

Ash Wednesday, March 6

Read: Matthew 6:19-21 TREASURES IN HEAVEN

There are so many scripture passages concerning money contained in the Old and New Testaments. They have to do with the mechanics of giving our tithes, offerings, and treasures to the Lord and there are also passages that identify certain returns on our investments.

On Sunday November 11th, I began my first sermon series about finances, and we talked about the story of Jesus observing the people of Israel in the temple putting their tithes into the collection baskets. An elderly widow enters the temple and hurriedly drops two copper coins into the overflowing sea of money already collected. Jesus points to her and declares that she has given more than anyone else, because she gave all that she had. I told the gathered congregation that none of us can out-give God.

That same day, God showed me just how truthful that statement would become in the life of our church. On the way to visit one of my congregants who occasionally works on Sunday, I noticed a homeless woman standing next to the store that I was going to visit. We talked for a little while, but only in pleasantries. I excused myself and entered the store to complete my business. When I came back out, this lady was still there, asking nothing from anyone who passed by. I was moved to offer her some help and she accepted with a lovely smile and a hug.

Later, as I was visiting the farmers market in The Plains, my farmer friend for over six years weighed my apples, thanked me for my military service and then asked me to do him a favor. I agreed and he reached into his cash register to hand me some money to put in my church's offering plate. It was the same amount that I had given to the homeless woman.

Upon arriving home, I chanced to talk to my next-door neighbors and handed them a jar of apple butter made by one of my congregants. They had never had it before and offered to pay for it. I declined and parked in my driveway. The neighbors ran over to me with an envelope and asked me to place it in my church's offering plate. It too was the same amount that I had given to the homeless woman.

On Sunday November 25th, I finished my sermon series about finances, reporting to the congregation that in the last year and a half, we had given over \$8000 to local non-profit groups in our area that provide outreach to the community. We celebrated God's providence in answer to our faithful giving. But that's not the end of the story:

Our yearly Charge Conference was being held later that day and as I prepared the sanctuary, notes, and program for our gathering, I thought about checking the mailbox. I opened the box to reveal a letter from a wonderful lady whose sister's funeral I had officiated at on the 1st of November. The letter said thank you and inside was a check which held a gift from God that was over and above what we had given to others in God's service. God just cannot be out-given. I believe it now.

-- Rev. Frank Bertrand

TODAY: Think about the treasures you have been given by God and the ways you might share them with someone else. It does not have to be much, but you will find the more you give, the more God will return to you. Be blessed in Jesus' name.

Thursday, March 7

Read: Isaiah 59:2 READ IT OUT LOUD

“In the beginning...”

With pencil in hand, I carefully copied each word from the first chapter of Genesis onto a single sheet of paper. Completing each verse, in turn, I read it out loud. When finished, I went to see my father.

He was writing a sermon. A professor of religious studies and an ordained minister, he often served as a guest preacher in nearby chapels and churches. As a young child, it was hard to get his attention when he was working on a sermon.

“Do you want to see my sermon, Dad?” I asked.

“Right,” he said, deeply preoccupied with the reframing of insights into moral arguments, using imaginative turns of phrase. Or something like that.

That’s as far as I got.

But in speaking the opening words of Genesis aloud as I eagerly copied them down so long ago, with clear purpose and intent, those words became my words. And they remain with me to this day. (“My words which I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips . . .” Isaiah 59:21, NIV.)

Actors will tell you that performing a role in a play binds you to that play for the rest of your life. You’ll remember lines you spoke, where you were in that time and space, and the exhilaration of being a part of a communal experience larger than yourself.

I’d go on to play shepherds and wise men in the usual church pageants; Noah in a children’s production of Andre Obey’s play by that same name, and the distant voice of God in Archibald MacLeish’s play *J.B.*

I also began to read aloud in church. One cold December morning as a wide-eyed, hastily-showered pre-teen, in a spray-starched Sunday shirt and tie, I stood before the congregation and read passages from Dylan Thomas’ *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*. Thomas’ memories became memories of my own.

And then there was scripture. Lots of scripture. I can still read Luke aloud as part of a Christmas Cantata, and be deeply moved each time by the angel Gabriel’s gentle, “Fear not, Mary...” as he realizes he has profoundly troubled a young girl, and by her brave declaration in reply, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” The voices are longing to be heard and unfailingly captivating.

The public reading of scripture is an act of devotion. As readers, we lend our voices to those captured in the text: to patriarchs and matriarchs, to Kings and their daughters, to prophets and psalmists, to the over 3000 people named in the Bible and the thousands of others who remain anonymous. In giving them voice, we share the experience of their lives -- lived in a world inhabited by the living God -- with the listening audience. We grow in wisdom through the sharing of that experience and create ties that bind us to the text and to our church communities.

I believe we’re all called to read scripture aloud. In public. Not to find meaning. But for the experience. And to keep these words in our mouths, forevermore. I hold this truth to be self-evident. But if you do require evidence, remember 1 Timothy 4:13: “Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture...”

-- Ted May

TODAY: Reread today's verse aloud. Then try it again for the remaining days of this devotional. Does it help you to connect more deeply with scripture?

Friday, March 8

Read: Mark 4:2-9 BE THE SOIL

It's been a tough year to grow grass in Northern Virginia, and that's a problem when you're preparing to put your house on the market. According to our realtor, what you want is "curb appeal." Unfortunately for the lawn, our large tulip poplars and leafy red maples grab most of the sunshine and our energetic dogs roughhouse regularly, completely oblivious to the turf they tear up. Thus, I have been doing a lot of seeding this year and, despite record-setting rainfall, I have remained hopeful scattering seed by the handful. It's inexpensive so I can be generous.

That's good because plenty of my seed bounces joyfully on to the stone path – to the delight of our chickadees and cardinals. The rest either stays on top of the soil – apparently too lazy to germinate – or sprouts tentatively, often getting trampled by the playful pups or unwittingly by me raking leaves. I never expected growing grass to be so difficult.

Isn't it wonderful that Jesus, through the wisdom of parables, meets us everywhere – even in our lawns and gardens? I can certainly relate to the plight of the farmer in the story, but it's the wayward seed and the low yield that really get my attention. Frankly, my life story is full of attempts to be good seed, but life's journey has had many rocky places and thorny situations. I want to live a high yield life, but how? I don't have much of a green thumb.

Here, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Noland family, and specifically to Josh's wife Amy who had a wonderful idea for her family Christmas gift this year. Wanting to heal family hearts that remained heavy from the loss of Mary Anne, their matriarch, who succumbed to cancer in 2016, Amy wanted to help keep Mary Anne's memory alive for her boys and especially for her many grandchildren. Amy solicited all variety of "Mary Anne stories" from those of us who knew and loved her.

Delighted to comply, I began to sift through more than a decade of memories searching for the perfect story to share and, in prayer, I was led to the parable of the sower. Ironically, Mary Anne did not fit neatly into the parable. She was not the farmer-type, nor could I see her strolling along the path, picking flowers or pulling weeds. With some sadness, I realized that I couldn't even imagine her as waving grain in the fertile field, though the field I saw was lush and overflowing with blooms.

That's when a thought warmed me like the first ray of sunshine on an early spring day: *we are that field*. All of us who have been touched by Mary Anne's heart, supported by her efforts, encouraged by her words, honored by her listening, and blessed by her love and loyalty are living more fruitful lives because *she was our soil*. What a beautiful way to live a high yield life: by being good soil for others.

"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. Then Jesus said, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.'"

- Wendy LeBolt

TODAY: Mary Anne Noland was deep, rich, fertile soil for me. Who has been good soil for you? Whose good soil will you be?

Saturday, March 9

Read: Romans 12:2 BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND

Time does fly and I feel like it is getting faster and faster as I grow older. It has been three and a half years since I left the Church of the Good Shepherd. Since then (which is more than half of my total time in the United States). I have lived in the small town of Alexander in Western New York. To me, this is a "wow." When I was driving up to Alexander from Washington DC, I thought that I knew enough of this nation and its culture. But now, I think that I was a baby knowing nothing about America and that now I have grown enough to go to preschool.

My time in Alexander has changed me for sure. I was not used to living in a rural area. When I first came here, I missed all the crazy crowded streets and heavy traffic everywhere in DC. But now, I feel like it is too crowded even in Vienna! I also initially felt a little scary to have such quiet evenings. But now I feel like it is just right. It must be me who changed. In the past, I was so nervous to meet with Americans, only because I did not know how to act and how to respond in a proper way. Everything was new. And frankly speaking, I had to get used to the food that you eat. A confession to make: I found it hard to enjoy potlucks at the Church of the Good Shepherd. According to Lyn, the food was so good, but I had to look for the Korean restaurant near the church right after the potluck lunch. Now, though, it is like my birthday when we have potluck here in Alexander. I do not need to look for Korean restaurants anymore. I am sure I've changed a lot.

I believe that my Alexander church members must have gotten used to, at least a little, being with me, their Korean pastor. Sometimes, they must have had an awkward moment because of their foreign pastor acting differently from their expectations. Some may have kept a distance from me because they had no idea what I believe and what theology I have. But I believe that the last three and half years have given them a better understanding of me and some kind of comfort to be with me. Whether we want or not, or, whether it is big or small, we cannot deny that we experience changes little by little every day.

That being said, I came up with a question: do I experience changes inside me as well? Is my faith life also changing? We change as we live every single day although we don't plan to. We just grow every day and get used to environments around us and to circumstances that we are facing. What about what is inside of us? What about us before God? According to the Bible, the changes that are supposed to happen inside of us are not something that we can choose to be changed or not to be changed, but they are required by God. God demands changes from us. Apostle Paul says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." It is a requirement, not a choice.

-- Rev. Yohan Moon

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Our Father in heaven, we experience visible change in adjusting to our everyday life. But if what is inside of us has not changed or if we have not made an effort to restore Your image in us, please forgive us and help us grow in You, especially through this season of Lent. Amen.

Sunday, March 10

Read: Deuteronomy 26:8-11 THE MIGHTY HAND AND THE OUTSTRETCHED ARM

Last week, we returned from our church's sixth mission trip providing eye care for people of the southeastern communities of the Dominican Republic. What started as a small band of nine including one optometrist, an optician, and seven unknowing but energetic volunteers, has blossomed. This year, we were 38, including three ophthalmologists, four optometrists, and two opticians. With our supply of some 10,000 prescription and reading glasses, we again examined nearly 1000 people and distributed nearly 1500 pairs of glasses. And we provided cataract surgery for 75 people.

If you were cruising through the Caribbean in mid-January, you also might have seen the container ship *Katharine B*, a colorful vessel the size of a football field. One of its containers was ours – a four-ton box filled with nearly \$200,000 worth of precision instruments like a 1200-lb. operating microscope and something called a phaco-emulsifier, special lenses, and hospital clothing that gifts have allowed us to purchase.

This has been part of a remarkable experience: A disparate and eclectic group of volunteers — professionals and helpers, from teenagers to octogenarians, from a half dozen churches, from four different states — have all combined our talents and instincts to help several thousand people in San Pedro de Macoris see better.

This also has been part of a remarkable journey. In a small way we're emulating the journey celebrated in today's reading. Led by Moses, inspired by God, and protected by "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm," Israelites had fled Egypt amidst great terror, but on their journey witnessed "signs and wonders."

In the joy and amazement of our patients as they see clearly for the first time in years, we are in our own way witnessing signs and wonders in this tiny corner of the town of San Pedro de Macoris.

We are taking the first fruit "which the Lord hath given us" and sharing it with our neighbors, and have been rewarded beyond measure. Interestingly, most of our group are older, perfect examples of one of today's realities — we have the benefit of longer active lives with extraordinary opportunity.

Here's the point: whatever your age or your station, you can find an opportunity for your own journey alone or with others. God's mighty hand and outstretched arm offer the inspiration, the path, and the protection.

"And you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you."

— *Haydee and Jim Toedtman*

TODAY: Take a few moments to examine your life for the "signs and wonders" that surround you. Then look for the opportunity to share your good fortune.

Monday, March 11

Read: 2 Timothy 3:14-17 CONNECTED TO GOD

These days, anything you could ever want to know is a click away. You can't turn on your phone without being bombarded with the daily news, or an opinion on said news. We are always connected, always tuned in. This level of technological advancement is exciting and stimulating. But it can also be quite overwhelming, depressing, and frustrating. It is a far cry from the weeks-long journeys and word-of-mouth that dictated the spread of information in biblical times.

Which is why, while reading today's scripture, I was struck by how applicable it is to our lives in 2019. In this passage, Paul warns Timothy about the immorality and misinformation that surrounds him. He encourages him to stay true to what he has learned in scripture, the only Word of God, for he knows

from whom these lessons come. What a powerful message to consider as we sort through the never-ending updates and news feeds. I can only imagine the words Paul would have regarding social media -- likely we'd all be in for a lecture. Nonetheless, if we can apply this same amount of discretion to the information we read, it can help us identify the intent and veracity of each source.

Even more important is how we present our voice to the world. As we express our own opinions, whether in speech or in print, we should continue to uphold the values that we have learned as Christians. It is in this way that we stay connected to God, instead of just the Internet.

-- Taylor Noriega

TODAY: Are you ready for an interesting challenge? Try spending more time today reading this devotional, the Bible, or another good book than you spend perusing the Internet.

Tuesday, March 12

Read: Exodus 20:12 HONOR YOUR FATHER

Last year I wrote about my mother and what an inspiration she was to me. This year I'm going to write about my husband Joe's father, who was also an inspiration. Joe's mother died when he was twelve, and PopPop (as the children and I called him) raised Joe by himself. He was a "boiler maker" and worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. While he was there, they had a terrible fire that killed many men. Joe's dad led several men out, and they were saved.

After he retired, and Joe and I were married, he would come to visit us and especially the grandchildren. Since Joe was in the Air Force, this was not as easy as it sounds. It could be a very long trip, and by this time, Joe's dad had two artificial legs due to hardening of the arteries. His car had hand controls, but there was still gas to get, and that's not so easy with the steel "sticks" (as we called them) that he put his arms in and used as sort of crutches. He made the trip across country from New Jersey to California every year and would arrive at the base gate. That's when we'd know he was coming, as he had to be vouched onto the Air Force base. It was usually a surprise (as he didn't generally tell us when he was coming), but it was one we loved. Not only did we love it, but all the children we knew loved it too, and would come over to see him and "play" with him.

His attitude was one of happiness and love. He was a joy to be around. He loved everything and everyone. He never complained and had friends everywhere. He was a wonderful man and all who knew him loved and admired him. He didn't say too much about religion, but we knew that he had strong faith. It had gotten him through some very hard times and strengthened him through many hardships.

-- Bev Kinego

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for blessing all of us with strength and courage to go through the hard times, and love and companionship to share the good times. Amen.

Wednesday, March 13

Read: Matthew 14:28-33 EYES ON ME

It's Wednesday, the day I have Library Time with the children of our church's preschool. We read a book together, they choose books to read at home, and we do a STEM enrichment activity. It is a highlight of my week.

We have a little ritual before I read to them: we zip our lips (zip!) and open our ears (wiggle, wiggle!), then I say, "Eyes on me!" to be sure they're paying attention. I know if they're looking at me, they're much less likely to be distracted, and much more likely to be delighted by Harold and his purple crayon or the adventures of Frog and Toad.

It reminds me of today's scripture passage. Jesus has been told about John the Baptist's murder, and he wants nothing more than to spend some time by himself. Instead he is followed by great crowds of people and, being Jesus, he is compassionate, healing the sick and miraculously feeding them with five loaves and two fish.

Then, once again, he withdraws from the crowds, sends the disciples across the Sea of Galilee, and spends time in solitary prayer. In the evening, he terrifies the disciples by walking across the water in a storm to join them in the boat. Once they realize who it is, Peter, being his impetuous self, asks Jesus to command him to come out on the water. There Peter is, walking on the water towards Jesus, when he is overcome by fear and begins to sink, calling out, "Lord, save me!"

Why did Peter start to sink? Because he took his eyes off Jesus. When do I start to sink? When I take my eyes off Jesus. When I'm distracted by the headlines, or my to-do list, or worries about my loved ones. Then I know I need to refocus my gaze, often by taking a long walk. When my eyes are on Jesus, I remember that God's love and grace surround me. I'm calmer, stronger, more joyful.

So today when I read to the children, it will remind me that I, too, need to zip my lips (zip!), open my ears (wiggle, wiggle!), and set my eyes on the One who is light and life to me.

-- Sue Warrick

TODAY: Look for ways to keep your eyes on Jesus. Perhaps you can take a walk, pray, read the Bible, talk with a trusted friend, or even share a story with a preschooler!

Thursday, March 14

Read: Lamentations 3:22-23 GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS

Spring is here; well, in less than a week, officially. It's a time of renewal and rebirth and the hatching of new ideas. Every morning is a fresh start, a *tabula rasa* (Latin for clean slate). For all this, and because it's my birthday month, Spring is my favorite time of year.

Over the last 24 years, I have told my students that every day in my classroom is a new day. A new chance to start over, to right any wrongs of the past, and to begin again with a willing spirit to try new things and to be bold and resolute. Just like the Lord teaches us with his love for us, I have an unconditional love for the teenagers in my theater program. Don't get me wrong – this is a tall order and often a difficult challenge. They question everything, are slow to trust the adults of the world, and so badly just want to be independent. But I never lose faith in them. I give them my lessons, I let them experiment and socially interact with each other, and ultimately, I wait patiently and watch them grow.

I like to think that one of my gifts is patience. I am all about the long game. I remember the first time I learned what patience is when I was five. I had to wait in a really long line to ride a pony at a carnival. It felt like forever, but my dad told me that I had to be patient and the reward would be great. It felt like forever waiting in that long line of parents and kids in the hot sun. But he was right. Once it was my turn to ride the pony, it was the greatest feeling. I learned that day that good things come to those who are willing to wait. I believe that faithfulness fits right in here too.

God teaches us to have faith in Him, even if His time is not in line with our own. We may not always know what He has in store for us, but with true faith, and the knowledge that every day brings a fresh start and new beginning, He will help us see the Way, the Truth, and the Light.

-- Scott Pafumi

TODAY: Offer this prayer: God, thank you for believing in me, for having faith in me to do your will, and for teaching me to have patience in every new day. Amen.

Friday, March 15

Read: Matthew 6:19-21 EMPTYING MY POCKETS

Not to pat myself too much on the back, but I recently realized the keen self-awareness that I possessed while in grade school. For one of my classes (let's say in fourth grade), I wrote a story called something like "The Boy Who Put Everything in His Pockets." True to the title, the lead character was a boy who constantly collected things (marbles, gum, crayons, cake, baseball cards, you name it!) and socked them away in his pants pockets. Each day his pockets would bulge further as he continued to pack them with more and more stuff. In the end, mayhem ensued when something (a match and fireworks, as I recall) caused his pockets to explode. I think the boy somehow ended up being okay, but wow what a mess!

Fast forward to 2018 when my wife Kathy and I became empty nesters (younger son left for college) and we made the big life decision to sell our house of twenty years and downsize to a condo one Metro stop from the city. We had originally moved into our house when Kathy was six months pregnant with our older son. And there we stayed . . . and grew as a family. The house was perfect for us in many ways, including its size, which allowed us to comfortably accumulate things during our time there. And needless to say, we had acquired way too many belongings to fit into our new two-bedroom condo. (Spoiler alert. This is where I draw the connection to my childhood story.)

While I wouldn't call myself a hoarder, I do tend to hold onto things. Part of it is some sense of optimistic practicality (I say to myself, "Surely there could be a use for that [fill in the blank] again!"). Part of it is sentimentality (tearing up when seeing son's "brilliant" yet bulky third grade art project). And part of it is simply laziness, procrastination, and a sense of satisfaction from holding onto stuff for no rational reason whatsoever. I mean, there are just *so many* neckties that I could ever need, especially in a "business casual" era when I rarely wear a tie for work (or at church, for that matter).

Thankfully, during the lead-up to our move, I was faced with no alternative but to let go and get rid of stuff. I am also blessed with a wife who is more than up to the task of choosing which of our sons' artwork projects to keep.

But the whole painful process of paring down made me realize that "Yes, Jim you often are *too attached* to stuff." I chuckled when I recalled my "prescient" childhood story about the boy and his exploding pockets. It also made me remember the Bible's teachings that as Christians we are *in this world*, but we are not *of this world*. By needlessly holding on to too many material things, we become more implanted in this world. I'll try to keep this in mind as Kathy and I settle into (and think about more stuff for) our new place.

- Jim Lovelace

TODAY: Reflect on the balance in your life between treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." -- Matthew 6:21

Saturday, March 16

Read: Isaiah 58:11 RAIN OR SHINE - HAPPY TRAILS!

“Hot chocolate at the top. Hot chocolate at the top. Hot chocolate at the top.” This is the mantra that keeps my sister Priscilla and me putting one freezing foot in front of the other as we make our way up Mount LeConte, third highest peak in the Smokies.

This drop in temperature and relentless rain is not what we expected when we signed on for our October fall foliage adventure. Soupy fog blankets every “commanding view” the guidebook promised. For the five and a half miles up, eyes stay glued to slippery rocks and puddles under foot – except when grabbing for cold cable handrails as the trail hugs a cliff face or inches over narrow ledges.

The trail difficulty rating of *strenuous* is well under the *impossible* we’re giving it as hiker after hiker passes us. It doesn’t help when, along with “thank-you’s” as we stand to the side, we get a few, “I just hope I’m still out here when I’m your age.”

That very morning my devotion from *Jesus Calling* had expanded on Isaiah 58:11 with: “I will not leave you circling in deeply rutted paths. Instead, I will lead you along fresh trails of adventure, revealing to you things you did not know. Stay in communication with Me. Follow My guiding Presence.” I shared the reading with Priscilla, even a little smugly. I mean, could a daily devotion get any more specific and relevant?

Well, this is not the hike we had been promised – by the guidebook or my devotion.

But here is what I’m learning. No matter what the circumstances, God asks us to trust His guiding presence, to stay in communication with Him. And the easiest way to do this is to simply say *Thank You, Lord* – without waiting for sunshine on a smooth path.

Thank You that when water cascading over the handrails soaks our gloves, we have extra pairs.

Thank You that when these gloves get soaked, our hand warmer inserts still work, sort of.

Thank You that even though we reach the summit’s lodge 15 minutes too late for hot chocolate, friendly climbers make warming room around the gas stove - and our family-style dinner is served 30 minutes early!

Thank you for thick wool blankets on our bunks – and the next morning’s sun glinting off snow-covered firs.

Thank You that Priscilla and I are in this adventure together, encouraging each other, even laughing our way up the mountain and back down.

Thank You that (at our age!) we are still out there on the trail, just doing it!

--Barbara Appling

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Dear Lord, whatever my path today, whatever the challenge or obstacle, keep me thankful and aware of Your constant provision and guiding presence. Amen.

Sunday, March 17

Read: Psalm 27 BE STRONG AND TAKE HEART AND WAIT FOR THE LORD

In the fallout of my husband’s call for a separation last April, I learned the truth of 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” When I had no strength left and was in utter despair, I cried out to God to save me. He graciously stemmed the tide of chaotic thoughts flooding my mind about my family’s future. “Why? Why me?” was replaced with “What now?” Proverbs 3:5-6 became my mantra. The Lord directed my path toward forgiveness and gentle thoughts. I’d never before really understood the whole Philippians 4 thing about the peace that passes all understanding, but I have learned that it’s a real thing! Moments of sadness do sometimes

steal over my heart, but hope soon follows. Reciting verses 13 and 14 of Psalm 27 always helps refocus me, for it says, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

I have become desperate for God's Word and prayer, two things that I regrettably had only pursued in fits and starts. Meditating on Genesis 50:20, I see now that God has blessed me through this trial. As much as I do not want this to be my reality, I know that it has brought me out of the apathetic, selfish life I was living. My free-time priorities have switched from mindless television watching and Internet surfing to Bible study, prayer, and listening to sermon podcasts. Oh, what a difference it makes to be steeped in the truth of God! There's not a lot of room for hopeless feelings when you're constantly reminded of all the promises of God that are extravagantly poured out in the Bible. My family, friends, and coworkers have shown me such love -- I almost feel like I've had the privilege of hearing the eulogy at my own funeral! God also brought new neighborhood friends into my family's life, so we had summer days filled with activity.

Though I am profoundly sad about my loss, I cannot say that I've had a bad year. I have laughed much and enjoyed many happy moments. If this is what it had to take to get me in closer relationship with God, then I would go through it all over again. I cannot praise Him enough for giving me the "strength that endures the unendurable," from Colossians 1:11.

-- Katherine Trott

TODAY: Offer the prayer that God gave to Moses with which to bless the Israelites (Numbers 6:22-24): "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." Amen.

Monday, March 18

Read: Job 12:7-10 ASK THE ANIMALS

My wife and I traveled to New Zealand over the holidays, celebrating our 25th anniversary. Our time there changed my perspective - hopefully long-term. This was a land of such beauty. Everywhere we went were snow-capped mountains, the riotous green of untouched forest, the pure turquoise water of rivers and streams. This was a place where the national government had made a real effort to treat the country's indigenous (Maori) people with respect and dignity - where a *rahui* (usage restriction) issued by a Maori chief to protect sacred trees threatened by a fungal infection is respected by the local and national governments.

As we walked through the New Zealand bush, surrounded by birdsong, I couldn't help but ask those birds, and the animals (even pests like stoats and possums), and the ferns and giant *kauri* trees, and the fish and penguins, fur seals and albatross we encountered along the coast - who has done this? Whose breath flows through you, and me - through every plant and animal, every sea creature and bird of the air?

And tears filled my eyes as I realized that the answer is the One Holy Spirit that enlivens each and every one of us.

Sister animals, living off the land, whose breath fills and animates you?

Brother birds, soaring ever higher, whose is the wind that lifts you?

Green siblings, fern and tree and bush, whose life flows through you?

Swift swimmers of ocean, sound, and stream, who inspires your course?

How can I ask you these questions? Who among us does not know that the Breath of God within us, quickening each of us, unites us all.

— Mike Croghan

TODAY: Go outside. If it's cold, wear a coat - but get out into nature. See if you can find signs of life returning - green plants sprouting from the thawing earth. Look for a wild critter or two - a songbird or a squirrel. Regardless, find a place to sit, and be quiet, and read the poem above like a prayer, inviting God's Holy Spirit to inspire you with love for the soil, the waters, the plants, the birds, and the animals that, together with you, comprise God's good creation.

Tuesday, March 19

Read: Galatians 5:22–23 ON WINGS, THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Every year when the weather turns colder and the neighborhood bears have gone into hibernation, I plan for a special day to place several bird feeders out in my yard. Two of these feeders, filled with sunflower and safflower seed, are situated directly in front of large windows adjacent to the table where we enjoy our meals. This location is ideal for close observation of the feathered friends who visit daily. In fact, bird-watching quickly becomes a delightful feast for the senses. Within a few minutes, even a casual observer will notice distinctive plumage, patterns of color, varied beak shapes, and different tail configurations. A closer look also makes it possible to recognize specific behaviors, and that's what captures my attention.

Over the years I've observed that birds take turns coming and going quite nicely. They seek coveted spots on feeder perches, but they stay only for a few seconds to get seeds. Individual birds gently make way for others to partake in the dining experience. They flit over to nearby bushes and wait patiently for their next turn to split open small seeds that offer needed nutrition. Birds are surprisingly regular, showing up at about the same time every morning and afternoon, as if they have an internal clock. They bring along many friends of the same species, but they also tolerate birds who are not like them. Of course, these lightweight avian buddies are naturally graceful as they swoop in for a snack and then soar off into surrounding trees. Adding to my delight, these beautiful creatures with various combinations of muted and vibrant colors are majestic in their own way. But the greatest joy for me is their faithfulness in stopping by to brighten every single day without fail.

The scripture for this devotion, Galatians 5:22–23, names nine attributes that represent the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When I reflect on the pleasures of bird-watching and consider what I have observed, I realize that my feathered friends epitomize that spirit. Maybe God sent them into our world as emissaries of peace.

I often wonder about humans. Could we learn to follow the marvelous example of birds? Could we routinely demonstrate those same aspects of behavior to show mutual respect? Could we enact compassion in our everyday interactions? What would it take to build communities where everyone gets along, despite their differences? Perhaps simple lessons from these charming winged creatures could move us ahead in sowing the seeds of lovingkindness.

--Melissa King

TODAY: Take time to notice feathered friends in your surroundings. Heavenly Father, teach me to be observant and appreciative of birds and other living things, so that I might learn to embrace the fruits of the Spirit.

Wednesday, March 20

Read: Psalm 32:8-10 DIVINE DIRECTION AND HIGH SPEED TURNS

It all happened quite naturally without second thoughts or worry. I was being directed. I believe God guides us but I had never experienced His hand quite so intently.

Life is a mystery and we go through each day in all its busy-ness, pain, light, and glory. And then years have passed. I was going to make a change and do what I really felt called to do. But what was that? And there it was. It began with me thinking what I was feeling was just grief, but there was also this nagging feeling, which I couldn't understand or describe completely. Seemingly by happenstance, I read an article about people who companion and emotionally support the dying and their families. It turned into an ah-ha moment! A God moment! This was the answer to my nagging thoughts. This was the type of person I needed when my mother was in her last days. I could have used someone at my side asking the right questions of me, guiding me, consoling me, talking to the medical professionals if I couldn't, playing comforting music, educating me on the dying process, and generally holding me up. I feel sure it would have made her death more tranquil and perhaps also it would have eliminated my years-long nagging feeling.

Could I do this for others? *Well, yes, I think so.* As I took this life turn at 50 miles an hour everything fell into place! A light went on. I followed the light. First it was the reading, research, and lots of prayer; then the training that changed my life and encouragement from friends and family. Then it was the people who appeared before me including a grace-filled friend who found herself on the same path. Then it was the first needy call so soon after my high-speed turn, then starting my own business. Then it was the overwhelming love and humility I felt volunteering at the bedside of the dying, enveloping their families and being present with them at the most difficult of times. Then it was (and still is) the relentlessness in which I am living this out.

This is not just me; it's me with the power of divine direction. Praise be to God.

-- Jane Euler

TODAY: If you think you might be interested in helping those at the end of life, don't wait. Contact your local hospice, nursing/retirement center or hospital; and volunteer today. The giving and receiving rewards are great, *'Thus Saith the Lord'*!

Thursday, March 21

Read: Psalm 37:7 REST IN THE LORD AND WAIT PATIENTLY FOR HIM

I've probably read passages like today's scripture verse hundreds of time. Psalm 37:7 reminds us to quiet down before God, to be prayerful before Him, to not bother with those who climb the ladder, who elbow their way to the top.

I wonder what's new in this. I wonder what fresh understanding God would have us discover. I wonder why on earth I would choose just *one* verse for our annual spiritual discipline of devotional writing. Or, perhaps, did this single verse choose me? That seems to happen sometimes with devotional writing -- the ineffable workings of grace invariably come into play. We set out to share one thought only to discover that God has revealed an entirely different one.

So ... last October, a small woman with a foreign accent approached me just as I was stepping away from an ATM and asked if I had any money I could give her. She had needs, she said, she had children. Clutching a fistful of cash, I refused, irritated by what I felt was obvious manipulation and a probable con job. Irrked, I walked to my car, got in and drove off vowing always to make sure my money was safely tucked away, out of sight. Driving along Herndon's busy main street, an interior verbal tennis match between my disgruntled ego and, very likely, my God, began to take place. The short version sounded like this: "Hadn't I read, about a million times, that I am to respond to the needy, to give alms to those that ask?"

"Yes. But hadn't I also read that people who beg for money just use it for things that are bad for them?"

"How did I know she would do that?"

"I didn't, but . . . "

"Give anyway."

At the next light, I turned the car around. "Ok fine," I thought. I'll go back and give her the money. But Lord above, I wanted a sign, a little something that said I was complying with a significant divine policy and not just being a chump. I realize now, as I write this, that I wasn't looking for reassurance as much as I wanted proof that I wasn't wrong. I was asking for certainty because I didn't want to feel like I was one down in some worldly game of win/lose. But I didn't know that then.

I drove back to the bank, pulled up to the curb, rolled down the window, interrupted the woman, who was talking to a tall middle-aged man, and thrust the cash her way. "Look," I said. "I think this a scam, but since you asked for it - here." With that, the man turned to me and said very kindly, "Ma'am, if this IS a scam, well, that's on her. That's her bad karma. But you? You are doing the right thing. God bless you."

Was that my sign? I think so. However, until today, I thought the object lesson for this incident was; "Yes. Giving to people who appear to be in need is a good thing to do." Now however, looking at it through the lens of today's Old Testament suggested reading, it shows up quite differently. That poor woman certainly was not the greedy, power hungry men that Psalm 37:7 promises will not win the game of life. However, in that moment, for me, she might as well have been. Wealthy power mongers are easy to spot and apparently I can patiently await their downfall, should that be God's plan for them. Yet, if I think someone is trying to elbow their way up my personal ladder or trying to put one over on me or mine, it's shocking how quickly I want to pull them down, and probably do. I confess this happens way too often and I know it's been going on for way too long. I also think God wants me to knock it off. Starting right now.

So today, quietly, prayerfully, and with the rasp of a devotional deadline just hours away, a surprising new lesson is honed. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way. Or, in other words, fearful worry over how things measure up, by our own reckoning, wreaks havoc in ways we can't foresee. God knows what He is about.

I am grateful for the hard working people who, through this devotional, have provided a unique opportunity for us to dig in and dig up the "pearls of great price" that God embeds in our day-to-day

lives. I am also grateful for all those who make the effort to share this with others. If you are reading this today, may God bless and keep you in this holy season of Lent.

May His wisdom be yours as well.

-- *Marey Oakes*

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, may I rest this day in your presence and wait patiently as my understanding of your Word grows and strengthens. In your own time, help me to discover pearls of great value. Amen.

Friday, March 22

Read: Luke 10:25-37 WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

It was dark as my car slowed at the bike crossing. Looking to my right I noticed a young man with a bicycle standing next to a hunched figure. This seemed a bit odd, so I rolled down my window and asked him if he needed help. He nodded yes.

As I approached the two it was apparent something was wrong with the second man. His head was down and both hands were tightly gripping the fabric of his pants just above the knees. He was shaking and although I could not see his face, the man was crying. On his right arm he had a plastic wristband and there was a bandage covering a piece of gauze on the inside of his forearm. The young man had been trying to talk to him, but he had not responded, and he did not respond when I spoke to him. Other than the shaking, he was rigid, and we could not get him to sit down or lift his head.

I called the police, who dispatched an emergency team. As we were waiting, the young man said he had been working in a local restaurant and was going home by way of the bike path. He had ridden by the man but was worried about him and turned around to see if he could help.

In the light from the approaching ambulance I could see that the distressed man's right arm was bleeding from abrasions on his elbow. An EMT pointed out that the wristband was from a hospital and the man had his right and left shoes on the wrong feet. We were miles from the nearest hospital.

The ambulance took the injured man away. The young bike rider was from Central America and a local high school student. I wondered if he was apprehensive as the ambulance and police cruiser arrived. Was he afraid when the men in uniform approached us? After all, he must know he is the "Other," not one of "Us."

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan an expert in the law asks Jesus, "and who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the familiar story of the man who is beaten and robbed and left "half dead." A priest and a Levite ignore the man, but a Samaritan takes pity on the man and helps him. Jesus then asks the expert in the law, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

The Samaritan of Jesus's time was certainly an "Other."

I don't know how many people ignored that hunched figure, shaking in the night. But I know who was the good neighbor.

-- *Rob Carter*

TODAY: "Go and do likewise."

Saturday, March 23

Read: 1 John 3:18 CAN YOU BE ED?

Ed was known as a man who would certainly speak his mind. I knew him from work; Ed was a retired Navy flier, and although we did not work in the same office or even the same department at the Pentagon, I would encounter him every couple of weeks or so, as we attended the same meetings or briefings. Ed was invariably the “good conscience” of our gatherings; always professional, he would be the one to question why decisions were made and why we were going in a certain direction. For Ed, “because we have always done it this way” was definitely not a good enough answer.

I attended Ed’s memorial service a few weeks ago. After suffering through a series of long illnesses, Ed passed surrounded by his close family. His memorial service really captured the sense of the person I knew, and as often happens, opened a window into a whole other side of the person I worked with, allowing me to appreciate his other passions and interests.

I learned that Ed was a beloved husband and a brother fiercely protective of his younger brothers and “baby sister.” In other testimonials, I learned that Ed loved working on his farm in eastern Maryland, and was a passionate, if only sometimes successful, saltwater fisherman.

It was in the casual reminiscences that followed the memorial service that I gained some of the most telling insights into this man. I learned Ed and his wife had sponsored a foster son, who they subsequently adopted, even though the young man suffered from drug dependency and the behavioral and legal problems that can accompany it. I spoke to a middle-aged lady who Ed had sponsored at summer camp in rural Maryland; for years, Ed had paid for her and her siblings to attend the camp when their father lost his job.

Even though Ed and I never spoke of such things, it became abundantly clear during the testimony of many friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family members that Ed was a man of intense faith who practiced his love through his actions. The world would be a much kinder place if there were more “Eds” in the world.

-- Bill Fiser

TODAY: Pray this prayer: “Dear Lord, help me to discern what people around me really need in their lives, and help me to show your love for them through my actions.”

Sunday, March 24

Read: John 8:25-32 THE POWER OF TRUTH

I recently watched the 2003 family movie, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, on a whim. I unexpectedly discovered that the film’s themes were quite moving and profound, with an especial relevance to persons of faith.

To recap: Sinbad is a sailor known the world over for his banditry. When he is wrongfully accused of stealing the Book of Peace (which keeps the world in harmony, and without it the world will unravel) everyone thinks he is lying when he says that he has not done so. He is sentenced to be executed.

At the last second, his childhood friend Proteus—the picture of nobility, dignity, and everything the hardscrabble Sinbad is not—volunteers himself in Sinbad’s place. Sinbad is freed; he has ten days to

find who has really stolen the book, and if he fails, Proteus will be executed. Sinbad's first instinct, once his manacles are removed, is to leave his friend behind and sail away.

After some convincing, the surly Sinbad decides to go after the book, which is in the hands of the goddess Eris. Sinbad tracks down Eris and she says she will give him the book if he answers one question truthfully: if he were hypothetically *not* given the book, would he return to his friend Proteus and certain execution, or would he run? Sinbad nobly answers that he would return, but Eris does not believe him, and returns him to his crew without the book. But Sinbad decides to go back for his friend, to Eris's chagrin. When he arrives at the island Syracuse, where Proteus is about to be executed, and regains *his* place as prisoner, Eris is foiled. She is divinely bound by the gods to return the book, since Sinbad has "told the truth." Peace ensues; the end.

I put "told the truth" in quotations because what struck me about the movie is that we all have the power to control, or *change*, our own destinies. When Sinbad told Eris that he *would* go back, she considered it a lie, because he had not proven himself; the truth was not true YET. But he made it happen, and once he fulfilled his promise, Eris was at a loss. The power of truth—and the fact that only *we* can control our personal truths—is powerful; not even a goddess could influence what Sinbad ultimately did! I find this compelling, because none of our truths have been fully written. We may not expect ourselves to do something brave in certain times in our lives, so we think the right thing to do is hesitate or sit back. I have also suffered from worrying that, because of certain sins, God will turn His back on me and this is something I think is a common Christian concern. But our stories are not fully written, and our time is not up. When we think the world is turned against us completely, when we are at an utter loss—those are the times that *we*, as individuals, are the most powerful, because we still have the power to either believe the world or believe in ourselves. This is a message I do not think can be overstated: in having the power to control what we do in times of crisis, we have the power to change even ourselves.

As with most things, I think that becoming a better person is only reasonably possible when broken down into achievable goals. Challenge yourself, but challenge yourself *reasonably*: don't make your "casual hike" up Mount Everest the first time you have ever been up a mountain. Just think about what God wants of you and what you want from yourself, and try to find some common ground.

-- Jack Lovelace

TODAY: Watch *Sinbad* as a fun way to think about "writing our own stories." This is a wonderful film for the whole family, and you could discuss its themes afterwards.

Monday, March 25

Read: 1 Peter 2:9-10 CHOSEN

A dictionary tells us that "chosen" means selected, preferred, picked, or taken out from. The Apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:9-10) tells us that we are God's "chosen people," His "special possession." What a wonderful feeling, to have been chosen by God!

If you go to the grocery store you will only choose or pick what you need out of many possibilities. God has gone to the "grocery store" and picked us all. However, we have to do something, too. We have to say "yes" to being picked. Scripture tells us in John 1:12, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

One of the joys and challenges of Christian life is helping people understand that they, too, have been chosen by God. They also will be His children, if only they will receive Him and believe in His name. May our lives attract them so that through us they may come to know the Good Shepherd.

-- Uchetta Okirie

TODAY: Reflect on the words of the well-known hymn by Frances Ridley Havergal: "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days; let them flow in endless praise."

Tuesday, March 26

Read: 2 Corinthians 3:3 A LETTER FROM CHRIST

This Lenten devotional booklet was born out of a church committee discussion 20 years ago following a sermon on witnessing one's faith and what did that mean. Was it the same as that scary word evangelism?

A committee member brought forth an idea from his previous out-of-state church: sharing personal faith stories in a Lenten devotional booklet for church members. So the call went out to congregation members. What came in were so many amazing examples of where God had touched people's lives that at the next committee meeting, the group agreed that we needed to share these stories outside our own church walls.

What a blessing over these many years to be inspired by the daily Lenten devotions written by fellow church members and friends – from the ways God speaks to us in the everyday of our lives to the big moments.

Reading these devotionals on a daily basis offers us a way to experience Lent's emphasis on deepening one's faith through study and prayer. For others, it provides the opportunity to take up a "discipline" or "spiritual practice." The addition of weekly meetings in recent years to discuss the devotionals has added another opportunity for growth.

But for those who have taken the plunge to share their stories over the years and write a devotion, it has been more. A few have written a devotion each year, some after moving away but wanting to stay connected with this body of faith. For others, it has taken years to be able to put their faith story in words. And many note that this booklet each Lent has made them more aware throughout the year of where God is at work in their lives.

May all the words and drawings contained in this booklet glorify God and bring others closer to Him. As today's scripture notes: "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

-- Becky Todd York

TODAY: Write a thank you note to someone today who has made a difference to your life or send a card to those who dedicate their lives to helping others — soldiers, police officers, firefighters and teachers.

Wednesday, March 27 Read: Galatians 6:9-10 BRINGING WARMTH TO OTHERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be a time suck and a negative place. I have tried to keep my posts positive: pictures of the grandkids, experiences I'm having and uplifting things that are going on around me. I do it more as an online journal of my life. If it makes you smile, then that's a good post. I try not to get preachy but do post things about our church and about outreach opportunities my husband, Bob, and I are part of.

Last year I was concerned about the extreme cold that was predicted over Thanksgiving. For the past 10 years Bob and I have gone to D.C. to serve Thanksgiving dinner to the ladies at the Bethany Women's Center, a part of N Street Village. I decided to make fleece scarves for them and purchase some gloves. I was excited about this so I posted it on Facebook. The next thing I knew another person going to Bethany saw my post, reached out to me and made more scarves and bought additional pairs of gloves. We were able to give them over 40 scarves and pairs of gloves. A month later a friend came over and brought five beautifully knit scarves for me to take the next time I go. I posted a thank you to her on Facebook, which generated even more interest.

Then in January I mentioned doing this to a member of our church outreach team. She asked if I would do this for our Martin Luther King Day of Service. So off to the Joann Fabric Store I went! I posted a picture of my cart full of fabric and relayed how I was able to tell others about what our church was going to do with all the fabric. This post generated even more interest, and even more people told me they were making scarves for Bethany.

Three simple positive posts have warmed my heart and hopefully will bring a little extra warmth to others. How are you using social media today?

-- Tina Harkness

TODAY: When on social media, remember Thumper's rule from the movie *Bambi*: "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all." Instead, focus on Paul's guidance from Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people."

Thursday, March 28

Read: Colossians 3:13 "EXPERIENCING" A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Our Thursday morning group completed the Advent study, *Sent: Delivering the Gift of Hope at Christmas*. In one of the chapters I was struck by a small change in language that yielded a large change in attitude, hope, and relationship. Our words do make a difference.

I was riveted when reading the way the pastor in one of the chapter defined the population in one of their outreach ministries. These people were described as friends "experiencing homelessness," not as homeless. Yes, this description made being homeless just their current condition. It was not a description of who they were.

When described as homeless, the person seemed labeled in a fixed situation with no ability to change. Homelessness felt like an impenetrable barrier. A person "experiencing homelessness" seemed to have the possibility of change, even growing out of homelessness. That small change in using a more hopeful language changed my view of the person and made having a relationship with them more possible.

Does seeing that person with more hope reflect in the way that we interact with them? Would that also be true of relating to someone "experiencing" poverty, mental illness, or another condition?

Do these labels distort both the way I see the person and the interaction I have with that person? Do I behave differently because of the way I label someone? What does God want me to know about those with whom I interact?

Henri Nouwen wrote that every person is a beloved child of God. In receiving and recognizing God's unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness, we are able to pour our love out to all of God's children.

May we, too, see each person as a beloved child of God. Regardless of the challenges faced today or at this time of life, may you “experience” the love of God and God’s love through others, so that we may spread God’s love throughout the earth.

-- Carole Yoho

TODAY: Look with blessings and joy at each person who crosses your path today. Pray they are “experiencing” God’s love through you and others. Take the opportunity to search online for Henri Nouwen’s series of sermons on “Being the Beloved.”

Friday, March 29

Read: Psalm 23:1-3 BESIDE QUIET WATERS

For the past three summers I have participated, with my daughter’s family, on mission trips to “down-east” Maine. The work, mainly home painting, repairs and upgrades, is based out of a United Methodist camp in East Machias, Maine. The down-east Maine coast has scores of bays and inlets where fishing and lobster trapping are major industries. Tides there are some of the largest in the United States, in many cases over a dozen feet, making dramatic changes to the coast-line.

One house where I spent most of a week working overlooked the Little River inlet near Cutler. Some mornings the boats were riding the high tide and only a few hours later they were resting on mud. This substantial change occurs quickly and smoothly as a massive amount of water moves into or out of the bay. We would remark on this change – how could so much water fill or empty the bay with no perceptible disturbance or noise?

At Church of the Good Shepherd, calls to help others and opportunities to provide assistance are spread using announcements in the weekly E-news, Sunday’s bulletin, or perhaps a conversation, an email, or phone call. After church someone mentioned to me that an elderly lady who sat in my pew lived near me, was in declining health, and probably needed help to get to church. As it turned out, I was able to help her, and was fortunate to get to know and help her at that time in her life.

I have been both the provider of rides and have received rides to appointments and medical procedures from others. These rides create connections; they quietly and effectively demonstrate caring and concern for each other. God is moving in and through these interactions as surely as the Atlantic’s waters move into and out of the bays along Maine’s coastline.

-- Bob Meredith

TODAY: Offer as a prayer the final verse of Psalm 23: “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Amen.

Saturday, March 30

Read: John 21:1-14 FISHING LESSONS

My good friend and mentor, Edwin Bossen, passed away in May 2018 at the age of 96. Ed was like a second father to me. My own father was a wonderful man, a good farmer, and very involved in community and agricultural organizations. However, he did not fish or camp. Ed did both of those very well. Sensing my interest, he took me under his wing and taught me most of what I know about fishing and cooking over a wood fire.

Ed did more than his share of cooking under challenging conditions. To keep his army buddies fed, Ed cooked his way across North Africa, then Sardinia, into Northern Italy, through the very cold

Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944/45, finally ending the war in France. Sometimes he told us lighthearted stories about those days.

For instance, young men occasionally got tired of army rations, so they might decide to barter cigarettes for a goat. The next thing you'd know, there would be a goat back in camp, and someone would ask, "Ed, can you fix this for dinner?" "Sure!" would be his enthusiastic reply.

His gentle nature and optimistic outlook made campfire meals fun and interesting. An example:

Dan: "Should I pour this bacon grease into the fire?"

Ed: "No, let's keep it for frying fish."

Dan: "What fish?"

Ed: "Don't worry. We'll catch fish."

Ed paddled with us into his 80s, but had not been a canoer until his sons and I invited him on our first trip to Quetico Park (western Ontario) in 1971. He always was eager to go fishing, even sometimes when others were not. Toward the end of that first trip, we found ourselves too far into the park and had to travel long and hard to get home. So after a really taxing day, a group of tired teenagers set up camp on a wide spot in the Basswood River, a few hundred yards below a rapids. It was a cool, gray, breezy evening in late September. We ate as much supper as was available, but an encounter with a bear earlier in the trip had reduced our supplies. We were still hungry and not in a great mood as we cleaned up after the meal.

Ed: "Who wants to go fishing?"

The honest answer was that none of us young guys wanted to go fishing. We were ready to spend a little time by the fire and go to bed early. I looked around at the faces of my friends and realized that no one else was going to volunteer.

Dan, with some reluctance: "Okay, Ed, I'll go."

We got into the canoe. I remember my arms and shoulders feeling stiff and sore as we began paddling.

Ed: "Let's head over to the base of those rapids and see what we can find."

As soon as we got into the fast-moving water just below the rapids, Ed caught a walleye. We drifted back into calmer water while he got it into the canoe and onto the stringer. (I was feeling less tired already.) Back we paddled into the fast-moving water and Ed caught another. Then another. Eventually I caught one, too. We returned to camp in less than an hour with five walleyes. This brightened the group's spirits considerably. We now had more food to eat, and good food, too.

This experience taught me that it's important to push myself to try to be helpful, even when I really don't want to. Who knows? Good things may happen.

What comes to mind when I reflect on my mentor, friend, canoeing buddy, and second father? I give thanks to God for having known him, and find myself thinking: "Thanks, Ed! Thanks for everything!"

For setting a great example, for being kind and patient with me, for your friendship, for sharing your jokes and stories, for everything! Thanks!"

-- Dan Pearson

TODAY: Give thanks for people who have been a positive influence in your life. Pray that you, too, may be a blessing to others.

Sunday, March 31

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:16 ONE PEACE WON'T HURT

"May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways." Sometimes I need that peace for myself. It could be about a big decision I need to make or small things that keep me awake at night. Other times it could be a troubled relationship with a family member, coworker, or friend; or about something I said or didn't say.

There are also times when I think about the need for peace in our country and our world. Unfortunately, this just doesn't feel like a peaceful time in our country or our world. As I write, the government is shut down over funding for a border wall. The decision-makers can agree on more security at the border, yet all I can see is the anxiety workers feel at not being able to go to work and get paid., I see families leaving their countries because of unrest and war, wanting to come to our country for a chance at a more peaceful life in spite of the hard work, sacrifice, and risk. We look to our Lord of peace to grant peace to individuals, our country, and the world.

This past summer I had two experiences involving peace. The first was in the little town of Pugwash, Nova Scotia, where we stopped on a trip while visiting a cousin. In the 1950s a conference was started by a group of scientists and thinkers who sought a world free of nuclear weapons after WWII. In 1995 the town itself was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for sponsoring this group. The Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs continues to this day. In December 2018 a workshop was held in Geneva, Switzerland on cyber security and warfare. I am amazed that this group has been working for over 70 years for peaceful co-existence.

The second experience was at a farmers' market, also in Pugwash. As I love to support local entrepreneurs, I was delighted to find some handcrafted chocolates. At first I didn't pay much attention to the name of the product or who was working the booth. Actually, the name on the chocolates confused me. It wasn't until later that I recognized the play on words that I had missed. The company name is Peace by Chocolate - One Peace Won't Hurt. I kept confusing "piece" and "peace." I also thought that eating one piece of chocolate could easily lead to eating more than one and that could hurt! However, "One peace won't hurt" was altogether different. The chocolates were made by a Syrian family whose chocolate factory in Damascus was bombed. After living in a refugee camp for three years, the family was sponsored for emigration by the town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The family went from making chocolates in their kitchen and selling at farmers' markets to building a new factory and selling online all over Canada and overseas! The family now shares some of their profits with other relief projects. As I think back, I'm sure one of the family actually sold me the chocolates at the farmers market!

What an appropriate name for this family's company. Their website (peacebychocolate.ca) tells the story from war-torn Syria to a place of refuge and peace in Canada, as well as starting a new chapter in their lives. Actually it feels like more than that. This family could have emigrated and started making

chocolate with few people knowing their story. Instead, they are sharing their story and working for peace for others, not just for themselves.

So, is peace just a feeling or a state of mind? Is it just a feeling we keep to ourselves and those close to us? Or, does the Lord's peace require action? Can it be shared with others? Can one person make a difference? Does the Lord of peace himself give you peace? If we experience peace when others are not at peace, do we notice the Prince of Peace nudging us to act, to share and to work for peace for others? These are questions we all must answer as we seek a life in peace with the Lord our God, as well as each other.

I pray that we can find peace for ourselves as well as work together to bring peace to our families, our country, and our world!

-- Elaine Woodward

TODAY: Reflect on the first lines of Saint Francis of Assisi's Peace Prayer: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love."

Monday, April 1

Read: Luke 15:3-7 THE LOST SHEEP

We've all heard it before -- nobody is perfect and all men and women are flawed. This is why it is ironic that when Jesus preaches the parable of the lost sheep to the Pharisees, he speaks of 99 just persons to make his point. We can all be the "lost sheep" from time to time and so it is important to understand the power of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

However, repentance is an act of self-reflection on your own actions before God. Because it is a very private ritual, we may often overlook other lost sheep. Many times these are even our closest friends and neighbors.

If you reflect on those around you, and identify a lost sheep, think about going after him or her. It is easy to ignore problems when they are not your own, and while praying for a lost sheep is necessary, listen carefully for when God calls you into action. There is no deeper regret than wishing you could have done more, and no greater reward than when you bring the lost sheep home.

-- John Noriega

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Good Shepherd, help me always to stay close to you and keep me from going astray. If others in the flock are wandering off, show me ways to guide them gently back into your fold. Amen.

Tuesday, April 2

Read: Romans 12:3-8 GIFTS OF GRACE

August 17, 2018 is a day I will always remember. A close friend of ours asked my husband Rodney and me to take her two children because they were going to be removed from their home by the South Carolina Department of Social Services and possibly placed in a home she did not approve of. She said she wanted them to go with us because she knew we would treat them like we did both of our sons.

Rodney and I wanted to help, but we knew this was a big decision. After discussing this and praying, we went to the home, signed papers, and became guardians for a 14 year old high school girl and her 8 year old half-brother. Our lives and theirs changed immediately.

Over the next 16 weeks, we truly had a special gift from God. The kids organized us like we hadn't been able to do since our sons lived with us. Getting up at 6 a.m. to make breakfast and get them off to school, helping with homework, having suppers together while discussing their day, and many more things that kept this "older" couple busy and happy. We also felt a purpose to helping these children – a reminder to me of my many years as a teacher and skills I hadn't used since retiring in the summer of 2011!

Our church family and friends never missed a beat. The first weekend, a neighbor came and said she would take the girl every morning to high school. Within a week, clothes were provided for both of the kids, and another church friend took the girl shopping for shoes and other needed items. Not only did clothes come quickly, but money and gift cards came flooding in for us to use for the kids to make sure they had what they needed. For Christmas, the executive board of our United Methodist Women chose this family to support, something that will always be remembered.

At times, the gifts were so overwhelming and usually meant a lot of tears from me. The body of Christ was at work in helping us care for these children during what turned out to be a temporary arrangement. The children's grandfather now has guardianship with their mother living in their home as they continue to be a part of our church community.

Why did God pick us? I have no clue, but I am so happy He did. Not only will I always remember the more than three months the children lived with us and changed our lives, I will never forget how my hometown church in South Carolina (Grace United Methodist Church, North Augusta) helped make their lives better.

— Pam Rawlinson

TODAY: Pray for families in need in communities across the country. Consider a donation to Britepaths, celebrating 35 years in 2019 of providing assistance and hope to struggling residents in the Fairfax County area and helping them thrive.

Wednesday, April 3

Read: Micah 6:8 LISTENING TO THOSE LITTLE NUDGES

Sometimes the world can get overwhelming with all we hear about wars, violence, poverty, and hate. There's never a lack of causes needing support, and it can just be paralyzing. I came across a quotation last year that I really liked. It is helpful to remember when times get crazy. It is from the Talmud: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

How, then, do we figure out what we should do? I think it starts with being open, being aware, and listening to those little nudges. I fail at listening more times than not, usually when I'm distracted, indifferent, or simply tired. But when I'm open to opportunities, they often beautifully present themselves. This has happened several times over the past year, but I'll focus on one. In December, as I was leaving the Centreville Labor Resource Center, the director was not at her desk by the front door. Usually I'll just leave after volunteering if she is not there. But something told me to go back to wish her a Merry Christmas. When I did, she asked if I knew of anyone who could take a family to Richmond to get fingerprinted. Since I was off work, I said I could. And so began a journey with this family, culminating with a trip to the airport to be reunited with their five year old daughter who had been detained in Texas. This was possible because I listened to that nudge and was open to filling a need.

In this case, and others like it during the year, I certainly did not solve any world problem. I did not complete the work. But I also didn't abandon it. I did what I could when an opportunity arose. And the best part each time? I got incredible joy out of the experiences. When we are called to do something, and we are open and responsive, I believe God's Spirit blooms in us and the feeling is pure joy.

So, take heart in these times. Yes, challenges in this world are daunting. But remember we are not to be overwhelmed. We are not called to complete the task. We are, however, to listen, be aware, and respond to the world's grief in any way we can. We are not free to abandon the work! My prayer is that I can remember this in the coming year, and with Christians around the world, we can make 2019 a more just and loving year.

-- Joyce Lynn

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the little nudges you send my way. Give me the courage to act upon them, knowing that I may not be able to complete your work, but also that I must never abandon it. Amen.

Thursday, April 4

Read: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 TURN, TURN, TURN

There is a time for every purpose under heaven – Ecclesiastes 3:1

A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep

These prophetic words flowed from the Old Testament into the loving hands of one of my heroes, Pete Seeger. He then crafted a song he would sing for most of his life, as he literally walked across this land – your land and my land. I remember reading about his protest marches as he advocated for racial integration and the rights of farm workers and factory workers and mine workers. As we listened to music of the 1950s, other music groups added their renditions to the popular music scene, including The Byrds, The Seekers, The Limelighters and Joan Baez. If these names are unfamiliar, you have missed a majestic and historic time in American music.

The song is a challenge to people of faith that now is the time to work for every purpose under heaven. A time to serve food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to build shelter for the homeless, to visit the sick and imprisoned, and to care for the least of these, our brothers and sisters. Jesus gave us this very important to-do list in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to engage in many of these pursuits that Pete Seeger was calling me to join, as I follow in his shadow. I even play the banjo and sing "If I Had a Hammer". As a teacher, I have the time to make short trips to join mission teams from the Church of the Good Shepherd, and these journeys have taken me across the country and to Haiti and Costa Rica.

I will be retiring from a teaching career this June that began in September of 1966. I have been blessed with the best students and the very worst; in some cases, the very same person. I have even

been able to encourage some of my students to join me in these mission activities. I look to God for guidance as I give myself to the calling that awaits.

A time to gain, a time to lose
A time of love, a time of hate
A time you may embrace
I pray it's not too late

- Myron Hanke

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, keep me mindful that there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens. Be with me during all the joys, challenges, and transitions of life. Amen.

Friday, April 5

Read: 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 SUFFICIENT GRACE

Having recently experienced a number of difficulties of various kinds well beyond my control I have come to hope for a limit on the number of new bad breaks headed my way. Our lives roll out before us on a plan not of our making. Our role is simply to experience fully and then learn. The spiritual question that lies before us is two-fold: What do I believe? How will I live? This is not a matter of solving puzzles in an explicit way, but of finding a way to discover our spiritual course, much of which involves waiting, patiently and expectantly. As my grandmother used to sincerely inquire, what is hidden in this?

In today's scripture, Paul recognizes his folly in giving in to his passionate drives too easily. His strength could lead him astray. He persecuted the Christians to death before God blinded him and sent him to learn spiritual wisdom from a seasoned teacher. His subsequent writings often soar, drawing us enthusiastically to positive and glorious truths regarding so many topics: affirming that charity or love is the most important part of our lives, embracing the primal need for all parts of the body of Christ to work together, and voicing the anthem that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Paul was a bit of a mixed bag, but ultimately he was repeatedly blessed to become a manifold blessing. He was no fool - he saw how his powers could betray him; so he confessed: when I am weak I am strong.

My grandmother lost her husband suddenly in a farm accident in 1949. Their children were grown and she was left to manage her 125 acre farm, no electricity, no phone, no central heat, only cold water into the house, the nearest neighbor a mile away on a dusty clay road. When we children visited, we experienced a magic place: quiet, sunrise and sunset without obstruction, starry skies, many animals and garden and farm work; a comforting routine. Mostly I remember the quiet, my mom and grandmother telling stories as we sat in rocking chairs on the screen porch. My grandmother told me it was not until she realized how dependent she was on God's grace, and not her considerable drive and skills, that she saw the way to confidently proceed. My grandmother was content, and so were we in her presence.

-- Joe Matney

TODAY: Spend a few moments reflecting on this short piece from Henri Nouwen: How much better is God's true goodness than our weak imitations of being fine and good enough, of playing at piety and purity? What a beautiful contrast, that is no contest at all. Indeed, Jesus declares, "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

To put on a pretty face, a brave mask,
Is that not our desire to hide.
Being revealed.

Slap a bandage over
Our raw wounds, our places of falling short,
And call it good.

Dwelling in the open feels vulnerable,
An announcement of our brokenness,
But in acceptance and declaration of our inadequacies,
We can become a testament to your perfect power;

For it is in admitting our weakness --- we will be strong in God.

Saturday, April 6

Read: Micah 6:8 MY FATHER'S VOICE

My husband and I bought three homes together over the years we were married. Our reasons for leaving one home to go forth to the next had to do with our desire for more space as our family grew and for different schools for our children. My parents visited us in our homes frequently, driving from Ohio and, later, from Florida. Each time they visited, I posted a "Daddy Do List" on the refrigerator. My dad had overseen the building of several of my childhood homes. Although renovation was not his vocation, he watched and learned, and thereby became quite adept at painting and wallpapering and fixing stuff. For me, the Daddy Do List was my chance to hang out with my Dad. I was his "sous chef." It gave us those hours of simply being together and talking. And I learned from him. One of his tenets: *Don't force*. To this day, when I'm tempted to force a latch to open or to nail a nail where it doesn't want to go, I hear, "*Don't force*." There's a reason I was running into resistance, he would tell me. Find another way, he said. My father's voice, guiding me still.

My father-in-law also visited us, he and my mother-in-law driving from New Jersey. He had the gift of being a mechanic. He could figure out how things worked. And "back in the day" before cars were computerized, he maintained ours for us. One of his tenets: *After you turn the ignition, let your car idle for at least a minute prior to putting it in gear*. It made sense to me. Give the fluids of the car time to begin fluid-ing, give the engine a chance to warm itself. I have followed his instructions all these years hence. I can hear the engine racing at first, and then after about a minute or so, I hear the engine calm. Then, I put it in gear. There's another thing that calms during that time: me. I have often been racing myself to ready for leave-taking. But that time in the car, giving my engine a chance to calm, calms me. I have come to use those moments for prayer. My father-in-law's voice, guiding me still.

If we believe that God sent, and sends, prophets to us to bear truth and challenge, Micah was one. He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. He rebuked Israel for dishonesty and corruption in government. He encouraged the people to change their ways and to open their hearts. And he told them how to do that: ". . . what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." (Micah 6:8). Amen.

My Father's voice, guiding me still.

-- Marilyn Dukes Bursch

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Father, help me to listen for your voice -- even in unexpected situations -- as I go through this day. Amen.

Sunday, April 7

Read: Isaiah 43:18,19 CLAIMING JOY

In about 500 B.C. or so, the Israelites were admonished not to dwell on their unfortunate past and unfaithfulness. Instead they were instructed to rejoice in anticipation of their restoration and redemption. What does this mean to me today?

Well, for one, I don't need to feel sad or angry about what didn't occur or meet expectations during the first three quarters of my life. I can learn from my experiences, but not dwell on them. This past year, I gave away some items no longer used or needed. It freed up much space. I can find things more easily! I believe the Holy Spirit was nudging me to clear clutter from my mind as well and helping me to focus on what really matters. Why am I so content now? What gives me such peace? What might God be making new in my life? What is the best way to spend my remaining years on earth? Can I still do something to change things in my own life or in the world?

So many questions! So much to do! Yet I find myself relishing downtime. And that is what God wants ... to be still, to wait, to listen in quiet. It refreshes my soul and restores my energy. I need to wait on the Lord for answers and guidance. My peace and contentment do indeed come from God.

--Ginny Johnson

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your endless wisdom, your prompting me to laugh like Sarah did, rejoice like Miriam and the Marys did. Humble me like you did for David and Peter and Paul, and continue to give me words in stillness and calm to share *when requested*, and especially to write them down before I forget them! It is a glorious time. I am so grateful, God, for your covenant relationship that forgives, redeems, restores, and assures your faithfulness and companionship now and forever. Such a relationship is reciprocal. Therefore I promise to seek your direction in how to spread your Good News as well.

Monday, April 8

Read: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Growing up in the United Methodist Church, baptism did not appear to be a priority or a requirement in the life of an adult. For years I thought it was sufficient to have gone through infant baptism by the preference of my parents even though I did not remember it.

Each year we observe the Baptism of our Lord in early January. As we observe Jesus' baptism, we learn how important this step was in the life of Jesus' ministry. For the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Almost four years ago, prompted by my brother, I attended a retreat where we were invited to receive baptism. Having been moved by the preaching and teaching in the course of three days, my friend sitting next to me nudged me to step forward and receive and acknowledge baptism of the Holy Spirit. From that day forward, I noticed a difference. Bible reading began to open my eyes and become more interesting. There was more of a desire to spend quality time with others in Bible study and

prayer and less time in self-entertainment. I noticed more details in our worship service, and the symbols of our denomination like the cross and flame took on more meaning.

The act of worship, especially in the form of music, also took a different turn for me. For it was no longer the emphasis on the music itself, perfection and playing. It was the God we worship who ultimately became my priority. What a freeing experience this is to focus on God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

That night after receiving baptism, I turned around and noticed a neighbor who lives across the street from us in our neighborhood! The very next day, the Lord placed in my path a mom who invited me to a woman's Bible study and prayer group that was convenient to my working schedule. Doors and direction began to open for me as well as strength to carry on to my next journey in ministry...beyond music. Praise be to God!

---Michele Bair, Music Director, Church of the Good Shepherd

TODAY: Reflect on these words from the traditional United Methodist baptismal service: "Dearly beloved, Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which grace we become partakers of his righteousness and heirs of life eternal."

Tuesday, April 9

Read: Jeremiah 29:11-13 TWENTY YEARS OF MY LIFE

Twenty years - what a difference in perspective. In December 1998 life seemed as tranquil as it can be with two teenage sons. One at 18 was going to begin full-time coursework at Northern Virginia Community College in January. The other at 14 was a freshman in high school. I had the usual mother's worries of how they were going to turn out. While we came to church regularly, I knew that I had a lot of trouble trusting God. Thinking about 20 years in the future was nothing I paid any attention to.

By the end of January 1999 my husband was diagnosed with stage four throat cancer and had selected a treatment plan that terrified me. In April, halfway through his treatment, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Of course these health issues threw our family into disarray, though for the boys' sake, I tried to keep it normal. Initially I felt guilty when church members brought us meals. After all, I was still capable of making dinner. But it sure was nice to come home from a day spent at appointments to a warm meal that I didn't have to make. It also gave time to connect intentionally with the boys. During the worst of this time, I was scared of what would happen if my husband didn't survive. Then I got more scared of what would happen if neither of us survived. How would the boys manage? Then I got really sad because of the milestones I would miss; a high school graduation, college graduations, weddings to young ladies I would never get to meet and love, and of course, rocking a grandchild.

We continued coming to church and I slowly realized that our faith and prayers and the prayers of our church members and friends and family would lead us through no matter the outcome. And so began a personal journey that would have me facing 10 years of health issues. Since you're reading this in 2019, you know God was good to me. Little by little as I released my fears and sadness to God, I was blessed with life. Even as those health issues arrived one after the other, I lived. I lived to see my sons grow into young men I am proud of. I have seen those graduations and weddings, and have rocked three precious grandchildren.

What happened over 20 years? I was given the opportunity to grow and learn to trust God more. A few body parts got removed or radiated, but lots of good family life was gratefully lived. Thank you, God!!! May my remaining days (no matter the number) be a witness to His glory.

-- Barbara Carter

TODAY: Pray for those facing health issues -- especially the scary ones, those that make us face our mortality and force us to choose to depend on God and trust that His plan is the best for us.

Wednesday, April 10

Read: John 3:16 A LITANY OF THANKS

In John 3:16, we are told the true expression of God's love for us. We have so much to be thankful for, irrespective of how and where life finds us this day. So, I entreat you to share "thankfulness" with the others in your life.

SUPLICATUS

From Dave Yoho's collective writing in "Peace is not a Season"

Thank you, God, for my history, a blending of joy and pain, for issues creating doubt, and – for those of which I'm certain, I'd have rather lived without.

I ponder: What part of my turmoil, I would knowingly disown. For despite the pain I've experienced, from each sad circumstance, I have grown.

Thank you, God, for my failures, from each of which I've learned that some success awaits me, as part of the process and your plan.

Thank you for my freedom to choose from right or wrong, for patience with my choosing and a failsafe in your plan, which offers forgiveness and atonement oft making consequences bland.

Thank you for the balance you give me in my life. A cornucopia of blessings mixed with happiness and love, served in combination with suffering and strife.

Thank you for my family, my heredity and past, for siblings, issues, in-laws, and for those who are not yet born.

Thank you for the blessing of the reader of this tome who, by your plan and circumstance became our friend or more.

Now, God bless you in this holy time, and in your time to come. May His abundant blessings enrich your live these days, and may this special reading serve purpose far beyond.

May your days be filled with comfort, your life with many joys. May you live in health abundant and each day become more wise.

Thank you for your being part of our lives – and permitting us to be part of yours.

-- Dave Yoho

TODAY: Reflect on some of the challenges and blessings you have experienced. How have they helped you grow? Are you able to give thanks in times of adversity as well as in times of abundance and opportunity?

Thursday, April 11

Read: Matthew 7:1-2 and Luke 6:38 WE ARE ALL ON THE SAME TEAM

Jesus teaches us, “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.” Quite simply, this means to me that we are all on the same team and we need to always treat others as we would like and expect to be treated – “Do unto others....” This is not always easy, is it? But we need to think about it. Do you really want to live your life judging and being judged? When God created the world, He created the fish in the sea, the animals on the land, and us, in His image. God created us to be in community with each other, not to judge each other. There’s something in each of us that seems to permit us to vie for a better impression of ourselves by judging or belittling someone else. We judge someone else’s relationships when our own are crumbling ... or their parenting skills when ours are less than perfect. Someone who doesn’t exercise is “lazy.” Someone who tends to keep their feelings within is “cold.” We judge who has what job, who’s busier, who has more stress, who has it “rougher.” When someone tells us bad news or about a tough time they are having, we sometimes even secretly rejoice that it’s not us. When someone shares good news we think of them as arrogant. No one wins when we do this because we are all on the same team! Paul tells us in Galatians 6:10, “Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good for everyone.”

So today, look for an opportunity to bless someone, especially someone who is not in a position to reciprocate. Make a special effort to identify someone you can encourage. Go out of your way to make someone feel special. In other words, “treat others as you would want to be treated.”

-- Joe Kinego

TODAY: Say this prayer: Heavenly Father, help me today to make a special effort to lift up another human being and to treat that person with the respect and the dignity that I would want to be treated. Amen.

Friday, April 12

Read: Philippians 4:19 THE HAND OF GOD

For years, whenever I prayed I'd start by thanking God for all He had given me. I'd ask Him to help on the big issues of the day, “life and death” stuff. I figured that with billions of people on the planet and all the challenges we collectively face, there was nothing to be gained with trivial requests. Better to keep God focused on the big stuff. But over the past summer, I learned once again that God decides what to get involved in, sometimes without us being aware of it until His presence is gradually revealed.

After three decades of living in Northern Virginia, my wife and I decided to move back to the country life we both enjoyed as children. A succession of seemingly unrelated events would lead us into life's next journey:

- My sister Maryjane was approached by a neighbor who wanted to sell his house;
- My wife and I met the seller and agreed, via a handshake, on the sale price and the date of sale a year plus in advance. There was no paperwork until closing. (Trust still exists!);
- We sold our home in one day and we sold it to a wonderful family. Our realtor, Beth, said she felt God's presence at work.
- We packed our own boxes in preparation for the move. While I did my best to acquire the right number and size of boxes, during packing our friend Becky provided us with some spare boxes. Unbelievably, as the movers showed up, all home contents were boxed as we

ran out of packaging tape and boxes. (Just enough! The loaves and fishes story came to mind.);

- We had a two-week gap between our home sale and the closing on the new home. Our friend and neighbor Liz allowed us to stay with her, a major relief as we were shuttling three children to college and I was finishing work;
- On our final Sunday at The Church of The Good Shepherd we were given the kind of loving send-off you would expect from this incredibly caring congregation. They inspired me to promise a 2019 devotion entitled, “The Hand of God.” (Consider it delivered!);
- The movers showed up at our new home on time and with everything in great condition. As we unpacked, our new friends Carol and Del provided pizza for all. To this date, the seller is at our call for anything we need and we remain in contact with our home buyers. These relationships couldn't be any better.

Turns out these events were all related: God was an active presence in them. Even though I never asked for His assistance via my personal prayer hotline, I felt Him during the whole process. More than once I remember something happening, looking skyward, shaking my head and saying, “Hand of God.” Apparently God decided we needed His steadying presence, whether I asked or not. And apparently God's view of what counts far surpasses the limits I had placed on Him. As a result of this revelation, I have opened the scope of my prayer requests when I talk with God. And I am eternally grateful for a whole new world of prayer possibilities. Praise God!

- *Dave Shields*

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Dear Lord, help me remember that you care about every detail of my life, and that you rejoice when I talk to you about all the cares of my heart. Thank you for all of the blessings, great and small, that come from your loving hand. Amen.

Saturday, April 13

Read: Mark 6:34-44 THE MIRACLE OF THE RUMMAGE SALE

When a large crowd gathered to hear Jesus speak, folks got hungry. By combining all of their food in a spirit of generosity, the masses were fed with plenty of leftovers!

Every year, the Church of the Good Shepherd holds two rummage sales. Each sale reminds me of the miracle of the fishes and loaves, when a large crowd, spiritually and physically hungry, was fed by Jesus' words and the sharing of fish and bread. Through the generous donation of time and items by our community members, our church consistently amasses an abundance of rummage, and our blessings spill over beyond our immediate spheres.

I have been involved with these rummage sales for over a decade now, and I continue to see the blessings that they bring to me and my family, our church, our community, and our environment. The preparatory week of hard work - setting up tables, sorting donations, and writing countless price tags - bestows upon me the gift of fellowship with other volunteers. It is a special opportunity to get to know others when we are devoting ourselves to an effort greater than any individual part. It is through this service that I have grown especially connected to our church family.

The generosity of the community never fails to amaze me. Donations come from near and far for many reasons: downsizing, purging, the joy of giving. Whatever the reason, we appreciate all of the donations. Much like the abundance of food for the crowds gathered around Jesus, these donations fill the church each sale.

There were probably many reasons why people came that day to hear Jesus speak. Likewise, there are as many different reasons for shopping as there are shoppers at the sale. Some shop to hunt for treasures. Some shop with family members in other countries in mind, filling suitcases to send back to them. Some shop because their money goes further at our sale, allowing them to afford things that they would not be able to at a store. Some shop simply because they enjoy the fellowship of spending their Saturday morning at the church.

Whatever the reason, people come and we welcome them. Talk with them. Clothe them. Feed them. When 1:00 p.m. rolls around and the sale is over, the leftovers are put on a truck and moved on to another charity for a chance to meet other people's needs. And what about the proceeds from the sale? They go to meet needs in local, national, and international communities, such as hurricane relief efforts, food banks, and Haitian schools to name a few.

Want to experience the miracle of the rummage sale? Our next sale is April 27. You are invited to volunteer, donate, and shop! But please, no fish!

-- Jen Laughlin

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, thank you for the joys of the rummage sale, and for how it binds our community together. Bless those who donate, those who come to buy, those who benefit from the proceeds, and the wonderful volunteers who make it all happen. Amen.

Sunday, April 14

Read: Philippians 4:6 THANKS FOR GOD'S BLESSINGS

For the last six months I have been learning to recognize my many blessings and enjoy them each day. We often take many aspects of our lives for granted, expecting them to continue for as long as we want them to. However, change is inevitable and often leads to growth, but sometimes brings uncertainty. For the last few years I have looked at each family holiday gathering as a blessing.

Our grown sons have stayed in the area and even taken turns staying in our home, but I was aware that the situation could change at any time. These past few months all of the family gatherings and trips took on more meaning for me because next summer we are expecting a big change. My oldest son, his wife, and their three daughters are planning to move to Louisville, Kentucky when the school year ends. All of us will miss them, especially my husband and me since they have been part of our household for all of their married life.

We have all enjoyed that time, watching the little girls grow from infants into individuals. During these years I was aware that I had what, to me, was the perfect grandma gig. I got to see the girls (and their parents) daily, but I was also able to lead my own. So when my son's job allowed for relocation and the young family discussed the option of moving, my husband and I were sad, but tried to focus on the advantages for the kids. In Kentucky they could afford their own home, a bedroom for each girl, and the possibility of my daughter-in-law working less.

As we were adjusting to the idea, we were given a gift that I have come to appreciate more each day. My daughter-in-law wanted to allow her employer a chance to hire and train her replacement and at the same time give her family a chance to save toward a house purchase. So their decision was to move in 2019, which gave us one more year together. As a result I have been trying to enjoy the

moments, recognize my blessings, and thank God for my family on a daily (hourly) basis. This was reinforced this fall when one of my United Methodist pastor friends said something to the effect, "What if you wake up tomorrow with only the blessings you thanked God for today?"

I pray to the Lord, and I praise the Lord, but how frequently do I thank the Lord? So the past few months I have tried to be aware of my blessings, and to thank God for them formally in prayer or informally with a thought throughout my day. I know that all things change with time, but with thanks and praise to God, more blessings will come with every change. Amen!

-- Kitty Bertrand

TODAY: Make a list of blessings you have received this week and thank God for each and every one of them.

Monday, April 15

Read: Nehemiah 8:9-12 THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH

[This poem reflects the circumstances of the Israelites after returning to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon.]

The Word was heavy.
The sounds were unfamiliar; in a language that was from a time of dwelling at home.
They had been cast out and it was if they had taken that to heart.
Now. The Word was separate. No longer their guiding light.
Their rule.
The repetitive mantras of reminders.

But they were called back; settling in their towns, blending and marrying.
With a priest who asked what was in their hearts.
And they remembered, who were we though?
And they said, was not the Word given to us?
And they knew, we were the chosen and the priest could read it again.

They gathered for this very thing.
The Word, spoken as it had been.
It was heavy with the reminder of what was entrusted to them.
And what they owed to God.
They wept at the flood of memories.

But stop this.
The priest said, this is how you remember.
We have been given much.
We have a community and none should be without.
Understand.
Comply.
But laugh, eat, drink.
Rejoice.
For this day, the Word has returned.
Our joy will be our strength.

And the people complied.
They ate and drank.
And rejoiced.
But most of all, they understood.

-- Candace Means

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, often we are focused all too heavily on working to build better lives for ourselves and our families. Remind us to pause to be refreshed by your Word. And help us also to celebrate community by laughing, feasting, and sharing with those who don't have enough. Amen

Tuesday, April 16

Read: Luke 10:29-37 MOVE CLOSER

"And who is my neighbor?"

So begins Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan, a foreigner whose definition of neighbor did not end at the border of his native land. This parable was much on my mind in early 2017 after an executive order was signed barring entry into the United States by nationals of seven predominantly Muslim nations. Many of Fairfax County's small Muslim population (less than 5% in 2010) are my neighbors – a mosque is essentially as close to my home as my church – but I knew not one of them on more than a passing basis. Thus, the executive order triggered a long-overdue series of visits to the mosque to get to know and worship with my neighbors.

Initially, the visits were awkward. The practice of worship at a mosque is very different from the styles of worship that I am accustomed to in church. It also felt awkward to explain that, as a Christian, I intended neither to convert nor to proselytize, but simply to worship. My intentions, though, were quickly understood. "We all worship the same God," responded a fellow worshipper as we chatted after prayers. Indeed, we do.

In addition, as I observed over the months, we ask many of the same questions that people who believe in one God ask. How do I draw closer to God? How should I interact with my fellow human beings? How can I build my community? We also share many of the same human concerns. How are my children doing in life? What can I do to help my aging parent? Where can my friend find a job?

In retrospect, it's difficult to understand why I thought my neighbors at the mosque would be much different from me in the way we live our lives in contemporary northern Virginia. On the other hand, there is a long history – both ancient and modern – of conflict between the two faiths. Perhaps a good approach would be one suggested to me as we lined up for prayers one afternoon at the mosque, with me leaving ample room between myself and the man on my left. Noticing the gap, he told me, "Move closer."

In Jesus' parable, a priest and a Levite moved farther away from the wounded man as they passed him on the road to Jericho. It was the foreigner, the Samaritan, who saw the half-dead man and loved him as a neighbor. Said Jesus, "Go and do likewise."

-- Hugh McIntosh

TODAY: Look for an opportunity to spend some time being a neighbor to someone of a different faith.

Wednesday, April 17

Read: Hebrews 12:1-2 RUNNING THE RACE

I've been a recreational runner since my late twenties, and have run many races, from 5K's to marathons. Race promoters, in their zeal to draw participants, often use phrases like "flat and fast" when describing the course. I've learned to take this with more than a little grain of salt, having been burned one too many times with an incline materializing at the most inconvenient point of my run. Hebrews 12:1 says, "So let us run with perseverance the race that is before us." The race that is before us. Not the one we wish we'd signed up for, nor the one that our running buddy makes look so easy.

Instead of lamenting that life has taken me to many uphill battles, I know I have to keep moving forward on the path I find myself on. The author of Hebrews tells us how to do this in verse two, by "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." For me, that means starting my day checking my phone for daily mailed devotions. It means making a deliberate effort to say a quick prayer every time a worrying thought pops up. It means talking to God about the day on my afternoon commute, and some Bible reading before lights out. All of that helps me say with confidence Habakkuk 3:19, "Counting on God's rule to prevail, I take heart and gain strength. I run like a deer. I feel like I'm king of the mountain!"

-- Katherine Trott

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, sometimes it seems like every day requires running a "marathon" of activities involving family, work, and community. Grant me the strength to run it with perseverance, always keeping my eyes fixed on you. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 18

Read: Luke 23:33-34 THE CHOICE

Having joined the Methodist community of faith as an adult, I have come to see the season of Lent as a cornerstone tradition of Methodism similar to the season of Advent. These parallel seasons of waiting and preparation are heightened for me now. I am writing this as Advent season is just days away from celebrating the *world*-changing birth of Christ and just weeks away from my *personal*-changing birth of Baby Girl Song. All this waiting and expecting! And, as only Christ himself could fully grasp prior to his crucifixion, anxiety.

He agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, and while we can speculate on what lay at the core of his agonizing prayer, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me", only Christ and the Father are privy to the unspoken concerns that prompted that utterance. In other words, perhaps we are no less clueless than the early disciples who seemed unable (or unwilling?) to grasp the enormity of Christ and his life and his death.

An equally over (or under?) analyzed Christ utterance, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do", can be approached similarly. "We" think, from the advantage of 2000 years of (mis)interpretation and tradition, that "we" (unlike our first century brothers and sisters) know the full meaning of that request. Yet I have more questions than answers: What does it mean to "forgive"? Were there conditions or stipulations for that forgiveness? Who are "them"? Are we part of "them"? What is it that they did? Was it time specific? Does God (Christ / Holy Spirit) exist within time? How does "what 'they' did" relate to us today (meaning does "what 'we' are doing" qualify for the same "forgiveness" as "what 'they' did")?

Maybe I'm not asking the right questions, and I certainly have no answers. But, in these multiple seasons of waiting (Advent, Lent, pregnancy), one definitive difference stands out to me in the darkness of this morning as I await the sunrise: I cannot predict what will unfold in my upcoming day, nor in the soon-to-be days of my baby girl's arrival. I cannot predict, but Christ could. Christ knew he would forgive and that he would choose love. In my interpretation, I do not impose limitations on that command to "forgive them" ... no limitations on who, when, or what they did. He had, in the span of just a few hours, been surrounded by all sorts of individuals who certainly needed forgiveness: the religiously pious and impious, the Gentile aggressor and non-aggressor, criminals and guards, and "friends" who had betrayed him and denied him. And, surrounded by all these agonizing (mental and physical) conditions, he chose forgiveness and love. I strive to make this my daily choice in honor of his sacrifice.

-- Heather Weger Song

TODAY: Pray this prayer: Dear Lord, Grant us today the wisdom to choose love and forgiveness for offenses both slight and large. Amen.

Good Friday, April 19

Read: John 19:28-30 LIVING WATER BECOMES THIRSTY

Water is an image used throughout the entire Bible. It is in the beginning with the creation story when the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2). The psalmist lies down in green pastures and is led beside quiet waters (Psalm 23:2). When there is movement in water such as in a spring or stream, the Hebrew language uses the phrase *mayim chaim* (living water). One interesting detail is that when water is used in the Hebrew Bible, it is always used in the plural form (perhaps a glimpse of the Trinity).

John's gospel is filled with much imagery about "living water." Jesus shares with the Samaritan woman (John 4) that everyone who drinks from the well water will thirst again, but those who drink living water will never thirst again. At the Feast of Sukkot (also called the Festival of Tabernacles), Jesus reminds everyone who is thirsty to come to him for "rivers of living water will flow from within" (John 7:38). One paradox in John is that Jesus, who is living water and who will help those to never thirst again, cries out at the cross that he is thirsty. How can living water personified become thirsty?

Of the seven final words (phrases) from the cross, perhaps "I thirst" reflects the most human side of Jesus. When we look at the context of his words, Jesus knows "that everything had now been finished ... so that scripture would be fulfilled" (John 19:28). When we consider the humanness of Jesus, we understand how thirsty he might have been. We also understand that while Jesus was fully human, he was also fully God. The divine nature of Jesus uses this phrase as a teaching moment.

We understand hunger and thirst in a physical way. Jesus would use this to give us a spiritual teaching through Holy Communion. The bread and wine were not only a physical experience, but also a spiritual one. Perhaps the thirst Jesus was referring to on the cross was not only a physical thirst, but also a spiritual thirst. Perhaps Jesus was directing us one last time to living water which would satiate us spiritually. In Jesus' last moment, through his pain and suffering, he would direct us once again to the living water which gives us life.

-- Pastor Eric Song

TODAY: Each time you reach for a drink, think of how Jesus was thirsty on this day. Let us remember that Jesus is the living water and we will celebrate life in the Resurrection!

Saturday, April 20

Read: Job 14: 7-9 GROWING UP

As you get older, God guides you to a place because he cares. Responsibility and independence are the two main paths you take in deciding who you are now and where you are going in your life.

God has a plan for everyone. This became clearer to me when I moved into middle school. This is where I learned responsibility for my actions as well as received more independence.

With God's guidance and with Jesus as your beacon, you have the best roadmap as you chart your course.

-- Jackson, age 12

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, bless young people who are striving to follow you amidst all the distractions of modern life. Help them (and older people, too) to honor the guidance you gave in Luke 6:31: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Amen.

Easter Sunday, April 21
THE CROSS

Read: Luke 24:1-12 THE WAY OF

On tour with our church group, we arrived in the Holy Land. We journeyed by bus crossing desert and mountains bare of trees and grass. Much of this land has been untouched since Jesus walked these mountains and valleys.

We began at the garden tomb site where we shared Holy Communion and offered prayer. It is a moving experience to walk the Via Dolorosa, known also as "The Way of the Cross." One can almost feel the suffering, as if the rocky ground, bare trees, and warm air rise up and testify to Jesus, making this a holy experience. This is a very moving location that sends a message to the pilgrim. Your body does not actually feel the pain. However, the knowledge that Jesus carried the cross here reacts with your heart and soul, causing tears to well up in your eyes. One thinks they feel the pain but this is only a dreamlike condition.

In these times of division and lack of trust, let's reconsider the life of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. Let us rejoice in God's great love for us that overcomes all hatred and division and is most perfectly expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On this Easter as we celebrate the Lord's resurrection, let's also pray for his second coming.

-- Scott Tilley

TODAY: Offer this prayer: Lord, thank you for sacrificing yourself on the cross for our salvation. Help us to live with joy as we seek to follow your commandments -- to love God and to love one another. Amen.