

September 2017
Who We Are
What We Do
Why We Do It



**Readings, Reflections,
Prayers about following Jesus
and being His church**

Dr. Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue S
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
403-327-2082
bruce@firstb.net
www.firstb.net

Monday, September 11: Acts 2:32-47

"The church," writes Thomas Groome, "is to be a community of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who ratify that faith by baptism, and who manifest the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, by proclaiming in word, celebrating in worship, and living in deed the Kingdom already and the Kingdom promised." That's a mouthful. But it is also very profound.

This Fall we'll be thinking about "church": who we are, what our purpose is, what we do, and why we do what we do. We'll be looking at what it means to be the people of God and why do things like the Lord's Supper and baptism.

This week we will focus on **who we are**, as Jesus' church. Next week we'll think more about **what we do**.

We, the church, are people – God's people (not a building). The New Testament word for "church" is *ekklesia*,¹ literally meaning "called out ones" or "called together ones." God has called us together, to be His distinctive community, His people. We are called together to be the church. Church is not an option.

We are a people – called to be a community together by the Holy Spirit – bound to one another through our common faith in Jesus (more about baptism later – it was the normal, expected practice (2:36)).

We are a people who live out (manifest) the Kingdom of God in what we do and how we live. The faith that is within us naturally shines through and overflows our lives:

- We talk about our faith. Part of this is learning, teaching, and mentoring **within** a Christian community – a church (2:42). Part of this sharing our faith **with others** (Peter certainly did.);
- We celebrate Him in worship and prayer, in community and individually (2:46-47)
- We live out Jesus' Kingdom of God values in our relationships with one another and in the world as we "love our neighbour as ourselves" (2:44-47).

"They'll know we are Christians by our love ..." goes the old song. That was what was happening in Jerusalem (2:47). Pray that the Lord help us be His church.

- How can you show God's love, today?
- How can we, as a church, show the love of Christ to our community?

*Almighty God, we bless and praise You
that we have wakened to the light of another day;
and now we will think of what a day should be.
Our days are Yours, let them be spent for You.
Our days are few, let them be spent with care.
We ask You to shine on this day.
Lord, we go to our daily work; help us to take pleasure in it.
Show us clearly what our duty is; help us to be faithful in doing it.
Let all we do be well done, fit for Your eye to see.
Give us strength to do,
patience to bear;
let our courage never fail.
When we cannot love our work, let us think of it as a task we do for You;
and by our true love to You, make unlovely things shine in the light of Your great love.
Amen.*

George Dawson (1821-1876)

¹ From this Greek word comes the French "église," or Italian "Chiesa." Our word "church" (from the German "Kirche") comes from another Greek word, "kuriakos" meaning "belonging to the Lord." Both are wonderful expressions of what it means to be a community of Christians: we are "called out" and "called together" by God, AND we are **His** people – we belong to the Lord.

Tuesday, September 12: 1 Peter 2:1-12

"All would-be Christians are invited to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour," writes Thomas Groome. "To do this means to accept the demands of membership in the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. As he invited decision in his own time, so he invites decision in our time: to seek first the Kingdom of God as he modeled and preached it. This a constant call to continuing conversion and repentance. 'This is the time of fulfillment: The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom must always begin in the hearts of its members ..."

We, those who love Jesus and welcome Him as our Saviour and Lord, are the church. Peter uses a building metaphor. He is not saying the church is a physical building; he is saying that the church is a community of the people of God. And in the church, each one of us is a critically important building block: the church cannot be complete without us. Imagine a beautiful building missing some key stones: we cannot be our best or reach our fullest potential as Christians unless we are part of the church (a brick off by itself isn't good for much). Each of us has an invaluable role to play. You don't *go* to church. You *are* the church.

God sees us as *"royal priests, a holy nation, His very own possession."* This is true individually. But Peter uses the plural here – this is how God sees us all, together. As a church, we are His people. We are His "chosen" people – the community He has called out and He has called together. Peter quotes Hosea, calling people to a new identity as His own people: *"Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people"* (the Book of Hosea is a wonderful story of God's unconditional love and grace).

As God's church, however, we no longer fit easily into this world, which is marred and corrupted by sin. In 2:11, Peter writes that we live as *"foreigners and exiles," "temporary residents and foreigners," "aliens and strangers"* in this world (depending on your translation). We are "called out" to be God's distinctive people. When we are born into new life in Christ, when we aim to live in the Kingdom of God, we no longer live as everyone else around us lives. We are now "citizens of heaven" living in a foreign land. And while we adapt in small ways, in important ways we keep our distinctiveness. We model a new and better way of life.

We may not want to stand out. We may simply choose to fit into the everyday world around us. But when lose our distinctiveness, we don't find the joy, peace, enthusiasm, and power that God promises us. We struggle with a mediocre faith, a restless spirit, and a sense of "missing something" spiritually.

Or we can choose to live as a Christian counter culture: *"You can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (2:9). It will not be easy. But it will be rewarding.

I appreciate how Eugene Peterson translates 1 Peter 2:10-12. Reflect on these verses today: *"You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted. Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives."* How can I live my faith today?

*Father,
we pray that your Spirit may give us the will and the courage
to act to make a difference,
to make real your kingdom among us.
Help us to walk as Jesus walked,
With compassion, grace, and unconditional love.
May we all live together
in peace, truth, justice and love,
sharing your love and
sharing the resources of your earth. Amen.*

Wednesday, September 13: Galatians 3:1-14

Way back in the Old Testament, Abraham and his descendants were chosen by God. The Jewish people came to see themselves as "God's chosen people" – they believed God loved them and only them. In their opinion, other people were not part of God's covenant, not loved by God, and had no part in God's Kingdom. Every non-Jewish person was a "Gentile." Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a contemporary of Paul, wrote that the mind of every Gentile is always intent upon idolatry and they have no share in the world to come. In the 4th Century, Rabbi Judah ben Ilai, taught Jews to pray daily, "*Blessed be thou who has not made me a Gentile.*"

That's not what God intended. God chose and blessed Abraham with these words, "*I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and **you will be a blessing to others ... All the families on earth will be blessed through you***" (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham and his descendants were supposed to be a blessing to all peoples. They were called to share God's love with all people. They were chosen to be ambassadors of God's love and grace. They were supposed to be God's messengers and blessers. It was not about building walls but building bridges. Old Testament Jews never understood that.

Jesus came to reboot God's plan for all nations to know Him. Jesus came with God's message of hope, mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love for all people – Jews, Europeans (Romans and Greeks), Arabic people (Mark 7:24-30), rich, poor, young, old ... In Acts 2:9-11, the disciples share God's love in the languages of Parthians, Medes, Elamites (Iran), people from Mesopotamia (Iraq), Judea (Israel), Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia (Turkey), Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans (Europe), and Arabs (Saudi Arabia). Later Philip leads an Ethiopian to faith, and Paul plants churches throughout what are now Turkey and Greece.

The people of God –the church, us – are NOT defined by ethnicity. We are defined by faith in Jesus. We are saved by faith in Jesus: "*The real children of Abraham are those who put their faith in God.*" Specifically, Paul points us to the cross: we are those who know our sin is forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross.

We don't earn our salvation. New life in Jesus is God's gift to us, by His grace, which we can only accept by faith. This gift is for all people, everywhere. The Holy Spirit, God's personal presence within our lives, is also available to all people, everywhere. The days of ethnic Israel, defined by bloodline, are over. The people of God are those who look with faith to the cross, and know God through His Spirit.

We – the church – are God's people, saved by His grace and empowered by His Spirit. We are called by the same purpose as Abraham was, to "*be a blessing to others ... all the families on earth will be blessed through you.*" As Jesus reframes this call, "*I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:18-20).

May the Lord help us to be His people: people of faith, people filled with His Spirit, and people who seek to be a blessing to all nations ...

*Lord, teach me to be generous;
to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil and not to seek to rest;
to love and not to require love in return;
to share your Word and not to be afraid;
to labour and to ask for no reward
save that of knowing I do your will.
Amen.*

Jacques Sevin (1887-1951)

Thursday, September 14: Galatians 3:15-29

What's your impression of "Old Testament Law"? Joseph Campbell perhaps captures it when he writes, "*Computers are like Old Testament gods; lots of rules and no mercy.*" Lots of rules and no mercy.

It is true there are lots of rules in the Old Testament. Most were there simply to help people understand how a good, orderly, respectful, civil society worked: don't murder, steal, lie, cheat, etc. Some, such as various food and hygiene laws, were principles designed to ensure good health. Others were focussed around spiritual faithfulness: keeping oneself faithful to God and God alone. None were simply petty restrictions simply to test people to see if they would mess up. All of them can be grouped together as either ways to "*Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength,*" or, "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*"

There is lots of mercy in the Old Testament. For instance, in Psalm 103:8-14, we read, "*The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust.*" In His mercy, God forgives those who confess their sin.

In Jesus, however, God writes that message in CAPITAL LETTERS THAT NO ONE CAN MISS. On the cross, Jesus takes upon Himself all sin, all evil, and all corruption. The good news – for all people, everywhere – is that, in His mercy, God can forgive all sin, through the death of Jesus. This is good news for ALL people.

Paul summarizes his point in Galatians 3:26-29: "*For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.*" For us – almost all of whom are ethnically non-Jewish – that is great news.

Who are we then? We are people who

- have "*put on Christ, like putting on new clothes*" – what does that mean?
- are "*all one in Christ Jesus*" – what does that mean?
- We "*belong to Christ*" – what does that mean?
- We are "*the true children of Abraham, his heirs*" (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5) – what does that mean?

The church is at its best when we are multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-rich/poor/whatever, multi-ability, multi-you-name-it, empowering women and men of all ages, cultures, and gifts. What unites us is our faith in Jesus. What unites us is the cross. That's what matters. How is this description of the church good news in our fractured world today? How is this a challenge?

*Lift up our hearts, O Christ, above the false show of things,
above fear, above laziness,
above selfishness and covetousness,
above custom and fashion,
up to the everlasting truth and order that come from you.
Take from us, O Lord God, all pride and vanity,
all boasting and self-assertion,
and give us the true courage that shows itself in gentleness;
the true wisdom that shows itself in simplicity;
and the true power that shows itself in compassion;
so we may live joyfully and freely,
in faithful trust that thou art our Saviour, our example, and our friend,
both now and for evermore. Amen*

Friday, September 15: Galatians 5

If you were to ask people on the street, "What is church?" what do you think they might say? Many people would give you a blank stare. A few might talk about some positive things. Many others would be critical – they have been hurt by church people, felt judged, found it irrelevant, have heard things from other people who have been hurt, or ...

If you were to read through the New Testament, how would you answer the question, "What is church?" You would have to conclude that:

1. Church is not something you go to. It's someone you are in fellowship with other believers.
2. You can't disassociate from church as a Christian anymore than you can disassociate from humanity as a person. Part and parcel of believing in Jesus is being part of His people, the church.
3. The church was not a human invention. The church was God's idea. Most of the New Testament is about church – God's gift to spread the good news about Jesus through ordinary people.
4. The church is messy. People sin. Leaders mess up. The Bible is not a story of an idealized church where everything worked perfectly all the time. Amazingly, God uses real people – like you and me.
5. We Christians need each other, probably now more than ever. The world needs Christians working together humbly under Christ to lead people into a growing relationship with him.

The church is people whom God has set free: "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free*" (Galatians 5:1). What are we set free from? We are free from the power of sin and death: through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our sin is forgiven. We are free to live again: because the past is forgiven, we can begin afresh. We are free to live in the Spirit: the Spirit correct, empowers, and guides us into new ways of living. We are free to be a blessing: life is not all about us – we are free to live for God and to be a blessing to others. How else are we free???

Our identity is as those who are called out, called together, and belong to the Lord. We are called out together to walk in and by the Spirit. Do we do that perfectly? Absolutely not. But we keep on aiming to be the people God has called us to be.

Humbly, we live in the freedom we have in Jesus: "*Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. ... What happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely*" (Galatians 5:24-25, 22-23, *The Message* translation).

*Lord Jesus, as I start this day,
I gaze at your face, your pierced side, and your wounded heart showing God's love for us.
I thank you for your cross and for my salvation.
I gaze upon you, risen and victorious as Lord and King.
I thank you for your Spirit dwelling within me.
Take, Lord, and receive my heart:
The words of faith that I speak,
The fruit of the Spirit I would live out,
the works of justice I would do,
my joys and sufferings.
In your grace, may my life make a difference in the life of the world today.
Amen.*

Saturday, September 16: Ephesians 2:11-22

For the Jews, the Temple was where God was actually physically present. Paul says the church is now God's temple. God's Spirit is within us individually. He is also among us, corporately, as the church: *"Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit"* (Ephesians 2:20-22).

We tend to personalize the Holy Spirit: He is within each one of us. But Scripture insists that He is also among us as a community, as a church. The Holy Spirit grows fruit in our personal lives, but also in and through the church: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* are just as much fruit of Spirit in the church as in our own lives (Galatians 5:22-23). The gifts of the Spirit are for the building up of the **church** so we can fulfill God's mission in the world.

The Spirit fills and empowers the church. In Acts 2, it is the Spirit who empowers Peter and leads thousands to faith in Jesus – and into the church. Throughout Acts, it is the Spirit who inspires, strengthens, and works through the church. Pray that the Spirit would empower us, as His church, in our city.

The Spirit brings unity to the church. *"So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people"* (Ephesians 2:19). This is not to say we all become like one another (uniformity); it is to say that *"together we are his house"* – different parts of the house (diversity), but all in this amazing miracle of the church together (unity). When decisions need to be made and people are in need, the Spirit can help us work that through so we can work together well.

As a temple of the Holy Spirit – God's actual presence in the world – the church is holy and precious. **Individually** we are called to holiness: *"Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body"* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). How does this challenge you?

Corporately, as the church, we are called to be holy, too. We are challenged to love the church with honour and respect. It is the bride of Christ. Paul says bluntly to those who are causing division in the church: *"Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple"* (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Pray that we might be a holy community.

"In the body of Christ," Thomas Groome writes, *"each individual is valued, cherished, needed, and has a unique function – a role that no one else can play. And yet each part needs the whole for its own functioning ... With God's Holy Spirit animating the body of Christ, the Christian communitarian spirit must be all for one and one for all."*

What a wonderful image of the church – *all for one and one for all*. The church stands with you. You are not in this challenge of life alone. And you stand with the church – you may be the encourager someone else needs, too. How can we be God's temple – His presence – in our world?

*Father, humble us.
Inspire us. Empower us.
We ask that your Spirit may give us the will and the courage
to act to make a difference,
in order to make real your kingdom among us,
so that we may we all live together
in peace, truth, justice and love,
with mercy, forgiveness, and grace,
caring for one another and sharing your gifts.
Amen.*

Sunday, September 17: 1 Corinthians 12

We are the church. The church is **you and I**. By God's grace and His mercy, we are saved by Jesus' death on the cross. We are the Temple of God, God's presence in our hurting world – individually and corporately. As those whom God has called out and called together, old human divisions of ethnicity, ability, status, gender, wealth, and age are gone. We are one in Jesus. We are filled with His Spirit. To quote Peter, we are "*a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession*" (1 Peter 2:9).

Peter goes on to say, "*As a result, you (plural – all of us together) can show others the goodness of God, for he called you (plural – all of us together) out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). We are the people of God, saved by Jesus, filled with His Spirit ... for a purpose. We **are** the people of God, called to **do** something. We are called out and called together to live as God created us to live, as Jesus would live if He were walking in our shoes – with love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and justice. And we are called out and called together to share His love, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and justice with other people.

The church, Paul says, is the body of Christ. The church is now the body through which Jesus does His work, just He did his work through His physical body back in the early first century. The entire church (meaning all Christians everywhere) are the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), but local congregations – like ours – are also described as His body (today's reading).

A body needs every part to be complete. It needs every part contributing to function in a healthy way. Like the image of "living stones" in 1 Peter 2, Paul says faith in Jesus leads us together into community – church. The church needs us all. And we all need the church (a finger without a body can't accomplish anything).

Being part of a church is not passive, it requires us to appreciate the gifts God has given us and to use them. Thomas Groome comments: "*The Kingdom must always begin in the hearts of its members. Without such a conversion it cannot be embodied in social realities. This conversion is a constant turning toward God by turning toward our neighbour. Above all other demands the Kingdom places on us the radical mandate of love as preached by Jesus.*"

As you think about the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, notice WHY God gives them – for the health of the body, not for personal edification. And why is the body of Christ healthy? To do what Jesus did – to bring the good news of God's love, grace, forgiveness, healing, hope, and so much more to the world. The body – the church – isn't healthy for itself: it's healthy to bring the Kingdom of God to the world ...

Sometimes we get stressed about "*What is my 'gift'?*" Whatever God has given you – time, talents, resources, experiences, education, special abilities – use them in His service. Yes, God may give you a special blessing of some kind – if so, great. But we can always begin by being faithful with what God has already given us. "*The primary gift of the Spirit,*" David Bosch says, "*is the gift of becoming involved in mission, for mission is the direct consequence of the outpouring of the Spirit.*" We can all celebrate that gift.

What can you do? Be part of the body. Share what you've been given – your experiences, wisdom, time, talents, finances, encouragement, abilities, dreams, ideas, skills, vision ... God can do amazing things through us as work together to see His Kingdom come and His will be done

*In everything we do, O Lord,
give us the humility to listen to Jesus, the Head of the Church;
give us a desire to seek out the truth;
give us a willingness to heed the advice of others;
give us wisdom in reaching decisions;
give us faith to believe in our conclusions;
give us courage to put our ideas to the test;
and, if we prove ourselves wrong, give us the grace to admit it.
Amen.*

Monday, September 18: 1 Corinthians 13

We are the church. The church is **you and I**. We are "a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you (plural – all of us together) can show others the goodness of God, for he called you (plural – all of us together) out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). We are called out and called together **to be** God's people and **to do** what Jesus would do if He were in our shoes.

1 Corinthians 12 taught us the church is like a body: we are all important and have helpful gifts, talents, abilities, experiences, and resources. 1 Corinthians 12 is about the church. (Spoiler alert) 1 Corinthians 14 is all about the church. What do you think 1 Corinthians 13 is all about? **The church.**

This description of love is often used at weddings. It does work well to describe the love that ought to exist between a husband and wife. But this high ideal was not originally written to define marriage. It was written to show us what relationships in the church – in **our** church – ought to look like. This is how Jesus would act if He were in our church. And this is how we are called to act, as well.

Think about how we get along in our church. Think about how **you** get along with people in our church ...

- How are you doing at being patient?
- How are you doing at being kind?
- How are you doing at being content (not being envious)?
- How are you doing at being gracious (not boasting)?
- How are you doing at being humble (not being proud)?
- How are you doing at honoring others?
- How are you doing at seeking the welfare of others?
- How are you doing at keeping calm (not being easily angered)?
- How are you doing at forgiving (keeping no record of wrongs)?
- How are you doing at being holy (not delighting in evil but rejoicing with the truth)?
- How are you doing at protecting people in the church?
- How are you doing at trusting people in the church?
- Does your love always hope?
- Does your love always persevere?
- Does your love never fail?

We are never going to be perfect. We try our best, but our love for one another is only a pale reflection of God's love for us. "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely." In the meantime we do our best ...

"Three things will last forever," Paul says, "faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love." May God help us to love well, today and every day.

*Lord, fill us with your love.
Lead us from death to life,
from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope,
from fear to trust.
Let peace fill our hearts, our world and our universe.
Let us dream together, pray together and work together,
to build one world of peace and justice for all.
Lord, fill us with your life-transforming, life-giving love,
And help us live your love in our relationships with one another.
Amen.*

Tuesday, September 19: Micah 6:6-12

This month we have been learning that **we** are the church. The church is **you and I**. We are "a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you (plural – all of us together) can show others the goodness of God, for he called you (plural – all of us together) out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). One of the essential realities Jesus modeled for us is the love, mercy, grace of God (1 Corinthians 13). He showed us that God has a deep love for the poor, sick, needy, disadvantaged, and "outsiders." Thankfully God showed **us** outsiders (non-Jews) His amazing love.

We are called out and called together **to be** God's people and **to do** what Jesus would do if He were in our shoes. As God has showed **us** love, mercy, and grace, He challenges us to extend the same love, mercy, and grace to other people – especially the outsiders.

Jesus didn't come up with this on His own. This is a deep theme throughout the Old Testament. God had called the Jewish nation to model these virtues, but they didn't get it. Not only did they not share God's blessings with others, they were corrupt themselves. The prophets are full of passages like this that challenge God's people to **live** their faith in practical ways.

What are some of the issues God is concerned about in Micah's day? How relevant are these today?

"The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you ..." What is good? What does the Lord require of us, His people, His church?

Stop and reflect for a moment: what does it mean to do what is right/act justly? To love mercy? To walk humbly with your God?

- How can you do what is right/act justly today?
- How can you love mercy today?
- How can you walk humbly with your God today?

*God of peace and justice, help us to change.
Help us to be the temple of your Spirit.
Help us to be your people and live your love.
May we work for a world that mirrors your mercy and grace.
May we live by your wisdom.
Help us to do what is right and act justly.
Help us to love mercy.
Give us the desire to act in solidarity
so that the pillars of injustice crumble
and those now crushed are set free.
Help us to walk humbly with you,
our Saviour and our God. Amen.*

Wednesday, September 20: Hebrews 11

We are the church. We are people whose faith is in Jesus, our God, our Saviour, and our Lord. Hebrews 11 is a celebration of faith in God. Faith is "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith is what defines us and unites us. I get distressed when some Christians allow other things define and divide them. A few years ago, some people got really stressed about theories of end times (things like premillennial dispensationalism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism). People took these theories so seriously they would say you were saved or not saved based on which theory you believed. Faith in Jesus didn't matter: your end times theory did. These are interesting conversations to have (I am happy to

discuss them with you), but I don't believe they are "salvation issues." Faith in Jesus saves us, not our human interpretations of Revelation and speculations about the future.

I have run across other people who get really stressed about things like the interpretation of the word "day" in Genesis 1, opinions about specific authors, and LGBTQ challenges. These are important and challenging things to talk about (I am happy to discuss them with you). They may be things we have passionate opinions about, but they are not salvation issues. Jesus clarifies that, "*God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). If we cut away all the non-essentials, faith in Jesus is essential. Faith in Jesus saves us.

As we read through Hebrews 11, the author highlights how people of faith have faced challenge after challenge after challenge throughout history, and kept their faith in God. That resolute faith is the common denominator. Some of the people he lists had lots of problems (Samson and David come to mind). Not all of them had happy endings: reread Hebrews 11:35-38. Despite their differences and diversity, the one thing that unites them is ***their confident faith in God.***

What we **do** as the people of God is keep our faith in God. We "*keep our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2).

We major on the majors – faith in Jesus – and allow that to define and unite us. What makes us Christians – the BIG salvation issues – are essential beliefs that Jesus is God's Son; by His grace, He saves us by faith; we have new life in and through Him by faith and faith alone.

We minor on the minors – all those other interesting, passionate opinions. We can talk about a them. But we do NOT allow them to divide us. Satan loves nothing more than a Kingdom divided against itself. Passionately though we may feel about those other issues, we don't give the devil the luxury of dividing and conquering us by making those the be-all and end-all of faith. Jesus doesn't do that. Neither can we.

When we keep our focus on faith and faith alone, we model a different way of living – a redemptive way of living. We live in a sinful world of division, polarization, distrust, fake news, suspicion, and hatred. As the people of God, however, we are "*a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you (out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). We can show others the goodness of God by modelling unconditional love, respectful dialogue, forgiveness, peace, grace, mercy, trust, and the ability to agree to disagree and still love one another. We can model a whole new world – the Kingdom of God – when we demonstrate that faith in Jesus is the essential thing. The other issues make for lots of interesting conversations, but are not essential to our faith. They just doesn't matter that much. We love and respect one another, despite our diversity.

- Do I ever major on the minors (get all worked about non-salvation issues)? Hard though it is to let things go emotionally, I need to let them go. I ask God's help. I pray for His forgiveness.
- What are the real essentials of faith in Jesus? Ask Jesus: read John 3:16. Ask God's help to keep focussed on the really important thing – faith in Jesus.

*Lord, lead us from doubt to faith,
from unbelief to faith in Jesus.
Lead us from death to life,
from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope,
from fear to trust.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Let peace fill our hearts and our world.
Let us dream together, pray together and work together,
to build one world of peace and love, of faith and hope,
and justice for all. Amen*

Thursday, September 21: Ephesians 4:1-16

As I reread what I wrote yesterday about unity in diversity, I could imagine some people grumbling ... "It's not all about faith in Jesus" "I don't agree" "Where does Bruce get off saying that?"

Before you get too annoyed with me, read Paul: *"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love (yes, Bruce has his faults. ☺). Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all"* (Ephesians 4:1-6).

That doesn't mean you have to agree with me on every little thing. It does mean that we handle our disagreements humbly and gently. We are patient with one another. And we keep united and in communion with one another because what unites us – our common faith in Jesus – is far more important than what we may have different opinions about. We may talk about the things we understand differently (from politics to our favourite football team, from Revelation to theories of the atonement). We do so respectfully, graciously, keeping them in proper perspective. They are not salvation issues.

On the essentials we agree. On the non-essentials, we model a genuine concern for learning, listening, understanding, growth, unity and community, and unconditional love.

Paul goes on to talk about a few of the gifts God has given his church. Their purpose is to help the church – the body of Christ – grow into maturity. What does Christian maturity look like? Paul talks about what **maturity** looks like in 4:14-16:

- *We have unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son*
- *We are not tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching.*
- *We are not influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.*
- *We will speak the truth in love.*
- *We grow in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.*
- *As each of us does our own special work, we help the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

What challenges you in today's reading? How are you doing at always being humble and gentle? Being patient with each other? Making allowance for each other's faults because of your love? Making every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit? Binding yourselves together with peace? How are you doing at growing in maturity? Speaking the truth in love? Becoming more and more like Christ? Using your talents, gifts, abilities, and resources to build up the church?

Ask God to help you personally keep on growing closer to Jesus ... and more and more like Jesus ...

Ask God to help us as a church to grow closer to Jesus ... and more and more like Jesus ...

*All powerful and ever-living God,
in your abundant love you give us more than we deserve
and more than we ask for.
Grant us your mercy in great measure.
Forgive us when we have gone against our conscience.
Help us to love as you love.
Give us what we dare not even pray for.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Friday, September 22: Ephesians 4:17-5:20

We are people of faith (Hebrews 11 – Wednesday). Our faith in Jesus is what defines us and saves us. We believe in *"one body and one Spirit, one glorious hope for the future, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all"* (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Because the early believers never stopped talking about Jesus, the Romans called them "Christians." Early believers didn't coin that word – the Romans did. These people never stopped talking about "Christ" so the Romans started calling them "Christ-ians" (Acts 11:26).

These believers called themselves "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:2, 18:25, 19:9, 19:23).

It's interesting to think about those two terms:

- **"Christian"** implies someone who believes in Christ. That's great. That's essential. But it also suggests that once you believe in Jesus, that's it. You're saved (and you are). You will be with the Lord forever after you die (and you will). But in the meantime ... so what?
- **"Follower of the Way"** implies someone who tries to follow Jesus every moment of every day. It includes faith in Jesus. But it also suggests that every step you take you try to take in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). There is an ongoing active component to "following Jesus."

Ephesians 4:17-5:20 gives some practical, gritty, nuts-and-bolts counsel on what we **do** as people who actively try to follow Jesus day by day. It's not rocket science. Much of it seems very common sense. Some of it feels downright "unspiritual": Paul talks about being angry, sex, coarse jokes, getting drunk, stealing, etc. It's rather frightening Paul deems it necessary to spell this all out.

The author's point is that ALL of life is sacred. We don't just follow Jesus to church on Sunday. We walk with Him every moment of every day, in every time and place. Our sexuality is sacred. Our conversation is sacred. How we treat one another is sacred. That's not to say we adopt some super-spiritual vocabulary that makes us seem totally peculiar to ordinary people. We don't become other-worldly and weird.

It does mean we let the Spirit renew our thoughts and attitudes and we put on our new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy. There are some things we **DON'T** do (you can read them all.).

There are other things we **DO** do: we tell our neighbors the truth. We let go of our anger. We use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need. Everything we say is good and helpful, so that our words will be an encouragement to those who hear them. We are kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven us. We try to imitate God in everything we do, because you are his dear children. We aim to live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. We are thankful people. We seek to live as people of light. We want to understand what the Lord wants us to do. We choose to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

What is God saying to you?

*Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us,
for the salvation you bought for us on the cross.
Help us to live for you in word and deed.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.*

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Saturday, September 23: Hebrews 13

Yesterday we read in Ephesians 4-5. Paul got down to the mucky-muck of real life, helping understand that ALL of life matters to God. For followers of the Way, it all matters.

We need to be clear: how we live does not save us. We are not saved by our good works or by following some moral code. We are saved by the grace of Jesus. Salvation is His gift to us, which we accept by faith. In Hebrews 11 (Wednesday) God reminded us that faith in Him is the foundation of strong lives.

How live is our response to this amazing saving grace of Jesus. Because God has saved us, because Jesus gave Himself for us, because He has blessed us with His Holy Spirit, we choose to follow His Way. We do this (1) because we love Jesus and want to honour Him, (2) because He gives us wisdom for life (like Ephesians 4-5 and Hebrews 13) and we want to obey His Word, and (3) it just works. God, who created us, gives us wisdom for how to live well. It only makes sense that we take His teaching seriously.

Hebrews 13 is another passage that builds on our faith in Jesus, helping us understand what our practical response to God's love could be and should be. It is very practical. Our faith in Jesus shapes our marriages, our sexual behaviour, our financial planning, how we relate to leaders, what we pray about ...

Life, as a follower of the Way is integrated: our faith in Jesus influences and determines ALL aspects of our lives. We DON'T have a "secular" part to our lives – work, money, leisure, friends, family – and a "sacred" part to our lives – church. Our faith in Jesus shapes who we are and how we live in ALL parts of our lives.

This is not easy. Our culture tries to squeeze us into its mold. The peer pressure to conform is enormous. But we carry on. *"Your strength,"* the author Hebrews writes, *"comes from God's grace"* (NLT) or *"It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace"* (NIV) (Hebrews 13:9). May the Lord strengthen us and help us live consistently Christianly ...

*O God our Father,
help us all through this day so to live that we may bring help to others.
May we all we do and say bring honour to Jesus, whose name we bear
May we bring joy to those that love us, and to you, our King.
Help us to be cheerful when things go wrong;
persevering when things are difficult;
serene when things are irritating.
Enable us to be helpful to those in difficulties;
kind to those in need;
sympathetic to those whose hearts are sore and sad.
Grant that nothing may make us lose our tempers;
nothing may take away our joy;
nothing may ruffle our peace;
nothing may make us bitter towards anyone.
You love us through all things.
Help us to love one another through all things as well.
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Sunday, September 24: Psalm 29

Worship. What is it? Why do we do it? How do we worship well? Worship is one of those things we do as Christians and as a Christian church. It is hard-wired into who we are as God's creation. Psalm 29, like many of the psalms we read over the summer, reminds us that we are created to worship God, to praise the Lord, to give Him the honour and glory due to Him, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, our loving Saviour Jesus, and our guide and helper, the Holy Spirit.

"From time to time the church should take stock of that which is most central, most important, most vital in our common life together," comments New Testament scholar, Tom Wright. *"Worship is nothing more than love on its knees before the Beloved,"* he adds. So he paraphrases 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's great passage on love, to describe our worship: *"Though we sing with the tongues of men and of angels, if we are not truly worshipping the living God, we are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. Though we organize the liturgy/service beautifully, if it does not enable us to worship the living God, we are mere ballet-dancers. Though we repave the floor and reface the stonework, though we balance the budgets and attract lots of visitors, if we are not worshipping God, we are nothing."*

"Worship is humble and glad. Worship forgets itself in remembering God. Worship celebrates truth as God's truth, not its own. True worship doesn't put on a show or make a fuss. True worship isn't forced, isn't half-hearted, doesn't keep looking at its watch, doesn't worry what the person in the next pew may be doing. True worship is open to God, adoring God, waiting for God, trusting God even in the dark."

"Worship will never end. Whether there be buildings, they will crumble. Whether there be committees, they will fall asleep. Whether there be budgets, they will add up to nothing. For we build for the present age, we discuss for the present age, and we pay for the present age; but when the age to come is here, the present age will be done away. For now we see the beauty of God through a glass, darkly, but then face to face. Now we appreciate only in part, but then we shall affirm and appreciate God, even as the living God has affirmed and appreciated us. So now our tasks are worship, mission, and management, these three; but the greatest of these is worship."²

We worship God. On the one hand, God is the Creator and Sustainer of all, *"The Lord rules over the floodwaters. The Lord reigns as king forever"* (29:10). We worship Him as almighty King.

On the other hand, God comes in the middle of the pain and suffering of this world, sharing our lives, and saving us through Jesus. *"The Lord gives his people strength. The Lord blesses them with peace"* (29:11). We worship Him as our loving Saviour, Jesus. We worship Him as our wise counselor, guide, corrector, and strength as the Holy Spirit.

Worship is all about our attitude. It's not about music or instruments or leaders or services. How can we come today to worship? How can we come with an attitude of humility, openness, expectancy, thanksgiving, and awe? How can you worship God – Father, Son, and Spirit – well today?

*Father, we gather in your presence in prayer and praise.
We thank you for our health and happiness,
for forgiveness and healing,
for our talents,
and for our family and friends.
We thank you for the wonderful world you have given us
to explore and to use to your greater glory.
We thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son,
who died that we might have life and live it to the full.
Send your Spirit to accompany us on our daily journey.
Give us wisdom that we may find you in all things.
Give us understanding that we may learn life lessons well.
Give us compassion that we may show your face to those we meet.
Give us generosity that we may share the gifts you have given us.
Give us faith that we may have confidence in your presence within us.
Above all give us love that we may bring joy into the lives of those around us.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

² N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, p. 8-9.

Monday, September 25: Revelation 7

"The great multitude in Revelation which no man can number aren't playing cricket," writes Tom Wright. "They aren't going shopping. They are WORSHIPPING. Sounds boring? If so, it shows how impoverished our idea of worship has become ... Worship is the central characteristic of the heavenly life; and that worship is focused on the God we know in Jesus" (For All God's Worth, p. 7).

What is worship for? Or, more appropriately, WHO is worship for? Throughout the Book of Revelation, worship is central (read Revelation 4-5). God's people (and heavenly beings from elders, to bizarre "living creatures," to angels) are all worshipping. Their worship is not for themselves, it's for God. There are no "worship wars," no complaints about the song choices, no criticism of how loud the thunder claps are or how bright the lightning is, and no grumbling about how repetitive the lyrics are. Their worship is not seeker-sensitive outreach; they are not trying to make attract people with the latest popular tune.

Who is worship for? Worship is for God. Only for God. The chief aim of worship is to please God and to praise God, whether by adoration and song, prayer and proclamation, confession and offering, thanksgiving or commitment, thunder claps and lightning, or all these together.

Why worship God? Because of who God is. God is the One who created us, He is the God who saves us, and He is the God who is within us. God has done great things and He is still doing great things. Wright adds, *"When John found himself looking in to the open door of heaven, he didn't see the god he might have wanted; he saw all creation worshipping the awesome and majestic creator God; and, when he looked closer, he saw a Lamb that had been killed and was now alive forevermore. ... The true God is not detached from the evil of the world, but has come to share it and bear it in his own body. We do not say, 'God so loved the world that he sent somebody else'; we say, 'God so loved the world that he sent his only beloved Son.'*

"And the God who sent the Son is the God who sends the Spirit of the Son, to put into practice, to implement, what the Son achieved ... God came in Jesus to the place where pain was greatest, to take it upon himself God comes today, in the Spirit, to the place where the pain is still at its height, to share the groanings of his world in order to bring the world to new life. But the Spirit doesn't do that in isolation. The Spirit does it by dwelling within Christians and enabling them to stand, in prayer and in suffering, at that place of pain" (For all God's Worth, p. 30). In the Spirit, we bring new life to the world.

"Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb." ((Revelation 7:10). Praise Him.

*O Lord,
help us to worship you in Spirit and in truth.
Give us a mind that is humble, quiet, peaceable,
patient, and charitable.
We pray for a taste of your Holy Spirit
in all our thoughts, words and deeds.
O Lord,
give us a lively faith, a firm hope,
a fervent charity,
a deep love of you.
Take from us all lukewarmness in meditation,
and all dullness in prayer.
Give us fervour and delight in thinking of you,
your grace, and your tender compassion toward us.
Give us, good Lord,
the grace to work for the things we pray for.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Tuesday, September 26: Isaiah 40

"So you're from Canada? I'd love to go to Canada. I have a friend in Vancouver and then I could rent a car and pop over for a weekend to see my cousin in Toronto ..." It's hard for people from a country like England (where this fellow was from) to appreciate the sheer physical size of Canada. You don't just pop over to Toronto for the weekend (a 45-hour drive from Vancouver; in contrast from tip to tail of England is 9 hours).

Sometimes we have an equally unrealistic perspective on who God is. We scale God down to a size we can handle. We do believe Jesus saves us – but once we have accepted Him as Saviour, and prayed a prayer that's about it. We do believe God cares about ethics – but if we don't swear (publicly), are (fairly) honest, and don't kill anyone, we're good. We do believe God created the world; now we can use its resources and treat the environment in the most financially beneficial way (for the short term anyway).

Isaiah blasts us with a so-much-more-than-Canada-compared-to-England scale perspective on who God is. You can't measure God on the same map at all. God is so far beyond our human-sized scale of reference that we cannot talk about Him in the same breathe as we talk about anything else.

The Israelites in Isaiah's day had cut God down to their size. In their minds, God couldn't do much. So they took advantage of the poor. They didn't care about the foreigners or refugees. Business people cheated. Judges were corrupt. Politicians were dishonest. There was violence in the streets. And the people of God were OK with all of that. God was irrelevant. And they were "God's chosen people." Right?

God spoke through the prophets to challenge their sinful ways. People didn't listen. God allowed them to suffer the logical consequences of their corrupt, godless ways. They were conquered. They went into exile.

What is the purpose of Isaiah's challenge to appreciate how awesomely BIG God is? "*Comfort, comfort my people,*" says your God. "*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned*" (40:1-2). A small god cannot do you any good when you face BIG problems (like systemic racism, corruption, violence, abuse of power, and exile). A BIG God who can level mountains, to whom the nations are just a drop in the bucket, who created the universe **can** save us. He can deal with our issues.

This is the great God we worship. Read through Isaiah 40 a few times and allow yourself to be in awe of our incredible God. This is the God who loves you. This is the God who saves you. This is the God who is within you. This is the God who lifts you up and strengthens you ... Worship Him.

*God, our almighty Father,
to you we dedicate our hearts, minds, and strength.
Open our minds and our hearts
so that together we may be grateful for our gifts and the gifts of others;
generous, to become men and women for others;
attentive and discerning in the events of daily life;
compassionate with the needy;
loving towards others;
faith-filled in our beliefs, with hope in the future;
eloquent and truthful in our speech;
learning to find God in all things;
curious to know;
engaged with the world;
committed to change for the better.
May we use the resources of the earth prudently
and set a prophetic example by our conduct,
so that we may employ our knowledge to benefit others
and create one family of all nations to the greater glory of God.
Amen*

Wednesday, September 27: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

A stranger smiled at me today. It brightened up my day.

I came to my office and chose to look at a picture I took of a carving of Jesus on the cross in an art gallery in Venice. If a random smile from a stranger can change me, how can I not be changed when I look at the face of Love – at the face of Jesus – Himself? How can Jesus not change my entire life, today?

The cross of Jesus changed the world. The coming of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus – God Himself – changed the world. That is why we worship God, Jesus, and the Spirit.

The cross is the climax of God's plan to save the world. Jesus' death was not just an example of one good man choosing to die. Jesus was not just an heroic, solitary human figure. On the cross, Jesus wins a complete victory over sin, violence, pride, arrogance – even death itself. On the cross, Jesus begins an irreversible, unstoppable process of changing everything by changing the lives of those of us who believe and who allow the Spirit to work within us. Through the cross, the God of love has forgiven us. He has given us new life. And His Spirit, at work within us, continues to change the world.

The cross is about God coming among us and experiencing all the pain, sorrow, and suffering the world can throw at Him (and us). The worst of what human beings are capable of is hurled at God. And on the cross we see God's response: Love. Unconditional love. Not a sword. Not a nuclear missile. Love.

As Protestants, we are uncomfortable with images of Jesus on the cross. After all, He has risen. But there is value in pausing to reflect on the depths of God's love, the power of God's mercy, the strength of His grace that is revealed on the cross. We celebrate the new life of resurrection only because of Jesus' suffering on the cross. Paul says to the Galatians, "*The cross of Christ (and all it means) alone can save ... As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died*" (Galatians 6:12-14). He goes on to say, that it is only because of the cross that we are transformed into a new creation and we become the new people of God (6:15-16).

As you read through 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, worship God. He loves us so much He did give His only Son **to die on the cross ...** Because of this, "*God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, 'If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord'*" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

*Be silent.
Be still.
Alone.
Empty before your God.
Say nothing.
Ask nothing.
Be silent.
Be still.
Let your God look upon you.
That is all.
God knows.
God understands.
God loves you with an enormous love
and only wants to look upon you with that generous love.
Quiet.
Be still.
Let your God love you.
Amen*

Thursday, September 28: Matthew 28

Jesus is alive. The response of those who loved Jesus and followed Him is to worship Him (Matthew 28:9, 17). Worship is the natural response of anyone who loves Jesus. He is the God who established the universe, who sustains His creation, who loves His people, who lived with us, who suffered at our hands, who died on the cross for us, who is risen and alive, who forgives and pardons, who fills us with His Spirit, who guides and gives strength, who corrects and comforts ... we could go on and on.

Think about all of the blessings we enjoy as God's beloved people. And worship Him.

A fundamental part of our worship response is then to share this incredible love and grace with other people. As Jesus' friends and family worshipped Him (28:17), He commissions them: "*I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you*" (28:18-20).

We worship God. And we desperately want other people to know the same blessings we have experienced. We want all people to come and worship God with us. (I hope!)

In part, we share God's love by how we live. We live lives that try to be more and more in line with what Jesus taught and how He lived. We don't just talk a good talk, we walk an authentically good walk. We live genuinely with virtues like honesty, integrity, compassion, mercy, patience, humility, and kindness.

In part, we share God's love by what we say. As we share how God has changed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we share the good news of forgiveness and new life through Jesus, as we reflect on how the Spirit is at work in our lives, we can invite other people to know Jesus, too. We have good news – great news – of hope and healing, mercy and grace, love and purpose to share.

We don't do this alone. Jesus adds, "*And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). That is more good news to share. Worship Jesus. Live His love. Share His love.

*With great devotion
I desire to worship you and serve you, O God,
Help me to share the love of Christ the consolator.
Help me to share the love of Christ the redeemer.
Help me to share the love of Christ the healer,
the liberator,
the enricher,
the strengthener.
Through your Spirit, may I be able to help another person:
to console, liberate and give them courage;
to bring them light not only for their spirit
but also for their bodies.
Help me to love each and every one of my neighbours
As much as you love me.
I ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

adapted from Pierre Favre (1506-1546)

Friday, September 29: Romans 12

Practically, how do we worship God? In part, we can worship through songs and prayers, through meditation and reading, through sermons and teachings. But **worship is really our whole lived response to the love of God**. Worship shapes how we live every aspect of our lives.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he spends Chapters 1-11 talking about the love of God revealed in Jesus. He talks about the amazing grace of God and how salvation comes only in and through Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection. He concludes: *"Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge. How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways. ... For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever. Amen"* (Romans 11:33-36).

After that "Amen" about the love and mercy of God, Paul changes gears to talk about our response to this incredible love and mercy: *"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him"* (12:1). How do we worship God? By giving ourselves completely to God. Then we allow Him to change who we are, from the inside out. Then we allow that inner transformation to reshape our character and how we live day by day, moment by moment.

"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity" (12:2 J.B. Phillips translation).

- How does the world around us squeeze us into its own mould?
- How can we allow God to re-mould us from within?

Paul goes on to give us some very practical examples of we can live as God's people, re-moulded by His Spirit. These practical ways of living, acting, and reacting, Paul says, are part and parcel of our worship (12:1). Worship is not something we do at church on Sunday morning; it's how we live in every aspect of our lives (12:4-12, based on *The Message* translation):

- Use your gifts, talents and abilities to serve God and others.
- Don't compare yourself with others, or try to be something you aren't.
- If you help, just help, don't take over;
- If you teach, teach with integrity and truth;
- If you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy;
- If you're put in charge, don't manipulate;
- If you're called to help people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond;
- If you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them. Smile.
- Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.
- Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.
- Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.
- Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.
- Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.
- Help people in need; be inventive in hospitality.
- Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.
- Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down.
- Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up.
- Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.
- Don't hit back.
- Get along with everybody.
- Don't try to get even; that's not your prerogative. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."
- If you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.
- Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

What do you struggle with in this list?

What does God need to re-mould in your life? Will you let Him?

*Father,
 I abandon myself into your hands;
 do with me what you will.
 Whatever you may do, I thank you;
 I am ready for all, accept all.
 Let only your will be done in me
 and in all your creatures.
 I wish no more than this, O Lord.
 Into your hands I commend my soul;
 I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
 for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
 to surrender myself into your hands,
 without reserve,
 and with boundless confidence,
 for you are my Father.
 Amen.*

Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916)

Saturday, September 30: Psalm 148

Worship of God is the foundation of the entire universe. All creation worships God – not just people. Of course the sun and moon, sea creatures, thunder and lightning, hills, cedar trees, and cattle worship God differently from people. But in their own unique ways, as God's creations, everything praises God.

All the cosmos praises God because He created such an incredible universe. Go for a walk, look closely at a flower, look up at the night sky, listen to the birds chirping – and allow yourself to be in awe. This is God's creation. It is all for His glory and it is all giving Him the glory (if you have time, read Psalm 19 as well).

Psalm 148 invites us to think about who God is in bigger and more profound ways than before ...

"The response (to the wonder of God's creation)," writes Sara Maitland, "is 'Wow.' The fancy name for this gob-smacked, punched-in-the-solar-plexus pleasure is 'awe,' and its articulation is an intake of breath; a sub-verbal breach in the space between me and the world; an expression of delight. Wow. I do not see how we can look at God's creation and not feel a little giddy with awe and delight and amazement."³

Over a hundred years ago, Matthew Henry wrote, *"It is not enough for us to be where God is worshipped, if we do not ourselves worship him, and that not with bodily exercise only, which profits little, but with the heart."* We can "go to church," we can listen to worship music, we can read the Bible, we can go through the motions of praying, but if our heart isn't in it, it really doesn't matter.

When was the last time your worship could be described as a "gob-smacked, punched-in-the-solar-plexus pleasure"? When did you last approach worship "a little giddy with awe and delight and amazement"? That's not the musicians' issue. As Matthew Henry reminds us, it's a matter for our own hearts ...

*Lord, thank you for the invitation to praise you. Praise the Lord.
 May I worship you as well as the stars, angels, mountains, and birds worship you.
 Jesus, may your cross lead me to confession of my own sinfulness,
 repentance, and a fresh knowledge that I am forgiven and free in your grace.
 Holy Spirit, may your flame light a fire in my heart
 that no cares, no worries, and no distractions can extinguish.
 Prepare me today to worship you in Spirit and in truth tomorrow.
 May my worship be a gob-smacked, punched-in-the-solar-plexus pleasure.
 Help me to be a little giddy with awe and delight and amazement.
 Amen*

³ Sara Maitland, *A Joyful Theology: Creation, Commitment, and an Awesome God*, p. 111.

Sunday, October 1: Mark 11:1-26

One of the aspects of our worship services is communion or the Lord's Supper. This commemorates Jesus' last meal with His disciples in Jerusalem. It took place on the Thursday evening before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus was arrested and tried that Thursday night after the meal. He was crucified on Friday (what we call "Good Friday"). He rose from the dead on Sunday (Easter Sunday).

To help understand the context, we begin today with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on ***the Sunday before*** all this happens. The people think He is a King and welcome Him as the Messiah. They worship Him.

But it is a mixed blessing, as the parable of the fig tree and Jesus' overturning the tables in the Temple illustrate. While the people celebrate Jesus on the surface, underneath there is lots of corruption. There are deep problems. Some people are caught up in the moment, but will quickly fall away. When push comes to shove, very few people will actually stand up with Jesus through the difficult days ahead. The same people who worship Him now, will be shouting "Crucify Him" on Friday. What does that say about their worship?

What about me? What is my commitment to Jesus? Did I get anything out of worship today? Marva Dawn would bluntly say, "*It doesn't matter. We weren't worshipping you anyway.*"

How did I worship today? In a worship service, it seems we assemble for a performance – we sit back as the audience, evaluate the performers (the musicians and pastor), and then debrief about what we liked or we got out of it. God? God is the topic under discussion. That is totally backwards. In reality, God is the audience. The pastor and musicians are the leaders. And the congregation are the performers. Worship is for God, not for us. Communion, specifically, is all about Jesus. It's not about what we like or dislike.

The better question to ask is, "*What did God get out of **my** worship of Him today?*"

Though our worship – music, prayer, Scripture reading, proclamation, listening, symbolic acts (from offerings to communion) – we praise and glorify God. It is wonderful to read some of the great worship passages in the Bible – Psalms, Revelation, for instance – and simply celebrate and adore our incredible Creator, Saviour, and Holy Spirit. It is great to be moved by fine music to revel in God's majesty, power, and love. It is fantastic to pray – adoring, confessing, thanking, and interceding – before God. It is amazing to be able to give back to God from what He has given to us ...

Gathering for worship was something the early Christians did regularly. It was time to praise God, learn from Him and one another, encourage one another, be spiritually challenged and recharged ... and then they went back into the world with new vision, enthusiasm, and energy. Worship is "a time aside" for us as followers of Jesus to be renewed and restored. We worship God. We celebrate Jesus. We are blessed by His Spirit. Then, encouraged, empowered, and inspired by God, we go out and live out His Kingdom ...

*Jesus, thank you for the cross.
Christ, by your body given for me, save me.
Christ, by your blood shed more me, make me holy.
Christ, by your wounds, cleanse and heal me
Christ, by your suffering, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within your mercy hide me.
Let me not be separated from you.
From the enemy defend me,
At my death call me
And bid me, come to you
That with your saints I may praise you
For ever and ever.
Amen*

Monday, October 2: Mark 11:27-12:12

Yesterday we began thinking about communion or the Lord's Supper. It commemorates Jesus' last meal with His disciples in Jerusalem. That meal took place on Thursday evening. Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover celebration on a Sunday to much fanfare and celebration (we read about this yesterday). This week we'll read through the events of the week leading to Jesus' last meal (Thursday).

Jesus does not have an easy time of it in Jerusalem (11:27-33). But He never compromises His integrity, His convictions, or His compassion. *"What we see in Jesus,"* says Kevin Makins, *"is this man who is God who refuses to be pinned down, who dances around the questions but give answers to questions they weren't asking."* He certainly did have an "interesting" way of dealing with His critics – asking them some difficult questions (11:29) that forced them to deal with His identity as God Himself.

The parable in Mark 12:1-12 is a not-so-veiled description of how people have treated God's prophets over the centuries (people like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist). And it is an accurate description of what will happen to Jesus this week. The not-so-veiled challenge of Mark 12:9-10 is that there are consequences for rejecting Jesus. Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only true source of life.

At communion we often read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: *"For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, 'This is my body, which is given for you.' Do this to remember me.' In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant between God and his people – an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it.' For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again."*

We remember Jesus' death on the cross: He died that our sins might be forgiven, that we might have a renewed relationship directly with God, that the power of evil and death may be destroyed, that the penalty we deserve to pay for our sins might be paid in full, that the righteousness of God might be fulfilled, that we might have new – eternal – life today and forever ...

"God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous," Paul writes, *"He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood"* (Romans 3:24-25). Lord, help us to believe ...

*Lord God,
our loving Father,
you know all my sins and failures,
my weaknesses and temptations.
I come to you with deep sorrow in my heart
for the wrong I have done
and for the good I have failed to do.
Lord Jesus, through your death on the cross,
Forgive me,
accept me,
and by Your Spirit strengthen me,
now and always.
Amen.*

David Konstant (b.1930)

Tuesday, October 3: Mark 12:13-44

A lot of things happened during Jesus' last week. Mark gives us a variety of insights into what Jesus considers to be the real priorities of life. What is life really all about?

1. It's *not about* money (12:13-17, 41-44)
2. It's *not about* being smart or clever (12:18-27) – the Sadducees were not really interested in the answer to their question; they were really interested in making Jesus look bad.⁴
3. It's *not about* religion – in terms of the right rituals (12:41-44).

It *is* about ...

1. Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (12:28-30), and
2. Loving your neighbour as yourself (12:31-34)

Life is about genuine love for God and genuine love for the people around us (12:33-40).

The Lord's Supper is not an empty ritual. It's an opportunity for us to reflect on God's amazing love for us: *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."*

The Lord's Supper is also an opportunity for us to think though how we will respond: *Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us ... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect"* (1 John 4:9-17).

Is your love "growing more perfect"? Ask Jesus to help you be more loving ... in your relationship with God, and with your "neighbour" ... (Who is your neighbour??? Read Luke 10:25-37).

*Lord, as we think about communion
We remember that You are the bread of life.
You feed our souls, you nourish our hearts
and You give us sustenance to run the race before us.
As we break the bread, we feel the softness of Your love for us.
We smell the fragrance of the grace You release afresh each day.
We thank you with all our hearts for the great price You paid
when You were crucified on the cross for us.
Yet just as the yeast has caused this bread to rise,
You rose again, triumphant over death
as Lord of Lords and King of Kings forever, and our beloved Saviour.*

*We remember that you are the giver of life.
You are forgiveness.
You bring deep peace to our souls and Your love flows within us.
As we pour out the wine, we see Your sacrifice poured out for us.
We notice the depth of Your goodness, and the pain You suffered for us.
We dwell upon the intricacy of human life,
and the price You paid to set humanity free.
Yet just as the tombstone rolled away to unleash the Risen Lord,
Your light shines in our hearts now,
extinguishing all darkness to release Heavens blessings upon us.
Thank you, Lord.
Amen.*

⁴ We often get sidetracked by the question, "What does Jesus mean when He says that those who are resurrected will 'neither marry nor be given in marriage?'" This gets many happily married people nervous! Can heaven really be all that good? Jesus is ***NOT*** answering this question here! Jesus ***IS*** answering the *Sadducees'* question about whether or not there is a resurrection at all. *The Sadducees* (not Jesus) present heaven as a continuation of life as we know it: you get married; you have children to inherit your property and care for you in your old age, you continue the same kind of life in heaven ... etc. *Jesus* emphasizes heaven is completely different from life as we know it now – after all there is no longer any death, pain, suffering, and so forth! So the purpose for marriage – *as the Sadducees understood it* (to have children to inherit property and continue your family line) – was no longer relevant.

Wednesday, October 4: Mark 13

This is one of those chapters we struggle with ... it seems so ... frightening? Confusing? Rather than getting hung up on the details, focus on some of the big themes coming out of the text:

- ***We need to rely on God alone.*** Sometimes God has to take away the supports we rely on and shatter some of our preconceptions, so we rely on Him alone and follow Him, trusting He knows what he is doing. For the Jews, the destruction of the Temple annihilated their traditional religious foundation. With no Temple, they had to choose: trust in Jesus or not? Do I trust in Jesus?
- ***Stand firm.*** Mark's readers will see the destruction of the Temple (70 AD). They were experiencing persecution. Why is God allowing it? Why do bad things happen? Mark reminds them that God knew all this would happen – Jesus had said so. God's word to us when we find life hard is the same as Jesus' words to his disciples then: hard times happen; stand firm (v 13).
- ***What's going to happen?*** Jesus warns of a godless ruler desecrating Jerusalem. In AD 70 the Roman army ravaged Palestine, destroyed the Temple, crushing the Jewish people. According to tradition, Christians in Jerusalem remembered Jesus' warnings (Mark 13) and escaped to Pella, across the Jordan River. God's plans revealed in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus: there will be a day of judgment before God's King comes to establish God's kingdom. We are safe!
- ***Be prepared.*** We have God's rough outline for the future but no details. God has not revealed the exact date of Jesus' return; it's useless to spend fruitless hours trying to work it out (see Acts 1:6-7). God tells us about the future so we'll be ready (v 33). The picture Jesus paints (vs 34–36) is not one of passive waiting or sadistic delight in impending judgment of the wicked, but of vigilant action. Notice how many times Jesus exhorts his followers to '*watch*', '*be on guard*', and '*be alert*'.
- ***Jesus is coming back.*** Jesus knows how easily the urgent demands of daily life preoccupy us. If we don't keep His return in mind, there is the danger that instead of doing what God has assigned to us, we will get distracted or tired of waiting and fill our days with other things (v 36).

Communion is an opportunity for us to proclaim that God's future is coming into the present. We do not simply remember a long dead Jesus: we celebrate the presence of the Living Lord. He is with us today. He is with us in the good times and the hard times. We enjoy His presence now and we look forward to being with Him in eternity, too. We don't need to be afraid. He is with us through whatever comes along.

"At communion," writes Tom Wright, professor of New Testament, "*we are like the children of Israel in the wilderness, tasting fruit plucked from the promised land. It is the future coming to meet us in the present.*" God is with you. Right here. Right now. Worship Him.

*Father in heaven, you have made us for yourself;
our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
Fulfill this longing through Jesus, the bread of life,
so that we may witness to him who alone satisfies the hungers of the human family.
Fulfill this longing through Jesus, whose blood was shed
that our sin might be forgiven and we might be set free.
By the power of your Spirit lead us to the heavenly table
where we may feast on the vision of your glory for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Thursday, October 5: Mark 14

A lot can happen on a Thursday evening. Mark 14:1-11 sets the scene for the events that are about to transpire: Jesus is turning his face toward the cross. "*She has done what she could,*" Jesus said, "*and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time*" (14:8). We have no idea what motivated this lady to express her worship and adoration so profoundly at this time, but the depth of her love for Jesus is clear.

Compare her heart – full of worship – with that of the disciples (14:4-5) and Judas (14:10-11). "*The*

contrast of reactions as Jesus goes to the cross invites Mark's readers to ponder their own position, feelings and attitudes. 'Were you there,' asks the old song, 'when they crucified my Lord?' Yes, but the more important question is, 'What was going on inside you?' Were you part of those who wanted to look the other way, because some people were so exuberant in their devotion? Were you, like Judas, hoping that, if Jesus were determined to die anyway, you at least might make something out of it? Were you glad to be rid of such a trouble-maker? Or were you ready to give everything you had to honour this strange man, this unexpected Messiah, this paradoxical Passover-maker?" (Tom Wright).

As Jesus shares the traditional Jewish Passover meal with His disciples, He reinterprets it for the present moment. The Passover recalled the Jews' miraculous deliverance from Egypt (Moses, the plagues, Red Sea, etc.). At the Passover, they retold the story – again and again – of God's deliverance: because of God's grace they are God's free people. It was a deeply religious act, but also a deeply political act. Even when Israel was occupied by foreign powers (like Rome), the Jews emphasized that, despite appearances, they were still God's free people. Nothing and no one could ever take their true freedom from them.

Jesus emphasizes that real freedom is not political freedom or religious ritual, it's in a living, ongoing relationship with Him. Instead of linking the bread and wine back to the Exodus (as the Jews always did), He links them directly to the death He will die and to the Kingdom of God that will come through His death. His death will set His people truly free – freedom from the slavery of sin, freedom from the oppression of judgment, freedom for a wonderful hope for the future, freedom to live in God's Spirit ... (Romans 6). Nothing and no one could ever take their true freedom from them (Romans 8:31-39).

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remind ourselves, again and again, of our freedom thanks to the incredible love and sacrifice of Jesus. We remind ourselves, again and again, we are free people: we are forgiven, we have a personal relationship with Jesus, we live by God's principles of love, mercy, grace, and compassion. Nothing and no one can ever take our true freedom from us without our permission.

But living in freedom is a choice we make, day by day. In Romans 8:12-13 Paul writes, "*You have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live.*" We have choices. Like Judas, the disciples, Peter, the anonymous woman, we choose every moment how we will live. We can choose to honour Jesus in our moment-by-moment choices or we can choose to allow temptation, sin, peer pressure, money, sex, power, distractions (or a host other things) have power over us.

- If you were in Peter's shoes, what choices would you have made?
- What is going on in you today? What choices are you making about Jesus? Your faith? Your life?

*Crucified God,
we wear beautiful crosses around our necks, and hang them on our walls.
We have made the hideous symbol of suffering a decoration,
when what it really needs to be is a definition.
Define us by your cross, Lord.
Define us by your sacrificial love.
In our remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for us,
let us show by the offering of our hearts and hands
the depth of our commitment to live for him who died for us.
With gratitude, we celebrate all the gifts that are ours through Christ crucified –
new life, real freedom, eternal life, and a meaningful purpose.
Fill us now again with the power of your Spirit
that we might be bold in our witness to Jesus Christ,
till all the world adores his sacred name.
In lives of sacrifice and service, empower our witness to Jesus Christ,
whose cross so powerfully proclaims your love.
Amen*

Friday, October 6: Mark 15

The story of the Lord's Supper, Thursday evening, is part of a bigger narrative. Thursday becomes Friday.

If we were reading this for the first time, we might think things are spiraling out of control as the depths of human cruelty, bitterness, injustice, and inhumanity bubble to the surface. It's a Shakespearean tragedy.

But things are not out of control. Jesus has known from the beginning this is what will happen. It is, in fact, what has to happen. Through His death, Jesus destroys the power of sin and death forever. Through the evil of the cross, Jesus shows the limitless mercy of God's holiness, love, grace, and power.

The contrasts could not be more dramatic:

- Unchecked, **human nature** leads to anger, jealousy, rage, lies, and violence (the Jewish leaders), greed (Judas), fear (Peter), compromise and injustice (Pilate). Ultimately it loses.
- **God's character**, modeled by Jesus, is unconditional love, integrity, compassion, patience, self-control, forgiveness, peace, mercy, and self-giving love. Ultimately God wins.
- **Human "wisdom"** leads to an increasingly violent spiral of deceit, lies, cruelty, misery, despair, suffering, and death.
- **God's wisdom** leads to an increasingly powerful spiral of love, forgiveness, mercy, and life.

The events of Friday are not a tragic accident. They are the essential part, of Jesus' mission to establish the Kingdom of God. Paul writes, *"Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood ..."* (Romans 3:23-25)

"Now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. Because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins" (Romans 8:1-4).

Our response to the events of Friday should include

- Thankfulness: *"Most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners"* (Romans 5:7-8).
- Worship: *"Now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"* (Romans 5:11).
- Commitment: *"Those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit ... letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace"* (Romans 8:5-6)
- What else?

"You received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children," Paul writes, *"Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.' For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory"* (Romans 8:15-17).

This is great news. This is the continuing legacy of the Lord's Supper. Through Jesus' body given and blood shed for us, we have life, an eternal quality of life now and the certain hope of eternal life with the Lord hereafter. What is the Spirit saying to you, today?

*Jesus, your cross is the hope of those of us who believe.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the resurrection of the dead.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the way of the lost.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the Saviour of the lost.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the staff of the lame.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the guide of the blind.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the strength of the weak.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the doctor of the sick.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the hope of the hopeless.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the freedom of the slaves.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the cloth of the naked.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the water of the seeds.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the source of those who seek water.
 Through the power of the cross, You are the answer for those who need wisdom.
 We thank you, Jesus, for the cross.
 Amen*

Saturday, October 7: Philippians 2:1-18

Communion, the Lord's Supper, reminds us of Jesus' amazing, incredible love for us. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he reminds us of who Jesus is, His astonishing sacrifice, and the depths of His love and mercy.

Spend some time reading Philippians 2:6-11, reflecting on who Jesus is. In *the Message* version, Eugene Peterson translates it like this:

"Christ had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human. Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.

"Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father."

Now notice what Paul sees as the natural response to Jesus' sacrifice: *"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself" (2:1-5)*

"What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. ... Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure" (2:12-13).

"Do everything readily and cheerfully – no bickering, no second-guessing allowed. Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Carry the light-giving Message into the night so I'll have good cause to be proud of you on the day that Christ returns" (2:14-16).

Don't just believe the right things. Allow the Spirit of God to transform you ...

*Merciful God,
give us the same attitude as Jesus,
who emptied himself
and was obedient to you
all the way to his death on the cross.
Make us eager to put others before ourselves,
and their needs before our own.
We ask this through your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

Thanksgiving Sunday, October 8: Mark 16

I have been in several caves. But on one particular day in southern France it was so hot that the chance to visit la Grotte des Demoiselles to cool off seemed wonderful. When Marianne and I first went into the cave it was, frankly, disappointing: the roof of the initial chamber had collapsed decades ago shattering most of the stalactites and stalagmites. Everything was covered in debris. The guide was speaking French far too quickly for me to understand well – I was beginning to regret the decision to come to the caves at all.

Then we went through an air tight door into another chamber – called la Cathédrale des Abîmes. I was flabbergasted. It was a jaw-dropping, incredible sight with spectacular 60+m high limestone formations, sheer drops, amazing shapes, and glistening colours. It was the most spectacular cave I have ever been in. And it was a complete surprise.

As Mark 16 begins, Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome are going to anoint Jesus' dead body. It is an act of loving reverence. It will also mask the odour of the decaying body. Other bodies would be buried in the same tomb in days to come. They were discouraged, devastated, despairing the sudden, violent death of a person they loved dearly. They were wondering how they would move the huge stone that had been rolled across the entrance to the chamber. Their lives had collapsed. Their hopes were shattered.

But when they arrived they were flabbergasted. Their jaws dropped. The stone was moved. A man in white was sitting there. *"Don't be alarmed."* he said. *"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'"* (16:5-6). This was a complete surprise. And it was the most amazing, incredible, astounding news anyone could ever hear.

After all the traumatic events of the past week, Easter Sunday morning is something to be thankful for. As we celebrate Thanksgiving this weekend, think of thanksgiving in terms of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. How is the new hope and new life we have in Jesus the greatest gift we can be thankful for?

Give thanks, with a grateful heart.

Mark's gospel ends at 16:8. Much later (based on the Greek text and manuscript sources) 9-20 were added to provide a satisfactory conclusion.

It is interesting to end at verse 8. It does leave the story unfinished. But that gives us the opportunity to become part of the narrative.

We have the good news – He is risen. What are we going to do with that?

- Are we going to say nothing because we are afraid?

- Are we going to tell other people?
- Does Jesus' resurrection matter? What difference does it make in my life?
- How can I live differently because Jesus is risen?

Let's move on. Mark 16:9-20 do help us think through the "So what?" of the resurrection.

- Do we struggle with unbelief? With a lack of faith?
- What difference has Jesus made in your life?
- Do other people need Jesus's
- Do we need to hear Jesus saying to us, "*Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone ...*"?
- Who can I share Jesus with?
- When will I do that?

*Holy Jesus, You came down from heaven;
 You were pleased to pay the ransom on the cross for us,
 so that You might redeem us from all sin,
 and purify to Yourself a precious people, zealous for good works.
 Thank you for your awesome sacrifice.
 Thank you for your amazing grace.
 Thank you for your incredible love.
 Thank you that you are alive in us, today, through your Spirit.
 We ask You write Your law on our hearts that we may understand it,
 that we may know You,
 and the power of Your resurrection.
 May we express your grace in turning from our sinful ways.
 May we express your love in loving other people as you love us.
 May we express your mercy in forgiving those who sin against us.
 May we express our thanksgiving by giving you all the glory.
 May you rule our hearts by faith.
 May we, being dead to sin and alive to your Spirit, live rightly,
 bear fruit leading to holiness,
 grow in grace,
 and be your ambassadors of love.
 Amen*

based on Henry Hammond (1605-1660)