

Worship & Sermon Series:
DISCIPLES: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together

“Congregation as Primary in the Movement for Wholeness”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 20, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Acts 11:25-26; Ephesians 2:19-22; Colossians 3:12-17

Acts 11:25-26 (NRSV)

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

Ephesians 2:19-22 (NRSV)

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)

¹² As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

What does fried chicken say?

Yesterday morning I listened to a radio interview of John Le Carré.

“Hate to disappoint, but John le Carré doesn't have any top-secret spy intel.
“People approach me thinking I know amazing inside secrets. I truly don't,” he says. John Le Carré's spy days are long behind him.

Early in his writing career he worked for the British intelligence services MI5 and MI6.

Drawing on that experience, le Carré — a pen name for David Cornwell —
has spent more than 50 years writing some of the world's most acclaimed
espionage novels, including *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*,
Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, *The Constant Gardener*, and others.”

In the interview on NPR,

he pointed out that we can't relate to tragedies or traumas
that affect millions, countless people.

Break down any tragedy or traumatic event to the personal level,

he said, and suddenly we find we can relate, understand, connect.

Major issues and concerns like human rights, civil rights, social justice, inequality
are subjects so huge as to be almost mind-numbing.

However, when we listen and share a story,

one life experience at a time, it makes all the difference to how we respond.

That's one of the reasons congregations work so well as God's agents of transformation.

Congregations that consist of people who believe, doubt, wonder, seek,

laugh, serve, cry together, can be so effective.

We can relate because we share our stories and our lives;

we connect with God and one another.

We meet, worship, eat, practice our faith at a very human, interpersonal level.

Congregations serve to help us find our commonality;

here we become the incarnation of shared experiences
as children of the Living God.

We see the big picture,

see the huge need and hungers of the world,

yet here in the congregation we already know the answer

when someone asks, “What does fried chicken say?” ^[1]

What Does Fried Chicken Say?

The big, great, consuming concerns were civil rights, voting rights, human rights.

In 1962, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

under the guidance of its president, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

were invited to Albany, Georgia to help make social change.

Persecution and oppression along racial and class lines were a regular part of life.

Dr. King met with the Albany Ministerial Association,

whose president was a young Christian Church pastor named Don Brewer.

From 1959-1965, Nancy and Don Brewer served Christ in the congregation and city

at First Christian Church in Albany, Georgia,

raising young Robert and Betty, who 20 years later married me.
Not long after the Brewers settled into the church, the Albany Movement began.
Despite large demonstrations and filled jails,
American historians look back and say little changed,
that the Movement failed in Albany, Georgia.
Well, some lives were change and altered;
some lives were never the same again.

What does fried chicken say?

One hot summer day Nancy was washing dishes in her kitchen.
She thought about her neighbors in jail,
arrested simply because they walked downtown to register to vote.
She imagined them in jail being served cold grits and tepid tea.
Lord, everyone here in the South knows that that is a sin.
Nancy Brewer thought, *"What is it Southern women do
when they see someone in trouble, sick, or grieving,
and they really don't know what to say but they want to do something?
You know what they do. They cook!
My husband and I wondered if some of my United Church Women friends
would be willing to fry some chicken to send to the jails."*

*"It took only a couple of calls to get a calling chain going.
Almost to a woman, the answer was, "I'd like to do that."
And almost to a woman, the firm statement was added,
"But let's not tell my husband."
It wouldn't be a problem NOT to tell the men.
They wouldn't even ask,
for they were used to their wives frying chicken,
or baking cakes or assembling casseroles for somebody they knew.
"By Tuesday morning
there were trays and baskets and boxes of fried chicken gathered,
the pieces wrapped individually, and ready for delivery.
The logical place to find out how to deliver the chicken was the police department...
which turned out to not be logical at all, since the response was,
"Now, little lady, why would you want to do that?"
Fortunately we knew the name of a prominent [African American] minister,
from newspaper write-ups when Dr. King had been there the week before.
And my pastor husband asked his help
and he said he'd be glad to deliver the chicken for us...
and I'm sure he did." (Nancy Brewer, "What Does Fried Chicken Say?")*

What does fried chicken say?

My friends, what is it we do when we see someone in need of comfort?
Or in need of a companion?
Or in need of support and kindness?

We cook.
We empathize and we act.
We yoke ourselves to one another's blessed soul.
We wipe away each other's tears.
We see ourselves in one another's shoes, and we seek to ease pain and loss.^[2]

What we are talking about is more than any one person or family or set of relatives can do; it takes a church, a church existing for others, a church embodying love, a church in the shape of a congregation.
They say God must love family-sized churches because God made so many of them.
Like us.
A people like us.

God sends family-sized congregations like us 'primary through the door,'
commissioned by Jesus Christ to tackle injustice, right wrongs, heal the broken,
recognize and empower the marginalized,
comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

The big issues and concerns of our age don't overwhelm us.
We love, then listen, learning from stories in the community,
and then we act becoming sermons with skin.

Recently I followed another car a little too closely
so I could read the bumper sticker that read:
I don't know about your church
mine disturbs the comfortable
and comforts the disturbed.

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessings.
One Sunday morning while sitting in that pew over yonder,
the late Lymon Delk felt the call of God to re-alter lifelong habits,
He listened.
He trusted.
He heeded what he heard in the midst of a congregation he loved.
Lymon Delk's day-to-day life was never the same again,
Consequently, the same can be said for his family
and for this, his congregation, Christ's Church.
A life was saved and redeemed in the midst of congregational worship of Jesus,
and the world breathed in grace and released out joy.

Authentic Christian worship in the context of the faithful congregation
connects people with God and one another.

We worship *so that* and *until* we are ready and raring to go forth
into the world to be the living Word
God needs us to become and our neighbors need to experience.
Congregations grounded in Christ have depth and breadth,
resonate with meaning and purpose,
share in common an ethical core and practical application of love.

Love is at the center of all that we do and hold dear and are called to become.
The Apostle Paul speaks of what is to be valued and embodied in a community of faith.
Listen for the Word of God as expressed by Paul:

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. -- Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)

Clothe yourself with compassion and kindness,
with humility and patience, with forgiveness and love.
Clothe yourself with love.
Be bound to everything and everyone in every land in perfect harmony.
The love of Christ has already broken down the walls that divide
and the sins that separate
and the hatreds that stymie our vision.
Love always wins.
Love has already won the day.
Love helps us overcome fear.

What does fried chicken say?

Sometimes it says that church can be a very scary place.

One Sunday morning a gentleman walked three times around this physical plant
in order to generate the courage he needed to walk in the front door.
He was so nervous that morning he was wearing a black shoe and a brown shoe.
Praise God that he was so well received that he came back again, and again, and again,
and in time grew to become a servant leader.

True story.

Jesus said to the first Christian congregation, the gathering of his first followers:

“As the Creator has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Creator.” John 15: 9, 15

Clearly Jesus Christ invests Himself in you and me,
otherwise He wouldn't care what we knew or did or acted or believed.
Who else do you think is invested in your life?
Who else really cares about you?
Who has given you the time of day and timely advice,
a good shoulder to cry on and good counsel to lean on?
In this church, we say “Be kind, for you do not know the burdens others bear.”
In this church, we encourage each other to have fun, to be flexible, to go with the flow.
In this church, we live inside-out our motto:
resolve to love -- agree to differ -- unite to serve -- break Bread together.

What does fried chicken say?

We share fried chicken in meals and with the hungry in the city, free food, no agenda. No agenda, just lots of love and laughter and authentic living.
Unconditional love lived out in the midst of friends and neighbors and whomever.

One Sunday morning a few years ago Yolanda Lewellyn, an Elder at the time,
prayed over the Bread at the Lord's Table.
Yolanda Lewellyn said – and here I paraphrase:
*“God, help us to love one another.
Remind us that we don't get to pick and choose
the individuals or groups that we love.”*

We are interwoven in a congregation made up of folks from all walks of life.
We seek to shape the church in God's image, imago dei.
By His very nature and nurture,
Christ in the congregation shapes us, changes us,
remolds us into the Beloved Community.

What does fried chicken say?

That what we are testifying to is the joy and power of embodying the faith, together.

For “Show and Tell” in their elementary school class,
Teacher had asked her students to bring in signs of their religious practice.
Benjamin said, *“I am Jewish, and this is a Star of David.”*
Mary said, *“I am Roman Catholic, and this is a rosary.”*
Ahmed said, *“I am Muslim, and this is my prayer rug.”*

Jessica said, *"I'm a Baptist, and this is a casserole."*

What Does a Casserole Dish Say?

The Lord Provides.

There us always enough.

No need to fear scarcity.

No need to doubt there is room at the Table.

We planned ahead for company, so come on in.

We're not fancy, high and mighty, like a 5 Star Restaurant,

yet our casseroles point to what is really important:

the sustenance, the sanctity of feeding each other, the Spirit of God.

In the practice of the faith, the faith is practiced by sharing what we have,

what we do, what we are all about, together.

Food is spiritual, and spiritual food is sacred.

Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas

finds most Christians far too spiritual in the practice of their faith.

Hauerwas points out that

Christianity "is not a set of beliefs or doctrines one believes

in order to be a Christian,"

but rather "Christianity is to have one's body shaped,

one's habits determined,

in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable."

In her book An Alter in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor said,

"In our embodied life together, the words of our doctrines take on flesh." (p. 45)

Taylor points out that the greatest danger to the life of the church is not,

as some folks love to point out,

inept clergy, mean congregations, bad music,

or preoccupation with institutional maintenance.

Our greatest danger, she says, is "the intellectualization of faith." (p. 45)

We don't need more information about God; we need incarnation.

We don't need more raw data to employ; we need to Christ to be embodied.

Taylor said, "Not more *about* God. *More* God." (p. 45)

What does fried chicken say?

We are called by Christ into becoming the Word of God incarnate.

Embody *Emmanuel*, God-with-us.

Become the Living Spirit with some skin on it.

Embody the Love and Compassion of Christ.

This is where the Congregation fits in, is all in,
is at the same time both the inlet and outlet of Christ's the ever-flowing stream. The
Congregation is the setting that God calls for
in order to *"let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

At the Christian core of our acts of hospitality and healing,
remember that mission is not what we do:
mission is what we are.

Love is what we are.

Hope is what we are.

Providers and sharers, givers and recipients of casseroles and stories and hope,
God has the audacity to send the congregation primary through the door
to tackle the worldly issues and hurts and hungers,
together.

Nancy Brewer, my mother-in-law (mother-in-love in our family tradition)
wrote the following poem she entitled "GENE POOL" (October 2011):

*I've done my share. I've paid my dues.
Volunteers needed? Well, I refuse.
Chair a committee? If truth be told,
I've chaired a-many, but I'm just too old.
Well, just take the minutes, an easy task.
No, I've had my turn, so please don't ask.
No more casseroles will I bake.
No more raffle tickets will I take.
The community garden is ready to plant.
When they call for help, I'll say "I can't."*

*I glance in the mirror and with shock I see
the face of my Mom, looking back at me.*

*Memories flood of how she slipped away,
With the ledger balanced for that fated day.
A bookkeeper, retired from that lifetime career,
She was some group's treasurer, year after year.
Cake in the freezer for a Fellowship meal,
With banana bread ready for a food appeal.
February birthday cards written in advance,
Tithe checks written, nothing left to chance.*

*She transported "older ladies," then a stroke
Was just a nuisance of which she rarely spoke.
In her ninth decade, she could no longer drive,
But caring for others kept my Mom alive.*

*I glance in the mirror, and I see through a blur
My mother's daughter, wishing it was her.
Her genes, her example, my habits? I'd guess
When they call for volunteers, I'll likely say "yes."*

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

^[1] John Le Carré Fears for The Future In 'Agent Running in The Field'. October 19, 20198:08 AM ET; Heard on Weekend Edition Saturday

^[2] Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, Page 20.