A watercolor illustration of a workshop. In the foreground, a workbench is covered with a white cloth. On the workbench, there are two wooden barrels, one larger than the other, and several tools including a hammer and a chisel. The background shows a wall with a window or doorway on the left side. The overall style is soft and artistic.

Back to Basics

**Daily Devotions
for the 40 Days of
Lent 2018**

*From the Family and Friends of
Grace United Methodist Church*

Cover art by Darrell Brewer

Lenten Worship Opportunities 2018

Ash Wednesday, February 14

5:00 p.m. Ash Wednesday Worship Experience

7:30 p.m. Ash Wednesday Worship

Palm Sunday Worship, March 25

8:15, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.

Maundy Thursday Worship, March 29

7:30 p.m., with hand washing and Holy
Communion

Good Friday Worship, March 30

7:30 p.m.

Easter Saturday Worship, March 31

5:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary

This is an Easter service!

Easter Sunday Worship, April 1

8:15, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.

Watch *Grace In Mission* for further details.

It is my great pleasure and privilege to edit Grace Church's Lenten Book of Devotions again this year. As always, this booklet would not be possible without the heartfelt and much appreciated contributions from the friends and family of Grace United Methodist Church.

It is always a joy to discover what people share, what thoughts, feelings and reflections move them to reach out to our readers. I encouraged contributors to focus less on a prescribed "theme" and more on what's in their hearts. They did so, and I'm especially grateful to them. I am also thrilled to use as our cover art a water color painting by my dear late father, Darrell Brewer.

Finally, I am very excited for us to walk this journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday together, accompanied by this little book of daily meditations. Whether we begin this time with self-examination, prayer, self-denial and the ashes of burnt palms on our foreheads...or we simply experience the changing season in anticipation of warmer days, we are all God's children and, therefore, made new in the promise of Easter.

—Barb Ceruti

What Luke Told His Friend Theophilus About Jesus

From Merrill Litchfield, former long-time devotions booklet editor, for the 2018 season of Lent, during which we will focus on the Book of Luke.

We Americans have a huge preference for BIG numbers; yet, when we eventually learn that God loves us and relates to us one by one, we find we have some learning to do about being willing to think of small things. Small things, perhaps, like talking with friends, one-on-one, about things that are precious to us? Or, rather than banishing hunger from all of DuPage County, taking a meal to someone who needs it?

One thing we associate with our observance of Lent is Bible study, but the Bible is a huge tome! Could we, among the things we "give up for Lent," give up trying to flabbergast our friends by studying huge chunks of Scripture, and stick to a single Gospel? Luke 1:1-4 spells out for us how Luke's Gospel came to be written "in an orderly account" for one person, Theophilus. We don't know much about Theophilus—that could have been one person's name or a generic name, "God-lover," for all who come to love God. Maybe we'd do well to think of ourselves by that generic name, so Luke would be talking simply to us, helping us to put what we believe "in an orderly account"?

Ash Wednesday, February 14

WOULD THAT LOVE MIGHT SPRING FROM HATE

Barb Ceruti



I sketched this drawing of Juliet in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film version of "Romeo and Juliet" when I was about 17. After seeing the film some time in my early teens, I fell in love with the story – portrayed so gorgeously by teenagers themselves at the time, Olivia Hussey as Juliet and Leonard Whiting as Romeo.

I purchased the LP of the film's soundtrack and listened to it over and over. Nino Rota's beautiful score, intertwined with dialog from the film (Shakespeare's lines), stirred something new in me. Not of a sensual nature, nor of a coming-of-age kind of crush (though

Leonard Whiting was pretty cute!)...it was *more* of a profound understanding that, despite class or creed, love prevails.

"For never was there a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo," says the Prince of Verona in Act 5 of Shakespeare's iconic play, when the Capulet and Montague families realize the tragedy and irony of their children's self-imposed death for love that enmity would not allow.

Love for all of God's people is the most basic message in all the teachings of Christ. It was conveyed time and again by Jesus, as He lived and even as He died. As Lent begins and our Lord draws nearer to His death at the hands of those who considered Him an enemy, let us remember that Christ died for love that we might have new life, and new love, now and forever.

Thursday, February 15

WHY DON'T WE LIKE GOD?

Merrill Litchfield

Read Exodus 34:29-35; also Luke 5:1-11

Consider the book: *7 Lessons From Heaven*, by Dr. Mary C. Neal, M.D.

Interesting, isn't it? When Moses came down from Sinai the second time (the time he *didn't* catch the mobs worshipping their own idol), he wasn't aware of it, but his face was radiant from having been with the LORD. The Hebrews' reaction? "Let's get outta here!" And they stayed at a distance until Moses called them back to him, first the leaders, then the people, so Moses could give them God's message. But, when he was done talking, Moses covered that shiny face with a veil. Did God seem too big for them? Bread from the sky, water from a rock, walking dryshod where water used to be? Too scary to get close to?

Let's skip ahead to New Testament times. Jesus the man provides a face for the mystery of Godness. Is he too small to be impressive? He does do miracles, heals and teaches, but only a few will follow him. When he provides a miraculous catch of fish for Peter, Andrew, James and John, Peter's reaction? "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man."

Now let's try modern times, as reflected in Mary Neal's book. Even authors are not foolproof; on p. 59, Mary admits her after-the-fact research was done in the (initial) hope of *disproving* what had seemed to happen, so she could *get out of* having to share her story. But God, having told her to do it, also made it possible, and so she wrote and arrived at sharing with us the key step to living as a servant of God: absolute trust in Him. Not just hope, which might be a bit wimply on occasion, not just faith (sorta, I think), but trust enough to take that first step, and the rest that follow it (see p. 198).

Trouble is, we want God to prove Himself to us, rather than us proving ourselves (and our love) to Him.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, God of all that is real, give us grace to let go of our wishful pretenses. Until we trust that You will make possible all that You ask of us, we will be too scared to move, hiding in our fears. But there is no fear where You live. In the Name of Your Son, we ask to be fully with All Three of You.

Friday, February 16

WOULD-BE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Rev. Doug Bowden

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

I felt thankful, learning from our pastors Cindy, Tammy, Matthew, and Mark, that they chose the Gospel of Luke to be the primary scripture for worship in Grace Church on the Sundays of Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Easter morning. Immediately, I thought of the section in Luke, where Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51b)

As Luke makes absolutely clear, Jesus knows that suffering, arrest, trial, crucifixion are what awaits him in Jerusalem. Indeed, in this section of Luke's gospel, 9:51-19:27, called "The Travel Narrative of Jesus," Luke mentions four times, in 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; and 19:11, that Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Most significantly, Jesus commissions, teaches in parables, and heals the lepers as he travels there. My thought is to read these verses of Luke 9:51-19:27 and write devotionals for seven Lucan passages of Jesus' travel ministry. I ask you, dear sister or brother in Christ, to read and pray with me.

We begin by carefully reading and deeply pondering Jesus' words of what it means and what is required for all who would be disciples of Jesus. Indeed, from a very young age, I have found Jesus' words on discipleship here in Luke 9:57-62 to be perplexing and even difficult. Perhaps you have had the same struggle. Three persons are ready to follow Jesus and be his disciple on the hard road to Jerusalem. One tells Jesus that, first, he needs to bury his father. Jesus seems lacking in human understanding and compassion, telling him to let "the dead bury the dead." Another says to Jesus, "Let me first say farewell to those at my home." To all three, Jesus speaks these truthful words of discipleship. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (9:62)

Prayer: O God, maybe, we pray, "How can I be a disciple of Jesus?" with such unconditional demands by Jesus.

Saturday, February 17

SURPRISED BY THE SAMARITAN

Jacalyn Green Tschirhart

One of the struggles I have had in my study of the Bible is the fact that some of the words and stories used to convey messages in the time of Jesus no longer hold the same cultural relevance for us. One concept that falls into this category for me relates to exactly who the Samaritans were, particularly in the parable regarding the "Good Samaritan" (which apparently was an oxymoron at the time).

Samaritans are listed several times in the book of Luke. In chapter 9, verses 51-55, Jesus and his disciples were traveling, and Jesus sent several messengers ahead to a Samaritan village where they were not welcome. James and John were indignant, saying in verse 54, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus rebuked them, and they continued.

Shortly thereafter, Jesus was preaching. In reply to the question: "What must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and love your neighbor as yourself." (verses 25-29). Next, he was asked the inevitable question: "Who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus tells his famous parable: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest...and a Levite... passed by...But a Samaritan...took pity on him."

It is customary to think about this from the point of view of the victim. Of course, the Samaritan was "a neighbor"; he was the good guy, the hero who took care of the victim! But when taken in the intended light, the surprise twist to the story for the original ears was that the behavior of the Samaritan was a surprise.

So, if we were to rewrite this story to make it current, who would be the Samaritans? Those who worship another religion? Those with less—or more—money than us? Those who look different? Those from other countries?

Is this story just about how we deal with those who treat us kindly (which is easy), or is Jesus really challenging us to think about how we treat those with whom we are uncomfortable?

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please give me the courage and the love to be a "good Samaritan" to others, even when it is difficult...especially when it is difficult. Amen.

Sunday, February 18

BASIC RULES FOR METHODISTS:

DO GOOD, DO NO HARM

Pastor Cindy Marino

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, gave his followers three general rules to follow: Do good, do no harm, and attend upon the ordinances of God. While also known as the three simple rules, they require us to be "all in" on our journey of faith.

Wesley would never separate the three: Doing good and doing no harm meant providing help for someone in need, but also required condemnation of whatever caused the need in the first place. And the strength and courage for the first two would only come from being obedient to the last of the rules. Attending upon the ordinances means participating in the "means of grace," those activities designed by God to keep us in relationship to God and one another. They include studying scripture, praying, fasting, Christian conferencing and participating in the sacraments, putting yourself in the places where God promises to meet us.

As we consider the basics of our faith during Lent, and as we practice the practices of faith, we can benefit from Wesley's integration of these three general rules. In his 1773 essay, "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," he makes the connection between the consumption of alcohol and the shortage of grain being experienced in England: "The grand cause is, because such immense quantities of corn are continually consumed by distilling."

Methodists have long been involved in acts of mercy and ministries of justice. Our challenge is to stay connected with God, the One who opens our eyes to see the needs and the solutions, who brings us to make the connections between needs and causes and who guides us to find ways to bring equity and wholeness to a hurting and divided world. May the three general rules bring you to find your passion and call in Christ.

Prayer: Gracious God, we are challenged by the diligence of John Wesley and we are blessed by his struggle to follow your call upon his life. Help us to see others through your eyes, that we might ease suffering as well as find ways to correct the inequities that cause it. May this Lent be a time for us to ponder the basics of our faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Monday, February 19

THE MISSION OF THE SEVENTY

Rev. Doug Bowden

"Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" (Luke 10:8-9)

We are choosing to be Disciples of Jesus, even in our uncertainty and struggle, as we ponder Jesus' rigorous and uncompromising call to walk and live with him on his long and hard journey to Jerusalem.

Indeed, here in Luke, Chapter 10, Jesus adds an extra mission, which is absent in both Mark and Matthew's Gospel. Yes, only in Luke 10:1-11, 16-20, is there "The Mission of the Seventy," by Jesus.

We are well taught by Jesus for the mission on which we are sent. Jesus' particular focus is on how the seventy commissioned and sent are to respond to the hoped for hospitality they receive. Clearly, the response by disciples of Jesus is to be grateful healers and givers of blessing in the name of Jesus. Guiding light and way is here for us, in our being evangelists for Grace Church in the larger Naperville area in the new year of 2018. May our "yes" to Jesus, travelling to Jerusalem here in Luke's Gospel, move us to acts of evangelistic hospitality and ever ready to bless new sisters and brothers in Christ.

Still, there is a harder, faithful reality here. David Lose writes, "Inescapable vulnerability is implicit in the mission to which Jesus calls his disciples." This we gratefully find in the life of Emmanuel Mensah, 28 years old and an immigrant from the West African country of Ghana. One of his first decisions, as an immigrant, is to join the United States Army National Guard. In December, 2017, just before Christmas, he is home on military leave in his Bronx, New York, apartment. A massive fire breaks out. He escapes the apartment building. Then, realizing that four of his neighbors are still in the fire-filled building, he rushes in and rescues them. Alas, one more needs to be rescued on the 4th floor. Once more, he races up the stairs to where the neighbor is. "(He) never made it out. Mensah's body was found high in the building's wreckage." (Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, January 14, 2018).

Prayer: O God, walking with Jesus to Jerusalem, we pray we are ready to love like Emmanuel Mensah.

Tuesday, February 20

WHY A BIBLE STUDY NOW?

Ginnie Battle

"But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy."
(James 3:17)

I have been in Bible Study for several years running. Every year has its own personality according to the group. This year, with Grace Church's new Bible Study format, we doubled the size of our group! What a great group it is. The personal stories, shared Christian goals and experiences, and the discussions all make the time together fly by! I remember in 2010 when I went to my first one, thinking, "I need to do this. This might not be fun, but I need it to nourish my soul." I was right, and I was wrong. My soul needed the nourishment, but I never had more fun or learned so much. Rev. Bill Bryan was our leader. Who could ask for better? The class was very diversified, so I also learned about other cultural and religious beliefs.

Rev. Doug Bowden, theologian and scholar with the warmest of hearts, is our leader and guide. He seems to be just like another class member, he does it so well. Doug keeps us on track the best he can, but if we want to discuss current events, that's what we do. If we have a calling or a goal or a story to relate, we do that too.

Recently, I was sick and missed two weeks of Bible Study. One of my friends said to me, "God will forgive you." I almost laughed! I realize I do this for me! God blesses me every time I go! I really look forward to what my friends have to say, what Doug as a theologian adds, our singing together (though we would never be asked to sing as a group outside that room!), and the love, learning and caring shared.

Understanding God's word is ongoing for all of us, right? Are we really so busy we can't make time for this, or for what God calls us to do?

Thank you, Grace Church, for this opportunity. Think about joining the next Bible Study, won't you?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your Word is our guide to living the Christian life we choose. Let us study your Word, let us love one another and let us remember all things are possible when we believe in You. May we use Your Word as You intend. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Wednesday, February 21

WHAT DID JESUS NOT SAY?

Merrill Litchfield

Read: Luke 11:27-28

When I first stumbled across Luke 11: 27-28, my reaction was, "Oh, goody! Now I've got a spitball all ready for those who try to promote a special place for the Blessed Virgin." But thanks be to God that my chance to "win" that argument never came up. Now that I'm older, and not so ready to fight about stuff, maybe I'm more ready to follow St. Paul's "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:15).

One of the things I've discovered in the meantime are some of the things that Jesus *didn't* say. Things like "You're wrong!...or "Blasphemy!! Somebody hand me a rock!!! He didn't focus on the negative side of the subject (as I had been intending); he simply nudged that unnamed speaker's thoughts into a more positive channel: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

I suppose there's another negative implied here: "Don't look to some other person in some other time, in the hopes that if you praise what they did, a little of that virtue will stick to you. Nobody else can do your holy-ing for you." Listen for God, and do what He says.

Prayer: Father of all, and wellspring of the love that will make our lives beautiful, if we accept it and enact it; lead us not to truths we can use as clubs to bludgeon our way to what the world calls "winning," but, by a love like Yours, to sweet and gentle truths of truth. The kind we won't mind eating, if we have to. Amen.

Thursday, February 22

THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

Vickie Wagner

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete." (Luke 6:46-49)

As I was pondering this year's Lenten theme, "Back to Basics," I thought about how important it is to get back to basics when it comes to feeding my soul. God's word provides the foundation for my Christian faith, but more often than I like to admit, reading the Bible gets put on the back burner. Like lots of people, I have a regular routine before I get ready for work in the morning. It goes like this: sit in my recliner, dog in lap, coffee in hand and quietly begin the day by looking at my phone. Often, this time includes checking Facebook, email, etc., while my time in God's word is either very short or doesn't happen at all.

This story of the wise and foolish builders reminds me to do the wise work of "digging down deep" into God's word to build and strengthen my faith foundation. By strengthening and building my life in Christ, I can stand against the "torrents of life" and have protection and peace because my life is "built on the rock." I don't want to be like the foolish man with no foundation in my life. My desire this Lenten season is to become more disciplined in choosing to read my Bible first, before other things that so easily distract me.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be wise and grow in me a desire to spend more time in Your word. May my life's foundation be strong so that I can stand firm in faith, empowered to serve as a light and witness for You. Amen.

Friday, February 23

ONE DAY AT A TIME

Bruce Sanders

"And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Matthew 6:28-30)

To borrow an overused phrase, let's "dial back" anticipation a bit this Lent. I am privileged to have been volunteering at an addiction treatment center for some years. These are people who have voluntarily, or at the behest of their employer or the courts, decided to enter counseling for some form of addiction. Advances in science and medicine show that these are not evil people, just ill. Brains are physically altered by their use of their particular "drug of choice."

Many "use" to cope with forces over which they have no control. Yet, amazingly, the first thing that many do is to admit their lack of control. One proven method of staying sober is a 12-Step program. It may seem counterintuitive, but the first three steps are the following:

1) We admitted that we were powerless over (drug of choice); that our lives had become unmanageable; 2) We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity; 3) We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the Power of God *as we understood Him*.

Once someone is desperate enough for treatment, they have lost faith in nearly everything: their substance, God, and more devastatingly, themselves.

We try to help them understand that they aren't "bad people trying to get good" but "sick people trying to become well." The most important thing I share with them is to let go and trust in a Higher Power. The chance to live for 24 hours a day can greatly simplify the recovery process.

So, this Lent, perhaps if we focus on tomorrow instead of 40 days hence, we can look for changes to make, today, that can profoundly impact the future. Rather than worry what *might happen tomorrow*, let us choose what we can *make happen today* with God's help.

Prayer: God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference.

Saturday, February 24

ALL WE REALLY NEED TO KNOW

Kelly Scotti

Kindergarteners bring to the first day of school a plethora of emotion and energy. Some exude confidence, thanks to their pre-school preparation; others are nervous, shy or fearful. Some share excitement and curiosity and wonder, while others are timid, tentative or meek. Whatever their individual toolbox of characteristics, all kindergartners share a common thread. They arrive that first day with open hearts and the spirit of innocence, ready to begin being shaped and molded into their future selves. Kindergarten is not merely about the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic). Kindergarten is most importantly the stage used to build the basic foundation of humanity.

Can you remember your five-year-old self and the myriad of life's simplest lessons being imparted upon you by your kindergarten teacher? Now think about your life today, the community in which you live and work and the world around us. Then imagine the enormous beauty of humanity and peace that could be generated if each of us were to dedicate ourselves to going back to the basics, back to the building blocks learned on the playground of kindergarten. The Lenten season so often emphasizes what each of us will give up as our individual sacrifices. This season, perhaps it can be about what we change to be better people for ourselves, the people in our orbit and the world around us by going back to the basics. Isn't that what Jesus would do?

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (abridged)

By Robert Fulghum

These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.

Be aware of wonder.

Sunday, February 25

LESSONS FROM MRS. PRATT

Chamus Burnside-Savazzini

"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Luke 18:16)

It is amazing how quickly the Lenten season comes around immediately after we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It was mere weeks ago. I remember thinking as a child, "Wow, he grew up fast!" I did not understand that many years and many things had transpired between his actual birth and his death and resurrection. The swiftness of how we celebrate these important biblical milestones throughout the year helps me to remember how quickly my own child and the children around me will grow up. Not only will they grow up, but also leave my direct care and protection. I think a lot about what I am doing *now* to prepare them for *later*. What priceless investment am I making in their lives? What will really matter when life throws curve balls at them? Am I creating the memories that stick with them so that they make good life decisions? Only time will tell.

As I reflect on my own life and the investment others made for me, I am thankful for my youth director, Miriam Pratt, who made sure I was prepared to read the scripture during the Sunday service. When her little yellow wagon came around the corner, I wanted to run because I knew that meant that I had to go to church! I could not skip it because I had a responsibility to serve. She built so many important character traits in me that I did not even realize. I had to be dependable, prepared, focused, willing and able. I cannot say that I remember anything besides the 23rd Psalm, but I do remember not wanting to let her down. She showed up to my high school graduation and then mailed me a graduation card with a crisp \$50 bill for a gift!

Every conversation with my grandmother included her telling me that Mrs. Pratt asked about me. In my junior year of college, my grandmother called to tell me that Mrs. Pratt was silently battling cancer and had passed away. All I could feel was the guilt of not making it a point to stop and call to tell her that I *did* indeed learn so much from her, and I knew she loved me just by the way she encouraged me. I appreciated how she made sure I was involved in church.

Prayer: Dear God, as I contemplate the sacrifice that Christ made for me, may my life be a sacrifice and example for the next generation in whatever way You choose. Amen.

Monday, February 26

PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Rev. Doug Bowden

"The next day (a Samaritan) took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'" (Luke 10:35)

More and more, through my life as a disciple of Jesus, I find myself deeply moved by the compassion of a Samaritan for the man robbed, stripped, beaten and left half dead (verse 30). First, in Jesus' parable, a Samaritan, to the total surprise and shock of all who heard his story, stops on the road and goes to the man, robbed and beaten, bandages his wounds and pours oil and wine on them, and then, after all this care, brings him to the inn, where he stays overnight. Second, before leaving the inn the next morning, this Samaritan, in an act of steadfast love and extraordinary generosity after paying the two denarii for the overnight lodging, tells the innkeeper to care for the man no matter how many days are needed, and when he comes back to the inn, he will repay the additional costs of the innkeeper.

This additional or follow-up care of the Samaritan for the man truly astounds me. Certainly inferred in his promise to the innkeeper is the permanent devotion of the Samaritan to the healing and wholeness of the man, facing many days of recovery and healing. He tells the innkeeper that he will come back to care for and make sure the man is healing and restored to his family and friends. What agape love this is!

This past summer, in the *New York Times*, I found the story of a New York City police officer by the name of Miosotis Familia, who was, in the same way of Jesus' parable, a Good Samaritan to the people of her police precinct. She helped Deakys Abreu in a domestic violence case in 2005. Ms. Abreu said, "She was my strength, she was my heroine." Another person she helped with the love and devotion of a Samaritan was Cleopatra Teaque. She had a problem with her boyfriend in 2015, so she called Officer Familia, who helped her find a safe and secure spot for two years. Many more in this New York City neighborhood grieved deeply when Officer Familia was shot and killed as she was filling out paperwork in her police truck early in the morning of July 5, 2017. At her funeral service, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said, "She lived for her children and mother, but she died for all of us."

**Prayer: O God, Jesus has changed our lives in this parable.
Help us find people in need to help.**

Tuesday, February 27

IN THE SILENCE OF THE SUNRISE

Gay Craig

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."
(John 14:27)*

When the snow is light and fluffy, I don't mind pulling out the shovel to clear our driveway. It's a quiet, peaceful scene on our short street, with pure white blankets covering roofs, evergreens, sidewalks and unplowed streets. Recently, when I had finished shoveling, I leaned the shovel near its usual place, but I unknowingly blocked the electric eye sensor. Lowering the garage door became a project. We were somewhat inconvenienced until the repairman arrived and moved the shovel to a new location.

Feeling foolish, I realized that, just as I blocked the sensor, I had allowed myself to get so busy and over-committed in my day-to-day activities, I had carelessly blocked God's peace in my life. Only a short time before, I consistently spent the earliest part of each day, just before sunrise, sitting quietly alone with my reflections and the Lord. Sometimes, I talked to God about my problems and asked for help or guidance and thanked Him for His many blessings, but most of my time was spent in silence...listening. It was peaceful, and I relied on those minutes to give me strength for the day. There were no thunderous announcements, no quaking of the earth, but occasionally, I heard whispers in my consciousness, and I know they were the Holy Spirit guiding or reassuring me. Most of those mornings, nothing eventful occurred, except that I nestled in the knowledge that God is present with me; I am His child and He most certainly loves me.

Last year, at a critical time in my life, I bypassed those precious mornings, but the foundation had been laid and I stood firm on it for peace and hope on difficult days. Now, my promise to God is to return to Him each day, simply to spend quiet and attentive time in the presence of my Creator because I depend on the gift of His peace.

Prayer: Everlasting Father, I want to draw closer to You, to be guided by Your love and wisdom and to be obedient to Your teaching. Help me to regain the discipline to simply and silently spend time with You, open to Your presence and receptive to Your love.

Wednesday, February 28

QUESTIONS, OR ANSWERS?

Merrill Litchfield

Read Luke 17:11-17

I've come across this story a number of times, and it usually leaves me with more questions than answers. Let me share some of my questions with you. When Jesus says, "Where are the other nine?" my mind wants to answer, "Still doing what you told them—going to the priests to show their cleansing, as the Law requires." But I suspect my mind, which has often been caught playing the smart mouth, stands ready to duck if Jesus replies: "And how many of these would come back to say 'Thanks' after they were done keeping the rules?" One other question I have is, since the Samaritan was a "foreigner," would he have had a problem getting into a Hebrew holy building, or seeing a Jewish priest? Would any of those considerations make it easier for him to choose to return to Jesus?

But whatever questions there may be, one thing is apparent: Jesus is pleased that someone came back in a spirit of joy and gratitude to offer praise and thanks to God. Jesus, in Matthew 5:17, says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them." Even so, from time to time, He is pleased to put a new spin on old rules—like healing on the Sabbath; even if it looks like work, it's worth doing. I get the impression that, in general, Jesus preferred a living, loving Spirit over a set of rules, long since written down, memorized, and kept if someone's watching. But here's the question with a point on it: in what spirit do I come to Jesus?

Prayer: Loving Lord, help us to be as freely giving of a spirit of peace and love for those around us as You are in providing it to us. May our pockets be empty, but our hearts full as we serve. Amen.

Thursday, March 1

DROPPING THE BLANKET

Ray Seidlitz

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'" (Luke 2:10)

I am an early riser in the morning, usually before 5:00 a.m. I make a cup of coffee, sit down in my favorite chair and say my prayers. Then I open my iPad to read the *New York Times* and attempt to do the crossword while I drink my coffee. But before I start reading and doing the puzzle, I always take a look at the inspiration for the day. I particularly liked one of these inspirations from this past Christmas season.

It had to do with the children's classic film "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and the many references made to the true meaning of Christmas throughout the movie. Charlie Brown bemoans the commercialization of the holiday, pleads with Sally and others to keep the true spirit of Christmas, and selects a tree that is anything but flashy.

However, one of the most meaningful messages in the movie is more subtle, almost hidden. As Linus stands there reciting from Luke 2 and gets to the words "Fear not, for I bring you tidings of great joy," something amazing happens—something that never voluntarily happens in any other Peanuts film. Linus drops his blanket.

This is no accident. He drops the blanket because he believes the words he speaks—"fear not."

This Lenten season and beyond, I hope and pray that we all can drop any "blankets" and fears we are holding onto and climb into Jesus' lap to receive his love and forgiveness.

Prayer: God, thank you for your Son, Jesus. Thank you for his birth, death, and resurrection.



Friday, March 2

A LENTEN JOURNEY OF TEARS

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

According to the German Lutheran theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, the kingdom of God is nothing other than God's joy at finding again those who are lost. Repentance, then, is the experience of being "found"—the joining in God's joy. In the New Testament, Paul labels us as "sinners." In the Gospels, Jesus labels us as "sick." We are both, to be sure. We are sick sinners. And one of the major "sins" or sickness we encounter is when we become indifferent to the massive suffering we see around us. We need to prepare ourselves for suffering. We need to prepare our young for suffering.

In the Bible, it is God who carries all sins and all suffering. God carries the world's long history of human wrong, human injustice, human depravity, human degradation. And by carrying this history, God transforms it into God's own suffering. We see this most clearly in the cross of Jesus Christ.

We're called to stand in solidarity with all who suffer injustice, with all who are crushed by the unending array of illnesses and misery, with all who are crippled by poverty, with all who are plagued by violence and our never-ending wars. By remembering, by standing in solidarity, we stand up for God because it is God who ultimately bears all the pain and all the problems of this deeply flawed, as-yet-unredeemed, unwell world.

We often can't do a whole lot about what ails and assails us, as a church, as a city, as a country, as a world, but there is one thing we can do. We can bring our tears. We can shed tears in solidarity with the One who carries all the pain, all the injustice, all the suffering of all creation. Christ did not die for sin. He died for sinners. There is a great difference to be found in this important distinction. Here is good advice from the Letter of James: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep..." (James 4:8-9)

Lent is the perfect time to lament—to weep—over your sins. If you don't have enough of your own sins to weep over, then feel free to weep over the sins of your family, or the sins of your congregation. If you are feeling particularly strong, weep over the sins of your city, the sins of your country, the sins of your world.

As a child, I gave up candy for Lent. Now, as an adult, I don't give things up. I bring something else to bear. I bring my tears. I promise—if you also bring your tears—that at the end of these sacred 40 days, you will be transformed. You will be standing faithfully and firmly with the One who was transformed on the Mountain of Transfiguration. After 40 days, you will be standing faithfully and firmly with the One who was crucified for us and all creation. If you do this, when Easter dawns, you will find yourself bathed in a joyful light that knows no bounds, a joyful light that surpasses all understanding.

Saturday, March 3

WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT!

Ruth Allison

In Luke 17, Jesus teaches us about forgiveness. Our family motto growing up was to go out and do good. My mother was often found out on the streets asking for donations for the poor. Her influence on me was to teach by example. She forgave my many mistakes and was always there to build me up.

So how during this Lenten season can we make a difference? I can only hope that we will continue to look for opportunities to "do good" and that we can be there for each other as hard times befall us.

I was so proud of our church during this past Christmas giving period. I was grateful for your help at "Christmas Around the World" as members of our Sisters Bible Study came forth with their support in selling items made by Women at Risk. I was very busy bringing your generous donations of needed clothing and toys for the children of Trinity Joliet Methodist Church. Our Emmaus group kept filling up the giving tree with new hats, gloves, scarves, and socks. My heart soared as I watched their faces light up.

This, to me, is what life is all about:
Doing Good!

Thank you, Grace Church, and may we continue to make a difference throughout the world. Forgive us when we fail to see the needs of those around us.



Sunday, March 4

THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE

Pastor Cindy Marino

John 17 "The Basics of Love"

In the Gospel of John, on the night before He was arrested, Jesus was gathered with the disciples, His followers. He is praying for them. You can tell by His words that He was concerned for them. These guys... fishermen, tax collectors, organizers, disappointed Him again and again, misunderstood Him and abandoned Him at critical times. But, Jesus prayed that they would experience the same relationship with each other that Jesus knew as part of the Trinity even before time began.

He prays to His Father, "I remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one."

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are One; they have this mutual admiration thing going. Scripture describes that they encourage one another, support one another, love one another, hand one another tools, hold one another's ladder. And that's the kind of community Jesus wants for his disciples after He's gone.

More importantly, that's what Jesus wants for us. His prayer in the Gospel of John continues: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so the world may believe that you have sent me." The world needs to see Christians, Christ followers, acting differently, as witnesses to the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Gracious God, breath into us the love with which You hold us. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit and send us into the world as Jesus was sent to bring the world to wholeness in His name. Amen.

Monday, March 5

JESUS VISITS MARTHA AND MARY

Rev. Doug Bowden

"(Jesus) entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." (Luke 10:30-39)

Jesus loved to visit Martha, Mary and Lazarus, who were sisters and brother, in their Bethany home. So, how understandable that Luke would claim this story and place it here, within the travel narrative of Jesus going to Jerusalem. One new fact for me is this: here, in Luke's Gospel, is the only place Martha and Mary appear in the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. We remember, of course, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and comforting Mary and Martha in the Gospel of John, Chapter 11.

I think my sermons on Jesus, Martha and Mary in their Bethany home have grown more sensitive and thoughtful over many years of preaching and pastoring. Indeed, I am thankful for this; maybe it's a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in me. Maybe your understanding and interpretation of this Gospel story has grown too, through the work of the Spirit. Clearly, we need to be very careful and committed to naming Martha and Mary as equals as well as our beloved sisters in Christ. We have grown to know that this is not a Gospel story to praise Mary, as she overcomes cultural expectations sitting at the feet of Jesus and learns from him, and then to denigrate Martha for the frustration she feels and expresses to Jesus in verse 40. Biblical nuance is definitely called for here. We are to affirm and praise Martha and Mary both.

I find the theologian John Shea helpful in his interpretation, as we travel with Jesus to Jerusalem. First, he offers a new translation of "the better part," Jesus' words directed to Martha, for the frustration she is feeling (verse 40). "Good" is the better translation of the original Greek. So, in his understanding, Mary has chosen the good part, "the connection to God who is good, the ground and energy of effective action." So, John Shea concludes, "The story does not reinforce a Martha-Mary dichotomy. It is not an either/or message but a both/and message." ("The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels, Liturgical Press)

Prayer: O God, through Jesus, our traveling companion, we pray for both listening and faithful service.

Tuesday, March 6

THE LOST BOY

Jacalyn Green Tschirhart

"Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." (Luke 2, verses 41-46)

This is a Bible passage that has impacted me differently when I have read it at different points in my life. When I was young, I didn't think much of it (except maybe that Jesus was smart! Cool!). But after I had children, it struck me much differently.

About twenty years ago, when my children were three and four years of age, our family was entering a hotel together. Bob and I were carrying the luggage, laughing, with pent-up energy from sitting in the car, and Erin and Charlie ran ahead together. We had been to this hotel before, so we were not too concerned. But when we reached the room, and they were nowhere to be found, I panicked. Thus ensued some of the longest and most surreal five minutes of my life, as Bob and I ran up and down the halls, encountering workers who did not speak English and could not answer our questions about whether they had seen two small children. We did find them, of course, but not before I imagined all sorts of dire consequences and dissolved into tears of relief when we found them.

To lose a twelve-year-old boy in a large city—for three whole days! What did Mary and Joseph think? (Maybe something like "God gave us his son and we lost him, oh no!")

What *should* we do if we face our problems, as people of faith? We should pray. Of course, this did not occur to me in my moment of fear. Yet, as Christians, and especially as Methodists, prayer is a foundation of our religion. And, as Pastor Bill Bryan likes to remind us, tongue in cheek, "Why pray when you can worry?"

Wednesday, March 7

FIRE FROM HEAVEN?

Merrill Litchfield

Read: 2 Kings 1:1-17

Also read: Luke 9:51-56

"And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?' But he turned and rebuked them, and said, 'Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'" (Luke 9: 54-56)

When I first thought of citing this biblical incident, I had a hard time finding it, even when I looked in my "handy" concordance (of the NIV). Eventually I resorted to my Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and my KJV: found it! The problem with the NIV is that not all the manuscripts agree on what's included here, so some of the text is transferred into a footnote, in order not to mislead the reader about how reliable that passage might be. But that also makes it harder to dig up!

In Mark 3, when he lists the disciples, Mark says Jesus called James and John "Boanerges" ("Sons of Thunder"). Do you suppose that might be based on this Luke 9 incident, or did J & J just preach louder than the other disciples? But, skipping the humor (if that's what that was), there are two things here that occupy my mind. One is that they were not proposing "fire from heaven" just because they were angry, but because Elijah had done the same thing (see the story in 2 Kings). We don't very often credit the disciples with being well-read in the Scriptures; after all, they were ordinary workmen. But this makes me wonder: am I underestimating how well the Jewish Scriptures were taught? Or is it possible that, Israel being a "weak country," J & J made a point of remembering Elijah's show of power? The second thing is Jesus' clear statement of his mission: "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Prayer: Lord of Grace and Comfort to those who trust You, thank You for trying to teach me "[human] anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20). I need Your grace, hour by hour, to spread Your comfort to those around me; I need Your Spirit, that I may remain close to You. Amen.

Thursday, March 8

THE LUXURY OF A NEW YORK TIMES

Liisa Gary

I feel generally enlightened about the advancement of technology and how it has affected my life. I admit that I feel more in touch with more people because of it, and my attachment to my cell phone is probably something that is now in my bloodstream. I am more prone to forgetting my glasses and wallet as I “do the final grab” than I am my cell phone before leaving my home. To me, cell phones represent the consummate standard for where society is today in terms of changing technology. Cell phone towers are worldwide, and the most remote cultures on this planet maintain contact with the world via their cell phones.

No going back there.

Along with the ever-present cell phone in my purse is my constant awareness of the state of our country and the world because of the “alerts” that I have subscribed to via CNN apps, and the like. It is perhaps in this sense that I feel that my reliance on my cell phone has become closer to an addiction, a predicament shared by countless others. And I know this because the internet is filled with funny anecdotes about phone attachment...the internet is filled with funny anecdotes about everything.

And here lies my biggest worry: missing out.

In the not-too-distant past, I would squeeze in reading several newspapers as best I could to maintain my awareness about local, state, national and international news. I missed out on a lot of TV watching and other activities because I was reading and watching the news. I enjoyed a good political debate and felt pretty informed for the most part and could keep up with most current event conversations.

And then the internet happened. Newspaper reading seemed suddenly archaic and if I were to be able to keep up, I had to up my game and spend more time online. And with my phone, I had no reason or excuse to miss out. I've sadly found that there is little benefit to reading papers and I've given up on them, for the most part. It feels both easier and harder to keep up, as there is so much *more* news available but is easier to access.

I reflect fondly on days with coffee and my newspapers. Once in a while I indulge in the *New York Times* and feel like I have gone back in time. And it feels wonderful...until my phone pings with yet another *Washington Post* alert.

Friday, March 9

DEAR MISS KATE: A LETTER TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER

Pastor Mark Himel

Well, Miss Kate...

I am so very proud of you as you are growing up into a young lady. You have done such an excellent job transitioning from your Chicago to Dallas move. I am so happy to see how much you have embraced your education, activities, and friends at school. I pray you have a wonderful experience the remainder of this year at school, as you prepare for high school next year.

You are and will be in my prayers as you go through the experience of your confirmation. This is a very special time between you and God, your opportunity as a young lady to really focus on your personal relationship with God. As you personally have made the decision to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, you have been assured of your salvation with God, merely based on your faith in God.

Remember, there is nothing you can do to earn your way into heaven, by doing a bunch of good things for people. But, once you have faith in God and have accepted Jesus as your Savior, you are then called by God to go out into the world, God's world, and care for His people who are in need, and for this world itself that God gave us to be a part of here on earth.

When you were baptized you entered and were accepted into the kingdom of God by God's grace alone. God's grace is a wonderful, living personal relationship we can have with God if we stay aware of His presence in our lives. The gift I give to you today through this letter is the term PJS, your pajamas. There is only one grace we receive from God, but you will always remember it by thinking of your PJS.

Prevenient - God is always present in our life, right now and always. We just must stay disciplined to remember to be aware and keep God in our daily activities of life. Reading God's word, studying His words of the Bible, and staying in fellowship with other Christians are very helpful disciplines to let God into our lives.



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Saturday, March 10

HOLY FIRE

Vickie Wagner

I am so grateful to have the opportunity each week to lead our 5:00 Saturday worship at Grace. Recently, this was the scripture text about the baptism of Jesus from Luke 3:16: *"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'"*

This prompted me to sing a song that I wrote several years ago about the Holy Spirit as fire and how He works in our lives. I share these lyrics as a prayer as we grow in faith and in our desire to be more like Christ.

Holy Fire - Vickie Wagner

There's a fire burning it's coming our way
It's covering a lot of ground and turning night to day
Lighting up the sky a remarkable display
I can see it in the distance but I'm not afraid

Chorus:

Holy Fire touch my heart
Reveal my true condition
Strip away the pretense and struggle for position
If there's anything within me left standing in Your way
May the power of Your Spirit burn it all away
It's bringing down the walls pulling down facades
It's tearing down the fences leaving only blackened sod
Blazing a trail preparing the earth
For the sprouting of regeneration and the hope of a new birth
(Chorus)

There's beauty in this Holy Blaze the Spirit from above
He cleanses us and purifies with the power of His love
He calls us and fills us and fuels us to serve
As messengers of mercy this gift so undeserved
(Chorus)

Sunday, March 11

AM I WELCOME HERE? THE BASICS OF WORSHIP FOR ALL

Lynn Leitzen

"It is up to us to do everything we can to make sure our children are not hindered from claiming their rightful place in God's community of love. Make no mistake—the children are not the future of the church. They are the right now of the church, and we must do everything we can to make the word accessible to them...or we don't have a future. My sincere hope is that we don't simply 'let the children come,' but rather we reach out and bring them to the place where they already belong.

—*"Mister Mark" Burrows, Director of Children's Ministries at FUMC Ft. Worth, TX*

Note: Next Sunday, March 18, Mark Burrows will lead our 9:30 worship service. Following worship, he will engage staff, parents, and anyone passionate about children in church in a roundtable discussion.

When you visit Grace's website homepage, the first statement you read is, "Naperville's People of Grace are a welcoming congregation, embracing diversity and dedicated to a ministry of Christ-like hospitality and compassion for all." How does that statement resonate with you? Do you feel welcomed, embraced, of sacred worth when you enter our building for worship? Do our children? We are *all* to be welcomed with Christ-like hospitality and compassion and made to feel that we are *all* of sacred worth.

Our Children's Faith Formation Ministry Team, led by the Spirit-filled Chamus Burnside-Savazzini, does a wonderful job welcoming our children to the Faith Formation Hour (Sunday School) every week, but what about worship? How often do our children have the opportunity to worship in the sanctuary? I encourage you to search an article online called "Where Should Children Worship?" that examines this hotly contested debate. Where do you fall on this issue? Do children belong in Sunday School or in worship? Maybe both?

In our current all-church book study, "Make a Difference," James Harnish underscores the importance John Wesley placed on worship and the sacraments as essential spiritual disciplines.

We don't want our kids to miss out! Do we? Can we thoughtfully and intentionally do both? Can we find a way to provide a time for all ages to GATHER together to worship, and a time to GROW as Disciples through faith formation classes, so that we may understand that, because of God's love for each of us, we are compelled to GO to serve.

Prayer: Gracious and Loving God, you have called us all to Gather, Grow and Go. Ignite in us a passion to reach out and welcome the children to the place they already belong. Amen.

Monday, March 12

DIVISION RATHER THAN PEACE

Rev. Doug Bowden

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Luke 12:50)

Many disciples of Jesus, like us, committed to healing, reconciling and peaceful ministries in his name, wrestle painfully with Jesus' words here in Luke's Gospel. Indeed, to hear Jesus announce about his ministry that its goal is division rather than peace is to make me anxious and confused, especially in this year of 2018. Division is on our lips and in our hearts, even as we pray and work for unity and peace.

So, how can we, in beloved Grace Church, hear Jesus' call here and dare to believe what Patricia J. Lull writes: "This Jesus is a Lord worth getting to know." Pastoral sensitivity is the first step, she believes. Sadly and painfully, many of us know division in our individual or family lives or in the life of the church. Our life-long healing comes slowly, as Sunday by Sunday in worship we confess our sins of division and hear our pastors say words of pardon and assurance. As Lull concludes, "Beyond Jesus' stern speaking to the crowd (Luke 12:49-56), there awaits an equally strong word of forgiveness and God's tender embrace." Then, prayerfully and in the free grace of God, filling and working in our lives, we come, remembering Old Testament prophets like Amos, Hosea and Micah, to accept that the words Jesus speaks here are ones we must hear, even as we resist and struggle with them.

Once hearing and accepting, as we travel with Jesus to the cross in Jerusalem, we pray for God to help us find loving and practical ways to work through division to mutual forgiveness and perhaps life-filled, new ministries to do with many others in his name. Here for each "Body of Christ" are the questions to ponder and then act upon. "Has the congregation acquired skills and patience for talking together about issues that often divide families or communities? Is there room for 'hot topics' in this congregation's life, or are all divisive issues avoided? Building the capacity to listen to one another on highly charged themes takes time and skill; once established, it is a rare and precious gift." (P. Lull)

Prayer: O God, help us to face divisions among us and find our way, through Jesus, to a peaceful unity.

Tuesday, March 13

THE LIFE OF A TREE

Cheryl Ameiss

"I know the plans I have for you..." (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Have you ever taken the time to think about the life of a tree? As the tree first started to grow from a seed, it needed the warmth, protection, nutrients, and water from the ground. As it grew, it enjoyed the fresh water from the nearby stream. It may have been knocked around a little by winds, maybe it even got flooded a few times as the stream swelled, but what did it do? It pushed its roots even deeper into the ground, to stand more secure and strong.

As it got taller and wider, it would give shade to plants and animals in need of the shade. As its branches got bigger, birds or squirrels would build their nests in it. Its leaves in the fall would feed itself, create building materials and give homes to insects. As it "breathes," it takes in the toxins in the air and gives needed oxygen.

As it starts to die, its branches get brittle and fall off, giving life, homes, food for insects, bacteria and other animals. Insects and disease start to eat away at it, but it is still standing. Woodpeckers and other cavity animals start to hack away and build homes for their families. It is still standing and still giving.

Why can't we be more like a tree? The tree followed God's plan, stood against the strong winds of adversity and made itself stronger and secure. It shaded plants and animals and gave them homes, and as it died, it continued to give life to others as God intended. Is God giving us daily examples and guides of the way He wants us to live?

Shouldn't we be better than that tree? God gave us free will to decide if we will follow His plan or do what we want. A tree can't move but stands strong and gives of itself for others. Aren't we supposed to be like that? Isn't that what God wants from us—to be unmoving in His plan for our lives? Aren't the animals, insects, bacteria and other things better because that tree lived? I wonder if we really let God take over our lives, who or what would be better off because we did?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, continue to guide us and show us the way as we struggle to find the plans You have made for us. Amen.

Wednesday, March 14

IN WHAT SPIRIT?

Merrill Litchfield

Read: Luke 9: 54-56 *“And when his disciples James and John observed this, they said, Lord do you wish us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elijah did? But he turned and rebuked and severely censured them. He said, You do not know of what spirit you are, for the Son of man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save (them from the penalty of eternal death). And they journeyed on to another village. (Luke 9:54-57; Amplified Bible)*

When Jesus wanted to say the thing that mattered most for teaching James and John, he said, “Spirit.” We often use the word “spirit” in a number of different ways; we often confuse ourselves and/or our hearers because “spirit” is such an abstract word, with sometimes-subtle differences between meanings. We’d be hard-put to take a picture of a spirit; non-material things don’t often smile for the camera. And it’s hard to track the action of a spirit. Imagine going to a football game with a large crowd; walking in, it’s not too hard to remain calm and detached (unless you’ve already bet on the game?). As the game goes on, and the action gets exciting, which happens? Does the spirit of the game get into you, or do you get into the spirit of the game? Or a little of both? And which guides whom? To what kinds of actions?

I think I’m glad Jesus hasn’t asked me this question yet: do I really know what spirit leads me? I pray that His Holy Spirit does, but I’ve often fooled myself about what my motives really are. Am I saying what’s true because it’s true, or am I saying it for the purpose of looking good, impressing people?

Prayer: Lord of the Heavens, You see so clearly what we are up to; in Your grace, don’t let us get away with it, unless it really is Your will. And, in that case, may we thank and praise You for Your helping hand. Amen.

Thursday, March 15

OTHERS

Barbara Hoch

"Whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus. Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people." (Colossians 3:17 and 23)

When I was very young, I heard George Beverly Shea sing a beautiful hymn at a Billy Graham crusade which was broadcast on the radio. The title was simply "Others."

Lord, help me live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer shall be for others.

Help me in all the work I do
To ever be sincere and true,
And know that all I do for you
Must need be done for "Others."

And when my work on earth is done,
And my new work in Heaven begun,
May I forget the crown I've won,
While thinking still of "Others."

"Others," Lord yes, "Others."
Let this my motto be.
Help me to live for others,
That I may live for Thee.

I like to use this hymn in my prayer time whenever I need to be reminded what my purpose here on earth is all about. It helps to keep me a little humble when I remember, "It's not about me." To understand what or who it is about, I turn to the Bible. One important verse I remember from Romans 11:36 says, "For all things were created by God, and all things exist through Him and for Him. To God be the glory forever."

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I pray that Your spirit will constantly guide me and use the gifts You have given me for the benefit of others and bring glory to You ever more. Amen.

Friday, March 16

MAKING ROOM FOR PEACE

Danielle Keethler

For the past year or so I have begun to make a concerted effort to simplify my life. My goal was to live a life that glorifies God and does not feel like I'm a hamster on a wheel, moving as fast as I can without a goal. So, I began my journey with prayer. I asked God to plant His desires in me and give me guidance, direction and discernment, to simplify my life and find more joy and peace.

My health and overall wellness is where I began. I looked into ways to improve my diet. Through my local library, I found a wellness expert that evaluated my health and provided guidance. By simply cutting way back on sugar, drinking more water and being aware of what foods I should and shouldn't eat, I find I have more energy and vitality and more joy in preparing healthy recipes.

A friend lent me a book about the five love languages that has enhanced my relationship with my family and friends. Knowing how those closest to me experience love has helped me to focus on them in ways that matter. Learning to be fully present, giving my full attention and actually turning off the cell phone and really listening has brought about an enormous change in my attitude.

I discovered flyady.net. It is a system of maintaining your household that is simple, not overwhelming, and provides accountability and encouragement. It has helped me to achieve harmony and eliminate clutter and has been life-changing.

1 Corinthians 14:33 tells us that God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. I have found that peace at home supports my overall goal of glorifying God. James 1:22 tells us to be doers of the word. I know that He expects me to have a ministry within my church community...but not so many ministries that I am frazzled. When I stop and pray throughout the day and catch my breath, I listen to God speaking to me. He helps me to focus on the ministry He has called me to so I can give my whole heart to The Stephen Ministry.

I know that on my own, I cannot achieve any of these goals. Through continual reliance on the one who created me, both in failure and success, I can move toward a more victorious life.

Saturday, March 17

THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER

Rev. Doug Bowden

"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of his age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." (Luke 16:8)

Jesus, coming closer and closer to Jerusalem where the cross awaits him, chooses to tell this parable. Indeed, we who are his disciples and who have said yes to his call to go with him to Jerusalem hear this parable and are in listener shock. Perhaps more than any other parable Jesus tells, this one of The Dishonest Manager, Luke 16:1-9a, leaves us completely confused and even more offended by the way the story ends. Simply, this dishonest manager, after apparently a long time of dishonest financial acts, shrewdly eliminates the commission formerly required by the master and tells the master what he has done. Certainly, we think the master will come down hard on the dishonest manager and punish him severely.

Just the opposite happens. The master "commends" the manager, even as he calls him "dishonest," for his shrewd actions, in effect saving himself in the eyes of the master. This is hard for disciples of Jesus to hear! Most New Testament scholars have reached this consensus. Jesus commends the dishonest manager in his parable to give his disciples a "real life" example of necessary prudent action, which for "the children of light," disciples of Jesus, may sometimes be necessary, as dissatisfying as it will be.

Helen Montgomery Debevoise asks the bottom line question for us: is there anything redemptive or redeemable about this parable?" Over the years, my preaching attempts on Jesus' Parable of The Dishonest Manager over the years have focused more and more on the shrewdness of the manager. So, Jesus tells this parable to make it absolutely clear that sometimes in the ethical and moral challenges of 21st first century life, being shrewd and resilient and using such actions for the sake of the Kingdom of God will be necessary. Still, more insight is needed. Help comes, now, in the voice of Christine Pohl: "Jesus does not commend the manager's practices, but rather his insight into the connection between resources and relationships. When we consider our wealth and economic practices—even the means we employ to accomplish good ends—we are ignoring Jesus' warning that is impossible to serve God and mammon."

Prayer: Patience and humility we need, O God, for finding a faithful way, with Jesus, in our lives.

Sunday, March 18

NOT SO ORDINARY PEOPLE

Elaine Johnson

I recently introduced a favorite movie, “Ordinary People,” to my daughter. The film is heart-wrenching, but it’s also interesting for how it depicts wealth, circa 1980. When I first saw it, the Chicago North Shore lifestyle it portrays seemed manicured and luxurious. Fast-forward four decades and it looks modest. Really, really modest.

Yes, the Winnetka setting is lovely and the family home at the center of the drama is imposing. But in every other way, the standard of living represented is pretty unpretentious. The home’s kitchen is as unadorned as the one in my childhood bungalow, with its basic appliances, laminated countertops and generic ironstone dinnerware. Not a marble backsplash or custom cabinet in sight. No ubiquitous laptops, smartphones and flat-screen TVs, either, since none of those had yet been introduced.

The simplicity extends to dress, as well. The tax attorney father goes for his morning jog in standard-issue Hanes sweats, not \$75 anti-microbial, moisture-wicking running pants. Meanwhile, Conrad, the high school senior, kicks around in plaid shirts, ratty sweaters and no-name jeans. In no way does the attire of any of the film’s Lake Forest High School students scream “American Eagle” or “Lululemon.”

But the clincher is the car driven by one of Conrad’s friends—the only friend who seems to have a car of his own. It’s a clunker. Now, contrast that with the gleaming rows of vehicles in your local high school lot.

Indeed, if “Ordinary People” is any indication, the very definition of the “good life” has changed drastically in the last generation and, along with it, our expectations of what it means to have a good life. It all seems a far cry from Jesus’ admonition that “life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” (Luke 12:23)

For as long as I’ve read Luke’s verses about God’s care for the lilies and ravens, I’ve assumed they were intended to lend assurance to those who are worried where their next meal is coming from. But the verses also direct us to “Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail...” (Luke 12: 33)

And I understand that as enticing as Instagram can be, as alluring as Pinterest is, their focus is on the decorative, while God’s is on the simple. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Monday, March 19

WORDS TO LIVE BY

Ellen Burrows

What does that imply? In religion it suggests what those say each Sunday at Grace United Methodist Church's 8:15 service: *The Apostles' Creed*. "I believe in Jesus Christ, the only begotten son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." That is the understanding of the life of Jesus Christ. Learning this creed is a requirement for Grace confirmands. If that is a basic, do we truly understand what it really means? Is it possible to make the Christian religion that simple in one sentence?

We go further in sentence two to clarify how Jesus' life ended by saying, "He descended into Hades; the third day, He arose from the dead; He ascended into Heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

We have said these words for many years from memory, yet we print them in the bulletin as though the Creed is a new thought or explanation of our basics. The closing sentence is a summary of our basic Christian belief: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

A basic is meant to be simple, easily understood and, thus, easy to live. To be a dedicated person, living as a Christian, requires much more than words. It requires action to do what we say we believe. Thus, as Christians, we have the Ten Commandments to further aid us in our Christian life. Words alone are only a written reminder; it is our actions that demonstrate that we not only say the words, but we believe it is our Christian responsibility to apply them to our relationship with others.

Prayer: God, please guide my life, so that I not only say the Apostles' Creed, but I live it in my relationship with others.

Tuesday, March 20

LAZARUS, COME OUT!

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

The raising of Lazarus is the most important miracle of Jesus found in the four Gospels. This miracle, found only in John, is the culmination of all that Jesus did in his earthly mission. Nothing else comes close! And the deeper one goes into this miracle, the more astonishing, nourishing it becomes for our psyches and souls.

Just before Jesus raises Lazarus, he is on the other side of the Jordan—at the place where John the Baptist had baptized so many. Jesus had withdrawn to this barren place because people in Jerusalem had tried to stone him for blasphemy. Then word comes to Jesus that Lazarus, his beloved friend, is sick. He waits for a few days before leaving for Bethany (recall that Bethany is but 1.5 miles from Jerusalem, so for Jesus to go back to Bethany means that he will again be placing himself in grave danger).

So they head up to Bethany. Martha comes out to meet Jesus, and what does she say (reading between the lines)? “Lord, I am so very disappointed in you! If you had been here my brother would not have died.” What is Jesus’ response? His response is the most important proclamation of Jesus found anywhere in the New Testament: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26) “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man comes out, still wrapped in burial clothes. Jesus says, “Untie him and let him go!”

So what became of Lazarus? We don’t know. But we do know from John 12:10 that the chief priests make plans to kill Lazarus—as well as Jesus. Martha and Mary’s question to Jesus is plainly, “Where were you when my brother died?” Is this not also our question when loved ones leave our midst?

What is Jesus’ response to Martha and Mary’s question? He weeps! This is Jesus’ answer to all our woes, to all our sorrow, to all our suffering: Holy Tears! And here’s a vital point: God the Father did not rescue his son Jesus from his own suffering, his own profound passion and death. I do not believe God the Father wanted his son to die in such a disgraceful and horrific way. God, instead, wanted to show us how far Love was willing to go: even to humiliation and death on a cross!

Let me highlight a deep conviction: Our God, the Father of our brother Jesus, is not a God who *rescues* us. Our God, the Father of our brother Jesus, is a God who *redeems* us. There is a world of difference between these two words. We trust there will come that time when the Risen Jesus will stand in front of our grave—in front of wherever our bodies rest in dust or ashes—and shout out to us: “Come out! Come out of death! Rise up, body and soul, once more!”

Wednesday, March 21

SEVEN LESSONS FROM HEAVEN

Merrill Litchfield

Read: Luke 16:19-31 “*[Abraham] said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”* (Luke 16:31)

Consider the book: *7 Lessons From Heaven*, by Mary C. Neal, M.D.

In 1999, Dr. Mary C. Neal drowned in an accident while whitewater kayaking in southern Chile. One of the remarkable parts of this adventure was that, though she had been underwater for something like a half-hour, she was brought back to life, brought back to the U.S., and continued her life as an orthopedic surgeon in Wyoming. In 2011, she wrote her story in her book, *To Heaven and Back*. In 2017, she surpassed herself by writing a second book about the same incident(s), titled *7 Lessons From Heaven (How Dying Taught Me to Live a Joy-Filled Life)*. On her first try she was uncertain how to handle some of the things she had to describe; on the second time around, she was more affirmative, in spite of the fact that she was very aware that many people will deny the possibility of coming back from death, and along with that, specifically deny that she could have met and talked with Jesus. How frustrating can that be, to have an experience brimming over with things to tell, and nobody wanting to listen to it?

In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus includes a fine touch of irony in verse 31, knowing both that He, himself, will be coming back from the dead, and he will be facing a stubborn opposition that refuses to listen. And what holds true for the Master is also true for His followers, as Mary relates. Frustration, of course. But for those who do listen, and believe, God’s immeasurable power is poured out in everlasting joy.

Prayer: Lord, God of all reality, thank You for sharing yet more of Your reality with us. Thank You for using a person of knowledge and caring to pass Your message; we ask You to bless her for blessing us. Amen.

Thursday, March 22

LIFE LESSON IN G MINOR

Dan Wagner

"As iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another." (Proverbs 27:17)

I had made a successful transition from a fledgling Baptist college to a major music school in Philadelphia. I relished the increased academic and musical rigors. But there *was* class piano. I was a voice major, and therefore assumed I could coast through *"piano for dummies."* I was impressed that this "insignificant" class was taught by an accomplished concert pianist. But surely she couldn't be serious that a voice major with no piano background could actually play the materials she assigned.

The time came to test our progress. I had dabbled in practicing a few minutes here and there. G minor was just not happening. Oh well. It would have to do. I played for Professor Taylor, an impressive, stylish, and very upbeat woman with a captivating Cuban accent. After I hacked through my test she called me into her private studio. It turns out that the professor was a devout Christian. I knew this when she said to me something like, "Daniel, I understand that you are a Christian." *Um, yes.* (I'd been known to be a "Defender of the Faith" in this huge secular university setting.) "I am a Christian, too," she said. "I would like to ask you how you can justify your lack of diligence and preparation in this class. What kind of witness do you believe it is when you are not being a good steward of your education here?"

I remember what *she* said. I forget what *I* said. I'm guessing that I mumbled an apology and said I would work harder. And I did. It was through her wise and courageous words that I realized for the first time in my academic and musical career that some skills required *work*. Sometimes *hours* of work. I learned that in fact I *could* play *all* of the major and minor scales at speed, two-hands, two-octaves. Up and down. It actually took *practice*. And I learned some profound theology from Maria Taylor; I had been well-trained at my Baptist college to argue the case for Jesus and to share it with people. But I had completely overlooked the call of Jesus in my own life in some practical and meaningful areas of my own integrity and stewardship.

I've told this story and watched people gasp in horror at what my piano professor said. I *treasure* what she said. Somehow her calling me out made me feel respected. She cared about me enough not to coddle me, but to make me *better*. She knew that this weakness in my discipleship would result in my being a poorer musician. I can't say that I recommend the Maria Taylor approach very often, but, since we're getting back to basics, one of the reasons God calls us to be together as a church is to speak the truth to one another in love and humility and respect, to acknowledge one another's dignity enough to expect better of us.

Friday, March 23

WHY PRAY WHEN YOU CAN WORRY?

Ray Seidlitz

"Why pray when you can worry?"

—Pastor Bill Bryan (retired Grace pastor)

I'm pretty good at it when it comes to worrying about things. Sometimes when I go to bed at night, I lay there and think about some things I have to do or problems that await me tomorrow or some time soon. And then I start worrying about how I'm going to solve or fix them. Pretty soon after that, I can't get to sleep at all. Sometimes I get up and read a while until I feel a bit drowsy and then go back to bed.

I don't worry about things all the time, but when I do, I've found that prayer really can help. If I just pray for a while and turn it over to God to let him handle things, then I start to relax and soon fall asleep.

Pastor Bill's words are facetious, or course, but the Bible has many passages telling us not to worry about things...

Matthew 6:25-34 (NLT) begins: *"That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?"*

Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT): *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

I have to remember these words of wisdom: "Worrying is like a rocking chair; it gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere."

Prayer: Lord, help me to trust You more to take care of every one of my needs and to ease my anxiety and worry less.



Saturday, March 24

HOW GREAT THOU ART
Herb and Nancy Bell



Consider: The 23rd Psalm; The Lord Is My Shephard

We just moved to Tabor Hills, a retirement community, after living in Downers Grove for 60 years. We have been married for 60 years and decided to get settled into an assisted living community when we were 80 years old. HOW GREAT THOU ART – God helped us give away 60 years of treasures and placed us in a caring, loving home. We gave our middle son back to God when he was five (a 24-hour virus). But God blessed us the next year with a wonderful new son, now a Methodist minister at Wesley Methodist Church in Aurora. GOD IS GREAT.

We come from very diverse backgrounds – family and religion. However, with God's help we have made it work. Diversity is very good if you realize GOD IS GREAT. He has been and needs to be the center of our lives. HE LOVES US ALL. We are so happy we found Grace Church, the staff, and so many wonderful people. We will journey to the cross with all of you realizing that Easter Morning always comes after Good Friday.

Prayer: We love you, Lord Jesus—you are awesome. We are looking forward to meeting you face-to-face one day.

Palm Sunday, March 25

WALKING THE WAY OF JESUS

Pastor Bill Bryan

Read: Philippians 2:5-11

One of the most sacred places for the worldwide Christian family is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the old city of Jerusalem. I have been especially blest to have visited there. This amazing site has been visited by Christian pilgrims for centuries. The location itself was the site of celebrations by the Jerusalem Christian community as early as the year 66 of the Common Era. The Emperor Hadrian in 144 CE attempted to erase the memory by building a shrine to Aphrodite there. In the fourth century Emperor Constantine honored his newly found faith by building a church there, marking the place of the resurrection of Jesus. Though almost completely destroyed by invading soldiers in 1009 CE, money was raised and reconstruction soon started. This smaller structure with a few minor additions is there today.

Inside the church, on the upper level, two small chapels exist side by side. One is called Latin Calvary, the other Greek Calvary. In both chapels, one may see beside the altar and through a glass encasement the top of the limestone rock, believed to be the top of the limestone earthen hill—the Place of the Skull mentioned in the Gospels.

Once years ago, when I had a free day in Jerusalem, I attempted to retrace the steps of Jesus during the week of his passion. From Bethphage on the Mt. of Olives, I walked northward to the spot where Jesus wept over the city, and then down the slope until I came to the Garden of Gethsemane. From there I crossed the Kidron Valley, and made my way into the walled city and up the narrow street, the Via Dolorosa—"the way of suffering." Cold and damp—there was a light snow in the air that day—I climbed to the upper level of the old church. I sat on a bench to rest with my gaze fixed upon the altars and the limestone rock encased by glass. It was a moment of wonder and deep, deep gratitude that here, or at least very near this place, my Savior Jesus had bled and died for me.



Monday, March 26

DAD'S CUP Kathy Carey

"I am blessed and my cup runneth over." (Psalm 23:5)

When I think of an overflowing cup, I am reminded of the way my Dad drank his coffee. He doctored it up with milk and sugar and poured it onto his saucer to cool it off, then he drank it from the saucer.

Just as Dad poured out his coffee, he poured out his helping hand to neighbors. In a farming community, it was necessary to help in time of need because of sickness, accidents or death. The farmers were there with their tractors and equipment needed to do the job: planters, cultivators, mowers, wagons, balers, and corn pickers.

Dad's good example of pouring out help to neighbors has carried over to my brother and me helping our neighbors...whether it be shoveling snow off the sidewalks or giving powdered sugar to the neighbor girls who wanted to bake on their snow day off from school.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may we always have full cups when it comes to helping neighbors. May we be there for them in time of need. Amen.



Tuesday, March 27

ADMITTING OUR SINFULNESS

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

We have all done things in our lives that are wrong, that are sinful. And, yes, we cling to a God of mercy—a God who showed the way of forgiveness while dying on a cross. But many of us do not dare to speak our sins. We conveniently “forget” them in the busy clamor of our days. But sin does not go away just because it is unacknowledged. Sin does not go away just because a person doesn’t want to admit it. And, yes, we admit our sins to God first and foremost, the only One who can forgive. But, I also believe, we should admit our sins to at least one other person as we beseech God’s forgiveness.

For example, many of us have been wounded by parents who beat us when we were children. Yet a significant majority of people in America still mistakenly believe that hitting children is somehow okay. It is not. It is a crime. It is an abomination to the Almighty. I recall some years ago when I was being interviewed on WVON, discussing urban violence. I brought up the violence perpetrated by many parents against their children as being a significant cause of urban violence. I was told that I didn’t understand the Black Community because the Black Community was “okay” with spanking and other forms of physical “discipline.” I very much disagreed.

There is a vastly mistaken notion that goes like this: “Spare the rod; spoil the child.” This quotation is from a 1662 poem by the English poet, Samuel Butler. Something similar comes from Proverbs 13:24: *“Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.”*

There is a misunderstanding, though, regarding “the rod.” The “rod” is more accurately “the shepherd’s staff.” It would be better to translate the passage from Proverbs as “Those who spare the shepherd’s staff . . .” The shepherd’s staff was not used to beat the sheep. The shepherd’s staff was used to “guide” the sheep, to point them in the right direction. I don’t understand parents who will argue that beating their children was somehow a good or godly thing. Beating children damages them at their deepest core. It leads to all kinds of violence and all kinds of physical, psychological and spiritual problems. The effects of parental abuse are never-ending for the child.

When it comes time to stand alone before God’s Judgment, I’ll need to acknowledge my many sins and failings. But I can rightly say I never hit a child. Beating our children is a crime that cries to heaven. Yet what makes the sin of child abuse so pernicious and poisonous is the blatant unwillingness to admit it as sin. Lent is a good time for all of us to admit that we are broken and in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. It is also a good time to admit to another person that we have sinned.

Wednesday, March 28

WHAT AM I AFRAID OF?

Merrill Litchfield

Read Luke 12:4-7 and v. 32 *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom."* (Luke 12:32)

Consider the book: *7 Lessons From Heaven*, by Mary C. Neal, M.D.

Sometimes on TV, we are shown clips from the Cold War era, say, of schoolchildren being taught to "duck and cover," or instructions on how to build your own bomb shelter. It's being shown as entertainment, because that fear of sudden nuclear attack is mostly behind us. Jesus, in verses four to seven of Luke, leads us through an interesting consideration of "Whom should we fear?" The "Squirt Gun Squad," or someone that can kill us? Jesus takes us one logical step farther: once we're dead, all enemies are powerless to hurt us any more; but even after death, we all remain in God's hands. Biblical shorthand tells us we should "fear" God, but I'd like to offer this instead: some people don't distinguish very well; "fear" for them becomes blind panic, unable to do anything, rather than offering God the proper (immense) respect due Him for His Creation, for His giving us our lives and loves, and for continuing to pour His endless love and joy upon us.

The author, Mary, shares with us that one of her chronic fears was of drowning, in spite of which she still loved water sports. Anticipating what she'd feel like when she was air-hungry, with no place to get any air, how agonizingly panicky would she become? How scared was she when she drowned?

Not at all; Jesus was with her as she watched from outside her body. The only disagreeable thing was when she learned she had to return to Earth, that it was not yet time for her to stay in Heaven.

What I like most in this Luke passage is that, though Jesus agrees with giving God his "proper respect," nonetheless His closing word is "Fear not."

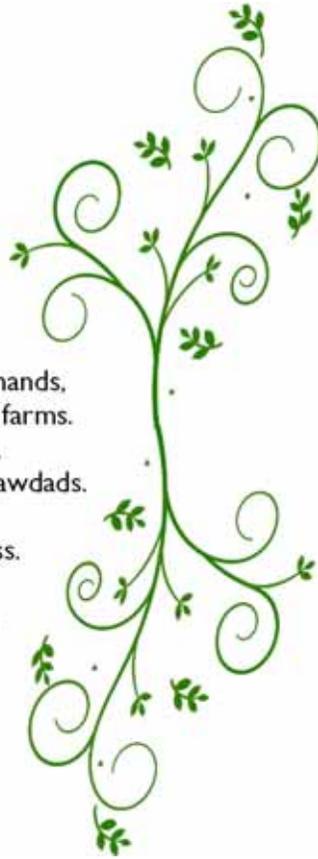
Prayer: God of all comfort, help us to trust in You when our fears show up. Your love is bigger than they are. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, March 29

Emma CW Ceruti

I am from
the bottom of a mason jar
filled with blue burning moonshine
quickly drained into thirsty cups.
The lint
in the empty pockets of factory workers.
The orange groves
whose arms stretched toward the sky
whistling "Of the Father's Love Begotten."
From the peaches and chewing tobacco,
from "yes ma'ams" and "no sirs."
From the dirt under the fingernails of worn hands,
who toiled on railroads and country farms.
From the cool, clear water of Rainbow river,
from the mouths of alligators and crowdads.
The corn fields and Johnny Cash,
who carried sore hearts to a sweet numbness.
The elms, poplars and maples,
overgrown Spanish moss and fighting weeds.
From freckles – the stars of skin
and hands that clung together
chanting, "My Father who art in Heaven—"
From saints and sinners,
Butch and Aunt Jack.
Pulpits and pews,
from jail cells and crowded bars.
Drunken dancing
in the warm kitchen late at night.
From the baptismal font,
with babies crying
as holy water runs down their soft heads.
From the sweat of our brow
to the fruits of this earth,
for dust we are,
and dust we shall return.

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Good Friday, March 30

WILLING...OR NOT?

Merrill Litchfield

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34)

Consider the book: *7 Lessons From Heaven* by Mary C. Neal, M.D.

"In the years since my kayaking accident, I have often considered why it is so difficult for most of us to say yes to God. When life is comfortable and satisfying, it is more difficult to say yes. But I've concluded that so much of our hesitation is rooted in fear—fear of losing control, fear of accountability, and most significantly, fear that God will change our life. We worry that God's plan may not be what we want, and we fear that we may not want to go where He leads. We fear failure, putting ourselves "out there," and we fear what others may think. It's an endless list." [*7 Lessons From Heaven*, Chapter 10, p. 150]

I'm aware that not everybody is comfortable with my taste in books. When I went into ambulance work, I knew I would bump into incidents of death and dying; I wanted to be as ready as I could, so I read a number of books that many people shy away from. Now I know that it's not what I know, but my willingness to stay with somebody in a tough situation that matters most. It may even give me a chance to say a word from God, one they need to hear.

This year, I have been very excited to read *7 Lessons From Heaven*, delighted at the experiences the author Mary shares with us, especially how easily Jesus helps us from earth to His Kingdom. Yet I'm also aware of a number of people who avoid books that speak of death, that offer new information of how God deals with humans. Some, aware that these stories are not humanly possible, try to project our human limits onto God. 'T'won't work. God does what He wills, and proves His love for us, even if we're scared of Him. Others, who try to compare all other books with Scripture in an effort to keep a standard, may miss the times God raised someone from the dead in the Bible, and reject all modern resuscitations. The question is, how often will Jesus have to say to us, as He did to Jerusalem: "...but you were not willing!"

Prayer: Lord God, Giver of Life, and Giver of Eternal Life, You have poured Yourself out for us in creating, in providing food and oxygen, in giving each individual life, blessing so many of them, and redeeming all who will accept You. We owe You more praise and thanksgiving than our hearts and minds can pour out. And then we also must thank Your Holy Spirit for the sighs He provides to multiply our feeble prayers. Thank You for a prophet like Mary, sent to us with a message from You, who does her best to convey it. May we be willing to hear, and to do when You ask it. Amen.

Holy Saturday, March 31

JESUS HEALS TEN LEPERS — MORE THAN A THANK YOU

BY THE HEALED SAMARITAN LEPER

Rev. Doug Bowden

"He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan." (Luke 17:16)

This seems, at first reading, so absolutely clear. Jesus and his traveling disciples meet the ten lepers somewhere between Samaria and Galilee. Even closer now to Jerusalem, to which Jesus set his face, as we first read in Luke 9:51, Jesus responds with compassion to their cries. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:13) A faithful Jew, Jesus tells the ten lepers to go first to the priests, where, obedient to the requirements of the Torah, each one can be cleansed and blessed and then able to return to their family and friends in their homes and communities. This applied, of course, to the nine Jewish lepers. But what of the Samaritan leper? Where did he go to follow Jesus' instructions? Even more importantly, and very moving for us to read, "And as they went (the lepers) were made clean." (Luke 17:14)

Implied by Luke, a master storyteller, the nine healed Jewish lepers immediately returned home to their family, friends, synagogue, and work. Truly, they had been restored, healed by a fellow Jew named Jesus. Thankfully, it is the healed Samaritan leper who now takes center stage in Luke's Gospel story.

Indeed, realizing that he has been healed by Jesus, the Samaritan "praises God with a loud voice." (15) Then, even more significantly, he comes back to Jesus, where he "prostrates himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." (16) Jesus, receiving the Samaritan leper he has healed, responds by asking the obvious and urgent question. Where are the other nine healed lepers? Where is their praise to God for healing?

Here, at this mountaintop moment of the story, is where now, thanks to New Testament scholars of the last 20 years, we embrace this new insight. This healing story is so much more than the Samaritan returning to thank Jesus for healing him of his leprosy. The Samaritan came back to Jesus as a new disciple of his. This is what his prostrating himself at Jesus' feet means. It is an act of worship. Jesus, then, welcomes a new disciple and invites him to come with him (on the way) to Jerusalem.

**Prayer: O God, the healed Samaritan leper teaches us.
More than "thank you," Jesus is our Lord and Savior.**

Easter Sunday, April 1

THE DAFFODILS STILL BLOOM!

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

When, at what time, did the Father raise Jesus his Son, from death to resurrected life? The quick answer is: we don't know! All we know from the Gospels is that sunrise brought an empty tomb. But an ancient tradition has it that the time of the Resurrection was 3:00 in the morning.

It seems God works best in the deepest part of the night. God is always in conversation with us, especially in stillness, especially in darkness. Easter is God speaking to us in such a deep and unforgettable way that even the deaf among us hear God's voice.

Easter is the Father's answer to the horrors of Good Friday. But Easter is much more than that! Easter is the Father's abiding answer to every one of us imprisoned in the frail flesh of life, imprisoned in the long history of human corruption and never-ending evil. Easter is the Father's abiding answer to every one imprisoned in prejudice, imprisoned in the unsatisfying pursuit of pleasure, power, and privilege.

Easter is God Almighty's pledge that what happened to Jesus Christ on that first Easter morn will happen to each of us. Easter is God Almighty's promise that the victory given to Jesus Christ is our victory as well. We, too, will be resurrected body and soul.

I'm mystified why this core Christian belief is so seldom proclaimed, so seldom preached. Heaven is not our final home. Heaven is but a way station. We will not spend the expanse of eternity in heaven. No, we will be resurrected body and soul. We will then live out the endless joys of eternal life on a renewed, healed, heavenly earth.

Daffodils are among my favorite flowers, partially because they come so early in Spring and also because I'm not allergic to them, as I am to Easter lilies. Next to the side door of my home where I always come and go, there's a small garden with many daffodils. After the soul-crushing events of losing my beloved Beth to cancer, part of me wondered if those daffodils would again bloom. But, of course, as perennials, they bloomed. And I find comfort and consolation in this: the daffodils still bloom!

One of the songs I regularly listen to when I work out at the gym is *Unchained Melody*. Most of us are probably familiar with the popular 1965 version, sung by Bobby Hatfield of the Righteous Brothers. What we may not know is that the original was written and sung in a 1955 movie titled "Unchained"; hence, the title of the song. The movie is about a man imprisoned far from his wife and family.

Is this not a metaphor for each of us? Are we not all imprisoned in one way or another? Yet Easter promises there will come that sacred day when each of us will be finally and forever unchained.

"Oh, my love, my darling. I've hungered for your touch, a long, lonely time. Time goes by so slowly and time can do so much—are you still mine?... I need your love. I need your love. God speed your love to me...Lonely rivers sigh, wait for me, wait for me. I'll be coming home, wait for me."

Are not these lyrics well-sung to God: "Oh, God, my darling, I've hungered for your touch a long, lonely time. Dear God, I need your love...God, speed your love to me!"

Our only home is in the spacious heart of our loving God—a heart broken wide open on Good Friday, a heart that eagerly waits for us to come home!

He Is Risen! Alleluia!



DEAR MISS KATE: A LETTER TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER

...continued from page 27, by Pastor Mark Himel

Justifying - Meaning there is justice between us and God as we go through life. When we mess up, do something wrong, make a mistake of some sort that may not be pleasing to God, we can be forgiven. God gives us the opportunity to grow from our sins if we recognize and be sorry for our mistakes, repent. Then try to make up for our mistakes, learn from them by reconciling, doing something good to overcome our mistakes and make the situation better. So, there is justice in life for the not-so-good things we may do from time to time. God is loving, forgiving and knows we are not perfect. God offers forgiveness each time we fail, when we genuinely acknowledge our mistakes and try to make the situation better as we repent and reconcile with God.

Sanctifying - Is best understood, I think, by visualizing your walk with God each day as you have let Him into your life...keeping your eye on the life of Christ, trying to live more like Christ. Christ is perfection and something we will never be, but having the mental image of each day trying to walk more like Christ, towards Christ, is a good mindset to keep as a discipline in your life. As you already know, we are not perfect, and will move away from what Christ would like for us to do from time to time. But as you walk, keep your eye on Christ and what he has taught and is teaching us each day, and you will again move closer to Christ, which is a very good place to be. Just think of walking with Christ, being with the Holy Spirit, as you go through the not-so-good and good times of life.

So, as you put your PJ'S on each night to go to bed, know that you are never alone, God is with you, loves you and so wants you to love Him and all His people of the world, and care for His world, this earth where we live.

I love you,

Papa



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