

***“Best Summation of the Faith”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 20, 2020  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Matthew 20: 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,<sup>[a]</sup> he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”<sup>[f]</sup>

**Footnotes**

- a. [Matthew 20:2](#) Gk *a denarius*
- b. [Matthew 20:9](#) Gk *a denarius*
- c. [Matthew 20:10](#) Gk *a denarius*
- d. [Matthew 20:13](#) Gk *a denarius*
- e. [Matthew 20:15](#) Gk *is your eye evil because I am good?*
- f. [Matthew 20:16](#) Other ancient authorities add *for many are called but few are chosen*

**Trigger Warning for Sermon:**

*Today’s sermon includes a story that quotes coarse language, the kind not repeated in polite company, much less in church.*

*I do hope you are not offended. If you are, please forgive me.*

*The point being made is not the earthy language, of course; it’s the divine love that runs through the souls whose story we give voice in this sacred space.*

*By the way, if you spend the whole sermon waiting for coarse language, you’ll miss the forest for the trees.*

*Sit up, open up, and let the Spirit do what it does best: rise up.*

## *Reaching Across the Lines*

I stayed two whole summers  
with my paternal grandmother when I was 8 and 9 years old.  
Her name was Mary Powers Siggers Calvert; we called her Marm.

Some of the lessons Marm taught me those summers were subtle, others less so.

After I slammed the butcher's shop door in Marm's face,  
hurrying inside to get a free slice of bologna,  
she taught me to hold doors open for people coming in behind me,  
especially elders and ladies.

Like her.

She modelled respect and recognition for those out of sight, marginalized,  
sharing her philosophies just as she lived them.

Her Bible and Commentary were well-marked.

She taught the third-grade class at Scarsdale Congregational Church  
for thirty consecutive years.

She emphasized to her students that words of faith were empty unless backed up.  
Actions, like names, mattered.

Her measure of morality leaned toward justice.

So, she acted.

I watched her practice of correspondence.

Most summer days when I wasn't swimming at a local pool  
or doing my daily chore of clearing the lawn of fallen twigs,  
I watched as Marm penned letters at her desk in the sunroom.

With the discipline of a pilgrim she held to her routine.

She wrote to each of the New York Mets to request autographs for her grandsons.

Several Mets returned signed 3x5 black-and-white photos,  
which we then taped to our bedroom walls.

When *Columbo* aired in '71, she wrote to the star Peter Falk,  
and offered to pay the dry-cleaning bill for his signature wrinkled raincoat.

In one episode, Lt. Columbo had a cold.

She sent Peter Falk a note with sage medical advice,  
informing him she had been a nurse during the Great War.

She had definite ideas for other people's penchants.

"Peter," Marm said to my brother, "your favorite ice cream flavor is butterscotch."

Turning away to reach for the scoop,  
she missed his look of mortification.

She corresponded with incarcerated men across the Deep South.

She exchanged handwritten letters with prisoners from a variety of backgrounds.

She sent birthday cards and notes of encouragement to their wives and children,  
often including a little something to help tide them over  
or to pick out a small present.

Marm showed me, in her own way,

how to see the world from another soul's worldview.

And how to act.

Taking sides is one thing.  
Standing in the middle is another.  
Reaching across the line is something completely different.

### *Reaching Across the Lines*

The subject Jesus Christ spoke about the most is the Kingdom of God,  
aka the Kingdom of Heaven,  
aka, the Beloved Community.

Jesus keeps hoping, praying, encouraging us to get the message.  
He even tells us parables -- stories with hidden meanings --  
so the meaning will break forth in us like a bright, sunny dawn.

*Jesus said, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner  
who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.  
After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,  
he sent them into his vineyard.  
When he went out about nine o'clock,  
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace  
and he said to them,  
'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'  
So they went.  
When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock,  
he did the same.  
And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around;  
and he said to them,  
'Why are you standing here idle all day?'  
They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'  
He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' --Matthew 20: 1-16*

Jesus' Parable of Laborers begins with the hospitality of the landowner.  
The Landowner is loving.  
Compassionate  
Fair  
Just  
Not content with the status quo  
Not playing favorites because we are all God's fav  
Constantly, consistently, creatively making room and making a way  
for old friends and newcomers alike.

God leaves the field, the temple, the comfort of home  
to reach out to make people welcome,  
to put them to work and play in the fields of the Lord.  
More than that, God is not content to only look after the familiar,  
to bask in the glow of those who worship and revere the Lord.  
Jesus says that God is looking at the world from all different views and viewpoints,  
and so should we,  
reach out and listen and share our stories  
with old friends and newcomers.  
Calls us to look and actually go beyond the circle of light,  
to take our lights and go outside, together,

into the darkness and discover there are folks  
all around us who crave, seek, desire, yearn for love.

The love of God.  
The love of a friend.  
The love of a community that will respect and care for them  
Just as they are.  
Taking sides is one thing.  
Standing in the middle is another.  
Reaching across the line is something completely different.

And here we are in 2020, finding that Jesus is teaching us, pushing us  
to re-examine our practice of hospitality.

My mother, Buffy Calvert, and I had an email exchange  
that included gist of today's message:  
the practice of Christian hospitality  
is bigger than simply welcoming someone into your own circle.  
Buffy responded, *"What a challenging idea.  
Hospitality as going out to others instead of just letting others come to you.  
MUCH harder for me!  
Love to all, Mother"*

This is coming from someone who has invested her life in reaching out,  
in attempting to see the world through other people's eyes, their understanding,  
to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.  
Yes, much harder for me,  
and as we work our way through this concept and practice together,  
we may agree, that it is much harder for me, for you, for us,  
yet so rewarding, for me, for you, for us,  
for all of God's children.

We have these gifts, and we are deepening them even as we speak.  
We've honed them, together.  
*You belong  
Conversations that matter  
Courage to be authentic, real, hopeful  
Mission minded practices  
Multiracial, multicultural, multigender  
Open and affirming  
Intentionally anti-racist and pro-reconciling  
A Big Table with Big Love for all people  
Reaching across the line to hold a hand, share a meal, break Bread together.*

### ***Reaching Across the Lines***

*"The supreme religious challenge," said Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,  
is to see God's image in one who is not in our image."*<sup>[1]</sup>

*"Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror  
to the God we did not make up."*<sup>[2]</sup>

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, An Altar in the World, she agrees.

*"...the hardest spiritual work in the world  
is to love the neighbor as the self  
– to encounter another human being  
not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save,  
enroll, convince or control,  
but simply as someone who can spring you  
from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.*

*All you have to do is recognize another you "out there"  
– your other self in the world –  
for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself.  
To become that person,  
even for a moment,  
is to understand what it means to die to your self.  
This can be as frightening as it is liberating.  
It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is." (p. 93)*

### ***Reaching Across the Lines***

Will Campbell was a Baptist preacher.  
I promise you, he's not like any Baptist preacher you have ever known.  
He's one of a kind.  
If you've ever read the cartoon Kudzu,  
Will Campbell was the inspiration for the preacher Will B. Done.

Around here in the south in the early 1960s,  
*"...on one of the Freedom Rides,  
Campbell was challenged by newspaper editor P.D. East  
to sum up the Christian faith in 10 words or less.*

*Campbell replied,  
"We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway."*

*Not long after, [Campbell's] good friend and fellow activist Thomas Coleman  
was shot and killed by a police officer named Jonathan Daniel.*

*After the shooting, Campbell was devastated;  
[however] P.D. East wouldn't leave him alone,  
challenging him on his definition of Christianity.*

*He demanded Campbell to answer  
whether both Thomas Coleman and Jonathan Daniel  
– the victim and the murderer-- were bastards.*

*Campbell feebly replied that they were.  
"Which of those two bastards did God love the best?" asked P.D. East.*

*This question changed the course of Campbell's life,  
when he realized that  
God loved the bigoted, wrong-doing Ku Klux Klan members  
just as much as He loved the victims of the bigotry.*

*[God through Will Campbell expanded] the [parameters of the] civil rights movement,*

*and began ministering to white supremacists,  
sharing God's love and hope  
to the very people he had been fighting against.  
The thought of reaching across both lines...  
sounds dangerous, frightening...and beautiful.  
After P.D. East heard Will Campbell's answer to his question,  
he responded, "You've got to be the biggest bastard of us all...  
because damned if you haven't made me a Christian,  
and I'm not sure I can stand it."  
Campbell used to say, "I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-human being".  
He explained that being pro-Klansman  
is not the same as being pro-Klan,  
and being capable of making that distinction  
might be the only hope for civil discourse.*

*So my goal is to be able to say that I am both pro-Gay and pro-Fundamentalist  
[because I am pro-human being].  
Taking sides is one thing.  
Standing in the middle is another.  
Reaching across the line is something completely different.  
Reconciliation-- both to God and to [humanity] --  
was the purpose of Will Campbell's life and ministry,  
[and Marm Calvert's life and ministry,  
and our church's life and ministry]  
and I hope that someday, someone  
could say the same of me.<sup>[2]</sup>*

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

<sup>[1]</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 60

<sup>[2]</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, p. 100

<sup>[3]</sup> Christine's Blog "On the Wings of a Pig" July 18, 2009