: I'm sorry if the way I put it offends you, but we need to know
what Abel is telling you. You understand me, Donovan? Don't go Boy Scout on me.
We don't have a rule book here.

James Donovan: You're Agent Hoffman, yeah?

Hoffman: Yeah.

Donovan: German extraction.

Hoffman: Yeah, so?

Donovan: My name's Donovan. Irish, both sides. Mother and father. I'm
Irish and you're German. But what makes us both Americans? Just one thing. One.
Only one. The Rule Book. We call it the Constitution, and we agree to the rules, and
that's what makes us Americans. That's all that makes us Americans. So don't tell me
there's no rule book...

My fellow Americans,

what holds us together isn't land or money;
what binds us one to another isn't language or personal backgrounds,
or our racial or cultural heritage.

The only thing -- and the best thing --
that makes us Americans and holds us together
is the U.S. Constitution.

Too often Americans get classified and boxed up, divided into tribes, subsets,
categorized and selected for one side or another.

Yet no matter what side you think you stand on,
no matter your views or alliances or affiliations,
we are one nation under God,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,
united, chosen and claimed and connected by these words:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,
establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility,*

*provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare,
and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,
do ordain and establish this Constitution
for the United States of America.*

What Holds Us Together

²⁰ *Then [Jesus] said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"*

²¹ *They answered, "The emperor's."*

Then he said to them,

*"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
and to God the things that are God's."*

The Bible says, *"When they heard this, they were amazed;
and they left Jesus and went away."*

Well, not everybody went away.

Some stayed around for the feast.

Some stayed for the Last Supper in the Upper Room.

Some stayed because they believed,

or wanted to believe,

or once believed,

or hoped to believe one day that this, indeed, is the Messiah.

Some stayed because the Messiah had done got to meddling,

and the whole people of God done got the message.

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