

“Beginnings”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Thanksgiving Sunday, November 24, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Acts 10: 44-48; Romans 6:1-5

[A few minutes before delivering this sermon I will baptize Dr. Mitchell Moosavi in the name of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.]

Romans 6:1-5 (NRSV)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Acts 10:44-48 (NRSV)

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Beginnings

Today marks a new beginning.

We are broadcasting today’s worship service live.

Relax: only the preacher and worship leaders’ images and words are going digital.

We’re using FaceTime during the service to connect with our beloved Larry Todd,

who recently moved from his Shepherd’s Center home here in Decatur

to a full-care center in the Piedmont Hills of northern Georgia.

The iPad is on a tripod right up front, by the piano,

in the spot where Larry sat and worshiped the God he loved and followed.

With Larry, it was never about wanting more *about God*;

it was always *more God*.

You see, Larry shows folks that it’s always about seeking, loving, revering more God.

An accident when he was in his late 20s left him a triplegic.
He could have quit, thrown in the towel, abandoned all hope.
What seemed like an ending became a new beginning,
 albeit difficult and lonely and trying.
Two decades ago, when he relocated to Decatur,
 he called around looking for a church that was wheelchair accessible.
Come on over, we said. Welcome home!
I'm on the way, he said. See you Sunday!
He made himself at home, and we have not been the same since.
For close to 19 years
 Larry has been a special part of this significant congregation.
During the Passing of the Peace,
 Larry wraps his good arm around me and pulls me close to say, "*Oooooo! There's something about you that rings a bell!*"
What do we say around here?
Everyone deserves to be recognized and respected.
Active in Pathfinders Class, present at church picnics, fellowship meals, Braves games,
 vocal in worship – who else shouts after each choral anthem, "*Encore!*" --
 Larry was elected to serve Christ's Church as a Deacon,
 serving Holy Communion and, on occasion,
 leading the call to worship or reading the Scriptures.
We partake of Holy Communion weekly but there are steps leading to the Table.
When it comes to breaking down the barriers between the Table and God's people,
 the challenge was to solve a human-made problem to make the Holy accessible.
So, to resolve the conundrum, we decided to offer communion by intinction
 on the fourth Sunday every month.
In this way, Larry or anyone else who might be physically challenged
 might share the Bread and Cup in our rotation of servant leaders.
As a matter of fact, when his three-year term as a Deacon ended,
 --our by-laws stipulate a year off between terms--
 we so wanted him to continue serving Holy Communion
 that we unanimously elected him a Deacon Emeritus.

Problem solved. Love served. Grace abounds. Right, Larry?!
Ooooo! There is something about you that rings a bell.

For some time now, over a year, we have missed each other.
Thanks to Keith Williams, Russell Broomfield-Ranney,
 and the staff at Larry's new home,
 we are now live and in person with our beloved friend.

Beginnings

*"Through baptism into Christ
 we enter into newness of life
 and are made one with the whole people of God."*

This confession of faith is near the beginning of the opening paragraph
in the Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The full Preamble is used by many Disciples congregations in worship
as an affirmation of the faith of the church throughout the ages:
not as a “test of fellowship,”
but as a statement of faith that identifies our commitment
to and place within the universal and ecumenical church.

What binds us together as Disciples of Christ is our belief in Jesus Christ.

We’re not bound together by structure or by creed.

We are bound by a covenantal relationship,
a loving relationship that has its genesis in God,
its beginning in God,

and continues in the revelation of God in Christ.

We belong together because we seek, follow, revere the Love of God in Christ.

You know that “*Christ is not Jesus’ last name,*” said Richard Rohr.

Christ in Greek means Messiah.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior that God sends daily, hourly, every nanosecond
to save and redeem and resurrect the world.

Yes, Jesus walked the earth as a person, a prophet, a priest, a preacher.

The greater, larger, mighty, joy-filled theological truth
is that He was and is our Messiah.

He is the earthly and heavenly embodiment of God’s love,
a love God holds for you and me and all the world.

Jesus the Christ – fully human, fully divine – is the incarnation of God
reaching out to have a relationship with you.

The loving action that culminates in baptism really, truly, thankfully starts with God.

God initiates the action, the relationship, the wanting to connect with you.

Our response is up to us.

Sure, we can quit, throw in the towel, abandon hope.

Say Yes! to the love and hope and grace God offers and provides.

Say you want to connect with the Holy.

Say you seek not more *about God*; say you seek *more God*.

Beginnings

For Disciples, baptism is foremost the means of entry into the life of the church.

If you ask a person who has grown up in the Christian Church,

“*When did you join the church?*”

they will almost invariably site the date of their baptism.

It's not that we don't consider ourselves a part of the church before that;

we welcome home one and all

regardless of wherever folks are on their faith journey.

Baptism, however, is such a watermark in our lives as Christians.
Baptism is when we make a personal commitment to follow Jesus.
Baptism is so personal, as well as an incredible communal action,
that a person undertakes a new life of Christian discipleship
within the fellowship of the whole people of God -- Christ's church.

Baptism is often described as “an outward sign of an inward act.”
Sometimes it's called a “symbol”

which some people translate to mean “only a symbol.”

However, for the one being baptized,
the word symbol is too small to stand up
to the depth and breadth of the rite of baptism.

Rising with Christ, dripping wet, made anew, is a dramatic, life-altering event.
In a sense, Christ etches His name upon our inner being
in a way we never forget.

Whether we were sprinkled as an infant or immersed at an age of understanding,
the Holy Water touches our soul, and we are never the same.

Through baptism,
we receive the gift of the holy spirit to strengthen, guide, and comfort us.

Through baptism,
we are ordained to Christian ministry, each and every one of us.

Through baptism,
we are yoked with every church in every land,
and we are yoked as members of the Body of Christ, forever and ever.

Through baptism,
our sins are forgiven, and we are given a clean slate to start afresh.

The immersion into the water symbolizes our dying to sin,
and when we rise up out of the waters,
we are raised into a new life in Christ.

This doesn't mean we never do wrong again.

We are "works in progress" and sometimes we forget our new life in Christ.
Sometimes we may forget or neglect the new possibilities and new beginnings
given to us through our baptism;
yet the spirit is with us to pull us back toward God
and to remind us of our calling.

Through baptism,
we make covenant with God and one another.

In communion,
we renew our covenant.

At one point in our lives,
we say Yes! to the love of God and are baptized,

consciously accepting Jesus as the Christ and vowing to follow him.
Yet we realize that we don't always live up to our vows.
We come each Sunday to the Lord's table to pray, to seek, to let Christ
lift the burden of guilt and shame and loss and brokenness
from our shoulders,
to free us by His grace for a more loving existence.
With other members of the Christian community,
we gather in worship at a family table.
We crave not more *about God*; we crave *more God*.
We remember the words of Jesus at his last supper with his disciples.
We pray together; we serve Holy Communion to one another,
whether passing trays coming forward to partake by intinction.
Together, we break bread and drink from the cup.
Like baptism, communion is deeply personal and deeply communal.
We want to connect with a God who looks upon our hearts and says,
"Ooooo! I know you! You are my beloved! With you I am well pleased."

Beginnings

In the summer of 2010,
First Christian Church of Decatur blessed me and my family with a sabbatical.
For part of the sabbatical my son Henry, who was 20, and I
traveled to Mozambique, Swaziland, and South Africa.
Beautiful nations, beautiful people, beautiful experiences of hospitality.

We were in Cape Town, South Africa for a week.
On Tuesday we had lunch in a cafe, then toured St George's Cathedral
-- also known as People's Cathedral because it has always been integrated,
even during Apartheid.
Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the pastor there
when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
Tutu helped initiate the process of helping South Africa heal
in the wake of the cultural and economic ravages of Apartheid.

The Truth and Reconciliation process brought people together,
victims and victimizers, to share their stories,
to listen to each other for the first time.

Henry and I found out Rev. Tutu was going to lead mass on Friday at 7:15 AM.
Whoa!
We vowed to go back to worship at dawn on Friday!
Our host family very graciously got up extra early and made the arrangements
so we could make it to St. George's Cathedral for worship.
The chapel was packed with around 40 or so people,
and there was Archbishop Tutu leading the service.
We slipped out to find a couple chairs and then settled down to worship God.

Now, I had met Desmond Tutu twenty-eight years ago,
back when I was a divinity student at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.
In 1984, the seminary honored Tutu when he preached there.
As an elected officer of the seminary student body
it was my privilege to greet and escort him.

Meanwhile, at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town,
after Desmond Tutu led us through the liturgy of the Lord's Table,
he invited us to come forward and partake.

As I approached him, standing there in front of the Lord's Table, holding the
sacrament,
I was initially thinking about Tutu as a man, a priest, prophet and preacher,
as a hero, as a liberator of the oppressed
and reconciler of broken relationships.
However, when I drew closer to the Lord's Table and Desmond Tutu
a deeper sense of appreciation took over;
I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the love of God
and the gift of Jesus the Christ
so that all might be saved and redeemed.

As I drew nearer and nearer to receive Communion,
I celebrated that I am baptized,
that nothing can ever come between me and the love of God in Christ.
Since Henry and I had been the last to enter the chapel,
we were the first to leave.

Former Archbishop Tutu was at the door to say good-bye to the worshipers.
I introduced myself to him, mentioning that we'd met at Union Seminary in 1984,
and then I introduced him to Henry.

Tutu looked keenly at Henry and then asked me,
"Does he look now like you did then?"
"Yes."

Suddenly Tutu raised his hands and arms high in the air
and erupted in a loud exclamation of joy and recognition, "Oooooo!"

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