



LENTEN MEDITATIONS
FIRST-PLYMOUTH CHURCH

During a church council meeting last spring, I looked out into the courtyard and saw the image you see on the front cover. It struck me this was the perfect metaphor for the Christian life. Here was Raef Walker, completely relaxed and resting in the cross, knowing he was on safe ground and that his parents were just inside if he needed them. For many Christians, Lent is a time to take on a spiritual practice in order to grow a deeper faith. It is my hope that this devotion book, with its scripture reading, reflection and prayer each day will help facilitate this growth during this season. May we all come to “rest in the cross.”

The pieces contained here were written by members and staff which run the full spectrum of age and theological understanding, representing the diversity of our congregation. A big “thank you” to all who contributed. Once again I am indebted to Kathryn Bellman for her editing skills and Beth Pauley for formatting this booklet.

Blessings and peace this Lenten season,

*Rev. Nancy
February, 2010*

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COMPARISONS CAN DECEIVE

Luke 18: 9-14

I am a justifier – that is, I always try to rationalize my actions instead of admitting my fault and accepting the consequences. In my experience, the easiest way to rationalize my actions is to compare them with the actions of others.

As the joke goes, if you and a friend meet a bear, you don't have to outrun it. You need only be faster than your friend. It's all relative, you see. In the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple, the Pharisee seems to see his life through the lens of comparing himself with someone seemingly less virtuous, like the tax collector: "At least I am better than he is," he thinks. But the tax collector doesn't try to rationalize himself to God. Instead, he openly admits his faults and flaws, humbly asking God to have mercy on him, a sinner.

Jesus praises the tax-collector's honesty and humility, but I think something else happens when we recognize our own imperfections. I believe we can come to better understand and sympathize with the shortcomings of others, and this recognition allows us to grow in patience, compassion and forgiveness for everyone around us. As those seeds of love grow within us, we come to realize that none of us can be justified to Christ. We can only be justified through Him.

Prayer: Holy One, help us to see and admit our own imperfections so that we can understand and sympathize with those in others. And in that understanding, grow love within each of us through patience, compassion and forgiveness, for Your glory alone. Amen.

Brady Jones
Wednesday, February 17

ENOUGH

John 17:1-8

At a last meal with his disciples, Jesus also shares a final time of teaching. The long discourse (John 13-17) ends with a prayer that includes thanksgiving for the followers of Jesus: “They have kept your word. Now at last they have recognized that all you have given me comes from you . . . They know for certain that I came from you, and have believed that it was you who sent me.”

Oh, really! Enough already! Only a few verses later Judas comes with soldiers who arrest Jesus. The disciples flee. Peter denies Jesus. What do you mean, they have kept God’s word? What do you mean, they know for certain? What do you mean, they have believed?

The disciples may not keep God’s word. The disciples may not believe for certain. But Jesus believes in them and gives thanks for them. And that is enough. From Jesus’ belief in the disciples, seeds of faith grow, and Christianity comes into being.

The mystic Meister Eckhardt taught that if the only prayer we ever say is “Thank you,” it is enough. May we, like Jesus, pray “Thank you,” believing that whatever God gives us is enough.

Prayer: Thank you.

*Carolyn Zeisset
Thursday February 13*

SEEKING PEACE

Philippians 4: 1-9

It's a paradox that I find myself "fighting to find peace." I understand it is a journey, and it is glorious when I am on the right path. Jesus is a model for us of connecting God's love to how we live our life. I've often made an excuse for myself "I can't turn water into wine, how could I live like Jesus? All I have to offer is love." It has finally dawned on me what a miracle love is. Giving love is transformational for both me and the people I love.

I am blessed with people in my life who are easy to love. They are an answer to my prayers. Others are not so easy to love. Loving the difficult to love takes prayer and patience but it is part of that path to peace. I think I get better at it with practice – but it does take practice. I pray for a calm demeanor. For an open heart and mind. I pray my face and tone portray respect and calm.

A dialog with God is necessary to fuel the journey – and that dialog is continuous. Every moment can be a prayer. Every moment can move me closer to peace.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the transformational gift of love. Strengthen me to be able to persevere when it is not easy. Soften me to listen when it is not easy. Open me to hear your guiding whispers as I journey to peace.

*Teresa Harms
Friday February 19*

LOOK, LISTEN, LOVE

John 17: 26

“that the love you have for me may be in them . . .

Years ago I was teamed with three wise women teaching a group of Head Start teachers. As we began our final meeting, the leader of our team casually mentioned that we’d each be expected to “say a few words” of farewell. I was totally surprised, speechless. I silently asked for help and, while the others spoke, jotted a few notes on scraps of paper that I still have. God spoke to me, I suppose, for I realized in retrospect, that just as Jesus prayed for his disciples, I spoke a prayer for living a good life.

LOOK at people—really look—past skin color, imperfections, social status. See the person deep inside. Thornton Wilder’s play “Our Town” always brings tears to my eyes. Emily has died and says to her mother, “Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. . . .”

LISTEN with your whole heart, not just your ears, as you mentally drum your fingers wishing to get on with things. Deepest thoughts take form and are confided to one who listens with the heart. You may not always like what you hear, but listen anyway, without criticism.

And LOVE with a deep, genuine caring for others. Jesus asked us to love one another. If we truly love with deep respect, wouldn’t it be a start toward peace in the world? Look, listen, love, and care. You will be remembered.

Prayer: Loving God, please open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts that we may care for all creation, as you would have us. Amen.

Virginia Opocensky
Saturday, February 20

LIVING IN THE QUESTIONS

Hebrews 2:10-18

Christianity has found it spiritually evocative to affirm Jesus is both human and divine. There is something about that paradoxical tension – how could someone be both? – that endlessly generates new insights of faith. His humanity spurs new ways to identify with him as our brother and friend and his divinity opens up new ways to worship the transcendent.

But Christians, like anyone else, find paradoxes troubling. And so for all time, some Christians emphasize only his humanity and think of him a simply a great prophet and moral teacher. Meanwhile, other Christians emphasize his divinity and say “Jesus is God.” Both sides flee from the richness of paradox and find solace and superficiality in an easy answer.

Hebrews 2 promotes the ancient paradox. Jesus is described as a divine being who descends into human form – just as the Greek mythological heroes did – but he is also affirmed as simply our brother from the same Father. Divinity and humanity comeingle in Hebrews 2 in ways that our rational mind will tend to reject.

This Lent, try to simply reside in the paradox, and trust that your faith will be deepened by ambiguity rather than certainty. Besides, even if you think he was merely a human being, is it not fundamentally mysterious to us what it is to be human? Calling him “human” does not really reduce the mystery, it simply raises different questions. Live in the questions this Lent, and let our Christ be forever beyond easy answers.

Jim Keck
Sunday, February 21

MISSING THE MEANING

OR, HOW I GAVE UP LIVING IN PENTHOUSES FOR LENT

Corinthians 1:1-19

Grace, peace; strength, wisdom & discernment. Through Jesus. This is Lent? Is verse 4 saying someone gives thanks to God all the time because of the grace given to me through Jesus? *Me? Really?*

For decades Lent didn't really make sense to me. It seemed there were special activities, rituals, and expectations for a set period of time – but for what? I had appreciation for other cultures' special times, like Hanukkah and Diwali, but not my own? Puzzling. In researching *The Meaning of Lent* I read it is an exciting time for the children to draw palm fronds, and that Lent is “mounting a come-back in the 21st century.”

Not until I experienced the glorious First-Plymouth music one Easter and the ritual procession before the message by Otis Young did I feel joy and meaning. Still I did not get the week before. The scripture says I know everything I need to know because I have been *enriched in him* and I, and you, and all people are *not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait* – strength to the end. Trusting the grace of God, it is safe to go inward, to question or seek clarity and peace.

Prayer: Thank you, Creator God, for the gifts of love and strength. As we strive to accept the grace and peace offered us, may we find agreement where none seems to be. Open us to our God-given capacity to see good all around us and to welcome all flowers of God. And, may we appreciate the joy and new beginnings symbolized by the Resurrection. Amen.

Ginny Wright
Monday, February 22

CARRY YOUR SPIRIT HIGH

Mark 1: 14-28

We all know that kind of person most of us envy them a little: they carry themselves through life with grace and integrity. When something devastating happens to them they are not crushed. They call upon an inner peace and know that everything is how it should be. Some even have a charisma that attracts almost everyone. Nobody says anything except wonderful things about them and has the utmost respect. I surmise Jesus was the kind of person that you liked instantly and hung on his every word because of the feeling you got when you were in his presence.

We all strive for things at times and neglect the really important things like our relationships with others and our own inner peace. It is one thing to know God. It's another to live every day in a way that displays to all around us that we have found gratitude for this gift.

Prayer: God give me the serenity to live life for today and be gracious to all the wonders you have provided in your plan for me.

Jim Jarvis
Tuesday, February 23

HEALING

Mark 1:29-45

A baby born today is likely to live to be a hundred. In Jesus' time, if you lived to forty, you were considered to be old. If you suffered from leprosy, you were expected to die soon. You were to wear a mask and shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever you met a person. You were dying. The people in Israel believed that only God could heal you. Yet, Jesus healed people like these – physically, spiritually, and psychologically. Jesus didn't have the thousands of medicines and medical facilities of today.

Today we have stressful lives, but at First Plymouth, diverse help groups are available to heal us. For example, Susan Brasch in her sessions on overcoming fear suggests that we become aware of our fears, face them, and we will find that others become better connected to us and we will receive satisfaction in serving others. Sessions in good nutrition and diet are offered. A financial planning class enables people to avoid financial disaster.

In the year-long Confirmation Class for 8th and 9th graders, youth are shown how to enjoy friendship with each other, how to handle conflict, and begin to date. These young people are taught to handle many "hurts" that might require future "healing" if left unaddressed.

Sermons by Jim Keck alert us to who we really are and how God sees us as wonderful beings living together, thus framing life with a positive, true world view. We are taught that the Spirit of God permeates each of our lives. We find healing at First Plymouth – so that we do not "die" while we are living.

Prayer: Thank you God for living in us, healing us every day, making us free to explore and enjoy your life on earth.

Don Tilley
Wednesday, February 24

WHO'S TO SAY?????

I Corinthians 2:14-16

Philosophy can be so complex yet so simple. One of the simplest ways to “unlock” philosophy is to recognize two or three important principles. One of these principles is summed up by the question – “who’s to say?” Who’s to say when one is thorough in their work as opposed to being obsessive-compulsive? Who’s to say when someone is passionate in contrast to being overly-emotional? Who’s to say when someone is either a very spiritual person or has instead compromised with worldly values? The question “who’s to say?” prompts us to consider our view of God’s sovereignty.

Paul indicates in I Corinthians that the true heart of a believer is determined solely by the Spirit of God. Thank goodness for that, as that frees us Christians from determining who is a sinner and who isn’t. To determine who is Christian in their behavior and who is not is exhausting, and, at the very least, contrary to Christ’s teaching to “Judge not . . .”

Why not commit yourself during the Lenten season to see the good in people free of judgment, avoiding the tendency to determine the salvation of someone else’s soul. After all, who’s to say?

Prayer: O Lord, help us to give live according to the grace you have given to us, grace that we do not have to earn. Help us to avoid making others earn your grace. Grant us the peace and wisdom to love according to the mind of Christ. Amen.

*Dale Battleon
Thursday, February 25*

HEAVEN CAN WAIT

Mark 2:13-22

Jesus had to deal with the Religious Right of His day, the Pharisees. They had an obsession with hundreds of religious “wrongs” and thought everyone who wanted to be “clean” should follow them. Black and white, finger pointing – sound familiar today?

Jesus responded by living life day by day, person by person. Healing the broken now, dealing with “sin” later.

His actions were new wineskins in His day. He wanted people to show compassion, put “sin” on the back burner, and concern themselves with others and their daily struggles. Enjoy the here and now.

Prayer: Loving Creator, Heaven can wait, may we use our time in loving action and thankfulness.

*Gary Schuerman
Friday, February 26*

MOM LIKES ME BEST

1 Cor 4:1-7

When we were kids my brother and I were in constant competition – who got the best grades, who had the most friends, even whose plate mom put the most food on. Nothing was too trivial. We were constantly competing and constantly judging. On the surface we were judging each other, but underneath we were judging ourselves. Am I good enough, smart enough, worthy enough?

This passage tells us that all of this is a waste of time. God, and only God, knows our hearts and minds. All of what we are is a gift from God so there is no reason to blame, feel bad, or be “puffed up.”

Prayer: God, please help me to keep from boasting and selfishness. Help me to always be thankful for what I have. Amen

*Rhonda Rowe
Saturday, February 27*

MAN IS BY NATURE A SINNER

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.
NRSV

Many years ago the children's Christmas pageant I directed had a song in it called Man is by Nature a Sinner. I was shocked, first by the title (purely patriarchal) and then by the subject (sin at Christmas time?). To my surprise, the song was beautiful, true to life with examples of human weakness and rich with the Gospel message of unconditional love and saving grace.

Every person is sinner "by nature." Isn't it good to know that God doesn't expect us to be perfect? Doesn't it make life a little easier knowing that not only does God know that we will mess up, but that our Creator has provided a means to reconcile our errors and set us back on track?

Whether we call it sin, missing the mark, messing up, it doesn't matter. Sin is a reality of being human that separates us from God. The beauty of Paul's message is that he is declaring "no condemnation" based not on our conduct, but on our status "in Christ Jesus." Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, unlocked the door, so that we can never be permanently separated from God.

Whether Christmas, Easter or the Fourth of July, it is always fitting to give thanks for God's gift through Jesus Christ.

Prayer: For loving us in spite of who we really are, we give you thanks, O God. Amen.

*Barbara Smisek
Sunday, February 28*

PAUL'S TOUGH LOVE

1 Cor. 4:8-21

A paraphrase of the passage (abridged): “It seems to me that God has put us who bear His message on stage in a theater in which no one wants to buy a ticket. We’re something everyone stands around and stares at, like an accident in the street. We’re the Messiah’s misfits. We’re treated like garbage, potato peelings from the culture’s kitchen. And it’s not getting any better. I’m not writing all this as a neighborhood scold just to make you feel rotten. I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled. I know there are some among you who are so full of themselves they never listen to anyone, let alone me. They don’t think I’ll ever show up in person. But I’ll be there sooner than you think, God willing. God’s Way is not a matter of mere talk; it’s an empowered life. So how should I speak to you – as a disciplinarian or as a good friend and counselor? You decide.

Sometimes we want to tell someone exactly what we’re thinking. Call it tough love. Call it an intervention. Call it reality therapy. We rarely want to be the recipient of this, but we are often witnesses to it when we listen to call-in talk show hosts, reality television and advice columnists who use this blunt approach.

Was Paul the first Dr. Laura? Paul’s letters in the New Testament give us his side of dialogue. We do not know what the Corinthians and other communities in his travels did to rate his admonishments or if they wrote in reply. It would have made an interesting scene to learn both sides. What we have are centuries of translations attributed to Paul. The Message’s author, Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible wanted a contemporary “vitality and directness ... writing straight from the original Greek.” Paul’s writings do not disappoint.

Prayer: Lord, Open me to the reality of your love. Amen

*Lily Blase
Monday, March 1*

AT YOUR LIMIT

Mark 3: 19-35

Phone ringing. Full calendar. No break in sight. We've all been there. It's that place where you feel like there is nothing left of you to give and where you're wondering why you're doing any of this at all. Not only have we all been there, but Jesus was there too.

Jesus is, once again, in demand by the curious, the in-need, the devoted, and the accusatory. His friends are so concerned about him that they attempt to go in to rescue him (v. 21). Upon their arrival, they hear Jesus confronting the religious teachers who came to accuse Him. He is delivering rational arguments and warnings (v. 22-30). Now, Jesus' mother and brother want a word with him because they are concerned (v.31-32). He doesn't say no. He doesn't rebuke. He instead seeks clarification. "What exactly do you mean?" He broadens his "family" to "whoever does God's will" (v. 33-35). He welcomes more into community with him.

Can you imagine? As we interact with all of those who ask for our time and energy, with what attitude do we approach them? We can learn a lot from Jesus here. There are numerous examples of Jesus taking time to renew and reflect, and we also need that time. But he also shared the bounty of that rejuvenation to expand his limit of love and action to all his brothers and sisters.

Prayer: Lord, I need your rejuvenation to expand my limits. Today, empower me to expand my limits to include all of your children. As I trust in you to provide the time and energy, I will step out with understanding and inclusiveness to demonstrate your love, as shown to me through Jesus. Amen.

*Emily Snodgrass
Tuesday, March 2*

SOWING PARABLES

Mark 4: 1-21

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed . . . some seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

Atop the Nebraska State Capitol stands Lee Lawrie's 19 foot tall sculpture, the Sower. Seeds of life are cast to the winds to inspire citizens to build a prosperous life. We are invited to be open and attentive to Jesus' teaching. These settings for "planting" have intriguing implications for effective parenting, educational theory, and business plans. Unfortunate circumstances such as rocky roads and thorny relationships minimize the development of potential. We mistakenly put poorly timed or ill-advised efforts in non-productive situations. When our faithful offerings are rooted and surrendered without anxious care, our efforts are rewarded. To reap abundance, we must persevere and confidently trust in God's guidance to discern optimal conditions.

Inspired by his agrarian roots, John Cawood, a priest in the church of England, penned lyrics in 1815 based on this parable. I believe it can inspire us yet today.

*Let not the world's deceitful cares the rising plant destroy,
But let it yield a hundred fold the fruits of peace and joy.
So when precious seed is sown, your quickening grace bestow
That all whose souls the truth receive its saving power may know.*

Prayer: Creator God, your teachings are cast like seeds into the ground. May this message grow in our hearts so that love may abound.

*Susan Goodrich
Wednesday March 3*

SOWING THE SEED OF KINDNESS

Mark 4:30-32

Have you ever had to approach someone who is routinely unhappy, unapproachable and generally disagreeable? Many encounter this routinely at work, while shopping or even in our own homes.

I was asked to take a time-sensitive request to the manager of the purchasing department, who was notorious for being short tempered and disagreeable. As I entered this individual's office, I handed the order over and began to explain the situation. The manager immediately handed the order back. My irritation was growing, but as I felt myself begin to mirror the behavior I was encountering, I made a conscious decision to stop.

Taking a deep breath, I smiled empathetically and asked the manager if everything was okay? Her face immediately went blank, as if she had forgotten how to respond to kindness. After a short pause, she mumbled about having too much work to do. I replied that I understood how overwhelming things around the office had been lately and she proceeded to help me.

I planted a small seed in this individual simply by showing empathy. My future interactions were always cordial. Perhaps if we all tried to show a little kindness to that overwhelmed employee, an impatient child or the anxious parent, we might plant the seed of change in their demeanor and they might learn how good it feels to mirror kindness.

Prayer: Loving God, I pray that we may take the time for “short pauses” during our interactions with others, so that we may act in kindness to all.

*Julie Heinrich
Thursday, March 4*

IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING

1 Corinthians 7: 1-9

Many of my high school English students are addicted to texting on their cell phones. I don't use the term addicted lightly. Cell phone use is forbidden in class, of course, but as I observe students hiding their phones in whatever way they think they can get away with while they continue to text, I'm increasingly convinced that at least some of them truly *can't* keep their hands off them. Their itch to text overpowers all other concerns, even the desire to stay out of trouble. I have been cried to, lied to, and openly defied much more often about phones and texting than any of the myriad other distractions that have rolled through my classroom during the past 30 years. So I worry that this seriously interferes with the greater purpose of what we do in our schools.

Almost 2000 years ago, St. Paul also worried about the Christians he mentored and taught. The distraction he addressed specifically in 1 Corinthians 7 was the heat of sexual desire. Paul wished his flock could, like him, remain single and celibate to pursue greater purposes and avoid distractions of the flesh that interfered with their spiritual growth.

This jars our modern sensibilities, tempting us to dismiss Paul's admonitions as anachronistic and irrelevant. But when we stop to think, we know in our hearts there are many distractions that keep us from the things that truly matter, from the seeking and giving and loving we ought to be doing as Christians—and as part of the greater human community.

Prayer: Dear God, our ultimate teacher and mentor, help us learn to sift through life's distractions to find the substance of what really matters to You and to us. Amen.

Julie Doerr
Friday, March 5

FROM DEMONS TO POWERFUL PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Mark 5: 1-20
Mark 5:1-20

In the fourth chapter of Mark, Jesus and his disciples had weathered a deadly storm. As they approach land in anticipation of much-needed rest, they encountered a violent, self-destructive man possessed by demons. Jesus quickly recognized the man's problem and commanded the demons to leave the man.

We each encounter individuals plagued with their own demons – lack of self-confidence and insecurity, debilitating mental illness, broken relationships, on-going health concerns, etc. The demons can create a life of bondage, similar to the man in the Gospel of Mark. We have an opportunity to minister to the afflicted and be Christ to them. Even though Jesus was able to free the man of his demons, we are not called upon to “fix” the personal demons of others. Rather, we can make a difference by being available, listening intently, and showing compassion.

The liberated man begged to go with Jesus. However, Jesus instructed the man to “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.” The power of the personal touch in relating an experience is an opportunity to minister to others. During this reflective season of Lent, may we each find occasions to tell others what wondrous things God has done for us.

Tell it over and over,
Tell it over again;
Tell of mercy and love and salvation,
Till all earth shall reply, Amen!

*A. Rosalthe Carey
Ann Finkner*

BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST'S DEATH?!?

Romans 6:3-6

When I brought my children to the baptismal font I had no more idea what they were getting into than I knew what I was getting into when I said, "I do." The minister smiled beatifically, sprinkled a few drops of water on each one's head, and the congregation collectively beamed. It was lovely. For my children to follow Jesus seemed a good idea. Then I read we are "baptized into his death". What?!

Only gradually have I come to see that trying to follow Jesus and turning for help and guidance to his God who is Love, wakes us up little by little to the truth of who we are: someone different than the gods of consumerism, and autonomy said. That awakening may lead to death - of relationships, of family cohesion, even career path.

Those deaths come, not because we seek them, but because God, working secretly inside of us, is changing each one into a more Christ-like person (yes, that Christ who welcomed little children with open arms and overturned tables in the Temple). That God who is Love gives us a new vision of what life can be that leads us to acquiesce in what's being done in us. Deaths continue: death of anxiety, death of shame . . . This is what happens when Jesus gets hold of you.

Is this what we want for our children?!

Prayer: Secretly-working God, I'm still finding out who you made me to be. I trust that what you are doing with me is much better for everybody than what I could do, so help me not to get in your way, but to work with you, as Jesus did. Amen

*Kathryn Campbell
Sunday, March 7*

SEEING LIFE

Mark 5: 21-43

We of this world see someone or something as dead, while Jesus looks at the very same thing and declares it alive. We are certain of the death in front of us (death of love, trust, hope, possibility...). Jesus looks at what we have pronounced dead and tells us, certainly, that it lives. It is not dead. It is alive.

How much of life have we given up on? What aspects of the world and its people – systems, decisions, circumstances – have we determined unchangeable or beyond repair? What relationships have we “given up for dead?” What parts of ourselves are deadened? What abilities or dreams have been buried?

Imagine with me Jesus looking compassionately on our pain and brokenness, our anxiety and regret saying: “It is alive. Don’t be afraid, only believe.” Can we hear this today? Can we see signs of life where we have trained ourselves in resignation?

Mark tells us people in the room made fun of Jesus’ declaration of life. Then as now, being asked to trade fear for belief brings our armor up. The reaction may be, “*he doesn’t get it.*” We list reasons to hang on to just this one fear, this one thing that really is beyond hope.

We are given another invitation, shown another way. Feeling Jesus’ loving presence as an old friend in the room, we hear him say: “It is alive...you are alive...love is alive...LOOK with me...” And the heartbeat returns.

Prayer: Loving God, awaken us to the life and possibility in all things. Strengthen us to imagine Your possibilities. Amen.

*Erin Glenn-Hash
Monday, March 8*

FOCUSING ON GOD

I Corinthians 7: 32-35

Be Stress-free! 10 Ways to Please Your Spouse/Partner! These and similar topics scream at us from magazine covers as we stand in the check-out lines. Paul seems to be saying we will not have worldly anxieties if we stay unmarried, having no one to please but God. My first response whenever I read this is “What am I doing wrong?” I’m not married but I confess that my interests are far from undivided and I am rarely focused on “how to be holy in body and spirit.” I can’t imagine that even in Paul’s day unmarried individuals didn’t have anxieties over mundane and worldly matters.

Maybe what we should strive for is to reduce the distractions, in order to increase the opportunities to focus on God. One day as I drove home from work, I was reviewing this passage in my mind, wondering what on earth I could say about it. My thoughts roamed, touching on somewhat related scriptures, ideas, and catch-phrases ranging from “Consider the lilies of the field” to “Let go/Let God.” Suddenly I realized I had sat through one red light and driven several more blocks without any of my usual impatience! In thinking about a Biblical passage and its meaning for me, opening my mind to anything that might come, concerns about work left undone at the office and the chores waiting for me at home ceased to exist. What a moment of Grace! How exciting it is to realize that we can take these opportunities to focus on God even in the middle of our busy days.

Prayer: Compassionate God, You know how caught up we get in our lives, trying to please others, being anxious about worldly affairs. Help us to open our hearts and minds in devotion to you. In Jesus’ name, amen.

*Susan Klein
Tuesday, March 9*

ARE WE DISTRACTED?

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

As I read through this passage to begin to think about my Lenten devotional, I found myself to be distracted by a variety of things going on around me. Of course, I had to read the passage again. Then it occurred to me what was happening, and indeed what often happens to me and I would guess many others so often.

There are many things in life that we distract ourselves with. We in fact make these things our priorities, often forgetting what is truly important. We feed our ambitions to achieve certain goals, or as the passage suggests, we feed idols that do not exist. We use money or possessions to measure our status. And yet what God calls us to do, is to use all that we have to give thanks.

1 Corinthians 8: 6 says: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

As we continue through this Lenten season, let us not distract ourselves with the many false idols that we put before us, but let us remember to use what we have to give praise and thanks to God.

Prayer: God, Creator, as we appreciate the beauty of your creation, let us not falsely worship our own creations. Let us acknowledge the gift we are given by using them to honor you. Amen.

*Jeremy Bankson
Wednesday, March 10*

SHIFTING YOUR DESIRES

1 Corinthians 9: 1-15

I want to examine the implications of this passage not only for its author but for all people in modern society. Let me first begin by offering what is at stake in this passage: the integrity of the author, the gravity of the human condition and the social nature of us all. Starting with the latter we must ask, is it not human nature for all people to desire praise or reward, and for all people both past and present would that not include prospering from one's daily labors? The author cites numerous examples of this, rebuking those who would scrutinize or examine him and his actions, by saying to them that everyone including yourselves desire monetary and material rewards for your efforts.

The author addresses this by simply asking the rhetorical questions concerning his own spiritual worth that everyone tries to answer for themselves. The author's take-home message however, is "I am fulfilled and satisfied through living the gospel." It was and still remains part of our human nature to desire praise and reward for our actions, and in the modern world the societal pressures for financial and economic self-preservation are harder to attain than ever before, making competition and greed commonplace. This passage suggests that by replacing our desire to compete and our need for reward, living the gospel is not only possible but it offers a more fulfilling life than one dictated by the rewards and benefits of societal endeavors.

Prayer: O Lord help us silence our material desires for success and external gratification, Guide us towards the teachings of compassion and caring, and help us become more fully human through a shift in our desire for belonging and purpose that is centered on a relationship with the divine in us all.

*Mitchell Connelly
Thursday, March 11*

THE OTHER SHOE

Mark 6:47-56

Do you ever find yourself waiting for ‘the other shoe to drop?’ Things seem to be running smoothly . . . but how long will it last? Or even, if a couple of things haven’t gone right – bad things come in threes – what’s next?

I learned to prepare for the worst. I have a reputation as a worrier. Obviously, I’ve said, done, and thought each of those things. But that’s not what God wants of me or for me.

When the disciples were in the boat on the rough seas and saw Jesus walking on water, they were terrified. Jesus said to them, “Courage . . . take heart . . . it’s all right. It is I.”

I believe that God wants me to appreciate each moment of life that I have. I’m not appreciating anything when I’m worrying about what might happen next. I need to trust that God has *good* planned for me. Then watch to see what it will be and from which direction it is coming.

Believing in the goodness of God and watching to see that belief confirmed; those are activities that can not only benefit me, but, by my example, others as well. So if you see me waiting for the other shoe to drop, please remind me: “Courage . . . take heart . . . it’s all right.” God is here.

Prayer: Father, help us to be smart, to prepare when it’s important to be prepared. But help us to recognize each positive, beautiful, creative moment that you have given us. If we’re in a place where we can’t see those, put your arm around us and tell us to, “Take heart.” Then open our eyes so we can see again. Amen.

Pam Moore
Sunday March 14

ENCOURAGING WORDS

John 17: 1-8

John tells us that on the night that Jesus was betrayed, before he was arrested, Jesus spoke at length to his disciples, and then turned to the Lord in prayer. During his petition, he recounted that he had completed the work God had given him to do, and asked that he be taken back into the glorious presence of God, even as He had been before the creation of the world. A very interesting concept - that Christ knew of the Father's glory, had shared it, and came to earth to preach it - all this before being born in human form.

He continued, acknowledging the success of his mission, that he had made men aware of the glory of God, and that those men had faith that Christ in fact had come from God. Implicit in this was that those who believed in Christ, and subscribed to his teachings, would share in God's eternal love.

This idea is the great capstone of the Christian faith. Acceptance of Christ as our redemptive Savior allows us the certainty that we can and shall enter into the joy of the Master, as good and faithful servants. This belief, that God so loved us that He sacrificed His only son that we might be saved if we believed in Him, is what it is all about.

When we are tortured by doubt, and our faith is fragile, these words of Jesus can give us solace and confidence. They tell us that there is a plan, and a path to salvation, and they should be a balm to our sin-sick souls.

James Hewitt
Saturday, March 13

THE BREAD OF LIFE

John 6:35 – 40

I recently read a book by a Jewish man who considers himself an atheist, but who tried following the rules of the Bible for one year. Obviously, he couldn't follow all of those rules in the Torah, so he had to sort through and figure out which ones he wanted to attempt. He came up with some of the ones we would expect, the 10 Commandments, developing a prayer life, not drinking, or swearing. But he also decided to try to live out some of the more esoteric rules. The book describes his struggle to be faithful to these laws.

There are some very funny moments as he describes his decision to sew tassels on his clothes, grow his beard and sideburns, making sure none of the clothes he wore were made with two kinds of fibers. There are also poignant moments as he struggles with not lying, not gossiping, and praying on a daily basis. At the end of the book, he discloses that he's not sure he believes in God, but he has noted some changes in his life. He is less anxious, more compassionate, and more grateful for his life and what it offers him. In short, he is more content and joyful.

He may not believe in a higher power, but he has found the Bread of Life. When we follow Jesus, the way of Jesus, his life and teachings, we will find the Bread of Life. When we cultivate the kind of life Jesus lived and taught we will find ourselves full. We will be satisfied. We will be nourished. And so will those around us. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "I am the bread of life."

Prayer: Holy One, thank you for sending Jesus, so that we may know how to live in a way that brings us closer to you. And in living closer to you, find peace for ourselves, and more compassion for our brothers and sisters. Amen

*Nancy Erickson
Sunday, March 14*

OPEN TO OTHERS, OPEN TO GOD

Mark 7:24 – 37

Mark 5:1-2

I am tired. We all are tired. We have children and spouses and jobs. We are supposed to be gourmet cooks, have spotlessly organized homes, recycle, run marathons, volunteer, climb mountains, write novels, look like a catalog model, and do it all with a smile on our face (and not a hair out of place).

Jesus was tired too. He escaped to Tyre for a bit of a vacation but all the demands of the world followed him there. A Gentile woman who asked him to heal her daughter maybe just put him over the edge. Instead of Jesus the gentle teacher kindly healing her daughter, she got insults and a short temper. However, she didn't give up, and Jesus listened. Her persistence called him to be open to all of God's creation and Jesus healed her daughter. She reminded him of the importance and worth of all beings – Jews, Gentiles, children, animals, the abled and the disabled, women and men

So when I am tired, and I have had enough, I need to be open to God. I also need to be persistent and continue to advocate for those whose voices are not always heard, but also need healing. Thankfully, God does not require us to be perfect (Jesus clearly displayed his human side in this story), but just to be open and listen to God and each other.

Prayer: God, remind me that even Jesus experienced human exhaustion, but when he opened himself to God's creation, he was renewed and healing began. Help me to remember that I can be renewed and healed by being open to God as well.

*Suzanne L. Sughroue
Monday, March 15*

SACRED HOSPITALITY

Mark 8:1-10

When I was growing up, my family would drive 50 miles to visit my grandmother after church every other Sunday. She'd greet us with a smile and plenty of hugs. She always had a big meal ready for us. As you walked into the kitchen, the round table displayed an array delicious food ready to be eaten. There was always happy chatter throughout the meal. Going to my grandmother's gave me a warm and welcoming feeling. Talk about great hospitality!

The word hospitality means "the friendly reception of guests and strangers." Jesus was a man who practiced hospitality and compassion in his ministry. In Mark 8:2, Jesus had been preaching for three days. He must have been exhausted, yet he told his disciples that they needed to feed everyone before they traveled to their homes. What a challenge this must have been for the disciples! Being hospitable to a small group of friends is a lot easier than showing hospitality to 4,000. Jesus was teaching the disciples a lesson about hospitality and compassion. The two go hand in hand. He has the same message for us today.

Hospitality should be part of our daily life. It can be as simple as a smile or telling someone to have a great day. Hospitality can be extended to our co-workers. Send a card or pick up the phone and call someone who has lost a loved one. On your morning drive to work, sharing the road with others in a positive way can extend hospitality to the other drivers. Food Banks, the City Mission, and many other programs all help in giving hospitality and compassion to those in need. How is God challenging you to show hospitality?

Prayer: Dear God, open our eyes to see the opportunities to reach out in hospitality to our neighbors and the strangers we meet in our daily life. Amen.

*Kathie Johnson
Tuesday, March 16*

ANOTHER WORLD

Mark 8: 11-26

I never should have let my wife talk me into getting a Jeep. After an initial few weeks of timid ascensions to the tops of curbs and carefully traversing parking lot puddles, I am now fearless in it. I've driven it to the peaks of Rocky Mountains, and crossed miles of mud-bottomed Ozark rivers. Of course I didn't think twice of driving it out to my parents' house a few miles northeast of town Christmas morning. However, about a quarter mile before I got there, I hit the drift that finally foundered my little Wrangler with an apathy achievable only by nature. I grabbed the scoop shovel I brought along and got to work. A few absurd and desperate moments of digging later, I stopped to catch my breath. I turned north to get a look at the wind, and was immediately disoriented facing such assaultive cold. Each breath seemed to feed my vertigo, soon I couldn't tell up from down. My hands became too numb to hold a shovel and I began wading through the snow. I kept looking around for a street sign, familiar land mark, anything that could point the way home, but all I could see was a world that had become only a howling swirl and I was it's lone occupant. When I fell through my parents' back door, and after they realized they were not suffering a home invasion from some kind of Yeti, I realized that even during those desperate minutes in that blizzard, there was world which was not just cold and isolating right outside my perception always waiting for me to find it again.

Prayer: Oh Lord, please help us to remember that Your truth is constant, even without obvious direction to it.

*Adam Witte
Wednesday, March 17*

THINKING ABOUT FAMILIES

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

This particular reading reminds me of my family, and how we need one another. I think in every family they fight and tell each other that they are not important when in reality they need the others to survive. A sister cannot say to another that she doesn't need her, for who would be there to hold their secrets if not them? A child cannot say to a nanny "I don't need you" for the child would realize the need as soon as the nanny was gone. This passage is also similar to a family in that they fall and rise together. They go through the good and the bad together, and they realize that at the end of every tunnel is a light, a light that will lead to the life that Christ desires for all of us.

Prayer: Today, dear God, I thank you for my family. The good and the bad days are all truly blessings with them by my side. Even on days when I want to be rid of them, I know you're there, keeping us together. I ask you to bless those who have no family to support them through their tough times, and to celebrate with them in times of joy. I ask you to lead them to their own happiness and keep them in our hearts as we go forth in our journey of life. Amen.

*Mary Stine
Thursday, March 18*

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 Corinthians 12-27-31

Strive for the greater gifts and I will show you a still more excellent way.

God has given each of us unique gifts that work together for the greater good, just as we are all members of the body of Christ. Think about your role in the various groups of your life; your family, work, friends, church. Do you play the same role in each group? Or, is your part somewhat different in each setting? I know mine isn't the same everywhere. Yet, we each have a gift to bring to each group, especially our church. Is your gift being a 'dish disciple,' part of a prayer group, attending a Course in Miracles or other adult class, teaching Sunday School, taking part in a discussion group, sharing your expertise with others, planting and tending the landscaping, cleaning the church, singing, playing an instrument, taking pictures, ushering, greeting, providing financial support, leading a game at the Block Party, gathering gifts for others in the community, serving on a church board, being part of a mission group, bringing food to someone recovering from grief or illness, serving at the Gathering Place, Lighthouse, or Matt Talbot's Kitchen? Find your joy in serving others.

There is a greater need for saints now than ever before. Never has the world been so organized, press, radio, education, recreation, to turn our minds away from Christ. St. Paul was converted when he had murder in his mind. We are all called to be saints. *God expects something from each one of us that no one else can do. If we don't do it, it will not be done* (from Dorothy Day "All is Grace" The Need for Saints Now).

Prayer: Loving Creative God, Thank you for the many gifts you give each of us that we may work together for the greater good of all your people. Amen

*Jeanne Johnson
Friday March 19*

THE WAVE – IS LOVE THAT EASY?

I Corinthians 13:13

So faith, hope, love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

On a drive to Lincoln one summer's day, a car passed me and the driver waved. I didn't recognize the driver or the car, and the wave wasn't just a lifting of a few fingers off the steering wheel. It was a wildly exuberant, hand-shaking-out-the-window kind of wave. And, she waved that same wildly exuberant, hand-shaking-out-the-window wave to every single car she met. I was joyful at her joyfulness. Was it motivated by love? Can something so easy be love?

Paul mentions faith, hope and love five more times in his letters. If God's love is poured into our hearts (I like that image), then love must be flowing through our bodies. We must be filled with love, so how do we express it, and what blocks our expressing it? Love is a reflection of God's own character and is a specific concrete expression of our own personality. If God's love works through us, we can be alert to seeing it in others too. Yes, I can choose to see "the wave" as that driver's expression of love – a lovely way to start the day. Let us go and do likewise.

Prayer: Ever-present God, help us experience the rich meaning, purpose and beauty around us, and help us remember that we are part of it, as you planned. Amen.

*Nancy Howard
Saturday, March 20*

WHEN PIGS SING

John 8:46-59

“Never try to teach a pig to sing; it only wastes your time and annoys the pig.” Sensitive people may find that phrase insulting. Pigs, being intelligent creatures, realize no offense is intended so none is taken. Pig lore is full of practical advice concerning everything from casting pearls to what not to make from a sow’s ear. Pigs love stress-free situations like feeding at a trough, although, if required, even a blind sow can find a few acorns.

In the book of John, the Pharisees repeatedly attempted to drag Jesus through their court, and trip him up with their legalistic arguments. When they depleted their limited legal lexicon, they respond like children quarreling on a playground: “Is not!” “Is, too!” “You’re crazy!” “You’re REALLY crazy!” “Oh, yeah? Prove it!” Of course, Jesus is the Teacher on this playground. He deftly steers the dialog between historical truth and living lies, and patiently distinguishes “words” from “the Word”. The Pharisees are confounded and, as bullies often do, resort to force when they fail to get their way. In this chapter, they pick up stones to silence Jesus, but he is able to slip away.

Prayer:

Unknowable Creator, font of light and wisdom,
Thy origin raised high beyond all things,
Pour forth a ray of Your brightness into my shadowed mind;
Disperse the ignorant darkness in my soul.
Amen.
- Adapted from Thomas Aquinas

*Matthew Finkner
Sunday, March 22*

WHY USE FIVE WORDS WHEN 500 WILL DO?

1 Corinthians 14: 1-19

Often we talk and talk and talk – in person, on the phone, texting, facebooking, tweeting. After awhile, people don't have any idea of what we've said. We are speaking, but we are not communicating – not connecting. We are not really heard. It's almost as though we are speaking in an unknown language. Our words are numerous but end up meaningless. Why use five words when 500 will do?!

Sometimes we speak very little. This quietness can be sincere attentiveness. We are just waiting to be sure we have something valuable to say and a thoughtful way of sharing it before we break a prayerful silence. When a quiet voice finally speaks, we tend to listen, and there is a surprising power and presence to the wisdom and insight that just a few words can bring. And sometimes we don't even need to speak a single word to communicate. If a connection is made, one can have a "conversation" with movement, a glance, body language, drawing, humming, cleaning, cooking – anything really!

God doesn't care what language we speak or how we package the message of love that we are called to share with all our neighbors. God does care that we do all we can to communicate love with every unique person we meet in whatever way they need to be able to "hear" the message.

Prayer: Gracious, loving God, help us to discover the ways to communicate your message to each person we meet. Help us to connect with our neighbors and to fully share your amazing love with others. Your love, O God, is not a gift just for us to keep. Help us to continually share your gift with all our brothers and sisters each and every day. Amen.

*Tom Trenney
Monday, March 22*

OF INNOCENCE AND COMMITMENT

Mark 9: 42

And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea.

This passage has seemingly contradictory messages in its violent imagery. At the time Mark recounted Jesus sayings, many of the members of the early church had experienced extreme violence in their lives. The Romans had just sacked Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. The early followers of Jesus faced many challenges and could be killed because of who they were or what they believed. However, Jesus' message was that they should live with the love and innocence of the little children he held in his arms.

Today earthquakes and suicide bombers remind us of the potential for violence and destruction in the world. Jesus tells us to open our arms and our hearts to love like little children in spite of this violence and destruction. He also reminds us that little children are whole-hearted in everything they do. We need to live whole-heartedly if we are to manifest this love in the face of all the hate and distractions in the world.

Prayer: Help us to be open to love with the innocence of little children and the whole-hearted commitment to show your light in the way we live our lives.

*Kent Winston
Tuesday, March 23*

PAYING ATTENTION

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6

We are all called by God to minister in some way in our daily lives. If we stay open, pay attention and listen to the spirit, we will better know how to be Christ's people.

I felt called to be an elementary teacher. When I was truly open and aware of the children's needs, great things happened. When I was not distracted by my own worries, it was my joy to be a part of the lives of so many children and their families.

Little did I know what God had in store for me in retirement! I feel lucky to be an antique dealer, my second passion after teaching. I have been shown time and again that I am not in the shop only to sell "old stuff." On the days that I work in the shop, my prayer is always that I will be open and truly paying attention to the folks who walk in the door. When I follow God's nudging, amazing things have happened. I have been blessed to hear people share their financial troubles, health concerns and sense of feeling lost in the world. I feel I have been put there to be a witness to God's love, unending willingness to forgive, and hope.

To paraphrase Paul in 2 Corinthians 2-3, "we do not peddle the word of God for profit" nor can we claim any credit for the good that may come out of anything we might do or say. It is God, in Christ's spirit, who makes us confident to be a messenger. With a humble heart, I am willing to be a witness to the message of Christ. During this time of Lent, may we all be open to the ways God wants to use us.

Prayer: On our Lenten journey, Lord, forgive us for missed opportunities to share the Resurrection message. Nudge us to open ourselves to your guidance as we meet our sisters and brothers in need of your promise of grace and hope.

Betsy Pearson
Wednesday, March 24

UNVEILING A HIDDEN GLORY

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

As I did every year near Memorial Day, I stared at my great-grandfather's faded headstone trying to decipher what appeared to be a poem carved below his name. Since he had been born in Germany, I assumed the poem was written in his native tongue; however, my college German failed me each year. This past year I approached the grave from a different angle and amazingly one cluster of the worn letters popped out at me—in English! Then, as if a veil was being lifted, the poem became completely legible. I was astonished by the description my great-grandfather, the phrases speaking of a sensitive man with a strong faith in God. This did not match the image I had developed from family stories of a stoic immigrant who ruled his large family with an iron hand.

As we drove away from the cemetery, I struggled with the conflicting images of my ancestor. Had one of his children or grandchildren known a different side of him? Perhaps they bravely peeked beneath the veil he had put over his personality, not unlike Moses who covered his face to prevent the Israelites from staring at the glory that resulted from his experience with God. I then realized how often people may experience the glory of God, only to hide it from others. I resolved from that point on not only to accept the freedom of reflecting God's glory with an un-veiled attitude, but to be certain to look at others from different angles to catch glimpses of their images of faith and spirit.

Prayer: Dear God, please help me to openly reflect your glory through my words and actions and be ever aware of your radiance shining through others.

*Catherine Corbet
Thursday, March 25*

FOLLOWING THE WAY

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. (1) . . . For God . . . made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (6)

Though we are just human beings, and imperfect ("clay jars" as the passage says), we have within us the light that comes from God. It is not our own perfection, but God's that enables us to do better than we might ordinarily do. We know God through Jesus Christ's ministry on earth and through the love we show one another. Sometimes it is comforting to know that we can turn to God and to that light within to find our way forward. Because God is, we can.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, shine within me today, "Be Thou my vision," so that Your light may illumine my path and help me to follow Christ's Way. Amen.

*Kathryn Bellman
Friday, March 26*

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Our family, as we know it, was kind of set in a tailspin after our youngest son was married. He found out he had a 20 month old daughter. As a family we began looking into the future, what would be best for this little girl and our son and his new wife.

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen . . .” It would have been easy to point fingers and make accusations, not being ready, newly married, dealing with the birth mother, shuffling a child back and forth . . . “But on what is unseen.” This little child of God, her needs for stable parents and extended family. How will this impact her life in the future? Maybe now is not the best timing, but it’s what has been handed to us and God will lead all of us on this journey.

One of my daughter-in-law’s (and my) favorite quotes of Mother Teresa is “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that he didn’t trust me so much.” The struggles right now are temporary, and more will always come along, but the unseen, the caring, support and unconditional love we share are eternal.

Prayer: God, help us to close our eyes temporarily to the worries and challenges around us and focus inward on your everlasting, unconditional love. Amen

*Deb and Jim Comstock
Saturday, March 27*

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH

First Timothy 6:12

Lives are found wandering along their faith trail as doubt has entered. Percival as he sought the Holy Grail, Timothy in Corinth, each fighting to find the way back to a faith in Christ. The closeness of God had been felt, but is now gone.

We see the warriors returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, coming back less than whole. The room in intensive care, respirator is off, monitors quiet, a daughter died from H1N1. Having worked for twenty-five years for the same firm, the company is sold and you have no job. Where is God?

During Lent, Jesus is to give us direction. He struggles with His colleagues, but they do not hear or understand His message. They deny knowing Him, run away. Jesus finds himself with the blues, doubting, questioning. Jesus prays, talks with God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We grieve over loss, change, pain, wounds. What is the purpose of life; what does change signify? Jesus had to have the blues, had to die. We certainly suffer the blues, and will die. Our lives present as a struggle, love hurts, the cross hurts, birth and death hurt. God asks us to do more than we believe or want to do. Lent is a story of pain, desperation and rejection. Realizing that, we are ultimately left with nothing to cling to but our God. We must reach out and grab onto our God. Holding on to the love and joy we can find in God. Remembering Jesus and His blues, and His fighting the good fight of faith.

Prayer: Lord, help us to remember and hold onto You as we struggle with the blues.
AMEN

*George Wolcott
Sunday, March 28*

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORDS OF A CHILD

2nd Corinthians 1: 1-7

2 Grace to you and peace from God that is our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and father of Jesus Christ, the father of mercies and the God of all consolations.

As we experience the Lenten season, I think back to Christmas Eve this year. The tree was up, decorated with lights shining and piles of gifts were resting under the tree. I was anxiously awaiting the arrival of my four-year old granddaughter.

Olivia arrived in her red Christmas dress. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. She saw the nativity scene on the table. She said softly, "I like that." I asked her if she knew who the people were. She reached out with those beautiful hands of a child and carefully touched the figures one by one. "This is Joseph." she said. "And this is Mary" she added, as she gently touched the figure on the head. She looked at the figure in the manger and carefully patted the infant and said, "This is baby God."

I carry that sentence into the somber Lenten season. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that the joyfully celebrated baby God is the same figure that leads to the miracle of God at the resurrection.

Prayer: Oh Sacred One, We give thanks for the bountiful blessings that you have bestowed upon us. We thank you for the gift of faith. Thank you for our ability to hear not only with our ears, but also with our hearts. We ask you Holy One, to send your blessing to those less fortunate and to mend the hearts and heal the bodies of those who suffer. We pray for consolation for those who are in need and we ask that you grant peace and mercy to us all. Amen

*Sally Jones
Monday, March 29*

CELEBRATING THE HOPEFULNESS OF LENT

2 Corinthians 1:8-22

Life is a process, with opportunities to be transformed, to engage in a renewing of the mind. Reading 2 Corinthians enhanced my understanding of Lent. Many avoid Lent because we do not think of it as a happy or uplifting time. While Lent is a time of preparation through prayer and penitence, we might also view it as a time of celebration of Jesus' victory over sin and death. We can choose to view Lent as a time of renewal, and the observance of Lent as a choice, rather than an obligation.

What can we do during Lent to re-focus on spirituality? Many consider some form of self-denial, such as eliminating or limiting indulgences related to food or entertainment. Or we may wish to consider a variety of things we might do for the benefit of others: sharing our friendship, providing a listening ear, or contributing our time as well as our money to worthy charities.

I've had privilege and honor to serve as a Stephen Minister, to engage in mentoring through TeamMates, and to offer workshops such as "Strengths Finders," and "celebrating God's Creation of Our Amazing Universe." I hope these efforts have helped others to gain insight about themselves and the wonderful world in which we live. I had the great privilege of spending fifteen years working for Dr. Don Clifton's Gallup Organization, where the mission was for each of us to be "other-oriented."

Prayer: Dear God, please forgive us for our foolish ways. Bring into our consciousness specific things each of us might do to enhance the lives of others who might benefit from our efforts and our resources. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

*Paul Thompson
Tuesday, March 30*

WE MUST BE QUICK TO BE CALM

2 Corinthians 1:23 – 2:11

I am an extremely emotional person. I can dance in my joy and share it with others freely. In fact, I strongly desire companionship in these moments! To have others laugh and smile with me only accelerates the joy I am feeling myself. But with the ability to feel and share extreme joy comes the ability to feel and share extreme anger and hurt. This is not something I care for in myself and I struggle with it daily.

There have been many times in my life that I have been hurt or have felt that someone was unfair to someone I love. The emotions stir within me and I can feel that a confrontation may occur. Without taking even a breath to think of the effect my words may have, I speak out. The hurt or frustration or anger becomes the fuel for a verbal lashing. The attack is often over long before I've realized it was in full swing, let alone in time to give myself a chance to stop – reflect – make certain the effects of my words would nurture; not tear apart.

Paul speaks to the Corinthians in this passage, asking them to reaffirm their love toward a fellow Christian in their community. This reminds me very much of advice given to me by a very dear friend. At the end of an email exchange in which I had spilled forth much emotion and frustration about people in my life, he said only, “We must be quick to be calm.”

And we must.

Prayer: Generous and loving God, dwell within our hearts, filling us so richly with your love that we can make no other choice than to approach those in our lives with the patience and unceasing love you have for us. Amen.

*Rebecca Shane
Wednesday, March 31*

THE GIFT OF COMMUNION

Mark 14:22-25

On that last night, at the Passover meal, Jesus gave himself to his Disciples, his beloved followers through the bread and wine, (body and blood), as a way of remembering Him; of being in union and reunion with Him.

This was pure grace, given without a test of knowledge or worthiness; freely given, freely accepted. The Communion meal leaves us as His followers a way to unite and reunite in love, to express remembrance and gratitude to Jesus who died in shame, executed as a criminal for our sake.

Now we can forever be with Jesus in communion, with Him and all those who are his loving followers – together in remembrance of Him who is our all – with gratitude for His gift of eternal life, and His gift of being forever present to us throughout our journey. Communion with Jesus gives us strength for the journey and loving connection to Him who is our Savior, our Teacher, and our loving friend.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for giving yourself in love to us as food for our journey, and for being with us always.

*Colene Walker
Thursday, April 1*

PETER'S CHOICE

John 13:36-38

I recall often sitting in church during Holy Week and listening to this passage. Peter, full of bravado, tells Jesus he would lay down his life for him. Imagine how baffled Peter must have been when Jesus told Peter that he would deny even knowing him three times by dawn! Sitting and listening to this reading, I thought I would never face Peter's choice and, certainly if I did, I would never deny my Lord.

Age and experience have intervened and I have become acutely aware of how often we have to make Peter's choice in our daily lives. When the phone rings and caller-id tells us that it is our friend that is struggling with alcoholism and we think, "Let it go to voice mail, I am too tired to answer," we have made Peter's choice. When we are aware that our elderly neighbor needs a ride to the grocery store and we think, "It takes her forever to pick up just a few things and I don't have the patience," we make Peter's choice. When we pass the giving tree at church and have the means to help but are unwilling to provide our money and energy to do so, we have made Peter's choice. The choice to show that we know Jesus presents itself to us daily. What choice will you make?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Lord, grant that we may see and acknowledge your presence in everyone we encounter. AMEN

*Karen Clark
Friday, April 2*

HALLELUJAH! THE SPIRIT HAS SET US FREE!

Romans 8: 1-11

How sweet the sound of these words from Romans 8: 1-11. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ”. We are truly a blessed people, who are in Christ.

So often I have sat and thought about my life and have pondered the things I have done and felt so unworthy of God’s Grace. We as humans tend to judge ourselves much more harshly than God does. We have yet to understand that the gift of this Season of Easter is unqualified freedom from condemnation. We are promised that if we live in the Spirit we have a life of blessings and freedom. We are not required to do anything, anything except live in the Spirit. This is often a concept that I have struggled with, what does it mean to live in the Spirit? So often we cannot live in the Spirit because we so quickly condemn our own life. When we fall into that trap we can no longer live in the Spirit, because we begin to live outside of the Spirit.

As it says in this particular scripture, if we live according to our own sinful nature then our mind is hostile to God for we do not submit to God’s law. However if Christ is in us, our spirit is alive because of righteousness. As long as we stay in the mind of Christ we cannot be hostile to the Holy Spirit. Staying in the mind of Christ is simple. It means to stay in the Spirit of Love. Love yourself, love others, and love Christ.

Prayer: During this Lenten Season, Lord, we are thankful that we are no longer under the laws of condemnation but freed by the Spirit to be who we were created to be.

*Ray Thomas
Saturday, April 3*

