

Lenten Devotions 2010

By Rev. Dr. Richard E. Rusbuldt



A Spiritual Journey Press E-Book

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AN INVITATION TO A LENTEN JOURNEY

For some of you, this will be your first Lenten Journey; for others, you have walked to the cross with Jesus more than once. For each of you, may this year's journey lift your thinking and feelings beyond any level you have previously experienced. Lent is that period of time between what is called Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Early church history indicates one or two days of fasting was to be engaged in to prepare for Easter. The first reference to 40 days of fasting occurred in the Council of Nicaea documents in 325 AD. Scholars believe that the number "forty" was suggested by the forty days that Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

In its earliest days, the fast was rigorous. Only one meal a day was allowed, with no meats to be eaten. Gradually the fast was relaxed until eventually it was replaced with other practices. Today, we hear many references to "give up something for Lent"; and the list is long of the various possibilities. In some churches, however, there is a greater emphasis on penitential practices and private devotions. It is the latter to which you are invited to become a sojourner with me for forty-six days. You are not invited to "give up" anything; instead you are invited to do something, namely, a forty-six day walk with Jesus – to the cross and the tomb.

Last year, I told you about Kay Rolfs-Massaglia, First Baptist, Cleveland, Ohio who did something that, to my knowledge, no one had ever done. She recorded her feelings, reactions, comments, and yes, several disagreements on her journal's pages, and sent them to me when it was completed. It was fantastic reading!!! I am happy to tell you that she "did it again" in 2009! Thank you, Kay, for your gift to me. Another "thank you" goes to Dr. Lee Spitzer of ABCNJ who is providing the front and back cover pictures, as well as the technical expertise to make this study booklet available online and without cost to you. One more "thank you" goes to Dr. Joel Sierra Cavazos, pastor of Comunidad Bautista Jirch, Monterrey City, Mexico, who for the first time last year translated the complete Lenten Devotions into Spanish, and made them available to many pastors in Central America and Mexico. He will be doing the same for 2010, and I am indebted to him forever for his willingness to open this devotional to Latinos around the world.

Some of our journey will find us listening to Jesus' teachings to his followers as he prepares to die. Some of the journey will deal with preparations for his death. And of course, the latter part of the journey will deal with his death. You probably won't agree with everything contained herein – and that's quite alright. (Kay didn't, and we're still the best of friends!) You may not like some of the suggestions – if not, skip them. Perhaps you will miss a day here and there; that's O.K., too. Each day's journey stands pretty much by itself, and can be missed, or picked up at a later date. We will meet both good and evil people, consider wisdom from "above," ponder the humanity and divinity of Jesus, shudder at the suffering and brutality he endured, confront the "why" questions again and again, pray daily – and even more. But over-riding our whole journey will be one universal truth:

GOD LOVES US – AND GOD CAME!!!!

1. Wednesday, February 17, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 4:17; 23-25; 5:5

Thought: As we begin our journey to Jerusalem with Jesus and the disciples, keep in mind that they had already been working and traveling together for 1,049 days. So although you probably think 46 days is a long stretch of time to devote to this journey, it's small compared to what they invested. As we join with them, what do you suppose they were thinking at that time? I think I know. They were *trying to make sense out of what was happening*. And needless to say, the Sermon on the Mount didn't make much sense.

It had actually been that way from the beginning. After they were called by Jesus to become followers, they saw unbelievable miracles happen to a large number of people (4: 23-25). At the same time, Jesus began to teach (Matthew 5-7). He launched the Sermon on the Mount with verse 4: 17: *Repent – change your life – God's kingdom is here*. Jesus should have known he was going to be in trouble – he launched everything by using that “dirty” word *CHANGE!*

As soon as he got to the third Beatitude, people were already looking at others to see how they were reacting. Jesus said the meek would inherit the earth. He was quoting Psalm 37: 9, 11. How ridiculous could one be? Their thoughts immediately drifted to their enslavement by the Roman Empire. The dictionary definition of “meek” means *humble, patient, and submissive*. They knew they could never take back their land from Rome by being humble, patient or submissive.

Then their thoughts drifted to the temple, to the priesthood, to the thousands of laws that bound them “hand and foot,” thus adding to their overall frustration with their Roman rulers. Oh, they were submissive alright, they would have said to each other – because there was a huge price to be paid if they were not. They were not free in any way – they were in double slavery.

Yes, they liked the miracles. Yes, they liked the excitement that Jesus generated. Yes, they liked the fact that here was a new, young voice who promised God's kingdom – right now!!! But as soon as they heard the word “meek,” the disciples of just a few weeks immediately began to try to make some sense out of what he was saying. How could anything like that ever happen? Was he “for real?” And for us today – is he “for real?”

Prayer: Jesus, thousands of years later, help us make sense of what you said. Amen.

Questions:

1. What did the Sermon on the Mount mean to those who heard it that day?
2. What does the Sermon on the Mount mean to you today?

2. Thursday, February 18, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:11-13

Thought: Matthew's list of nine beatitudes is longer than the other accounts. Yesterday, Jesus talked about the blessing of meekness – and he readily caught their attention. Today, in the ninth beatitude, he startled them even more when he suggested they would be persecuted – all because of him! How could one make any sense out of such teachings – such expectations?

Their puzzlement increased when Jesus continued: “Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.” (v. 13 - *The Message*)

You and I think little about salt. But when it's not there, we know it – and pick up the salt shaker and put some on our food – it's the cheapest item on our table! Usually the salt we buy is salty, and does what it is supposed to do. In Jesus' day, it wasn't always the case. The Phoenicians (and others) obtained quantities of salt by evaporation in salt-pans. But the Hebrews had access to an unlimited supply at the SW corner of the Dead Sea, in a 15 square mile elevation called the Hill of Salt.

Such salt was of the rock or fossil variety, and because of impurities and chemical changes, the outer layer was lacking in flavor and deemed worthless. Some less-than-honest salt sellers would put a little of the good stuff on top, and the rest was worthless. About fifty or sixty years after Jesus' died, there was a question asked of a rabbi about how one could make saltless salt salty again. He replied that one should salt it with the afterbirth of a mule.

If you have no farm background, be advised that mules are sterile, so there is no afterbirth. What he most likely was saying was “if you ask a stupid question, you'll get a stupid answer!” Jesus was stating a fact of life for those listening, namely that unsalty salt is totally worthless. He was telling the disciples as clearly as he could that he was counting on them to be genuine salt – reflecting a God who authentically loved and cared for a world in need of love. To this brand new group of disciples, these were penetrating and disturbing words. Of course, through the centuries, Jesus' expectation hasn't changed. Are we the real thing? Genuine salt? Or does the world find Christianity “without flavor” today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to be genuine salt – not a fake. Amen.

Questions:

1. How is your church genuine salt for its community?
2. Describe when you are meek; when you have been, or are persecuted.

3. Friday, February 19, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16

Thought: In yesterday's verse 13, Jesus asked us to be "salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth." He had another expectation of his followers: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept"(v. 14). I can just hear the disciples muttering to each other "Now what on earth does he mean by that?"

And what kind of sense can we make today of what he said? In his day, the small wicker oil lamps gave little light in the average home, which had few windows. To get maximum use, a lamp needed to be placed high on a lamp-stand. Is there any meaning for us at all today when with the flip of a switch there is instant light, and rooms, homes and offices are brilliantly lighted?

I like to think the challenge remains the same. Jesus asked his disciples to be light, to reflect the very essence of God – which is love. He asks no less of us today. Until about two years ago, Americans were indulging themselves in every way possible thanks to unprecedented wages, profits, earnings. Since then, many millions of workers have lost their jobs, the financial world has been turned upside down, retirement plans for many have gone up in smoke, and the global family has learned how much we are alike and how much we depend on each other. What would Jesus tell us to do today in order to be the "light of the world?"

First, he would probably tell us to get out of our churches, since the growing number of un-churched in this country have no intention of coming inside. Somehow, we need to take our "light" and hit the road, as they say. From the moment Jesus told the disciples they were to be "salt" and "light," it didn't make their journey easier. Instead, as they began their long trek towards Jerusalem, more and more challenges confronted them.

Second, if I am a light, reflective of a loving God, what does that require of me? Is it enough to participate in a service of worship once a week? How can God's people reflect God's Light and Love to those who may need it, but probably don't want it? Ours is not an easy task, no more so than that of the disciples. Reflect on your own "God's Light," and how it penetrates the darkness of the world.

Prayer: Jesus, show me how to give your Love and Light to people who could care less about you. Amen.

Questions:

1. Describe the Light that is within you, to be shared with others today.
2. How does your church deliver God's light and love to its community?

4. Saturday, February 20, 2010

Scripture: Mark 3:13-19

Thought: In Jesus' early days of ministry, John the Baptist was imprisoned. Soon after that, whenever he stopped to speak, teach, heal – wherever he went – the crowds grew larger and larger. Who were all these people? What did they want? Think of a large semi-circle. On the outer fringes were the curiosity seekers, and the non-informed-but-want-to-know folks. Mixed in with them were information-gatherers for the temple leaders and various other sects and movements. There were also some Jewish patriots present, hoping that Jesus would announce a revolt against Rome.

The next group closer to Jesus in the circle was much smaller, probably at any time not more than 75 to 100 people. These were folks who were seriously seeking to understand this new leader. They wanted to hear more of what he had to say. He challenged them in all of his teaching to become followers. Some did; and some didn't. But never in any way did he provide easy answers, or attempt to lull them into joining him on the way to the Cross. Again and again, he would conclude his teaching with the phrase "take up your cross."

The third and closest-to-Jesus group numbered twelve men. They were hand-picked to be his closest group of followers and supporters. In today's verses, Mark suggests there were two reasons why he picked them. The first reason was "that they might be with him." They would become his family, his small group, his companions on the journey. Second, he would send them out to preach. Jesus knew his time on earth was short. He knew he needed a dozen disciples – then eleven – to go out and multiply his efforts by the thousands, and then by the millions. The two "inside" groups, in most cases, tried their best to make sense out of what Jesus was saying. It wasn't easy – no more so than it is for us today.

For a moment, think of the church you attend. There are these same three groupings today. Perhaps the numbers are different, but the attitudes toward Jesus are still the same. There are those who are totally in love with God, and their lives reflect Jesus. There are those who are warmed by the relationship, but aren't "carried away" to any great extent. And there are always the fringe persons – still trying to figure it out. As we walk towards Jerusalem with these three groups, in which one do you find yourself?

Prayer: Jesus, wherever I am, draw me into your inner circle of life and love. Amen.

Questions:

1. What would it take to move you closer to Jesus?
2. What would it take to move those in the outer circle to an inner circle?

5. Sunday, February 21, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

Thought: We have little first-hand knowledge, and therefore few feelings for the desperate plight of most Jews at that time. The oppression of the Roman rule was brutal. How would you feel if each time you traveled from your village to the next, you had to pass by a cross on which hung a skeleton, the flesh picked clean by scavengers, a grim reminder from Rome that this fate awaited you and yours if you didn't obey the rules! Few were educated. They were bound, not by hundreds, but by thousands of temple laws that stole from them, as well as frustrated and humiliated them.

Philip Yancey tells of a filmed depiction in the movie *Son of Man* of the context within which the Sermon on the Mount was delivered. Roman soldiers had just invaded a village to exact vengeance for a crime against the empire. Young men of fighting age had been strung up to die; women were beaten to the ground; babies were speared "to teach these Jews a lesson." Into this setting came Jesus. Can't you just hear him?

"I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, right? So our forefathers said. Love your kinsmen; hate your enemies, right? But I say it's easy to love your own brother, to love those who love you. Even tax collectors do that! You want me to congratulate you for loving your own kinsmen? No. Love your enemy. Love the man who would kick you and spit on you. Love the soldier who would drive his sword in your belly. Love the brigand who robs and tortures you. Listen to me! Love your enemy! If a Roman soldier hits you on the left cheek, offer him the right one. If a man in authority orders you to walk one mile, walk two miles. If a man sues you for your coat, give him the shirt off your back. Listen! I tell you, it is hard to follow me. What I'm saying to you hasn't been said since the world began!"

No one had ever heard such teaching. Who was this rabbi? How could the disciples and others make sense out of what Jesus was saying to them in those early months of ministry? Until this time, no one had ever seen the pure, unadulterated, authentic love of God in human flesh. Jesus was different. Therefore, his followers would need to be different – then, as well as today. How is Christ's church different in the world today? In your town?

Prayer: Jesus, you not only *reflected* God's love, you *were* God's love in human flesh for all who could grasp such love. Help me be a better reflector. Amen.

Questions:

1. How would you have responded to Jesus' teachings in those days?
2. How does your world see Jesus through you today?

6. Monday, February 22, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

Thought: After reading today's verses, the words of old singer Woody Guthrie come to mind: "If Jesus preached in New York what he preached in Galilee, we'd lay him in his grave again." Over the past several years, as our economic crisis deepened, more and more workers lost their jobs. Do you think even one of them found comfort in Jesus' words "...don't be anxious about tomorrow?" In truth, I heard – and still hear – people who haven't even lost their jobs expressing all kinds of anxiety about tomorrow.

If you and I were to look at all of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, how many of them have we been able to carry out in our daily lives? Did Jesus actually expect this brand new group of disciples to do everything he asked of them? Does Jesus expect you and me to live as he described in this sermon? I'm sure he wishes that. But not one of us has come close to getting an "A" grade in this course on living. Why? Because I sense the Sermon on the Mount is more about God than about you and me. Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand – and in his "Sermon" provided a fantastic picture of what it will some day be.

Consider:

- Why should I love my enemies? Because God loved your enemies before they were your enemies; God ceases not to love, even in the face of total rejection or hurt. Neither should we. God abhors sin; but God loves every sinner, whatever the degree of shortcoming.
- Why should I try to be perfect? So that you can be like God; you won't make it, but trying the best you can brings a smile to the face of God.
- Why live without fear and worry? It's a matter of trust. God loves us so much, why would we ever need to worry about the unknown?
- Why pray? If an earthly parent gives his/her child bread or fish, so is our Father in heaven gleefully waiting to shower gifts on us.
- Why try, when we know we won't make it? Because Jesus gave us God's love in person – nothing was, or is held back. All God asks of us is to love God to the maximum degree of which we are capable.

Yes, it's true. The disciples couldn't begin to make sense of all Jesus was telling them. Neither can we. But his compelling message of a loving God wouldn't allow them to return to their nets. They went to the cross with him.

Prayer: Jesus, above all, help me grow in my love for you. Amen.

Questions:

1. Which part of the Sermon on the Mount is most difficult for you?
2. What words would you use to describe God's love for human beings?

7. Tuesday, February 23, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 8:5-13

Thought: Two things propelled Jesus into almost instant popularity. First were the things he said, such as in the Sermon on the Mount. Second were the things he did, such as today's long-distance healing of the Centurion's servant.

Was it not Jesus who had just proclaimed that we should love our enemies? One of the first things Jesus did after that message was to follow through on what he taught. The nearest legion of Roman troops was stationed in Syria. But there were small groups of troops in many areas, about 60 to 80 soldiers in each under the leadership of a Centurion. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army, in charge of discipline, and hated and feared by all.

This story is set in the context of a Roman empire in which religion was big business. At the heart of the business was producing miracles. A local temple could put a city on the map if its "miracles" were impressive enough. Cities actually sent delegates to the library of Alexandria to learn from "miracle workers" such as Philon, Cresibius and Heron (early engineers and architects!). Devices dispensed holy water, opened doors, and caused engraved figurines to spin and dance. Steam caused snakes to hiss. Thanks to clever ancient technology, worshipers heard rain, wind, and thunder accompanied by flashes of lightning. People traveled from all parts of the empire to any temple where it was reported that miracles were performed. Ironically, Herod's temple in Jerusalem was the biggest in the ancient world, but it was a "silent" temple. The Jews worshiped a silent, invisible God who declined to amuse visitors.

But into this very setting came someone who didn't even need a building within which to perform exciting and unexplainable miracles. Jesus' popularity rose in leaps and bounds, and word quickly traveled far beyond Galilee that someone had come on the scene who was totally different from the statues and fakery of the Greek and Roman pantheon of gods. Neither did you have to pay him, or make large financial gifts – there was no temple at all!!! He was the talk of the town! Even a Centurion of the Roman army experienced that Jesus of Nazareth was, indeed, a different manifestation of God's love – a man who was hated discovered healing love.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for practicing what you preached. Help me do the same. Amen.

**Questions: 1. How do you think the Centurion reacted to all of this?
2. Are you aware of any of Jesus' miracles of healing and loving today?
Name them.**

8. Wednesday, February 24, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 43-44; 7:28

Thought: As the months and years moved quickly by, wherever Jesus went and crowds gathered, there was always the unanswered question: Who is this Rabbi? The last verse in today's readings tells you the conclusion of Jewish leaders. Jacob Neusner, a world-renowned scholar on Judaism in Jesus' era, wrote a book titled *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, in which he told how he would have responded to Jesus. Neusner has great respect for Jesus and Christianity, and is "impressed – and moved" by such teachings as the Sermon on the Mount. He admitted that he found such teachings so interesting that he would have joined the crowd following Jesus from place to place.

He also admits that he would have parted company with Jesus. "Jesus takes an important step – in the wrong direction . . . At issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all. In the end the master, Jesus, makes a demand that only God makes." He could not go along with the shift from the Torah (law) to Jesus himself as the central authority. Matthew says, more than once, that Jesus taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. He made no distinction between his words and God's.

There is no question that Jesus provoked his listeners. After all, he said "I and the Father are one"; "I have the power to forgive sins"; "I will rebuild the temple in three days." He took on those who disagreed with him many times. It was he who prevented a mob from stoning an adulterous woman. Temple guards came to seize him at one point; they returned to the temple empty-handed saying "No one ever spoke the way this man does." He gave direct orders to demons "Be quiet!" He befriended lepers. He ate with sinners. He forgave those who crucified him.

Who was this Rabbi? This question hovered over every small and large gathering where Jesus was at the center. And who do we say Jesus is today? In a recent gathering at Philadelphia City Hall, people of all faiths, ages, cultures and careers came to discuss our racial and other differences. In a small group of three persons, I heard from a Black-Muslim leader more good things said about Jesus than I ever heard from a non-Christian. But the great teacher, Jesus, was not his God. Jesus said to Peter, "Whom do you say I am?" He asks us the same question today.

Prayer: Jesus, sometimes my faith in you is like thin ice on a pond; I'm afraid it's not dependable. Help my "thin-ice" faith become "thick and strong." Amen.

Questions:

1. If you were in those early crowds, what would you have thought of Jesus?
2. Who do you tell people Jesus is – today?

9. Thursday, February 25, 2010

Scripture: Luke 8:1-8

Thought: Why did Jesus teach using parables? Wouldn't he have been more effective if he'd just "told them like it is?" Without TV or print media, parables were the subject of conversation as people walked home, in their homes, in village gatherings. They asked each other, "What do you think he meant?" Jesus wanted people to search diligently to find meaning in his words.

In today's reading, the sower throws out the seed. It seems to land everywhere. We assume the seed is the word of God, don't we? Take that beaten-down path. Some people are like that. They aren't bad people. They just aren't interested. Their lives are like treadmills – constant movement and activity – but going nowhere. _____

Seed fell on rocky ground, too. There's not much depth for roots to penetrate and grow. Some people are like that – shallow minds and hearts – not much depth. _____

What about the ground overgrown with thorns? How many lives are filled with mostly clutter? So many things to do. So many places to go. So much stuff to accumulate. Isaiah called it "laboring for that which is not bread." Jesus said to Martha "You are worried and distracted by many things..." _____

And then there is the good soil. "Good soil" people produce fruit for God's Kingdom movement. They worship, give, plant, share, teach, model, and make a difference where they are planted. _____

Before going any further, go back and look at each type of soil Jesus mentioned in this parable. Place several names of people whom you think represent that type of soil on the lines above. Place your name on one, also.

We make much of the soil in the parable. But you know, I have a strange feeling the parable wasn't about the soil at all. The point of the parable is the Sower. Could Jesus be talking about God -- who loves so authentically that our God-Sower reaches out to the bad, the evil, the indifferent, the preoccupied, the ugly? Is Jesus wanting us to realize that's what God does with his grace, his love, his goodness and mercy? I like a God like that.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving the unlovely – including me. Amen.

Questions:

1. In which soil are you involved in planting the seeds of God's grace?
2. In what ways has the love of God shown grace to you in your life?

10. Friday, February 26, 2010

Scripture: Luke 8:9-15

Thought: They asked him what the parable meant, and you have his answer in today's verses. What do you think the disciples thought he meant? There was no blueprint for success. No "Ten Steps" were provided. There was no organized effort to establish the Kingdom. There were no educated leaders. There were no plans to follow through with which to introduce the world to God. Humanly speaking, the odds were all stacked against Jesus' efforts to establish God's Kingdom on earth. Rome and Judaism linked hands and killed God's leader, Jesus. Rome was an empire steeped in fiercely defended traditional pagan religions. Christians were a small, despised movement from a corner of Palestine.

Christianity was considered an illegal and depraved religion. The earliest Christians did not have church buildings – they met in homes. The first actual church building to be found is at Dura Europos on the Euphrates, dating back to 231. They had no public ceremonies to introduce them to the public. They had no access to the mass media of their day. After Paul, we find no "big names" of missionaries or public figures the next two centuries.

Instead, the faith spread through a multitude of humble, ordinary believers whose names have been long forgotten. They took the words of Jesus in the parable of the sower literally – and cast the seeds of God anywhere they could. Early Christians lived primarily in urban areas of the Roman Empire. They lived close together in crowded tenements. There were few secrets in such a setting. The faith spread as neighbors saw the lives of the believers close-up, on a daily basis.

It was a jolt to Rome when early Christians openly taught about God as "our Father." In that world, people felt, as many do today, that they were at the mercy of fate, victims of birth or chance, dependent on luck, their destiny determined by blind astrological forces. But Christians witnessed to a personal God who could be approached as "our Father." People of that day were quickly attracted to such a hope, a possibility to be in personal touch with their God. They sowed the seeds of God wherever they lived. Some fell on good soil, took root and grew, and produced fruit for God's Kingdom.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for introducing God to us as "Our Father." Amen.

Questions:

1. How many of your neighbors, family or friends have learned of Jesus by watching you, listening to you, observing you?
2. How do you feel about Jesus' plan to bring salvation to the whole world?

11. Saturday, February 27, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 10:7-10, 42

Thought: Who were the disciples? Who were the early Christians? How do they compare with Christians today?

Justin Martyr, a noted early Christian leader, wrote to Emperor Antoninus Pius and described early Christians: “We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity; before we used the magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need; before we hated and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race, but now since the manifestation of Christ, we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us without just cause.” Jesus caught the crowd’s attention that day when he suggested we could begin our prayer with “Our Father...”. They were attracted to the thought of “my own” God. This belief continued into the early church. A rather mysterious word square has been found in many places from England to Mesopotamia. Two were found at Pompeii which dates them before 79 AD when the city was destroyed.

		A			
R	O	T	A	S	
		P			
O	P	E	R	A	
		T			
T	E	N	E	T	
		R			
A	R	E	P	O	A
					P
S	A	T	O	R	
					E
					R

See how the words can be spelled forwards and backwards in any column or line.

The letters can be rearranged in a cross to (Our Father) twice, with the “A” and the “O” are the first and last letters of the Greek and Omega, a New Testament designation of Christ. No doubt this was a secret way for early Christians to identify, and be identified with other Christians. What would Justin Martyr write to describe Christians today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to value deeply your love for those who follow you. Amen.

**Questions: 1. As Justin described Christians then, how would you describe us today?
2. From your experience, how do non-Christians view Christians today?**

12. Sunday, February 28, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 25:34-46

Thought: Did the disciples and early Christians take seriously the teachings of Jesus? Today's verses reveal Jesus' expectations regarding what God's Kingdom is about, and the value he placed on following through on these expectations.

Did you know that just two hundreds years after Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee, in the city that was the heart of the Roman empire, Rome, Christians were feeding more than 1,500 of the hungriest, dirtiest, and most desperate of its residents? It has even been suggested that perhaps these early Christians started the first "Meals on Wheel's program!!! For two centuries, Rome had attempted to wipe off the face of the earth this "atheistic" religion. Yet in the very heart of their empire, Christians were acting with more care and responsibility than anyone else.

When Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") wanted to revive pagan religion at that time, this is what he said: "Christianity has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the Christians care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them."

Do you think those early Christians in Rome might just have caught the meaning of Jesus' words in today's verses? In brief, here's what Jesus said to the "sheep" about the heart of his kingdom:

**I was hungry – you fed me...
I was thirsty – you gave me a drink...
I was homeless – you gave me a room...
I was shivering – you gave me clothes...
I was sick – you stopped to visit...
I was in prison – you came to see me.**

And to the "goats" – just the opposite. "Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me – you failed to do it to me." (v. 45 - The Message) Thousands of years later, give your church a grade for doing these things. Then grade yourself.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive me if I've missed the point of your message. Amen.

**Questions: 1. In what ways does your church do the six items listed above?
2. In what ways do you and your family fulfill Jesus' expectations.**

13. Monday, March 1, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-10

Thoughts: In light of the six acts of caring Jesus mentioned in yesterday's verses, what do you think he had in mind when he told us to pray: "God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven?" What would your own little "world" look like today if God's will was in charge? What would be different? In the context of a global economy that has gone awry, what would Jesus have in mind for his followers to do? Give some thought to what God would like to see done in response to the needs of the groups listed in the left column.

The Need

God's Response (through us!)

Hungry people

Homeless people

Powerless people

Unloved people

Lonely people

Poor people

Hurting people

Addicted people

Sick people

Hopeless people

Victims of prejudice people

Jobless people

Mentally impaired people

Prayer: Jesus, help me make a difference for one person in the listing above. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What can Christians do to bring God's care and love to the helpless?
2. How can Christians re-shape the world as God would like to see it done?**

14. Tuesday, March 2, 2010

Scripture: Luke 12:13-20, 34; Psalm 14:1

Thought: Today ends our second week of walking with Jesus during Lent. The disciples had heard so many new, amazing, almost preposterous things that there is little wonder they continued to try to make sense of it all. Then Jesus dropped today's story/parable on them. What do you think his listeners thought when he said, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions?" Of all the things Jesus said in his three years of ministry, this may be the most counter-cultural statement of all, both then and now.

Have you watched any TV lately? If you have, for every twenty minutes of entertainment you saw ten minutes of advertizing giving you one clear and distinct message: you are what you have, and the more you have, the happier you will be. Isn't that old bumper sticker true that says "Whoever has the most toys wins?"

Jesus said it is a lie. Now he didn't paint this rich farmer who enjoyed abundant harvests as a bad guy. He was very successful in his chosen vocation. He was simply doing what most of us do – we have a second car now, so we need a second garage; we need a computer in every bedroom, office and game room in the house; we no longer need a TV set in the living room, we need a home theater; and on and on. No, he was doing what he was supposed to do – get and enjoy more and more.

Jesus didn't make the fellow a villain. He did nothing illegal. There is no hint of theft or graft. No mistreatment of his employees is suggested. There is nothing in the story to indicate insider trading, cheating, fraud or funny accounting – the kinds of things we hear much about today.

Jesus suggested that his problem wasn't self-absorption, but self-deception. He assumed he was in charge of his life, and he was not. As in many of Jesus' parables, we are told what we don't want to hear. We are not the master of our fate, nor the captain of our soul. We like to think we are in charge of our lives; but we are not. Jesus calls the man a fool, which brings to mind Psalm 14:1: "Fools say in their heart – there is no God." The farmer defined himself by what he had – not by whose he was. The basic meaning of Christian stewardship is that your life is not your own, that all you have, and all you are, are God's. Do you agree with Jesus?

Prayer: Jesus, may my heart and my treasure be in the same place. Amen.

Thought:

1. How has today's "get more" culture deceived us – and others?
2. What do you value most in your life today?

15. Wednesday, March 3, 2010

Scripture: Luke 9:18-22

Thought: Some of us have been “walking with Jesus” for many decades; perhaps others of us are new to this journey. As Jesus asked the disciples long ago, he asks us the same two questions: “Who do they say I am?” – and, “Who do you say I am?” Eternity hinges on how these questions are answered. The disciples responded to his first question with the following observations:

- ...they say you are John the Baptizer;
- ...they say you are Elijah;
- ...they say you are one of the old prophets who has come back.

There were many different views of the term “messiah” in Jesus’ time, and they all revolved around a deliverance on earth and an earthly kingdom. Contrary to what many think today, a “suffering Messiah” was not at all in the minds of Jewish people at that time. No, their Messiah was to reign as the “King”; he would be God’s appointed ruler – and suffering surely would not be part of the picture.

The disciples had been living and working with Jesus for almost three years when we joined them in their walk to Jerusalem. When Jesus refused to have bestowed on him during his three years of ministry the title of Messiah, many more questions were raised for the disciples. So Jesus asked them outright: “Who do you say I am?” There were twelve disciples; only one of them answered the question – Peter. “The Messiah of God” was his brief response. Now, thousands of years and billions of people later, Jesus’ question is still in need of an answer – by each one of us. Peter answered for himself – we don’t know how the other disciples would have answered. As you look around you today, and Jesus is asking the same question, how do you think different people are responding?

- my neighbor – Jesus, you are _____
- my children – Jesus, you are _____
- my spouse – Jesus, you are _____
- my best friend – Jesus, you are _____
- my parents – Jesus, you are _____
- my pastor – Jesus, you are _____
- my co-worker – Jesus, you are _____

When you eventually see Jesus face to face, how will you complete this sentence? Jesus, you are _____

Prayer: Jesus, help me know you better than I do now. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your present feelings for Jesus, the Messiah?
2. With whom are you willing to share openly your feelings about Jesus?

16. Thursday, March 4, 2010

Scripture: John 6:35

Thought: Today we ask: What did Jesus have to say about himself? Today's verse gives one answer: I am the Bread of Life. Is there anything more basic?

Rev. John H. Boyle was an American soldier at the end of WW II. He wrote the following story:

"I saw him out of the corner of my eye, walking toward me on that cold day in April, 1945, as I stood before the boxcars piled high with the corpses of the inmates of the infamous Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, Germany, shortly before we liberated it. They had been machine-gunned to death in a last-gasp frenzy by the guards when they heard the American forces were coming. I stared in horror and disbelief at the carloads of carnage.

Instinctively, I reached for the .45 caliber pistol on my hip as he approached me, just in case. Then I noticed his tear-stained face as, in a combination of German and broken English, he began to speak. 'Danke, danke,' he said. 'Thank you, thank you.' He was trying to express in the only way he could his joy and gratitude for what he thought would never happen to him: to be spared; to be saved.

Then this Lithuanian Jew reached into the pocket of his threadbare shirt. Once again I let my hand drift toward the holster on my hip. Out of his pocket he slowly brought forth a dirty-looking crust of bread and held it out to me. I took it, and he told me that on the day before, his friend gave it to him as he was being led away to be executed. The friend had realized that he would no longer need it, and since bread was a coveted item among the prisoners, he wanted him to have it. Now this man was giving me what had been given him, in order to show his gratitude.

I thanked him, and put the crust of bread in my pocket, where it remained for several weeks. From time to time I would finger it – remembering. Soon it was reduced to crumbs, and one day I emptied the crumbs into my hand and fed them to the pigeons in the park. . . Ever since that time, when I serve or receive communion, I remember that survivor of the Holocaust and his dirty-looking crust of bread. It was not much; but it was all he had with which to give thanks. I have been feeding on the twelve baskets full of the leftovers ever since."

When was the last time you said "Danke"?

Prayer: Jesus, may I ever be grateful for the bread of life you gave me. Amen.

Questions: 1. How did you feel when Jesus "freed" you forever?
2. How often, and in what ways do you express your thanks to God for the gift of life?

17. Friday, March 5, 2010

Scripture: John 8:53-59

Thought: Jesus had everyone's attention after almost three years of ministry, teaching, and miracles. Without a doubt, everyone was pondering the question: **Who is this Jesus? The Pharisees were no different. They boldly questioned his claims and asked "Who do you think you are?"(v. 53). The Pharisees (and others) had watched Jesus for several years, and he was so different they didn't know what to think about him. How was he different? Consider some things they couldn't have missed:**

- **Jesus loved to praise others. When he performed a miracle, he often deflected credit back to the recipient – "Your faith has made you whole."**
- **Jesus easily gained the confidence of people. He talked with the woman at the well, a religious leader in a garden, and fishermen by a lake – and after only moments of conversation, they revealed to Jesus their innermost needs or secrets.**
- **Jesus didn't have a list of "Things I Must Do Today." He "went with the flow", as we say. He easily let himself get involved with any "nobody," whether a hemorrhaging woman who touched his robe, or a blind beggar who wouldn't go unnoticed. Two of his greatest miracles (Lazarus and Jairus' daughter) happened because he arrived too late to heal the sick person!**
- **Jesus was "the man for others," so said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He would accept almost anyone's invitation to dinner, and his list of friends was so diverse it included rich people, Roman centurions, Pharisees, tax collectors, prostitutes and leprosy victims. People *liked* being with Jesus.**

The list could go on. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said "before Abraham, I am. . .", or "I am who I am" (The Message). C. S. Lewis put it this way: "He was not at all like the psychologist's picture of the integrated, balanced, adjusted, happily married, employed, popular citizen. You can't really be very well 'adjusted' to your world if it says you 'have a devil' and ends by nailing you up naked to a stake of wood."

**The Pharisees told him to his face that he was crazy – he had a demon!!
What would you say to the Pharisees?**

Prayer: Jesus, clear the "too busy to be bothered" scales from my eyes, that I might more fully understand who you are. Amen.

Questions:

- 1. When was the last time you told someone what Jesus means to you?**
- 2. In what ways could you make Jesus a "topic of conversation" among your family, friends, classmates, co-workers, neighbors?**

18. Saturday, March 6, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 6:28-34

Thought: A few weeks ago, a community leader with church ties committed suicide, two weeks after he lost his job. You've heard of similar cases, no doubt. As well, some families have been torn apart, marriages broken, homes and retirement plans destroyed, and there have been murdering rampages as a result of the global economic recession.

Was Jesus right or wrong in today's verses? Read them in *The Message* if you can. Here are the last two verses: "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."

Everything Jesus said and did in his three years of ministry was for the sole purpose of personally introducing God to humanity. He described a God who was so vastly different from people's perceptions that what he said and did was almost unbelievable. Besides, who needed a God like that? I suppose the answer to that question depended on who the listener was. Here are some possibilities for those who were in the crowd:

- I'm sick – I want to get better now – sounds good to me, Jesus;
- I'm poor – I need food today, Jesus – I'm not worried about tomorrow;
- I have possessions – I've already taken care of tomorrow, Jesus;
- I'm hurting – do you think your God could care, Jesus?
- I'm a politician – I have the power; I don't need an unseen god, Jesus;
- I'm in debt big-time – I know you're not gonna give me money, Jesus;
- I need a job, Jesus – today, not tomorrow;
- I'm alone, with no one to care for me – what can you do, Jesus?

I haven't read in a newspaper, seen on TV or online, or heard any sermons on today's verses. Have you? I haven't heard anybody give Jesus' advice to people who have lost their jobs, their homes, or who are in the process of being wiped out financially. I'm sure you haven't, either. So was Jesus completely out of touch with reality – then, and now? Or are we, perhaps, out of touch with God's reality? Did he *really* mean what he said about how we approach life, possessions, and hopes and dreams? Can't you hear the murmuring in the crowd?

What do you think Jesus' words mean today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me honestly believe that you love us so much that you will take care of us, both today and tomorrow. Amen.

Questions:

1. What do you think Jesus meant in today's verses?
2. What words from God can you give to people who have lost hope?

19. Sunday, March 7, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:16-19, 28-30

Thought: Vishal Mangalwadi (India) said: “If compassion had meant for Christ merely what most Christians understand by it today, then Jesus would never have been killed. He would have been a fit candidate for a Nobel prize, not the cross . . . In many cases, the ‘Sunday-school Jesus’ confines himself only to the changing of men’s hearts; the Jesus of the Gospels aimed at changing both human hearts and human society.”

In today’s verses, you can see how quickly Jesus’ reading of the verses from Isaiah to the crowd in Nazareth almost resulted in his death – and not on a cross. His early depiction of God’s intentions was not what his listeners wanted to hear. Do you find it bothersome, two thousand years later, that not once did he mention building a church or anything of that nature?

E. Stanley Jones (missionary to India) said “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost, and the other is a corpse.”

Jesus shocked his listeners with references to the fact that “God’s Kingdom is now!” It was pretty obvious to those who were in the crowds that God wasn’t in charge of much of anything, judging from their circumstances. He told them God loved them. After looking at their Roman oppressors and the legalism of their synagogues, they could discover little sense of being loved – by anybody.

Do you suppose that Jesus actually thought that when a person became a Christian – one of his followers – even the “world” within which that person lived needed to be changed because of his new life and mission? Can one Christian make a difference? Jesus thought so. He tried to convince his disciples that they could make a huge difference. He left for you and me the message that we are to go throughout the world, beginning in our own backyard, and become involved in God’s transformation of the world – beginning with the heart, and encompassing everything else about people’s lives and circumstances.

Prayer: Jesus, is it possible I have somehow missed the heart of your message about God’s Kingdom? Please show me again. Amen.

Questions:

1. Is your church a “ghost?” A “corpse?” Or God’s people on earth?
2. Are you a “ghost?” A “corpse?” Or one of Jesus’ true followers?

20. Monday, March 8, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-15

Thought: “Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth... Keep open house; *be generous with your lives...*” (The Message).

Who among us doesn’t feel good and/or thankful when someone has been kind to us? In the Gospels, being kind is an attribute often used to describe Jesus. Kindness is, ultimately, the treatment we receive – deserved or undeserved – from someone willing to touch our life. Being kind includes such things as courtesy, empathy, benevolence, gentleness and generosity.

Jesus was most serious about us being the salt and light of the world. Read this story told by Penelope Duckworth in her book, *I Am*. Years ago on a night flight from New York to the west coast Penelope went up to the lounge of the 747 to get something to drink. An older woman with an Eastern European accent asked if she could join her. They began talking, and the woman asked Penelope about her family and then began to tell about her own. She had a son teaching in Boston and a daughter living on a kibbutz in Israel.

Penelope assumed her companion was Jewish; and when she made a remark to that effect, the woman explained that she was a Christian but had raised her daughter as a Jew. When asked why, she told this story:

“When the Nazis came to her village in Poland to round up the Jews for removal to the camps, no one really knew what was happening, but everyone knew it was something dreadful. The smell of death was in the air. This woman was doing her weekly shopping near the train station the day the Nazis arrived. Gestapo officers were pushing the Jewish villagers onto the trains, and one was pushing a woman who had a little girl with her. He turned to the Jewish woman and, pointing to her daughter, roughly asked, ‘Is this your child?’ The child’s mother stopped, looked at Penelope’s companion and said, ‘No, she’s hers.’ ‘And so you took her daughter?’ Penelope asked. ‘Yes’, she nodded. ‘What would you have done?’”

She did just what Jesus suggested we should do: Be salt to the world – be light in darkness. Where does your light shine in this dark world?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to brighten my light in the growing darkness. Amen.

Questions:

- 1. To whom do you provide “salt” in his/her bland, tasteless world?**
- 2. In what ways does your life shine brightly for others to see Jesus?**

21. Tuesday, March 9, 2010

Scripture: Mark 12:41-44

Thought: As financial worries around the globe have increased over the past several years, “giving away” from one’s financial resources has significantly been on the decrease. In Sue M. Kidd’s book *Love’s Hidden Blessings*, this story is found:

“He stood on the sidewalk beside the front door of the department store... a tall, motionless man wearing no expression on his face, only sunglasses. He clutched a cigar box, which he would thrust out in a gesture of greeting and hope when footsteps came his way... Seven-year-old Janie and her mother approached the door – Janie’s steps slowing. She had caught sight of him. Her mother had seen him on the streets before. But this was Janie’s first encounter with someone begging for money.

‘What’s he doing?’ Janie asked her mother, too loudly!

‘He’s asking for money,’ her mother whispered.

Then comes the eternal question... *‘Why?’*

‘Because he’s poor and needs help,’ said her mother, hoping that would satisfy her. As they drew beside him, the cigar box was thrust in their direction. Janie stopped and peeked inside. Her mother grabbed her hand and pulled her through the door. With her mother browsing through the store, Janie wandered off. Mother quickly followed her to the front door where she was peering at the beggar.

‘Mama, can we give him some money?’ Janie asked.

‘Well, sure we can.’ She snapped open her purse. Janie peeked inside just as she did with the cigar box. All she saw was a five dollar bill and two quarters. She handed her the two quarters. Janie stared at the two coins for a moment as if there was something big and important going on inside her. Then she blurted out, *‘Mama, give him the five dollar bill, too, and I’ll save my allowance and pay you back.’*

Janie’s words cut through all the mother’s distraction and unconcern, and touched her deeply. She handed Janie the five dollars. Then she watched her walk over to the man and gaze up into his blind face before she laid the money in the box.”

It cost the widow whom Jesus watched as she put all she had into the temple treasury. Janie followed in her footsteps. Jesus said this is the kind of giving that counts in God’s Kingdom.

Prayer: Jesus, help me learn the joy of giving beyond my means. Amen.

Questions:

1. When was the last time you gave “beyond your means?”
2. What feelings do you experience when you “give away” from your own resources to help someone else?

22. Wednesday, March 10, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 19:30; 20:16

Thought: If you have time, read the material between these two verses. As you read yesterday's Scripture about the woman who put her two mites into the treasury offering, you know she is nameless. Yet this nameless woman, thousands of years later, is still pointed out, again and again, as a model for how Christ's followers are to give and share. There are other "nameless" models throughout Scripture. Jesus suggested that those who through their lives have been untitled, unreported, unnoticed, quiet, in the background, humble – yet who reflect a living, loving God in their daily lives – will be "first in line" at some point.

When I was the "kid" preacher in my first church, I can still remember sort of being "afraid" of those who had titles; there were Trustees, Deacons, Superintendents, and on and on. Many years later, though, I don't remember much about them. Instead, I remember a woman who, to me, was Grandma McNelly. She never held an office in the church, never taught a Sunday School class, never sang in the choir, never headed up the women's society, was never up front about anything.

Grandma McNelly was busy about other things, though, in Jesus' name. One of them was to bring that kid preacher, who lived in a rented room, to her house for some mighty delicious home-cooked meals. The food was out of this world. And while we ate, she listened to me, encouraged me, sorted out some of the dissatisfaction she knew I had to deal with, made me laugh and laughed with me, assured me that not only did God love me but she and her family did, too. Whenever I was with her, she was a "cup of cold water" for me when my life often made me feel like I was in a hot, dry desert.

We tend to place on "pedestals" those who pastor our churches, those who are elected to offices, those who lead. Much of the time, we miss seeing or knowing about those who remain in the background, who are rather quiet or silent about their faith, but who can always be counted on to lend a hand, encourage those who are hurting, pray up a storm for anyone in trouble, be positive rather than negative, clean up messes rather than make messes, and in general, reflect a loving, caring God to all who touch their lives. Think about your journey thus far, and recall some of those "nameless" persons who have reflected God's love into your life – and give thanks.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for those "last" persons you've put into my life. Amen.

**Questions: 1. When have you been a "nameless" person for someone else?
2. In God's Kingdom, will you be found among the "first" or the "last?"**

23. Thursday, March 11, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 21:33-41

Thought: Jesus' parable of the absentee landlord tells of servants who misuse land entrusted to them and then go so far as to kill the son of the owner in their attempts to gain ownership. Do you suppose Jesus just might have been pointing to our stewardship of God's planet named Earth?

As you know, we live in a throw-away society. Some things get thrown along the road, and some get thrown in landfills. What happens then? The U.S. National Park Service has published "disintegration" guidelines. This is how long it takes the following items to "return to the earth":

paper – 2-5 months	orange peels – 6 months
rags – 1 - 5 months	rope – 3-14 months
milk carton – 5 years	plastic bags – 10-20 years
leather shoes - 25 years	nylon cloth - 30 years
plastic containers - 50 years	soup cans – 100 years
aluminum – 200-500 years	plastic rings – 450+ years
styrofoam – never	

Over 50 years ago, then President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke these words that are fully relevant today: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the seat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 people. It is two fully equipped hospitals. It is 50 miles of concrete highway. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could house 8,000 people. This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

Jesus suggested we have a responsibility as Christian stewards to care-manage on God's behalf all that has been entrusted to us. How do you think we are doing?

Prayer: Jesus, help me be a better steward of everything you have entrusted to me, including my life, time, soul, relationships and "things." Amen.

Questions: 1. On a scale of 1 to 10 (high), describe your Christian stewardship.
2. What is your church doing in care-managing God's world?

24. Friday, March 12, 2010

Scripture: Mark 8:34-38

Thought: As Jesus continued his walk toward the cross, he knew things were not going to get easier for him. He also knew that some of his followers would eventually experience their own crosses. What “price tag” is attached to your own faith journey? Throughout history, for some the “price tag” has been life itself.

Lyons was the Roman capital of Gaul (modern France), and one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. Christians living in Lyons (and nearby Vienne) in 177 found their faith in Christ costly. To gain evidence against Christians, citizens of Lyons tortured several of the Christians’ slaves. The slaves quickly said their owners were guilty of incest and cannibalism, two common charges against Christians at that time. Such accusations inflamed the prejudices of the mob, who demanded action against the Christians. As a result, forty-eight Christians died either in prison or in the arena.

Blandina, a Christian slave girl, is typical of the incredible suffering endured by Christians at that time. A letter from the church says: “Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn until evening were worn out and exhausted, and themselves confessed defeat from lack of aught else to do to her; they marveled that the breath still remained in a body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds, and they testified that a single form of torture was sufficient to render life extinct, let alone such and so many.”

Blandina stood firm in her faith, however, and when she was returned to the prison, she encouraged the other prisoners to stand firm in their faith. Blandina’s ordeal was far from over, however. Later she was tied to a cross in the arena and wild beasts were let loose on her. Since none of the wild beasts would touch her, Blandina was cut down and put back in prison. Later she was brought back into the arena, scourged, put on a red-hot iron grill, and finally gored by a bull before she died. Jesus said “Take up your cross and follow me” – is this part of what he meant? It is interesting to note that immediately after this persecution; the church launched a mission venture to the rural population surrounding the city of Lyons. Is there an amount written on your faith “price tag?”

Prayer: Jesus, help me not to forget the price you paid – for me. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What have you given up to follow Christ?
2. What have you not given up to follow Christ?**

25. Saturday, March 13, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 25:40

Thought: For almost 50 years, members of First Baptist, Cleveland (Martin Rolfs-Massaglia, pastor) have annually traveled to Central America where they involved themselves in the life and work of rural Nicaraguan families. Last year Vinnie, Sam and Christopher were part of the mission team. Vinnie is a Euro-American sophomore, Sam is an African American junior, and Christopher is an Asian American senior – from three different high schools. Through the church’s mission budget, funds were provided with which these young men could participate.

One of them had been to Nicaragua the year before. The other two said they were going on the trip because it sounded like a real adventure. They were warned that traveling to rural Nicaragua was “rough travel”; they would be sleeping on the ground, have cold make-shift showers, outhouses, limited or no electricity and unfamiliar food. Several seasoned members of the team observed that the trio struggled with some of the challenges. Finding scorpions on the walls of the room in which they were sleeping was disconcerting. But not once did they voice a complaint.

Over the course of ten days, their concept of mission moved from a fuzzy notion of helping poor, nameless, faceless people to the bright faces of children with whom there was an immediate bond. Mission became the welcoming smiles of Victor and Matais, and Fani, Raynaldo and Paula, who lived with many brothers and sisters in houses with mud walls, dirt floors, thatched or corrugated tin roofs. Eight or more people lived in two or three rooms with scant pieces of the crudest furniture; yet they were still filled with joy and hope. They loved Jesus in ways these young men had never even thought could be possible. Mission became for Vinnie, Sam and Christopher a clinic in which they were using their muscles to help build a place that would help prevent the deaths of these very children – from completely preventable diseases. In their time there, they learned in a very personal way that poverty is not an issue to be discussed in a class or parlor. Instead, they learned it is the daily struggle for basic survival for real people, not unlike themselves. I have a hunch that during those ten days, God’s face was wreathed in smiles as these teens (and others) went about doing just what Jesus asked us all to do.

Prayer: Jesus, near or far away, show me some lives in which I can make a difference. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What images come to your mind when you hear the word “poverty?”
2. In what ways is your church touching the lives of people in need?**

26. Sunday, March 14, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 17:21

Thought: On his way to Jerusalem, what was at the center of Jesus' thinking? "Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the Kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously; so live generously." (The Message)

God's Kingdom. That's what Jesus was about. God's love was/is the foundation of God's Kingdom. Jesus was living evidence of the love of God. Then they hung God's love on a cross to die. But God's love proved to be even greater than death. Suddenly Jesus' followers were the embodiment of God's love. We could change the world. We could love the world to life. What happened? Do you suppose what happened might be why Harold J. Recinos wrote the following poem?

Speak

I sit and hear
about the man
from Guatemala

shot last week
by cops who never
sob about wrong

doing. I see
bony children in
unlit apartments

neglected, abused,
desperately crying
in beaten mothers'

arms. I hear people
talk about martyrs, agony
without end, the death

of the world, the vain
cries everywhere, the
churches unable to see

and hear beyond their
sullen Sabbath. I
dwell on the silence

of God.

In a noisy, confused, and threatening world, the living evidence of a God who loves can only be found in you and me. How much of God's love can be seen in you by today's world?

Prayer: Jesus, help me love the world as you loved the world. Amen.

Questions:

1. What evidence does the world have that you are a reflector of God's love?
2. What can your church do to show a hurting and bruised world that God loves, and God cares?

27. Monday, March 15, 2010

Scripture: John 3:16

Thought: What is the key word in this verse? Some would say it is “God.” Others might say it is “love.” And many would say the key to understanding the verse is when you put these two words together: God loves.

But how can human minds and words explain that which is far beyond human? What do we mean when we talk about God’s love?

Does love mean:

- the love of a child for a parent?
- the love of a parent for a child?
- the love of a husband for a wife, and a wife for a husband?
- the love of a lover for his beloved, or her beloved?
- the love of a grandparent for a grandchild?
- the love of a close friend?
- the love of a neighbor?
- the love of a teacher, pastor, counselor?
- the love of a pet?
- the love of God’s out-of-doors?
- the love of a certain food item or drink?
- the love of talent or artistic ability?

When we use the word “love” in the ways listed above, does it mean the same thing in each case? For most of us, definitely not. If that’s the case, then just what do we mean when we use the term – and in particular, when we use it to describe God and attributes of God?

As Jesus walked towards Jerusalem, the end result of which would be a cross, how could any of us describe that as a walk of love? Through human eyes only, it could best be described as a death sentence, unjust punishment, fate, unfair, unbelievably cruel, or just plain bad luck. Obviously, things are not always as they appear. How many of us meted out discipline to our kids while we told ourselves (and perhaps them, as well!) we were doing it because we loved them? What they read into that word was far different from what it meant to us. Ponder what you mean when you express love to God. Ponder what God meant when “God so loved the world...that he gave himself.”

Prayer: Jesus, I love you. Help me grow in my love for you and others. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What do you mean when you say you love God?
2. What did God mean when “God so loved...”?**

28. Tuesday, March 16, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:18-19; Psalm 40:8

Thought: Jesus announced his commitment to God's plans for the world, and in his prayer in Gethsemane – almost three years later – he once again voiced his desire to fulfill God's will. A friend from the other side of the world told me that our decision to live under God's will can be the most exciting decision we will ever make. "While it is exhilarating to yield to our Eternal Creator and to fling ourselves into His arms, it is also daunting to realize that it is He (not us!) who knows the ultimate design of who we will become, and what paths we will take in life. It is surely a "Quest" which cannot be compared to any other."

"My own Quest led me to such a place. As a foreign student in the USA, I had no idea where my life's path would lead. But a still, small voice always continued to steadily lead me back home – back to a country that was at war; a country that was "burning" and where life appeared to be "unsure." During those youthful days of testing, I would never have dreamed that my path back home would lead me to exciting new adventures, and to fulfillment that I would never have dreamed. But it was up to me to take the first step in my Quest – how glad I am that I did!"

"I have learned that our individual Quest may lead us, at times, beside still waters; and at other times, through raging storms. I believe it may even lead us to our own Golgatha, as did the Quest of our wonderful Master. Another learning is that being in the center of God's will is so much more than a simple one-time decision. We cannot fully comprehend God's plans for our lives, but in attitudes of deep prayer and worship, we can get some clues."

Scripture tells us how often Jesus slipped away from the crowds, and even from his disciples – to pray. Do you suppose during some of his prayer time, he might just have been checking out with his Father the status of his own Quest? I believe, without a doubt, that some of his time in prayer was for the purpose of gaining strength and courage to continue with what surely must have appeared to be an impossible Quest. God has hopes and dreams – and plans – for each one of us. Our very lives as Jesus' followers are individual Quests – on behalf of God's Kingdom!!!!

Prayer: Jesus, I am weak, and often can't see The Way. Give me a glimpse of who I am to become – who you want me to be – and lead me in Your Quest in ways that I can't even imagine now. Amen.

Questions:

1. What is your own Quest – which has Kingdom importance to God?
2. What excites you most about what God has called you to be, and to do?

29. Wednesday, March 17, 2010

Scripture: John 5:16-18

Thought: Jesus was in trouble because he healed a fellow on the Sabbath. Not only did the Jews think people weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath, God wasn't supposed to do anything, either.

How often have you heard the comment, sometimes, but probably not always in jest, that "God must be on vacation?" When we look around the world, and don't necessarily like what we see, it's rather easy to lay the blame on God's preoccupation, absence or that's-not-my-problem stance.

In *The Message*, it reads: "But Jesus defended himself. 'My Father is working straight through, even on the Sabbath. So am I.'" That really set them off. The Jews were now not only out to expose him, they were out to kill him."

I take confidence in the fact I am loved by a God who never takes a day off. We serve a God who works. Jesus said God works seven days a week. Then why is it, as one mid-life woman said, "I'd guess maybe 20 percent of my prayers get anything like the answer I want." For instance, when I've lost my job to the economic downturn, prayed and pleaded for a new job, and nothing happens, where is God? Or, the subject could be health issues, marriage and other relationships, growing older – why doesn't God answer?

Has anyone among us always got what we prayed for? I doubt it. For many Christians, prayer is actually no more than presenting a "wish list" to God. Lost to these pray-ers is Mother Teresa's response to those times when it seems as if everything has gone wrong. She says: "My secret is a very simple one: I pray." She defines prayer this way:

**"Prayer is simply talking to God.
He speaks to us: we listen.
We speak to him: he listens.
A two-way process: speaking and listening."**

My God is a seven-day-a-week God – so said Jesus, and so says anyone who knows God as a Listening Friend, not a Santa Claus.

Prayer: Jesus, thanks for being there for me on a full-time basis! Amen.

Questions:

- 1. When you pray a desperate prayer for a most legitimate problem, hurt or need, and you don't get any "answer," how do you feel?**
- 2. How do those feelings affect your relationship with God, now and in the future?**

30. Thursday, March 18, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 10:16-20; 1 Peter 2:20-21

Thought: Last year, for the first time, our Lenten Devotions were translated into Spanish. The translator was Dr. Joel Sierra Cavazos, pastor of Comunidad Bautista Jireh, Monterrey City, Mexico. I thanked him for his outstanding contribution, and asked if he had a “journey to the cross” story to share – read on, and thank you, Pastor Joel!

“I was glad to see him again – a young Baptist pastor and friend from a city in the neighboring state of Coahuila, where I was visiting and speaking to a group of over two hundred young people. His eyes showed a rare combination of excitement and empathy. His church is located in a section of town famous for its insecurity. Police patrols do not enter that zone at certain times of the day and night. We greeted each other and he shared his life-changing experience.

He had been kidnapped and held in seclusion for six days – the most horrifying time of his life. He was walking down the street when several men grabbed him, threw him into a vehicle and drove to an unknown destination. His captors wanted him to bear illegal drugs across the American border. As he refused to cooperate, they began to beat him without mercy.

Since he was not wearing any outward sign of being a pastor (Sunday shoes, shirt, tie or Bible) it was difficult for his captors to know they had kidnapped a pastor. He was wearing the t-shirt of his extra job at the poultry factory. Many pastors work at part-time secular jobs in order to survive. His captors spoke of violence; his response was prayer. They continued to beat him into submission and to work for them. He kept blessing God audibly, reciting psalms and singing hymns, such as: *The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed*. He kept telling them he was a pastor, and in no way would he work for them.

After a week of beatings and violence, they finally released him in a town 300 miles away. He was hurt, beat up, hungry – but filled with thanksgiving. Penniless, he hitchhiked back to his town, his family and his church. He said he now looks at life in a new way. During his beatings, he thought of Jesus hanging on the cross. Jesus gave him strength to endure, and the courage to go back to his church and be a witness to his powerful God.”

Prayer: Jesus, give courage to all who suffer in your name around the world. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What did Jesus mean when he said, “Take up your cross, and follow?”
2. What might you have done in such a situation?**

31. Friday, March 19, 2010

Scripture: Luke 9:51

Thought: In 2007, a movie was released called the “Bucket List.” It starred Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman who in the movie played men dying of cancer. The theme of the movie was to complete a list of tasks or activities before they “kicked the bucket.” The movie made viewers consider how they would prepare for death. Most mortals would do normal things like: 1. buy a burial plot; 2. lighten the load, (a) sell things (b) give away sentimental items; 3. write a will, or revise an existing will.

Not Nicholson and Freeman! Their bucket list was to do all the adventurous things that they feared to do while worried about protecting their bodies and staying alive. Remove the fear of death and they were free to skydive or risk other types of trauma to the body, such as crashing stock cars into each other. Facing death can change a person’s outlook on living. It can be a real motivation to take risks. Was it like that for Jesus? Once he made the decision to go to the cross, did it fill him with courage and resolve? What did Jesus’ “bucket list” look like?

Jesus had a public ministry in Galilee, healing and teaching about God’s Kingdom. But when the time was right, he made the decision to go to Jerusalem to die. Jerusalem stood at the center of God’s connection with the Jewish people. Preaching a message of repentance to the citizens of Jerusalem was #1 on his bucket list. It was so important that Jesus said even *“the stones will cry out”* if he did not do this (Luke 19:40).

Number two on his bucket list was the completion or fulfillment of the Passover with the institution of the Lord’s Supper. The Passover was an incomplete tradition, that was soon to be filled with meaning as Jesus became the Passover Lamb.

Number three on his bucket list was strengthening the leadership of the church, particularly Peter and the other ten disciples.

Finally, his bucket list included facing the cross. How did Jesus accomplish so much? He lived a life knowing he was just passing through with a short “bucket list” like none other had ever had.

(Today’s thoughts were given to me by Dr. Jack Bower, Prof. at Eastern U. He has had leukemia for many years, and lives with pain and hurt on a daily basis. In spite of his “cross,” he is in love with both God and people.)

Prayer: Jesus, let me live my life as if I could face death anytime – any day. Amen.

Questions:

1. What does your “bucket list” include?
2. What are you determined to do yet for Christ before you die?

32. Saturday, March 20, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42

Thought: Five or six years ago, a business “expert” on National Public Radio noted that if you want to start a business, or if you want to survive in your small business, you must pay attention to the “Law of Two.” The “Law of Two” says it will take twice as much time as you think to ultimately succeed; and it will take twice as much energy and twice as much money as you’re willing to invest. You’ll sacrifice twice as much as you planned, and you’ll fail twice as often as you succeed.

Without much effort, this business maxim can rather easily be transferred to life itself. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he suggested we travel two miles when the Roman soldier asked us to travel one while carrying his baggage! Or, Jesus’ law of two that suggested turning not one cheek, but two. As to forgiveness, Jesus suggested we always have to go beyond one act of forgiving, to two – and far beyond.

How would the Law of Two play out for Christians? Here are some possible scenarios for your consideration:

- Find someone in your life (he/she is already there!) that is half as whole as you are, and offer that person twice the time and care as you’ve shown to date.
- Find someone who has worked twice as hard as you in this world, and only come half as far, and give that person twice the support he/she needs.
- Find someone whose spiritual cup of life is, at most, only half-full, and pray for that person twice a day that God might double his/her blessing.
- When you are angry, take two deep breaths instead of one; take ten minutes before responding, instead of five.
- Think half as much of yourself, so you can give twice as much of yourself to the needs of the world.
- At least once a year, consider giving to God’s work what you normally give, and then double it.
- If your prayer life consists of one minute, make it two; if it’s five minutes, make it ten.
- Instead of inviting one new person to church with you, invite two.
- Instead of providing food for one family in need, provide for two families.
- Instead of telling just one person about Jesus’ Good News, tell two.

Prayer: Jesus, as you multiplied the loaves and fishes, multiply my efforts for you. Amen.

Questions:

1. If you could double some of your efforts for Christ, what might happen?
2. What new “Law of Two” items could you add to the above list?

33. Sunday, March 21, 2010

Scripture: Mark 5:21-34

Thought: Do you ever feel somewhat overwhelmed by all of the needs that seem to surround us on a daily basis? How can we ever begin to respond to all of them? Perhaps Jesus felt that way in today's story. While on his way to respond to the man's sick daughter, he became involved in yet another sad story of need. We don't know the woman's name. We don't know where she came from, her family's circumstances, age or much else. Neither do we know how she came to learn about Jesus, and what brought her to do what she did.

What we *do* know about the woman is that she had an ailment which had caused her to bleed severely for 12 years. Perhaps you can imagine what her feelings might be at this point in her life – feelings of despair, abandonment, fear and hurt. You see, this woman was a Jew. According to Jewish law, her bleeding placed her in a state of ritual uncleanness. This meant she could not attend worship, she could not touch anyone without making them unclean, and if she was married, she could not even live with her husband. Her illness, literally, placed her in what might be called solitary confinement.

This woman had tried everything imaginable in her day, had been to doctors till she could probably afford no more doctors, and was worse off now than in earlier years. Can't you see her sort of sneaking up to the crowd that surrounded Jesus as they walked towards Jairus' house? If someone recognized her, she knew she'd be banished from the crowd. Yet for her own reasons, she needed to get close enough to Jesus to just touch his robe.

And when she did, instantly the bleeding stopped. She knew right then that after 12 years of suffering, she was completely cured. And at the moment she touched Jesus, he immediately felt a surge of power leave his body. The disciples probably thought he was being a bit weird when he asked who had touched him; after all, he was surrounded by people. But for the woman, there were two healing experiences. First, she was healed physically. But perhaps more important, Jesus (God) called her "Daughter!" This woman, ritually unclean for 12 years, assumed by her peers to be in disfavor with God, and cast out to the fringes of society to live in hiding – God's daughter! Jesus further affirmed her by telling her that her own faith had healed her. Reflect on your own journey, and the times when Jesus has healed you.

Prayer: Jesus, help us have faith like this woman when we need it. Amen.

Questions:

1. When have you believed in Jesus as deeply as this woman did?
2. How many lives do you touch, in the name of Jesus, each week?

34. Monday, March 22, 2010

Scripture: Luke 9:23-27

Thought: Ah yes, Jesus is again talking about God's Kingdom. Doesn't it seem as if he is almost obsessed with such thinking? Is that what life should be – for you and me? Who needs God's Kingdom, when we have "our own?" Daniel Boorstin, former librarian of Congress and Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History offers his view of our culture:

"When we pick up our newspaper at breakfast, we expect – even demand – that it bring us momentous events since the night before. We turn on the car radio as we drive to work and expect 'news' to have occurred since the morning newspaper went to press. Returning in the evening, we expect our house not only to shelter us, to keep us warm in winter and cool in summer, but to relax us, to dignify us, to be a playground, a theater, and a bar. We expect our two-week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap and effortless.

We expect new heroes every season, a literary masterpiece every month, a dramatic spectacular every week, a rare sensation every night. We expect everybody to feel free to disagree, yet we expect everybody to be loyal, not to rock the boat or take the Fifth Amendment. We expect everybody to believe deeply in his religion, yet not to think less of others for not believing

We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. We expect to be inspired by mediocre appeals for 'excellence,' to be made literate by illiterate appeals for literacy. We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to the 'church of our choice' and yet feel its power over us, to *revere God and to be God*...Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people been more deceived and disappointed."

As they walked towards Jerusalem, the twelve disciples wondered often how Jesus' description of God's Kingdom could ever be possible in the world within which they lived. Two thousand years later, we who call ourselves Christ's followers struggle with the same questions. After all, how is it possible to "revere God" – and "*be God*?"

Prayer: Jesus, help me know what is most important – both short term, and long term. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What is most enjoyable to you in being a follower of Christ today?
2. What are your biggest challenges, headaches, regrets in following Christ's leading for your life today?**

35. Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Scripture: Luke 6:12

Thought: The other day, I made a pastoral call on a fellow who was hospitalized with serious surgery. I prayed for him. But I didn't pray all night, like Jesus often did. So, what if he doesn't make it? Does that mean something is wrong with me – with my assumptions about praying – because I didn't stay up all night and pray? As I have, you have probably prayed many prayers during your lifetime. How many were answered? Pause for a moment, and try to recall the most distinct, vivid, authentic answer to prayer you have ever received. Are your prayers (circle one): always – often – seldom – never – answered? Now try to remember your biggest disappointment in praying.

Richard Mouw tells a story about a tourist who observes a devout Jewish man praying at the “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem. The Jew rocks back and forth with closed eyes, beating his breast, sometimes raising his hands. When he finishes, the tourist asks, “What do you pray for?” The Jew responds, “I pray for righteousness. I pray for the health of my family. I pray for the peace of the world, especially in Jerusalem.” “Are those prayers effective?” the tourist asks. “It's like talking to a wall.”

Do you sometimes feel like Vladimir Lenin at the height of the Russian Revolution? “Electricity will replace God. The peasants should pray to it; in any case they will feel its effects long before they feel any effect from on high.” Yet Shakespeare said: “Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray...” Jesus' whole mission and ministry, including facing the cross, had as its foundation talking with God. Consider another approach to praying:

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their path into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor. Amen.

Prayer: Jesus, please help me better understand prayer. Amen.

Questions: 1. Why did God answer the prayer you identified above?
2. Why don't some of your prayers provide the answers you want?

36. Wednesday, March 24, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 6:25, 26

Thought: As the days slipped by, Jesus knew that Jerusalem and all that it held in store for him would quickly be upon him. He knew he faced different forms of evil in the shapes of denial, betrayal, desertion, physical beatings, unanswered prayer, shame and eventual death. Do you suppose that Jesus “practiced what he preached” those last two weeks before the Cross?

You ask to what I refer? Read today’s verses again. What did he say about the birds? You’ll immediately see that he said God is going to feed them and take care of their needs. But what is implied is even more important: God knows the birds are there, and God knows what needs they have. God responds to them with care and compassion. Sometimes, God even goes overboard with the little birds of the air – and us, too, at times!

I saw evidence of such last summer. We have five blueberry bushes, and birds love those berries even more than we do! So that we have some for our own family, each year I have to build cages with bird netting over them to try to keep them out. I say *try* because even my best efforts don’t always work. Mockingbirds are the smartest ones for finding the tiniest hole in the netting.

One morning, I saw a commotion, or what appeared to be, on the top of the largest cage. I figured a bird had gotten inside and was now trying to get out. I watched from a nearby shed, but couldn’t figure it out. So I moved out of the shed, and stood under a nearby peach tree. A robin was sitting on top of the netting – but not sitting quietly. Instead, the bird was bouncing up and down. Using the netting as a type of trampoline, it had discovered that if it bounced it high enough, when it came down, all it had to do was reach down through the netting and grab a blueberry. Again and again, the robin bounced, grabbed and ate to its heart’s delight. Apparently for some birds, God throws in some fun, too!!!!

My thoughts immediately jumped back in time to what Jesus said about God making sure the birds had food. Even the wild, carefree birds of the air have God’s attention!

As Jesus neared Jerusalem, I believe he did practice what he preached. First, God knew who he was and what he was facing, and Jesus knew he wasn’t alone. Second, God was available to listen and respond in any way that was possible. And third, God would be with him to the very end – and walk with him through his valley of the shadow of death.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for practicing what you preached. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What evidence do you have that God knows who you are?
2. In what special ways has God shown love and care to you over the years?**

37. Thursday, March 25, 2010

Scripture: Mark 10:43-45

Thought: Jesus said he didn't make the trip to our planet to be served by friends and family. No, he said rather emphatically that he came to be our servant. Walking towards Jerusalem was part of his servant role – for you, for me, and for all of humanity.

In 1520 a pamphlet by Martin Luther entitled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* began to circulate through parts of Europe. It brought profound transformation in the areas of ecclesiological, political, social and economic life. One part read: “The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the work of the rustic laborer in the field, or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured *before God by faith alone* . . . Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.”

Richard Foster put it another way: “We must see the difference between choosing to serve (an activity) and choosing to be a servant (a lifestyle). When we choose to serve, we are still in charge . . . when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge . . . we become available and vulnerable.” That’s just what Jesus did – he became available and vulnerable by coming as God’s servant to carry out the redemption of the world. How many examples of Jesus’ servanthood during his three years of ministry could you list?

Example: healing the lepers

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Mother Teresa put it beautifully when she said: “I’m a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world. . . We can do no great things; only small things with great love.” Jesus was God’s pencil – his servant whose task was to bring salvation to a lost world. What do you do as one of God’s servants today?

Prayer: Jesus, none of us want to be servants today – give us a faith vision of who you want us to be, and what you want us to do. Amen.

Questions: 1. During your journey with Christ, when have you been in a servant role?
2. In an evil world, how can Jesus’ servants make a difference today?

38. Friday, March 26, 2010

Scripture: John 15:12-17

Thought: As we continue our walk with Jesus to the cross, he isn't far from the gates of Jerusalem now. The subjects he now deals with, and the intensity with which he addresses them is unequalled on his journey to date. In today's Scripture reading, it begins with the word "command" and ends with the word "commandment" – rather strong language to use with friends (v. 14).

I wonder what kind of language Jesus would use in talking with his friends today. In a world that now glorifies possessions and power, my best guess is that he would tell us we've still got it all wrong. Because money and gaining possessions and power seem to be the highest priority of most people, Jesus would be rather unpopular in today's world – and another cross would probably be readied for his exit.

For instance, Jesus made many comments about the poor, and indicated God was highly sensitive to their plight in the world. Peter Maurin said in *The Unoriginal Beggar*:

**"What we give to the poor for Christ's sake
is what we take with us when we die.
We are afraid to pauperize the poor
because we are afraid to be poor.
Pagan Greeks used to say that the poor
'are ambassadors of the gods.'
To become poor is to become an Ambassador of God.
The basis for a Christian economy is
genuine charity and voluntary poverty."**

Who is Peter Maurin? He was Dorothy Day's teacher, and is commonly called the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement. By the time Day met him, he was living in voluntary poverty. Unbathed and unkempt, dressed in old stained clothes, his glasses missing one earpiece, and his coat pockets stuffed full of notes and books, he slept in flop houses when he visited New York, unless he met someone in greater need than himself, in which case he would give the bed away and stay in the park all night. He decided he had to practice what he preached, even as Jesus did on his way to Jerusalem and a cross.

Prayer: Jesus, how can I get anyone to listen to your story today? Tell me. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What is it you "preach" in Jesus' name today?
2. What is it you "practice" in Jesus' name today?**

39. Saturday, March 27, 2010

Scripture: “This is my command. Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.” (John 15:12-13; *The Message*)

Thought: Just a week before the cross, Jesus made clear to those who listened that he was ready to practice what he preached. These words summed up his intent with no room left for doubt. Did Jesus’ death on the cross occur because you and I (back to Adam and Eve) broke some rules, and a price had to be paid to gain our freedom from the curse? Or, did Jesus’ death on the cross occur because God loved those whom were God’s creation so much that there was no other way than to love them to the death? Many books have been written in response to such questions. Each of us has our own opinion, no doubt; however, the truth of the matter will not be revealed until we hear, in person, God’s explanation.

I grew up under hell’s fire and brimstone preaching! As an eight-year old boy, I’m sure I was scared into heaven more than any other reason. It took quite a few years for me to discover there was far more to God than such a description. It felt so good to gradually learn by example, study and experience that the love of God is what I want most to know about God. Even when I’ve done wrong, I’m glad I will be called to task by Someone who loves me rather than someone who is going to “make me pay.”

Over the years, I’ve sung many hymns and songs, and marveled at the various attempts to describe God’s love. Most don’t do it for me. However, there is a last verse of an old love song that, for me, comes the closest to describing the enormity and almost unbelievableness of such love. It’s titled *The Love of God*, and here is the last verse:

“Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the oceans dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Thought stretched from sky to sky.”

You know, that sounds as if it might just be enough for me. And you?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us with all the love in the universe. Amen.

Questions:

1. Just how much do you think God loves you today?
2. Give some examples of how God loves you.

40. Sunday, March 28, 2010

Scripture: John 11:38-44

Thought: One event, more than any other, caused action to be taken by the growing conspiracy that led to his crucifixion. John points to the miracle involving Lazarus as the event that turned the religious establishment fatally against Jesus. Also note that after raising Lazarus, Jesus' signs and wonders ceased.

Mary was crying; Martha was crying; the gathered mourners were crying. And finally, Jesus himself, "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," broke into tears. Why was Jesus crying, when he knew very well that he was going to bring Lazarus back to life within moments?

Perhaps Jesus' prayer gives a clue. "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." Have you ever said something in a voice much louder than usual – so that those around or near you would be sure to get the message? It appears that Jesus did that very thing. At this moment, Jesus seemed self-consciously aware of his God/man existence, a dual identity in which he simultaneously was the One who came down from heaven and the Son of Man born on earth.

Could it be that the public prayer, the loud voice, and the gestures were the marks of a spiritual battle under way? After all, Jesus knew exactly where Lazarus was at that moment, what was his condition, and of his fulfillment and completeness – in the presence of God. Jesus knew that Lazarus was now whole and content, in every way better for having left his earthly chains. Mary and Martha most likely believed this, too; but they had not yet experienced such. And they missed their brother very much.

Greek scholars tell us that the word translated "deeply moved" conveys more than distress; it implies anger, even rage. At that very moment, Jesus hung between two worlds. As he stood before a tomb stinking of death, it gave him a preview of what was ahead of him in this damned – literally damned – world. Just because his own death would end in resurrection did not minimize one bit the fear and fright of such agony and pain.

During this last week on our Lenten Journey, try to think anew of the very real human feelings that Jesus had to deal with. Yes, he cried. Do you?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for understanding our own very human situations. Amen.

Questions:

1. Do you think Jesus should have brought Lazarus back from heaven?
2. Ultimately, what difference did Lazarus' resurrection make?

41. Monday, March 29, 2010

Scripture: Mark 14:53-64

Thought: The events that followed Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane were complex since they involved two different arenas of power and intrigue. In a nutshell, after a religious trial before the Sanhedrin had found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, the Jewish leaders brought a charge of sedition before Pilate who conducted a political trial and had Jesus crucified. The four Gospel accounts tell different aspects of what happened. Contemporary writings confirm the biblical accounts.

Even Jewish writings in the *Talmud* confirm what happened. From the Babylonian Talmud comes this statement: "Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favor, he was hanged on Passover Eve." This was an early attempt to justify Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus, and show their "fairness" to him. Does any of this sound fair to you:

- Jesus was led to the high priest's house – Mark 14:55
- Peter followed into the courtyard – Mark 14:54
- Peter's denials began – Mark 14:66-68
- Jesus was interrogated by Annas – John 18:19-23
- Jesus was tried before Caiaphas at night – Mark 14:55-64
- Peter's final denial at cockcrow – Mark 14:69-72
- Jesus was abused and mocked by captors – Mark 14:65
- Jesus went before the Sanhedrin at dawn – Mark 15:1a
- Jesus was led to Pilate – Mark 15:1b

Then came scourging, mockery and sentencing. Haven't you wondered at some point in your life how God allowed the Genghis Khans, the Hitlers, and the Stalins to do what they did to humanity? As Jesus' body vibrated with the lash of the whip, how could God allow it to happen? As the blood flowed from his body, God did not intervene. Even Cicero said "The idea of the cross should never come near the bodies of Roman citizens. It should never pass through their thoughts, eyes or ears." Roman citizens were beheaded, not crucified. Why? It was more "humane." God's inaction can be summed up in one word – love – love so great God would die for us.

Prayer: Jesus, we cannot comprehend such love, and we thank you for it. Amen.

Questions:

1. How do you feel about God's love for us, so great that Jesus died for us?
2. If you had been there that night, what would your feelings have been?

42. Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Scripture: John 19:16-24

Thought: They crucified him. The crucifixion of a criminal by death on a cross was a Roman punishment, “the cruelest and the most shameful,” according to Cicero. It was applied to slaves and non-citizens in the case of a revolt, theft or murder, and also in cases of high treason to Roman citizens. Jews had experienced this type of punishment since 88 B.C., when Alexander Janneus crucified 800 Jews.

For the crucifixion itself, the Romans added to the post already in the ground a wooden cross-beam that could be attached to the top or lower down on the post. The condemned had to carry it himself to the place of punishment after he had undergone the mandatory scourging. Jesus needed help for this task (Mark 15:21-22). He wore around his neck an inscription that indicated the reason for his punishment, something which was later fastened above the cross. Some convicts were fastened to the cross with cords binding both hands and feet, but most were nailed. The convict’s clothes went by right to the executioners. A Jewish custom specified that a narcotic drink be given to him. Death, slow as it was, came either by exhaustion or else through respiratory or circulatory problems. Death by asphyxiation was hastened by the fact that, once the legs had been broken, the condemned man could not straighten himself out to catch his breath. Thus the body could be removed before nightfall, in conformity with the Jewish rule, and specially so on the eve of Passover.

As you read what happened to this point, it is an ugly scenario. The embryonic, hopeful, helpful and popular teacher and miracle-worker was now hanging on a cross. Doesn’t the world know that only failed Messiahs hang on crosses? Yet especially to Mark and John, the link between Jesus’ death and his identity is nowhere better seen than in the crucifixion account itself. Only in Jesus’ death can he be fully appreciated. This is the significance of the confession of the centurion, the only human throughout the Gospels to recognize Jesus as God’s Son (Mark 15:39)! John, again and again, pointed out that “being lifted up” (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) has a double meaning. Yes, he was “lifted up” and hung on a cross, but it is symbolic of his glorification – in dying he was the victor over sin and death. He who descended from glory – into hell on earth – will ascend into glory!!!

Celebrate, you who are Christians!!!!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us so much you were willing to die for us. Amen.

**Questions: 1. What is your primary reason for Jesus’ need to die on a cross?
2. What aspects of Jesus’ love for humanity do you most appreciate?**

43. Wednesday, March 31, 2010

Scripture: Luke 23:34

Thought: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Jesus had been praying this prayer for over twenty-four hours before he prayed it from the cross. He was praying it for Judas when he betrayed him in the garden. He prayed it for the soldiers as they roughly dragged him to his trial. He prayed it for the lying priests and elders. He prayed it for Peter when he lied and denied knowing him. He prayed it for Annas. He prayed it for Caiaphas in the middle of the night. He prayed for those in the Sanhedrin. He prayed for Pilate. He prayed for the soldiers who pinned him to the cross.

Some things happen in life, in history, and they are called *punctiliar*. It means something happened once, and it was over. Things that happen again and again, are called *linear*. They keep happening, keep on recurring with enough frequency that they become a part of ongoing life itself for us. Historians will tell you that Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness happened once – while he hung on a cross outside of Jerusalem, at a site that was called Golgotha, or Skull’s Hill.

I beg to differ with historians, however, because I view Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness as being linear. Yes, Jesus prayed his prayer of forgiveness for all who had harmed and wronged him in crucifying him. But I contend that Jesus is praying that same prayer today. He’s prayed it for two thousand years. I think Jesus is pleading with the One he called Father while on the cross for all of us around the world who “don’t know what we are doing today.”

We don’t know any more about what we are doing today as the human race than we did when we crucified the Son of God, Jesus. How can I say that? Because everywhere I look, in every culture and country in the world, I see injustices that are unbelievable and unjustifiable. I see poor everywhere I look. I see millions of people without healthcare in my own country. I see people with no value system at all, other than to gain more, obsessed with possessions. I see people who believe they are “gods,” in need of no God.

Listen carefully, and you will still hear Jesus asking God to forgive us.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your never-ending concern that we be forgiven. Amen.

Questions: 1. In your personal contacts, who needs God’s forgiveness most?
2. For what else does the human race need to be forgiven?

44. Thursday, April 1, 2010

Scripture: Luke 23:39-43

Thought: For those looking for it, there must have been some power emanating from the figure on the cross that most who were there missed. Did not the gruff Roman soldier exclaim, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” He saw all too clearly, probably because he was a part of it, the ugliness of Rome and his fellow soldiers as their victim on the cross forgave them for what they were doing. It was religion that accused Jesus, not those who were irreligious; it was the law that had him executed, not lawlessness.

While hanging on the cross in agony, Jesus showed a lot of caring for others. Isn't it true that when we're down for the count, discouraged, low on energy, afraid, or alone, the only caring we can muster is likely for ourselves – not for others? Caring demands great amounts of energy. Jesus exhibited care for his mother, for his persecutors (then and now!), and for one of his companions hanging on a nearby cross. say “companion” because that afternoon, all three men hanging on a cross were criminals in the eyes of Rome and the law.

One of his neighbors mocked Jesus' powerlessness. What kind of a Messiah is he if he can't even save himself? What a fake, he implied in his comment. For unspoken reasons, the other neighbor saw something quite different in Jesus. How he could fathom what others could not, I do not know. But somehow, this fellow knew that Jesus was powerful enough to live again, and that he was powerful enough to have his own kingdom – and he wanted to be a part of it.

And with every agonizing word, Jesus reached out in love and care for his neighbor on a companion cross, and granted to him everlasting life. Note there was no service, no preaching, no offering, no conditions, no commitment, and no baptism. All he had was faith in Jesus, whoever he was; and he wanted to be a part of Jesus' kingdom. That was enough!!!

The two criminals on their crosses still portray history then, and history now in regards to what was happening on Jesus' cross. People, regardless of who they are, where they live, what they have or don't have, or how old they are have to decide if Jesus' apparent powerlessness was an example of God's impotence (lack of power), or as proof of God's love. What do you say?

Prayer: Jesus, help us to understand love so authentic you would die for us. Amen.

Questions:

1. If not the cross, what other death would you have chosen for Jesus?
2. How is God's power portrayed in Jesus' death?

45. Friday, April 2, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 53:6-7

Thought: How's the weather today? Have you heard anybody complain about it yet? Have you heard any other complaints lately? Have you, perhaps, had some complaints of your own that you have voiced, or kept within yourself? It seems as if a very big part of being human is to complain. Think of all the things we can complain about. In fact, there is very little one can put on a list over which there will be no complaints.

As we read through the Old Testament, again and again we find God's people complaining. Sometimes it was about each other; at other times it was about other people and nations. But if you examine the stories long enough, you will find that they complained about their God more than anyone or anything else.

On this last day of our journey to the Cross, there hung Jesus in excruciating pain, deserted by those he chose to be his leaders, taunted by soldiers and riffraff for not living up to whom he said he was, and as the minutes ticked by, he was more and more aware of a growing separation from his own Father. He had been betrayed, unjustly tried, found guilty of nothing that called for crucifixion, was shamed in front of his mother and friends, was bleeding profusely, was thirsty, was breathing with great difficulty, and was badly fatigued.

Hundreds of years before, Isaiah announced what he would say on the cross – nothing!!! “He was beaten, he was tortured, but he didn't say a word. Like a lamb taken to be slaughtered and like a sheep being sheered, he took it all in silence” (*The Message*). The truth of the matter is that Jesus never once made a complaint about anybody or anything. On the cross, in yet another way, he showed that his love was authentic and genuine – so much so that there was no way he would lash out at anybody and chastise them for what they were doing. Not even death itself could bring a complaint from his lips.

I love the way Jesus showed us how to live – how not to get even with people when we've been wronged – how not to “pay” people back with unkind words – how to bear in silence what the world gives, because he overcame the world. He said “Take up your cross – and follow me.” It's the best way.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for modeling true love for us even in life's crises. Amen.

**Question: 1. What are your complaints about the fact Jesus was crucified?
2. Which “every day” complaints could be over-turned by reflecting Jesus?**

46. Saturday, April 3, 2010

WAITING --- IN SILENCE --- FOR HIS PROMISE



47. Sunday, April 4, 2010

Scripture: John 20:1, 11-17

Thought: Peter Marshall, Chaplain of the U. S. Senate once wrote:

"No tabloid will ever print the startling news that the mummified body of Jesus of Nazareth has been discovered in old Jerusalem.

Christians have no carefully embalmed body enclosed in a glass case to worship.

Thank God, we have an empty tomb.

The glorious fact that the empty tomb proclaims to us is that life for us does not stop when death comes. Death is not a wall, but a door."

Scripture provides a dozen different descriptions of the "living" Jesus interacting with a variety of people. Their responses, ranging from total disbelief to total adoration, are thought-provoking and inspiring. Little has changed from then till now. The empty tomb proved little. Only the living Jesus, and those who are "new creations" through him, are proof that there is life now, and life after death.

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Community in Americus, Ga., said: "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not an empty tomb, it is not a rolled-away stone; it is a carried away church." He's so right -- if there is any proof of Easter, we are "it". That's what it means to be the body of Christ. We are those people, who "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

All of the sermons preached today will reflect on what happened to those who came to the tomb, and found it empty. More will be said about the rest of the disciples as they learned the truth, concluding those stories with the "doubting Thomas" experience. But I challenge you today to pause and reflect on what Jesus felt that day. You won't hear much said about it because nothing is written about it. Yet Jesus must have had some significant feelings, too. Feelings of joy, completion, satisfaction and anticipation would surely be some of them. But I'm guessing his biggest feeling was about what was ahead for the beginning of God's Kingdom -- soon to be entrusted to those who are called Christians. That's you and me. Are we equal to the task? Jesus did his part; now will we do ours?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for enduring the cross, and opening the door called death to new life for those who believe. Amen.



Lenten Devotions 2010

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