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“Give God a Witness”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 27, 2022

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 9: 23-24 1 Corinthians 2: 1-13

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Thus says God:

“Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom,
do not let the mighty boast in their might,
do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth;
but let those who boast boast in this,
that they understand and know me,
that I am God;

I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth,
for in these things I delight, says God.”

1 Corinthians 2: 1-13

When I came to you, brothers, sisters [and siblings], I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

*“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love God”—*

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?
So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Sermon

Greatest Hits

A friend once described her church
to someone who had never been there before.

*"You will know you are in my church when you get there
if the people are friendly,
the worship services are meaningful and fulfilling,
and on top of the building there's a giant plus sign."*

In the Light and in the sight of God we gather as one people
to stand in the shadow of that plus sign.

We gather as one people to stand in the shadow of the Cross.

What is really dying on the Cross in our souls?
Our egos; our selfishness; our self-centeredness; our me-myself-and-I-ness.
When we die with Christ, we rise with Christ.
We rise as a new creation in Christ.

What is being born anew and afresh in us?
A new creation in Christ, restored, reoriented, reinvigorated.
A selfless, other-centered new being
giving thanks that God's love is for all people, and that all means all.

Paul wrote to the people of Galatia:
*"But far be it from me to glory
except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the world has been crucified to me,
and I to the world."*

Greatest Hits

Pretty good chance

most of us have a favorite album, CD, Apple Music download
that is a Greatest Hits collection, *the crème de la crème*,
whether your favorite artist's all-time hits are by
Vivaldi or Mozart, Lawrence Welk or Billie Holiday,
the Beatles or Aretha Franklin,
the Red Hot Chili Peppers or Mylie Cyrus,
The Weeknd or Beyoncé.

In addition to the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John –
there's an epistle that reads like a Greatest Hits collection.
As you turn the pages of the Scriptures your mind reels:
I know this passage! Hey, I know this one, too.
And here's another that speaks to my situation, my spirit!
The hits keep coming.

Pretty good chance you are way ahead of this guy.

We speak, of course, of First Corinthians.
First Corinthians is the Apostle Paul's letter, or epistle,
written to the fledgling church in Corinth
that was co-founded by Paul, Aquila and Priscilla.
Corinth was a city with a reputation for immorality and deep divisions.
No wonder the new congregation wrestled with a variety of real-life concerns.

The wealth inequality gap between the Haves and the Have Nots
was never more evident.

Wars and rumors of wars,
factions and prejudices outside the church from the wider community
seeped inside the vestibules and attitudes of the house church.

Class prejudice took up residence,
meaning some were being served communion first,
in greater portions, in seats of high honor,
threatening a radical egalitarian religious practice
grounded in grace, unity and hospitality.

Fear of sojourners and "the other" overcame unseasoned faith in Christ,
disdaining, judging, rejecting those who were raised in different religions
yet longed to follow Jesus Christ.

Everywhere the new Christians went raised questions of morality and immorality,
what was acceptable, what was holy, what was not.

They struggled with leadership factions in the church,
dividing their loyalties,
arguing and declaring *"I belong to Christ!"* or *"I belong to Paul!"*
or *"I belong to Cephas!"* or *"I belong to Apollos!"*

And ultimately, they wrestled with the biggest questions:

- Since Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead into New Life,
had the Cross of Jesus' crucifixion
lost its power, its meaning, its magnitude?
- What is the place and meaning of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead?
- Paul said Jesus promised He would return, soon!
What should we do in the meantime?
- After all, why point to the Cross on Calvary
when we have the gift of Resurrection into New Life?

That is a lot for any congregation to cope with, in any day and age.

Imagine, if you will, a community of faith
made up of new believers, misfits, and sojourners,
real folks in need of real healing from trauma and tragedy,
craving to serve
a Mighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace
in a vast city
torn apart by alternative facts and factions.

The Church of Jesus Christ is going to need some **Greatest Hits**.

When word reached Paul of the factions and questions and practices,
he had already moved on to launch another church in Ephesus,
across the Mediterranean Sea.

Paul responded by writing a missive to his Corinthian friends,
speaking the truth in love, a letter to be read aloud in worship.

Pretty good chance you're checking a list of 1st Corinthian scriptures in your mind,
picking your fav cut from the **Greatest Hits**.

Here Paul grounded their practice of the Lord's Supper,
offering liturgy, language, and love
to make solemn and strong their sacramental gatherings:

First Corinthians Chapter 11 gifts us with the Institution of the Lord's Supper.

*²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,
that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed*

took a loaf of bread,
²⁴ and when he had given thanks,
he broke it and said,
"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also,
after supper, saying,
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

First Corinthians Chapter 13 gifts us with the power of love:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
² And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.

³ If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.
⁴ Love is patient;
love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.
⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

First Corinthians Chapter 12 and 10 gift the power of Spiritual Gifts and Christian Unity:

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts,
but the same Spirit;
⁵ and there are varieties of services,
but the same Lord;
⁶ and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.
⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,
and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,
⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit,

to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
 ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles,
 to another prophecy,
 to another the discernment of spirits,
to another various kinds of tongues,
 to another the interpretation of tongues.

¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit,
 who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members,
 and all the members of the body, though many, are one body,
 so it is with Christ.

¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body
 —Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—
 and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 10

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink,
 or whatever you do,
 do everything for the glory of God.

³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,
 ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do,
 not seeking my own advantage,
 but that of many, so that they may be saved.

First Corinthians Chapter 15 gifts us with the message of Jesus' Resurrection:

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery!
 We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
 ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.
 For the trumpet will sound,
 and the dead will be raised imperishable,
 and we will be changed.

⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability,
 and this mortal body must put on immortality.

⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability,
 and this mortal body puts on immortality,
 then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:
 "Death has been swallowed up in victory."
⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory?
 Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul underlines these passages for our spiritual formation and edification
by reminding us
that we are Christ's messengers, ambassadors, practitioners of the faith.

Pretty good chance you've listened to and prayed over today's passage
and already observed its interweaving thread through these **Greatest Hits**.

Paul offers himself as an example, referring to Jeremiah 9:23-24

Thus says God:

*"Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom,
do not let the mighty boast in their might,
do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth;
but let those who boast
boast in this,
that they understand and know me,
that I am God;
I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth,
for in these things I delight, says God."*

Paul followed through, saying,

*"When I came to you, brothers, sisters [and siblings],
I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you
in lofty words or wisdom."*

Paul was authentic.

Grounded.

Real.

Flawed.

Imperfect.

Sure to disappoint, resolved to forgive and be forgiven.

His practice of servant leadership focused on giving God's power away
rather than holding on to it or using it for ulterior purposes.

He pushed his ego aside and let the Cross speak.

He put away his self-centeredness, his me-myself-and-I-ness
concentrating on the love of God in Christ
to bring about human transformation.

Paul said, in effect,

"When I was there with you, I did not preach all fancy,

*choosing instead to focus on Christ.
I was afraid, trembling,
offering examples and demonstrations of God's love and power.
Our faith is grounded in God's strength,
rather than human reasoning.
At the same time,
our learning is not superficial.
We've got smarts, brains,
wisdom borne of experience, so draw upon it for God's glory!*

*God's wisdom is a mystery;
only the Spirit knows what is in God's heart.
That is why we are given the Spirit of God
rather than the spirit of the world,
to help us understand the things
God has so freely turned over to us."*

(Passage adapted from Clarence Jordan, Cotton Patch Version)

To the world, teaches Paul, the meaning of the cross is utter foolishness.
What kind of deity loves humanity so much
that uppermost in the mind of God's loving Spirit
is the deliverance, liberation, and salvation
of saints and sinners alike?

To any who are grateful, thankful, in awe of such a love,
the Cross represents the power that saved and is saving us still.
Someone recently asked my wife Betty if she'd been saved.
"Yes," said the Rev. Betty C. Brewer-Calvert, "2,000 years ago."

If you were to ask any member or friend of this significant congregation,
"What do we have to offer the community?"
Pretty good chance he, she or they will say,
"How about the love of God in Jesus Christ?"

And so we have,
and so we shall,
with the grace and help of God.

My friends, we stand here, there and everywhere,
signed, sealed, and delivered by God's **Greatest Hit**.
The Cross of Jesus Christ.
We stand here in the shadow of the Cross,
a giant plus sign above the church and our souls,
sanctified, sealed, saved.

Accept Christ into your life and relationships and community
and you, too, shall be stamped,
stamped like Christ's identity was forever stamped by the cross.

Pretty good chance if you're like me
we'd like nothing better
than to jump ahead to the Resurrection Event.

The truth is that the Cross is both the way and the cost of discipleship,
a journey of faith and service and grace that
Jesus leads us through, loves us through, lightens the way through.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., taught,
*"For the crown we are to wear
there is first the cross we first must bear.
Bear it, for truth pressed to earth will rise again.
Bear it, for what you sow so shall you reap.
Bear it, for the moral arc of the universe is long,
but it bends toward justice."*

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