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“Metanoia: A Change of Heart”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 29, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Lenten Worship Series: Revisiting Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 6: 1-13

Concerning Almsgiving

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[a]

⁵ “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[b]

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.^[c]

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,^[d]
but rescue us from the evil one.^[e]

Footnotes:

- a. Matthew 6:4 Other ancient authorities add *openly*
- b. Matthew 6:6 Other ancient authorities add *openly*
- c. Matthew 6:11 Or *our bread for tomorrow*

- d. Matthew 6:13 Or *us into temptation*
- e. Matthew 6:13 Or *from evil*. Other ancient authorities add, in some form, *For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.*

Welcome to the hillside,
where we find ourselves overhearing the Gospel,
listening as Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount.

He speaks plainly, authentically, clearly, so we get it, so we follow, so we understand.

Someone once complained to Mark Twain
that the Bible was all jumbled up, inconsistent,
and filled with hard to understand passages.
"I have more difficulty with the passages I do understand," said Mark Twain,
"than with the passages I do not understand."

We understand this:

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus the Christ calls out across time and space for authentic conversion,
for us to have the courage to change our hearts when they need adjusting;
to have the means to change our ways when in need of realignment;
to have the audacity to change our attitudes
to get our minds' justified.

There's a word for what Jesus of Nazareth is preaching: **Metanoia**

Metanoia is Greek, meaning a transformative change of heart;
especially a spiritual conversion;
a change of mind, of attitudes, and of behavior

The Psalmist (Ps. 51:10) prayed for Metanoia:
"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Although never easy, the Apostle Paul welcomed change, encouraging us to do the same:
"Do not be conformed to this world," said Paul,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

Be open to a transformative change of heart;
especially a spiritual conversion;
a change of mind, of attitudes, and of behavior

When the Bible speaks of repenting and returning to the ways of God,
this is what we are being asked to be and to do:
change our minds, our attitudes, and our behavior...usually in that order.

Here on the hillside we listen as the Word is delivered from God's lips to our souls.

We heard Jesus open his sermon with the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

The difference between wisdom proverbs and Jesus' Beatitudes
is that in Christ these words come to fruition.

In Him, you shall inherit the Beloved Community.

We heard Him preach that we are good, beloved, powerful, making the Gospel personal,
saying, *"You are the salt of the earth.*

You are the light of the world."

We heard Him go deep into our relationships, saying,

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder,'

*but I say to you, if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you are liable to judgment."*

To be so angry at someone that you harm them emotionally or physically,
spiritually or psychologically is like killing a soul.

If your anger is eating you up inside,

and your angry behavior is hurting someone else, don't do it!

Help is here for all who seek it, who knock, who ask.

We heard Him turn the world upside down,

telling us that when someone asks for your coat, give two instead;

when asked to walk a mile, go two miles;

when slapped on the right cheek, turn the other also.

When the world around you defiles, demands, divides,

double down and rebound with love.

"Just need to love them more," said Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

King could have been speaking of this passage: grace is love in action.

Here on the hillside we find ourselves listening

as Jesus takes the sermon – and us -- to a whole new level.

Whenever I take a message to this place, getting into folks' business,

this significant congregation says,

"Preacher, you done stopped preaching 'n got to meddling."

Jesus quits preaching and gets to meddling, alright,

meddling with our egos, our selfishness, our self-centeredness.
our need to make a show of generosity,
need to have good deeds and prayers rewarded with applause.

Jesus gets to rearranging our priorities.

He gets to inspiring, motivating, challenging us:

act right for the right reason so you and I'll embody righteousness.

Let's listen & learn from the best, from the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Faith.

*"Beware of practicing your piety before others," He said, "in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Creator in heaven.*

² *"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others..."*

³ *But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret;
and your Creator who sees in secret will reward you.*

⁵ *"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;
for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners,
so that they may be seen by others..."*

⁶ *But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Creator who is in secret;
and your Creator who sees in secret will reward you."*

When you practice piety...

When you give alms...

When you pray...

When you fast...

When you love...

Recognize, my friends, that Jesus' starting point is that you and I already do so:

He begins believing in the best of us,
that we are practicing piety,
we are giving alms to help neighbors in need,
we are praying for one another,
we are fasting and living simply,
we are loving our neighbor as we would like to be loved.

He starts from such a positive, affirming place of grace.

You are good; let's fine tune your behavior a bit.

He meddles by seeking to tweak our habits and motivations.

This is both life-affirming and life-changing.

He calls us out without shaming us.

God is going to love us into spiritual maturity.
Love us into spiritual formation.
Love us into spiritual disciplinary practice.

In effect, Jesus is telling us that when we give alms,
don't listen for applause or crane your neck for thank you's that may follow.
Give quietly, lovingly, joyfully
because you have received so many blessings,
it's time to pay it forward, to help meet a need.

As Dr. Bill Lee from Loudon Avenue Christian Church in Roanoke teaches us,
the question isn't, "*Who is my neighbor?*"
The question is, "*What does my neighbor need?*"
What does my neighbor need?

When you pray, don't make a show of it;
trust that God is listening,
who is the most important one, anyway,
Be grateful that God is really, truly listening and responding.

Reminds me of the family around the dinner table.
Parent asks the youngest to pray for the meal.
The child closes her eyes, mumbles incoherently, then says amen,
Parent asks, "*What in the world was that? What did you say?*"
"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking with God," she says.

When you fast, when you practice piety, when you follow Christ on the way to the Cross,
it's not for entertainment purposes.
The point is to draw closer to the Holy by being holy, spiritual, prayerful,
by putting other's needs ahead of your own wants and desires and hopes.

Live simply so others may simply live.

Forget the laugh track, the imaginary trumpets blaring, the earthly rewards & trophies.
Public praise may feed the human ego, may prop up narcissism,
yet can "*erode the fundamental posture of the Christian life—before God.*"

(Craddock, p. 22)

President George Herbert Walker Bush loved to tell the story
of the child who offered this simple prayer:
*"God, bless my parents, my brother and sister,
and God, take care of Yourself,
because if anything happens to You, we are all sunk!"*
Without God, we are all sunk.

Remember Jesus' will is to be ours' as well:
your Creator who sees in secret will reward you.
Our Creator is seeing in secret more good works
than we will ever know or can tell.

You see, God's loving, forgiving nature is what makes it possible for metanoia,
for people to change.^[1]
Our repentance and transformation are the result of trusting that God is forgiving,
that God makes the first step toward us.

This is made abundantly clear in the New Testament:
God--and God alone--makes the first move, which is toward us.
The redeeming work of God in Christ Jesus
had nothing to do with human initiatives.
As Paul said, "*God proves [God's] love for us
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5: 8)

Resurrection is the ultimate **metanoia**, the ultimate change.
Yet God's resurrection happens every day.
We need God's resurrection power today.

My friends, we find ourselves in a global effort to rescue humanity,
striving to save one another,
reaching out to the Creator who loves us, who took the first step,
who is still taking the first step
toward saving, healing, redeeming the world.
Lord have mercy, we need you now more than ever.

As of 7 p.m. Friday, the State of Georgia released new numbers.
There are now 2,198 total [known] cases of coronavirus in Georgia,
including 607 hospitalizations and 65 deaths.
DeKalb County, our county, now has 219 cases.
I added the word "known" because without adequate testing
we really don't have the whole story.
There are some stories we do know.

Our dog Bryan is so happy to have his people, his pack home all day
he goes from one person to the next, touching base,
reminding us he has a tummy to rub.
My tabby Chase actually spoke up to say that if we liked staying in the house all day,
eating when we felt like it, keeping physical distance,
then -- finally -- we get what it means to be a cat.

Church member Robbin is handmaking facemasks for local medical personnel.

My wife's friend is 70 plus and taking care of her more-senior neighbors,
sharing her computer skills,
ordering for them food & supplies to be delivered to their doors.

My first cousin's adult daughter is a surgery intern in a metropolitan hospital,
quietly, humbly serving neighbors with coronavirus,
preparing & inserting central lines,
which patients need for healing & hope.

A nephew's wife is a public health specialist
and another nephew's wife is a nurse in a hospital,
both working long hours on the front lines of the pandemic,
and we are holding them close in our thoughts and prayers.

Our congregation is to be engaged in supporting the 30 children and parents
at Hagar's House shelter, as are many local congregations. Details coming soon.

We've been working with Decatur Makers to create a free food pantry
by the sidewalk in front of the church.

As soon as possible, we hope to have it out and functioning
as a safe place to get a bottle of water, some flip-top canned goods,
some life-affirming messages of hope.

We pray that all of the above proclaims quietly, humbly to fellow citizens:
we care not for the applause; we care about you.

Jesus starts where we are and assumes the best about us.

When we give,
when we pray,
when we fast,
when we love God and one another,
trust that your Creator who sees in secret
loves you, and we do, too.

We have all been touched, impacted, affected by this pandemic.

We may be in isolation, yet we are together.

We may be ill and in pain, yet we are healing, even if there is no cure.

We may be experiencing trauma, yet we have this hope, that God is nigh.

May the change we go through be one of metanoia,

a change of heart,

a spiritual and communal change

which brings us ever closer to the holy,

to one another, to our true selves, to building the Beloved
Community on earth as it is in heaven.

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

EXTRA MATERIAL:

Chef Jose Andres is one of the finest, most famous chefs, a man who can rest on his laurels and accolades. Instead of listening to the applause, he started World Central Kitchen, providing meals and support in times of disaster. He is helping his neighbors to eat and work and break bread together.

“Jose Andres...is the world’s leading crisis activist whose mission is feeding people. When he sees a natural disaster, he sees people in need of food. And that’s why he brought food to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. That’s why he delivered 400,000 meals in California during multiple wildfires.”—Laurence O’Donnell

In a “New York Times” op-ed piece outlining the food crisis facing millions of Americans, Jose Andres wrote, *“Today an army of American cooks stands ready to serve our most vulnerable citizens at a time when those cooks are themselves in desperate need of support. They are our food first-responders. With the full support of the federal government, they can serve the many while saving so many jobs. Every single restaurant in America pretty much is closed. Right here, the chefs of America, the food people of America, we are ready to be food first responders.”*

“We need to make sure that we understand that food is a national security issue. Food is not the problem. Food is the solution. And we need to make sure that we think that in the next few weeks, Americans going to have to eat, especially those people, the forgotten people, the people from low-income areas, elderly, homeless. We need to make sure that as we go through this virus, as this crisis, we need to make sure that food gets to everybody in need. And that’s very much the plan.”

Remembering how America galvanized together in WW II and the power of the WPA, he says, *“An army of American cooks stands ready to serve our most vulnerable citizens. We need to take care of our seniors, our children, our people who need the most help. It’s going to take a village.”*

^[1] [The New Interpreter’s Bible](#). P. 409.