

Worship Theme: "Emptying Ourselves of Pretense, We Pour Out God's Gifts"
[Live Streaming on Facebook at 10:30 AM: First Christian Church Decatur](#)
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"Two Bad"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 27, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Matthew 21: 28-32

The Parable of the Two Sons

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

George was good at volunteering people to do things they didn't think they wanted to do. That, many might say, is an annoying trait.

It can be.

To be honest, being volunteered to do something that isn't your idea can be annoying,
a bother especially to those of us,
like George Calvert's spouse and 4 sons,
church members and community friends.

We were the ones who got volunteered by him
to do things we initially felt like we didn't want to,
didn't feel like doing,
felt like we were being unfairly troubled,
unnecessarily pushed
needlessly inconvenienced.

Unless it's done this way, his way.

The Rev. George E. Calvert passed away in 2005 at 76 years young,
yet his life's lessons resound.

One of George's remarkable gifts was
he got folks to do ministry and community service, great and small,
whether they – we – wanted to or not.

I don't know where he learned this particular gift from.
Don't know who modeled it to him, for him.
Don't know whether it was some personal mentor
or direct orders from Jesus the Christ.
All I know is he did this thing so well, so often,
and it was so darn effective.

Basically, George identified a real need in the church and community
and then he identified a soul whom he believed could or should do the work.
More often than not
the soul might be idle or hanging around or actually busy with some other task,
and George would find him or her or them.
God, would he find you.
There was no getting away or avoiding or hiding.
He would look you in the eyes, tilting his head, peering over his glasses.
*"Friend, what do you think about helping out, about doing such and such?
You can do this.
You've got the skill set.
I'll be here to support you."*

Imagine someone you trust, who trusts you,
looking you in the eyes, saying to you, face to face:
You can do this!
You should do this!
We'll work side by side.
Go out into the field and work!
Go out into the community and play, and dance, and sing, and serve!
See, George excelled in this gift of volunteering people
because he saw talents and treasures within us.
Because he saw something in folks that we may not have seen in ourselves.
Because he needed the help,
acknowledging he could not rebuild and reconcile a city by his lonesome.
Because we needed the program, the project, the plan,
--even if we didn't know it yet.

And because folks knew, grasped, appreciated
that their pastor, their servant leader, our father
never asked anyone to do something
he wasn't willing to do himself.
And most of all, because he loved.
The invitation to serve emerged from a place of love.
Love for God.
Love for people from all walks of life.
Love for creating and sustaining and calling into being the Beloved Community.

Quintina Ortiz was our church treasurer.
Born and raised in Puerto Rico, *Mi Encanta*,
Tina was cheerful and humble and bright.
George asked her to serve on the Board of Directors
of Hope Community, a local housing organization.
Quintina prayed on it, said yes,
and learned so much about real estate
she became a landlord in her own right.

Over the course of his 50 plus years in Harlem
George pulled in parents, self-made musicians, gang members,
folks wrestling with addictions, college graduates and high school dropouts.
He volunteered whomever God sent.

A young adult named Mark Alexander found himself in an in-between stage,
so George tapped him on the shoulder and put him to work.
Mark took the job seriously.
The job became more, evolving into a career.
His good works became the fulfillment of a calling.

My brother David was fresh out of formal education when he was asked by our father
to survey neighbors on nearby 103rd Street
that was in need of significant renovation.
George asked David to poll folks and ask them about their needs,
to listen and learn from the people of 103rd Street,
to get their ideas for social change and renewal.

Initially David was reluctant, shrugging it off.
But then he did as suggested.
The insights gleaned from people about their homes and relationships
were drawn upon to rehabilitate an entire city block
between Third and Lexington Avenues.
David applied those same insights to help launch his own lifetime vocation,
a vocation of teaching young people to rehab homes and neighborhoods.
He helped launch and lead **YouthBuild**,
which is changing lives and rebuilding cities around the world,
including right here in Atlanta.

Many of you have commented on how you've been moved
by the way I eulogize and preside at funeral services.
Let's give credit where credit is due.

One day in my first year of pastoral ministry

George pulled me aside and asked me to preside at a graveside funeral,
to take the point
so he could lead a ministry program elsewhere at the same time.
"Oh, no, I'm not ready. You do it, Dad," I said, as this 25-year-old's confidence ebbed and all the
blood drained from my body.
"You can do this." he said.
"Here is what you say..."
Here is what you do..."
Then, at the benediction,
take some dirt and place it on the coffin,
saying 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust'..."

This quick lesson and trust in my raw skills and faith worked great.
For the next ten years I was filled with growing confidence,
comforting mourners and placing soil upon shiny coffins in graveyards
in Texas and Tennessee.
Then at my first graveside service here in Georgia,
wearing a robe and white stole, standing beside a coffin in the Decatur Cemetery,
about to conclude the service in front of most of our congregation,
at the benediction I scooped up a handful of Georgia red clay
and said, *"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."*
and attempted to place the soil atop the coffin.

Not happening.
Georgia red clay did what it does best:
stuck on my right hand like a red glob of muck.
Shaking, waving, praying, nothing worked.
Mortified, I thought to myself, *"Thanks a lot, Dad! Now what?"*
Linda and David Chesnut saved the day,
approaching with kind laughter and sacrificing a handkerchief.

Jesus said, *"What do you think?"*
A man had two sons; he went to the first and said,
'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'
He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.
The father went to the second and said the same;
and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.
Which of the two did the will of his father?"

No sugar coating here
No waxing nostalgic
No viewing history through rose colored glasses
Real people, real challenges, real professions and practices of faith.
Real bad decisions, real glad recoveries, real second, third chances.

Some folks George approached said no, to his face.
Some who said no meant it.
Some who said no were not very nice about it.
Negative responses to invitations to give, to love, to sacrifice in Jesus' name
do not fade away.
They sting, they lash, they last.
People remember opening responses to a request for help, yes?
You betcha.

Some returned later,
having thought about the invitation to serve, to work,
to do something that mattered,
and said, you know, I will, so they did.
There was some hesitation; however, in the long run there were results.

Are you like George, preferring folks say no, and mean it,
then say yes, I will, then not do a thing.
Some said yes, sir, certainly, I will,
then followed their own will and desires.
In the Bible, when the second son says to the father,
"I go, sir," but does not,
the word sir in Greek is Kyrie.

Kyrie.

Sir.

Lord.

A title of respect, of recognition, of reverence.

We know this from "*Kyrie Elision*" – "*Lord, have mercy.*"

Here we hear Jesus pointing out

that even those of us who revere God, who use all the right words,
yet whose profession of faith
does not match our practice of the faith,
are being held to account.

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus told us all about this, so it should come as no surprise:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Creator in Heaven."*

Jesus lifts up by example the preaching and practice of John the Baptist,
who called God's people to repent and believe in the Gospel.

Repent and believe.

Turn away from the ways of sin and toward the ways of God.

Repent and believe.

God requires good deeds and good practices, not empty words or vain professions.

Repent and believe.

Jesus said this to the very same religious leaders
who were baptized by John in the River Jordan,
yet did not accept his call to repent,
his call to act with love, in love, to love all people unconditionally.
The religious leaders said, in effect, *"I go, sir,"*
but did not go into the field to do God's work and will.

Jesus' message is directed at the original hearers of Jesus' preaching and teaching.
This message has legs.
This parable resounds to all who are sent to work in the fields of the Lord.

People take note of when and how
we respond to requests for help if we're rude or angry or indifferent.
People also note when and how
we respond by following through...or not.
Two bad ways to respond.
TWO bad.
Two imperfect ways to respond.
Two bad sorts of responses:
being ornery by saying we won't
or by saying we will but don't.
Age to age, no matter our home state or state of home,
we're imperfect.
Neither response brings joy to the one who calls us
to love, to serve, to work in the fields of the Lord.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ is the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Faith.
He has shown us, O People of God, what is good and true and perfect:

Professing Christ as Savior
is to be combined, intertwined, if you will,
with Christian Discipleship.

Word and Deed are inseparable.

"Not everyone who says to Jesus, 'Lord, Lord'..."

Are we doing the will of the Creator?

What do you think is the will of God?

To love. To love God. To love one another.

God calls us to yoke our Words and Deeds today, in such a time as this.

You can do this.

We can do this, here and now,

in the midst of chaos and calamity,
with compassion, hope and love.

*"The sacred scriptures of all faiths call us to love as we have never loved before.
This requires effort, vigilance, and radical humility [, said Richard Rohr].*

*Violence is easier than nonviolence yet hate only perpetuates hate.
The wisdom teachings remind us that love—active, engaged, fearless love—
is the only way to save ourselves and each other
from the firestorm of war that rages around us.
There is a renewed urgency to this task now.
We are asked not only to tolerate the other,
but also to actively engage the love that transmutes
the lead of ignorance and hatred
into the gold of authentic connection.
This is the “narrow gate” Christ speaks of in the Gospels [Matthew 7:13].
Don’t come this way
unless you’re willing to stretch, bend, and transform
for the sake of love.” --Richard Rohr, September 25, 2020*

Are you willing, are you able, asks the Master?
Are you willing to stretch, bend, and transform your will toward the will of God?
Are you willing to come this way, the way of love, for the sake of love?

Jesus’ parable reminds us
that we always have a say, a choice, an option to claim our inheritance...
or to deny it by following our own will and desires.
By the cleansing waters of your baptism
you are claimed, named, marked for love,
giving you the power to make positive choices for Christ.

As a Preacher’s Kid the mark of the Church is upon you.

When I was a kid other kids would stop me on the street and say,
“Right, Jamie, your father married my mother?”

Or, I’d come upon two kids using foul language in an argument and one would say,
“Don’t curse in front of Jamie. Don’t you know his father owns the church?”

Being a Preacher’s Kid could have dissuaded me from being a pastor.
Somehow, knowing my preaching, practicing dad’s imperfections and flaws
as well as George Calvert’s many gifts and graces
made this leap of faith that much easier--if easy is the right word.
All I know is God tapped me on the shoulder,
whispered a call into my mind,
showed me gifts I didn’t realize I had,
and volunteered me for a life of service above self.

Annoying?

Yes.

Yet, oh so fulfilling.

You, too, are volunteered by Christ to serve, called, compelled & commissioned.

You know,

God excels in this gift of volunteering people

because the Spirit sees so many talents and treasures within us.

Because God sees something in us that we may not have seen in ourselves.

Because God needs the help,

acknowledging that even the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit

cannot rebuild and reconcile a city by Their lonesome.

Because we need the program, the project, the plan--even if we don't know it yet.

Because the love of God is with you as you go forth

to work and play in the fields of the Lord.

Because we trust that our Savior never asks anyone to do something

Jesus isn't willing to do himself,

even if it takes Him all the way,

all the way to the Cross.

Kyrie eleison

Lord, have mercy.

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