



October 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, October 9: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

What are you thankful for (besides a long weekend, too much turkey, and family/friends)?

Last week, as we walked with Jesus through His last week and His resurrection we remembered that the greatest gift for which we can be thankful is the love of God, shown through us through life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, reminds us all of some of the blessings that come through our relationship with Jesus:

- We have been **called by God** to be his own holy people (1:2). What does that mean to you?
- **He made us holy** by means of Christ Jesus (1:2). What does that mean to you?
- He has given us **gracious gifts** (1:4). What does that mean to you?
- God has enriched **our church** in every way (1:5). What does that mean to you?
- We (as a church) have every **spiritual gift** we need (1:7). What does that mean to you?
- He will **keep us strong** to the end (1:8). What does that mean to you?
- **God is faithful** to do what he says (1:9). What does that mean to you?
- He has invited us into **partnership with Jesus Christ** (1:9). What does that mean to you?

John F. Kennedy once commented, "*As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.*"

Echoing the same theme, Nazarene scholar W.T. Purkiser wrote, "*Not what we say about our blessings, but how we use them, is the true measure of our thanksgiving.*"

How can we use our blessings to be a blessing to others?

*Lord, we thank you for this place in which we dwell;
for the love that unites us;
for the peace accorded us this day;
for the hope with which we expect the morrow;
for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies,
that make our lives delightful;
and for our friends in all parts of the earth.*

*Purge out of every heart the lurking grudge.
Give us grace and strength to forbear and to persevere.
Give us the grace to accept and to forgive offenders.
Forgetful ourselves,
help us to bear cheerfully the forgetfulness of others.
Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind.
Spare to us our friends,
soften to us our enemies.*

*Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors.
If it may not, give us the strength to encounter that which is to come,
that we be brave in peril,
constant in tribulation,
temperate in wrath,
and in all changes of fortune.
May we be bold, down to the gates of death,
loyal and loving one to another,
surrounded by your great love. Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Tuesday, October 10: Philippians 1:1-11

Who are you thankful for? Paul, writing from prison in Rome, is thankful for his friends ...

Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States during the tumultuous U.S. Civil War, has some interesting short, pithy, thought-provoking statements on friendships:

- *"The better part of one's life consists of his friendships."*
- *"Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"*
- *"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."*

Friendship is a give-and-take relationship. On the one hand, we are blessed by our friends. On the other hand, we can be a blessing to others (it truly is more blessed to give than to receive). Often this blessing is simply a matter of encouragement. Albert Schweitzer once said, *"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."*

I hope you have a friend or two who helps rekindle your inner spirit now and then.

How about you? Are you someone who rekindles the inner fire in others? Are you an encourager?

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote, *"Christ did not lay down his life for us as enemies so that we should remain enemies, but so that he could make us friends."* Jesus is the ultimate friend, the ultimate "encourager." Far more than just rekindling our inner fire, His Spirit **is** our inner fire.

Paul prays for us: *"I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God."* (Philippians 1:9-11). Pray this prayer for people you know who need some encouragement, today ...

*Blessed Lord,
who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
grant that we may in such wise hear them,
read them,
mark them,
learn from them,
and inwardly digest them.
By patience and the comfort of your holy Word,
May we embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, October 11: Colossians 1:1-6

Jesus changes lives. The Spirit changes lives. God, the Father changes lives. Paul talks about the "good news" or "the gospel" (an old English word also meaning "good news") changing lives. This good news is the good news about God's love revealed to us in Jesus, now real in our lives through the Holy Spirit.

How does God – Father, Son, and Spirit change lives? How has He changed your life?

Sometimes we struggle to say how God has changed us. Especially if we have grown up in a Christian environment, never gone through a major rebellion, never hit a serious "low," and never had brutal

problems, we find this a challenge. We almost envy the dramatic testimony of the former drug-addict-gang-member-jailbird-near-death-experience-toughian who had a death-bed conversion experience.

Part of the "good news" we can be thankful for is that we did not have to go through hell and back to know Jesus. Many people who do descend into the depths don't make it back ... If you don't have an "I-was-once-lost-but-now-am-found" conversion experience, be thankful.

Others of us have spent time away from God. There is a profound sense of alone-ness, purposelessness, emptiness, and hopelessness that comes from not knowing God. You try to avoid the "big," ultimate questions about the meaning of life and death because they take you into emptiness.

The good news is that, in God – Father, Son, and Spirit – we discover we are loved. We discover we are created with a purpose: for a relationship with God and with other people. We can experience His forgiveness and mercy: our guilt can be swept away and we can begin again. We have a mission: to help His Kingdom come by living, loving, and sharing His love with others. We have hope for the future: our lives and our eternities are in His hands. That is all good news.

Who do you know who needs good news? Pray for them, that they may know God. How can you share His love, His hope, and His peace with them today?

*Forgive them all, Lord:
our sins of omission and our sins of commission,
the sins of our youth,
and the sins of our riper years,
the sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies,
our secret and our more open sins,
our sins of ignorance and surprise,
and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins.
Forgive the sins we have done to please ourselves
and the sins we have done to please others,
the sins we know and remember,
and the sins we have forgotten.
Forgive the sins we have tried to hide from others
and the sins by which we have made others offend.
Forgive them, Lord, forgive them all
for the sake of the one who died for our sins,
rose for our justification,
and now stands at your right hand to make intercession for us,
Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.*

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Thursday, October 12: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Thank God for our government. You may or may not agree with every City Councillor, Mayor, MLA, Premier, MP or Prime Minister. But we can be thankful for the country in which we live, for the democracy we enjoy, for the security and legal system under which thrive. God has blessed us in many ways.

Peter, living under the brutal Emperor Nero (with whom he certainly did not agree!) writes, "*For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority – whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right. It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king.*" (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Paul, who would ultimately be executed by Nero, urges us to pray for those in authority.

What do we pray?

- We can thank God for those willing to serve in government – it's a tough job.
- We pray for God's Spirit to give them wisdom.
- We pray they would put God's priorities first: justice, integrity, compassion for those most vulnerable, the needs of those who are hurting and struggling.
- We pray they would put (1) God, and (2) the best interests of all people before their own interests.
- We pray for their physical, emotional, and spiritual health – public service is hard on a person.
- We pray for their families – public service is brutal on families.
- We pray God would lead people who honour and love Him into public service.
- What else can we pray for?

*Lord, help us not to forget that we are in a battle with enemies in the heavenly places.
We don't wage war with human weapons but with the weapons of the Spirit.
Let us put on the armor of light,
depending on your mighty power to make the enemy flee from us.
We thank you that you have given us this authority through the precious blood of the Lamb.
In the powerful name of Jesus
we can overcome all spiritual opposition.
We have your promise that if we resist the devil
he will flee from us.
Keep us from opening ourselves to his influence by allowing temptation to turn into sin.
Help us to repent of any sinful habits that create strongholds for the enemy.
Help us to be faithful and obedient to you, and you alone.
May we examine our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.

Friday, October 13: Philemon

Onesimus is a runaway slave, fleeing from his master in Colossae (modern day Turkey), now in Rome (he is mentioned in Colossians 4:9). Runaway slaves could be arrested and imprisoned (at best) or tortured and executed (at worst). He is running for his life – one step ahead of the executioner. What hope is there? He cannot stop running. He cannot work. He lives every moment in fear. He runs into Paul, a prisoner in Rome. Something Paul says brings Onesimus to faith in Jesus. And Onesimus "blossoms" into who God created him to be, in his new identity "in Christ": a gifted, talented servant, better than ever before.

Philemon is a wealthy, successful man. Paul is thankful for Philemon's faith in Jesus. Now he wants Philemon to act on it. Onesimus, his slave, has run away. Paul is now returning him to Philemon. How should he react? Legally he could have Onesimus brutally beaten or killed. We might agree this is a bit harsh, but Philemon would be quite justified in being very angry with Onesimus. It would have been very appropriate for a master to severely discipline the wretch and give him the worst of all possible jobs.

But Paul's letter to Philemon is about new kinds of relationships, relationships inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit (they are not "normal" in society – not back then, not now):

1. Consider Paul's relationship with Philemon: "*Your love has given me great encouragement ... you have refreshed the hearts of the saints*" (v.7). He describes them as "*partners*" (v.17) and "*brothers*" (v.20); they had a wonderfully caring relationship characterized by generosity, frankness, honesty and integrity (vs.18-22). Isn't it great to have friends like that who genuinely bless you.
2. Consider Paul's relationship with Onesimus: Paul calls him "*my son*" (v.10), "*my very heart*" (v.12); "*I would have liked to keep him with me*" (v.13); "*he is very dear to me*" (v.16). This was not

typical language to talk about a slave – legally a possession not a person. But Paul is demonstrating that in the Kingdom of God, relationships are radically changed and people are radically equal.

3. Consider the relationship Paul wishes for between Philemon and Onesimus: he wants Philemon to treat Onesimus as *"no longer a slave but a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you ... welcome him as you would welcome me (by the way, I may be coming, so prepare your best guest room for me ... he can use it in the meantime)"* (v.16-17, 22). Paul is asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus as the Father welcomes home the prodigal in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:11-32).

These are relationships characterized by forgiveness, openness, vulnerability and affirmation. They seek to shape, positively, the lives of others. In a very real, stressful – potentially life-and-death – situation, Paul emphasizes that there is a distinctly Christ-like way to handle it: a way of grace and love, forgiveness and compassion, that builds people up rather than tears them down.

Jesus' way of relating to people is to offer forgiveness first, then invite them to change. As Jesus' people, we are encouraged to relate to people in love, not for what they are, but for what they might and must be in Jesus. We forgive first. And we help people become the glorious creations God intended them to be.

Jesus' way of relating to people is to affirm them, bringing out the best in them. In practical terms, how can I bring out the best in other people? How can I encourage them to be what God created them to be? How can I relate to all people as those who are so precious to God that Jesus died for them? I believe in Jesus: how do I need to act like it, showing mercy and forgiveness, in my relationships with other people?

Jesus' way of relating to people is to be open and vulnerable. Secure in his relationship with the Father and His own identity, Jesus could relate to people without being defensive. Do my insecurities interfere in my relationships? Am I honest with myself and others, or do I hide behind a mask? Do I need to say, "I'm sorry"? Living that way does not come naturally. It is a gift of the Spirit empowered by the Spirit.

"God loves us not because we are loveable but because He is love; not because He needs to receive, but because He delights to give" (C.S. Lewis). Who do I need to love with that same Spirit?

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
in you we live and move and have our being.
From you we have received tender mercy and compassion.
To you we owe our safety in days past,
together with all the comforts of this present life,
and the hopes of the life to come.
We praise you, O God, our Creator;
to you we give our thanks, for you are our joy and crown.
You daily pour out your good gifts upon us.
We humbly pray that Jesus, our Lord, the hope of glory,
may be more fully formed in us,
that we may grow in humility, meekness,
patience, contentment
and absolute surrender of our whole lives
- body, soul, and spirit -
to your will and pleasure.
Do not leave us or forsake us, our Father, but lead us safely
through all the changes of this present world, with an unchanging love for you,
and with a holy peace of mind which comes from an assurance of your steadfast love for us,
until we come at last to see you face-to-face,
be with you where you are,
behold your glory and worship you forever,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

Simon Patrick (1626-1707)

Saturday, October 14: Revelation 4

The beings in heaven are not playing football (Canadian or European). They are not sitting on clouds playing harps. They are *"giving glory and honor and **thanks** to the one sitting on the throne."*

In the old Westminster Catechism, the first question asked is *"What is the chief end of man?"* or what is our fundamental purpose in life? How would answer that? Keep that in mind as we read today's passage ...

Four creatures representing humanity, wild animals (king of beasts, the lion), domesticated animals (king of which is the ox), birds (king of which is the eagle) are all praising God.¹ We think of worship as a uniquely human activity, but **ALL** creation worships Him. Non-human creation does not worship God as we do, of course, but it does worship Him in its own unique ways (see Psalm 19:1-6, 103, 148, Job 38-42). Although humans are different from other created beings (we are created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27)), we are still intimately interconnected with the rest of creation. Part of the meaning of the image of God is that we are to be wise stewards of all of creation (Genesis 2:15). We – and wild animals, domesticated animals, birds, everything else in all creation – are all beloved and precious to God.

There is another difference between humans and non-human creation. Notice the two praise passages. The four living creatures express praise to God: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty – the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come"* (4:8). It is a wonderful straightforward song of praise. The 24 **human** elders exclaim, *"You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power **because** you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased"* (4:11). People can express **why** God deserves this worship. The human elders see the broad scope of creation, history, and salvation and can **thank** God in profound and rich ways, expressing **why** God is worthy of praise.

Let's go back to that question from the Westminster Catechism: *"What is the chief end of man?"* In the Catechism, the answer is, *"Man's chief end – our fundamental purpose – is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."* How does that strike you?

In my younger days, I would have said my real purpose is to grow in my faith, serve God in all sorts of ways, read Scripture, talk with people about Jesus, volunteer at the food bank, lead this group and that class, raise money for a mission project, write this study ... These are all good things. Necessary things. But in my busy-ness I can sometimes forget **WHO** it is really all about. I can forget to take time simply to worship and thank God. I can forget to take time to reflect on **WHY** I worship and give thanks to God.

Today's reading is a call to take time to give thanks and worship God. God is holy and almighty. He existed before creation and will outlast it. He delights to love us. He saves us. Praise Him. Thank Him.

*Lord, I am selfish,
but you are all about serving others in the name of your Father.
I am doubtful,
but you trusted your heavenly Father to the very point of dying for him.
When it comes to temptation,
I am weak, but you were a perfect picture of strength when the devil came to tempt you.
I am prone to anger when I feel someone is misjudging me,
but you were our example of "turning the other cheek."
I take everything I have for granted,
but you gave the glory to your heavenly Father in all things.
I forget to give thanks and praise you,
but You took time to pray, and thank your Father.
In all these things and others, Lord, make me more and more like you every day.
Amen.*

based on Tracy Macon Sumner

¹ Old Testament imagery and references to compare with this passage: Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1

Sunday, October 15: Deuteronomy 14:22-23

This is the season of the year for giving thanks. One of the great characteristics of the church – you and I – is that we have so much for which to be thankful. As we have thought about worship and communion (the Lord's Supper) we have been reminded that God created everything, loved us so much He came among us in Jesus, died on the cross that we might be forgiven, and rose from the dead. We are saved. We have eternal life (now and hereafter). His Spirit is in us. These are **BIG** things about which we can be thankful.

But on a year-by-year, month-by-month, day-by-day basis we have so much to be grateful for as well. We take so many blessings for granted: our health, family, country, daily bread, friends, job, health care, homes, pensions, educational opportunities, church, ability to talk, freedom, clothing, city, transportation, security, ability to hear, savings account, schools, recreation opportunities, ability to see, emergency services, life experiences, and so much more ...

We grumble and complain about some of these things. If only my job were better ... If only church were better ... If only my health were better ... If only my family were better ... If only my car were better ... If only the health care system were better ... If only my pension were better ...

What if, like most the world, we didn't have any of these things?

Throughout the Bible, we are encouraged to "tithes." Tithing is about giving thanks to God. Tithing is a spiritual discipline in which we give the first part of what we have to God as an expression of worship and as an expression of our thanks for His good gifts. Tithing is what thankful, grateful people do. They appreciate that all they have is a gift from God, and they delight to offer the first part of it back to God in worship.

- When God helps Abraham rescue Lot, Abraham gives God (represented by Melchizedek, God's priest), a tenth of everything (Genesis 14:18-20).
- When Jacob is blessed by God, he says, *"If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you"*(Genesis 28:12-22).

We have spent the past week thinking of all for which we are thankful. Can I "put my money where my mouth is" and worship God by giving to His Kingdom? If so, great. If not, why not? For some of us, worship is all well and good until we are challenged to give money. Why? We can make all sorts of excuses and explain all sorts of things away ... but at the end of the day, what does this say about how thankful we really are? How strong our faith is? What does this say about our worship of – and trust in – God?

"Give thanks, with a grateful heart ..." Give thanks – with more than just nice words.

*This morning, as I kindle the fire upon my hearth,
I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart, and in the hearts of all I meet today.
I pray that no envy or malice, hatred or fear may smother the flame.
I pray that indifference and apathy, contempt and pride,
may not pour like cold water on the fire.
Instead, may the spark of God's love light the love in my heart,
that it may burn brightly through the day.
And may I warm those that are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless,
so that all may know the comfort of God's love.
Burn in me, glorious Father;
burn in me, beautiful Jesus;
burn in me, Holy Spirit of power.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Monday, October 16: Deuteronomy 26

What has God done for you? What do you have to be thankful for? How can you express that gratitude?

The Biblical principle of tithing arises from a genuine relationship with God. As we reflect on how much God has done for us in the past and is doing for us, right now, we WANT to express our gratitude to Him. Giving a tithe – the first part of our income – is one way to do that. *"He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey,"* writes Moses. We may gripe a lot about life in Canada, but compared to most of the world, we are doing very well. *"And now, O Lord, I have brought you the first portion of the harvest you have given me from the ground.' Then place the produce before the Lord your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him"* (Deuteronomy 26:9-10). What are you thankful for?

Tithing is not a tax. It's not "the-church-wanting-my-money." It's not even about providing financial support for the ministries of the church (although that happens through our tithes). Tithing is an essential part of our worship of God. Tithing is our grateful response to God's love, care, provision, and salvation. Tithing is a tangible way we show our love for God.

Tithing is also a practical way we put our faith into practice. Money is the hardest thing to give away for many of us. It's just tough. Tithing challenges us to deal with that deeply embedded desire "to hold on" and "be safe." Do you control your pocketbook or does your pocketbook control you? Can you give to God?

Tithing encourages us actually to step out in faith. By giving God the first 10% we are trusting God to help us make it through on the other 90% (90% is still pretty good). Do you really trust God to take care of you?

"Afterward," says Moses, *"you may go and celebrate because of all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household"* (26:11). When we break the vice-grip our money has on us and really trust God, we can celebrate. Sometimes we think following Jesus is all serious, somber stuff – it's not. We are called to rejoice and celebrate in thanksgiving and in worship. How can we celebrate the gift of giving?

Note the second half of 26:11: *"Remember to include the Levites and the foreigners living among you in the celebration."* The Levites, the priests, were one of the 12 tribes, but they did not receive property when the Israelites came into the Promised Land. As a result, they needed the financial support of the other tribes. This was the economic order God set up. "Foreigners" were the existing peoples in Canaan, and refugees and migrants from other nations; the Israelites were to provide financial help for them, too. Unlike surrounding pagan nations, the people of God were to care for all people, not just people like them. As we thank God for our blessings, who can we bless? With whom can we share our blessings who are not like us?

*Hands who touched the leper,
touch my wounded heart;
Hands who healed the blind man,
heal my aching soul;
Hands who cured the lame,
mend my disjointed life;
Hands who embraced all life,
enfold me in your peace.
This is my prayer to you, my Lord:
Give me strength, lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.
Give me the strength never to disown the poor
or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to your will with love.
Amen.*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Tuesday, October 17: Malachi 3:1-12

Let's be honest: giving money to God is a hard discipline for some of us. And we can find excuses:

- We're not sure we can afford it.
- There are other things that seem more important.
- The church doesn't really need the money.
- I don't agree with where the money goes.

The prophet Malachi takes the Israelites to task over tithing, giving to God the first portion of their incomes. "Will you rob God?" is about as blunt an introduction to the topic of tithing/stewardship as you can get. "Robbing" means both not taking what is not mine, and keeping for myself what rightfully is due someone else. In Malachi's world, one tenth of a person's income was due to God.² Failure to do that, Malachi insists, amounts to stealing from God. The excuses are just excuses. It's God's money, not ours.

In our culture, we resent being told we ought to give to God at all. We certainly resist being told there might be a percentage we should give to the Lord. In Christ, we are "free" of all these Old Testament laws, aren't we? We are saved by grace not the Law. And God's grace is free. Right? Yes!

Yes, we are free of the legalistic 10% law in Genesis, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But I've noticed people who are most outspoken about "not being under the law" – for instance, those who reject this 10% principle out of hand – claim this freedom so they can do whatever **they want to do**. In the case of tithing, they often reject the Old Testament principle because they want to give far less than 10% or nothing at all. It's **their** money and they don't want to give it to anyone – including God. Eager to hold onto **their** money, they often spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about their finances (Scripture has lots of warnings about this, e.g. Matthew 19:23-24, 1 Timothy 6:6-10). People who cling to their wealth often are not content, joyful people. They tend to have lots of problems with worry, anxiety, ulcers, and stress.

The reason Jesus sets us free from the legalisms of the Old Testament is not so we can hold onto our wealth. We are set free so can be even more generous. The people who are the most generous givers do so freely and joyfully, often well beyond the 10% principle. These folks often are the most pleasant, content, godly people I know. Malachi 3:10 is a promise (counterintuitive and countercultural though it sounds) that rings true in many of our experiences. God loves a cheerful giver. For your mental and spiritual health, maybe you can't afford **not** to give to God. (FYI, it is easiest if you give the **first** 10%, not the leftovers; there rarely are leftovers. When I give to God first, the bills always seem to get paid anyway).

It is more blessed to give than to receive (or to hold on to everything). What is God saying to you?

*Sweet Saviour Christ,
in your undeserved love for us you were prepared to suffer the painful death of the cross.
Let me not be cold or even lukewarm in my love for you.
Lord, help me to face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them,
to see my face as others see me.
Let me be honest enough to recognize my impatience and conceit.
Let me recognize my anger and selfishness.
Give me sufficient humility to accept my own weaknesses for what they are.
Give me the grace – at least in your presence –
to say, "I was wrong – forgive me."
God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
increase in us faith and truth and gentleness.
Amen.*

Polycarp (69-155)

² This was the Old Testament standard, establish back in the days of Moses: see Numbers 18:21-24 and the other passages this week.

Wednesday, October 18: Matthew 6:19-34

Worry. Stress. Anxiety. Often these are linked to concerns about our financial well-being. We struggle to really, genuinely, practically trust God.

Jesus invites us to discover freedom from worry through our relationship with God. This all sounds great. But it is very difficult to actually put into practice.

Some practical ideas I have found helpful:

- Give to God first (I use automatic direct withdrawal to the church) – if you never see the money, you can't spend it on something else. Tithing really helps me be free from an obsession about **my** money. It's God's money. He gets "paid" first. I can live on the blessing of the rest.
- Live modestly – I really don't need the newest car, biggest TV, fanciest house, or latest i-phone. In fact, I like the familiar older stuff. And I have less stuff to breakdown and cause me stress.
- Don't buy on impulse. Stick to your list in a store. Online, if you put something in your "cart" don't buy it right away: leave it sit and fester for a week. If you can live without it for a week, you can live without longer. Only buy what you really need.
- Stay out of debt (except for things like a mortgage – even then, buy modestly).

Paul advises his mentoree, Timothy, *"True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content. But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows"*(1 Timothy 6:6-10).

Notice: money, in and of itself, is not evil. The **love of money** is the root of all kinds of evil.

Money is neutral. It's just a thing. We can use money to be an amazing instrument of blessing. It can be a tool to build God's Kingdom. Or we can let the **love of money** eat us up from the inside out.

Paul goes on say, *"But you, Timothy, are a man of God; so run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness"*(1 Timothy 6:6:11).

Try tithing. It's a wonderful discipline that helps free us from an inordinate love of money. And we are part of changing the world through our own church, and, through our missions, the entire world.

*Lord God who is all in all to me,
Life of my life and Spirit of my spirit,
have mercy on me and fill me with your Holy Spirit
and fill me with love that there may be no room for anything else in my heart.
I ask not for any blessing,
but for you, who is the giver of all blessings and of all life.
I ask not for the world and its pomp and glory, nor for heaven,
but I need you yourself, for where you are, there is heaven.
In you alone is satisfaction and abundance for my heart;
you yourself, my Creator, have created my heart for yourself, and not for any other created thing.
Therefore, my heart cannot find rest in anything but you:
only in you, Father, who has made this longing for peace in my soul.
So now take out of this heart whatever is opposed to you
and abide and rule in it yourself.
Amen.*

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

Thursday, October 19: Luke 20:46-21:1-4

Jesus is contrasting two types of people. (Sometimes the "chapter breaks" in our Bibles are not so helpful; they were added 1200 years after the New Testament gospels were written).

- Consider the Pharisees in Jesus is Luke 20:46-47. They sound remarkably like the people Malachi was chastising (Tuesday's reading).
- Now think about the widow in Luke 21:1-4. She sounds remarkably like the person Jesus is encouraging us to be In Matthew 6:19-34 and Paul is advising Timothy to be (1 Timothy 6:11).

The point of both little anecdotes is not how little or how much each person did or did not give. Jesus' point is to challenge us to look at the hearts of these two types of people:

- The Pharisees love being noticed for their fine clothes; they love being honoured; they love being seen to be religious. But they also love money, shamelessly cheating widows out of their property. They give from their surplus; it costs them nothing, really. Where does God fit in their lives?
- The widow loves God. She gives Him everything she has.

We are not called to give every last penny to God and be destitute. We are asked to think about how much we love money. We are asked how much we trust God. We are challenged to look into our hearts:

- Do we have some of the Pharisee within us?
- Do we have some of this widow within us, too?

What might God be saying to you?

*Come, Lord Jesus, and remain in my heart.
Help me trust in you.
How grateful I am to realize that the answer to my prayer
does not depend on me at all.
As I quietly remain in you and let your life flow in me,
what freedom it is to know that the Father does not see
my frayed patience or insufficient trust,
rather only your patience, Lord,
and your confidence that the Father has everything in hand.
In faith, I thank you right now for a more glorious answer to my prayer
than I can imagine.
I trust in you.
Amen*

(Widow) Catherine Marshall (1914-1983)

Friday, October 20: Matthew 23:23-39

The Pharisees were the "evangelicals" of their day. They attended synagogue. They prayed earnestly. They studied their Bibles. They wanted people to live good, godly lives. They tithed. They wanted a God-fearing government. They wanted a God-centred, God-loving country. They loved (the 1st-Century equivalent) of a Governor's Prayer Breakfast or a photo-op with King Herod.

What does Jesus say to them? Ouch. All of Matthew 23 is Jesus' words to the Pharisees; you are welcome to read it all.

What might Jesus say to His people today? Ouch.

It is very possible to be very "religious" people – even to tithe a full 10% – and lose touch with God in any meaningful, genuine way. We can do lots of the right religious things for all the wrong reasons.

In Revelation 2, Jesus dictates a letter to His church in Ephesus (the same on to whom Paul wrote Ephesians). Jesus says to these followers of His: *"I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting"*(Revelation 2:2-3). They're doing all the right things. They're feeling pretty good.

"But," Jesus goes on, *"I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first. Look how far you have fallen. Turn back to me and do the works you did at first"*(Revelation 2:4-5). Ouch.

Remember the widow, in Luke 21:1-4, yesterday? In contrast to the Pharisees, she genuinely loved God. She loved God first. She gave from a grateful heart to God. Her gifts flowed from her love for God.

It is good – really good – to tithe and give generously to God's work. But it needs to glow from our love for God and our love for the people around us. We give out of love.

May God help us to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And may God help us to truly love our neighbour as ourselves. Out of that love, may we give with thankful, joyful, loving hearts.

*Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Salvation:
we praise you and we give you thanks.
And though we are unworthy to be your guests,
though we cannot offer to you a fitting devotion,
may your loving kindness supply for our weakness.
Before you, Lord our God, all our desires are known,
and whatsoever our heart rightly wills is a result of your grace.
Grant that we may attain a genuine love of you.
Don't let your grace be unfruitful in us, Lord.
Perfect that which you have started.
Give that which you have made us to long for.
Convert our lukewarm-ness to a burning love of you,
for the glory of your holy name.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Saturday, October 21: 2 Corinthians 8-9

These days Greece is facing tough economic times. Back in Paul's day southern Greece (Corinth, Athens) was booming. Northern Greece – Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica) – was in dire economic straits. They were persecuted for their faith. The Christians in Jerusalem were having an even harder time, economically and under brutal persecution. Paul is taking up an offering to help the believers in Jerusalem.

The ***struggling, suffering Macedonians*** are incredibly generous: *"They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity"*(8:2). These hard-pressed believers are eager to help (8:3-54). Wow. Isn't that fantastic.

However, the ***wealthy Corinthians*** are being stingy. They started a collection with great fanfare, but it is now side-tracked (8:6). Paul wants to give them an angry blast, but he chooses instead to appeal to their faith and sense of compassion. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul gives principles for giving:

- Give eagerly. It's a privilege not an obligation or a burden (8:11-12). How do you think of giving?
- Give generously (*"give according to what you have, not what you don't have"*(8:11-12)). Don't whine about how little you have compared to what you want or think you should have. Count your blessings. Be thankful. And give accordingly. As we shall see, *"God loves a cheerful giver."*
- When you have enough, be generous. There may be a time when the tables are turned, and you

can be thankful for the help others may give ("*Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it*" (8:13-15)).

Isn't it interesting that Paul doesn't have to encourage those who have the least (the Macedonians) to be generous? Yet he has to work so hard to convince those who have the most (the Corinthians) to give at all.

In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul gives us some more principles:

1. "*You must each decide in your heart how much to give.*" There is no firm rule. The Old Testament norm was 10% of one's gross income. Many of us choose to follow that guideline. Many people are much more generous. Paul is encouraging us to give generously **FIRST**, then live on the rest ...
 2. "*Don't give reluctantly*" ("*For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.*" (Proverbs 22:8)). It is a joyful privilege to help build God's Kingdom.
 3. "*Don't give in response to pressure.*" We give, recognizing that all we have is a gift from God. God is the one who gives us the ability and opportunity to have an income. We are stewards of what He entrusts to us. So we give back to God from what is already God's. It's part of our joyful worship.
 4. "*God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others ... For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous.*" One of the obstacles to generosity may be that we don't really believe we can afford the money or the time. What is God's promise? Do we trust God enough so that we can be generous?
 5. "*When we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving — the financial needs of the believers will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God.*" Generosity is such an incredible blessing to the one who receives it. And it is also a blessing to those who give, too. We have the satisfaction of knowing we are blessing others and building God's Kingdom.
- What is God saying to **you** – not the other guy – today?
 - How can you help build the Kingdom of God, today?

*How poorly we repay you, my Lord,
for all the good things you have given us.
In your majesty, you seek all kinds of ways and means
by which to show us the love you have for us.
Yet we hold this in low esteem, because we are so inexperienced in loving you.
Because we haven't practiced loving you as we should,
our thoughts follow their usual pattern
and we do not bother to ponder the great mystery
of the ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.*

*Majestic King, forever wise,
you melt my heart, which once was cold,
and when your beauty fills my eyes,
it makes them young, which once were old.
Christ, my Creator, hear my cry;
I am yours, you can I hear,
my Savior, Master, yours am I;
my heart to yours be ever near.
Whether in life or death's last hour,
if sickness, pain or health you give,
or shame, or honor, weakness, power –
thankful is the life I live.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Sunday, October 22: Matthew 5:1-16 Thanksgiving Supper, 5 p.m.

"Blessed are ____" or "God blesses those who ____" How would you finish that sentence?

- "Blessed are those who have prayed a certain prayer"?
- "Blessed are those who agree to a certain statement/position about _____ (fill in the blank)"?
- "Blessed are those who are against _____ (fill in the blank)"?

Churches and individual Christians would answer in all sorts of ways. What does Jesus say?

- God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who mourn. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who are humble. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who are merciful. What does that mean?
- God blesses those whose hearts are pure. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who work for peace. What does that mean?
- God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right. What does that mean?

What IS in this list that surprises you?

What is NOT in this list that surprises you by its absence?

Jesus goes on to talk about us as salt and light in the world.

- What does it mean to be salt in the world?
- What does it mean to be light in the world?

Jesus wants us to know that faith in Him changes us. Faith in Him changes how we live. We become passionate about things like justice and mercy. We actively become peace-makers. We expect persecution/opposition – that's life. Rather than whine about it, in His Spirit, we roll with it. Maybe it means we're being the people of God we are called to be when we go through some tough times ...

How can you be salt? How can you be light?

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,
To love what I ought to love,
To praise what delights You most,
To value what is precious in Your sight,
To hate what is offensive to You.
Do not let me judge according to the sight of my eyes,
Nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of my own, ignorant ears;
But help me to discern with a true judgment what is true and good,
And above all, always to ask You what is the good pleasure of Your will.
Lord, You know what is best;
let this be done or that be done as You please.
Give what You will, as much as You will, when You will.
Do with me as You know best, as will most please You, and will be for Your greater honor.
Place me where You will and deal with me freely in all things.
I am in Your hand; turn me about whichever way You will.
Here I am, Your servant, ready to obey in all things.
Not for myself do I desire to live, but for You –
would that I could do this worthily and perfectly.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Monday, October 23: Hebrews 1:1-12

What does God, the Father, say to God, the Son, Jesus?

- "You are my Son. Today I have become your Father" (quoting Psalm 2:7)
- "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" (quoting 2 Samuel 7:14)
- "Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. You rule with a scepter of justice. You love justice and hate evil. Therefore, O God, your God has anointed you, pouring out the oil of joy on you more than on anyone else" (Psalm 45:6-7)
- "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundation of the earth and made the heavens with your hands. They will perish, but you remain forever. They will wear out like old clothing. You will fold them up like a cloak and discard them like old clothing. But you are always the same; you will live forever" (Psalm 102:25-27).

The author's point is to emphasize that Jesus really is fully God. Angels are not.

What unique qualities does Jesus, God the Son, have? His is in a close family relationship with God, His Father. He is eternal. He never changes. He carries a scepter of justice, loves justice, and hates evil. He is anointed with the oil of joy. What in this list surprises you? What is NOT in this list that surprises you?

When you think of Jesus, is "justice" one of the first words that comes to mind? In both yesterday's reading and today's text, justice is important. Jesus loves justice and rules with a sceptre of justice AND God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice.

Throughout the Bible justice is closely related to righteousness. God is righteous, holy, and just. His people are to be like Him – righteous, holy, and just – in their behaviour. There is a moral component to justice: we live in accordance with God's commands (things like the Ten commandments). There is an ethical component, too: we live out His commands and seek to live like Jesus (things like integrity, care for the poor and vulnerable, honest business dealings, bringing God's love and mercy, support for foreigners).

We emphasize the importance of a personal decision to believe in Jesus and rightly so: it is essential. We have been less passionate about the expectation that we follow Jesus as people who hunger and thirst after justice. For Jesus, it's not an either/or. It's a both/and. We do believe His is our Saviour AND we live for Him with justice and mercy. What does that mean for me today?

*God listen to my prayer;
my earnest petition to come to you
for I know that you are hearing me as surely as though I saw you with my own eyes.
Anything that is amiss in my soul,
anything that is wrong in my life
may you, O God, sweep it from me and may you shield me in your love.
Let no thought come to my heart,
let no sound come to my ear,
let no temptation come to my eye,
let no fragrance come to my nose,
let no fancy come to my mind,
let no ruffle come to my spirit,
that is hurtful to my body or my soul this day or this night.
May you, yourself, O God of life, be in front of me, and behind me,
may you be my guiding-star,
may you be my Lord,
from my life's beginning to my life's end.
Amen*

Celtic prayer

Tuesday, October 24: Exodus 23:1-9

I struggle with parts of the Old Testament. I struggle to understand the violence, death, and destruction of the conquest of Joshua and Judges. I struggle with the symbolic language and judgment passages in the prophets. I struggle through the long lists of rules and regulations in books like Exodus and Leviticus that seem irrelevant to my life.

Read just a few of these principles in Exodus 23, a few pages after the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-20). Is this practical? Yes. Is God concerned about justice/righteousness/holiness? Yes.

We no longer have too many oxen and donkeys, but we could substitute contemporary possessions. Notice how commonsense these principles are. They are actually relevant.

Jesus links righteousness with seeking first God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:33). If we are genuinely passionate about God, Jesus, and the Spirit, then we will be passionate about His righteousness/justice/holiness as well. We choose to live with integrity, mercy, compassion, honesty, forgiveness, and grace. God has been so merciful and gracious to us; we choose to model His forgiveness and love to our broken world.

How can I "seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously" or "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" today (Matthew 6:33)?

*I praise you for the life that stirs within me.
I praise you for the bright and beautiful world into which I go.
I praise you for earth and sea and sky,
for scudding cloud and singing bird.
I praise you for the work you have given me to do.
I praise you for all that you have given me to fill my leisure hours.
I praise you for family.
I praise you for my friends.
I praise you for music and books and good company and all pure pleasures.
I praise you for the mission you give me to be good news in the world.
Amen.*

John Baillie (1886-1960)

Wednesday, October 25: Isaiah 1:1-23

What's a "prophet"? We tend to think of prophets as future-tellers. A few passages in the biblical prophets fit that mold. But most of the biblical prophets spoke God's truth into their contemporary world. Prophets, like Isaiah, were **not foretelling the future** as much as **forth-telling God's truth into the present**.

They did use a lot of symbolic language that makes it hard for us to understand some passages. But. If we sort through the jargon, their message still comes across loud and clear:

*"See how Jerusalem, once so faithful, has become a prostitute.
Once the home of justice and righteousness, she is now filled with murderers.
Once like pure silver, you have become like worthless slag.
Once so pure, you are now like watered-down wine.
Your leaders are rebels, the companions of thieves.
All of them love bribes and demand payoffs, but they refuse to defend the cause of orphans or fight for the rights of widows" (Isaiah 1:21-23).*

God is passionate about justice. And in the next 65 chapters of Isaiah, God returns again and again to the theme that the people of Israel are dishonest, lie, cheat, steal, pervert justice, are greedy, have no compassion for the poor or foreigners, and have forgotten Him. They do all the "right" religious things and give lip service to all the "right" doctrines, but their behaviour shows that they really don't love God at all.

"Wash yourselves and be clean." God says, "Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows"(1:16-17). Our love for God should result in practical fruit. We should love as God loves.

When we do, this is God's promise to us: *"Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool"(1:18). That is great news.*

Pray that God would teach us what it means in our community to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, defend the cause of orphans, and fight for the rights of widows. How do we care for the vulnerable?

May our lives demonstrate the fruit of God's Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus," Paul adds, "have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" or "let us keep in step with the Spirit"(Galatians 5:24-25).

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

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1916)

Thursday, October 26: Amos 5:1-24

Like Isaiah, the prophet Amos is **forth-telling** God's truth into his world. Their justice system is twisted, taxes are unfair, the rich get richer, people take advantage of the poor, people take bribes ... the whole culture is corrupt. And yet they are "religious" people. They go to church. They believe the right things. They even sing the right songs. But their lives show no righteousness, no love, no mercy, no compassion, no justice, no forgiveness, no honesty, no integrity, no godliness at all.

Has that kind of indictment ever been true of Christians? The specifics might be different, but do some of the attitudes of greed, heartlessness, corruption, dishonesty, smug superiority, judgmentalism, and pride ring true among some Christians? Do some of these things ring true in us?

This is what God says to the religious people of Amos' day: *"I hate all your show and pretense – the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise. I will not listen to the music of your harps"(5:22-23).*

What might God be saying to us?

"Instead," God says, "I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living."

Passages like Amos 5 lead us into some hard places. They challenge us to do some honest self-examination.

In humility and repentance:

- Do I ever take advantage of other people? Or am I silent when society takes advantage of people?
- Am I ever unjust in my dealings? Or am I silent when my society is unjust against someone?
- Am I greedy? Or am I silent when wealthy people take advantage of those who have little?
- Am I dishonest? Or am I silent when others lie, cheat, or steal?
- Do I think less of people who are less fortunate or are foreigners? Or am I silent when my culture puts down those who are poor, disabled, hurting, or foreigners?
- Am I a person of integrity? Or am I silent when people are hurt by a lack of integrity from others?

Thank God for His promise: *"Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool"* (Isaiah 1:18).

"God has shown you what is good," says the prophet Micah, *"And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:8). What does that mean for us?

May God help us to understand how we can be people who let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream ...

*You, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are a deep sea,
and the more I enter into you the more I find,
and the more I find the more I seek.
My soul cannot be satisfied without you,
for it continually hungers for you, the eternal Trinity,
desiring to see you with the light of your light.
As the heart desires springs of living water,
so my soul desires to leave the prison of this dark body and see you in truth.
Eternal God, what more could you give me than yourself?
You are the fire that burns without being consumed.
You consume in your heart all my soul's self-love and sin.
You are the fire that takes away the cold and darkness in my soul.
With your light, I pray that you might illuminate me
so that I may know all your truth.
Clothe me with yourself, eternal truth,
so I may run this mortal life in true obedience,
guided by the light of your most holy love and truth.
Amen.*

Catherine of Siena (1347-1386)

Friday, October 27: Galatians 6:1-10

Paul loves to contrast life-without-the-Spirit with life-in-the-Spirit in His letters. In Galatians 5:16-25, he writes, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions ..."*

"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God."

"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things.

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives."

He continues in Galatians 6 to clarify what it means to live by the Spirit and walk in step with the Spirit. *"Don't be misled," says Paul, "you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good" (6:7-9).*

What "good" things can we do? Who can you encourage? Who can you help in a small way? Who can you call? To whom can you be a little bit of light in a dark world?

One smile, one kind word, or one small act of grace can make someone else's day. And only God knows how far the ripple effects of that blessing may travel ...

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Saturday, October 28: Matthew 12:1-21

Justice can mean obeying the law. The Pharisees are passionately concerned about obeying the law: they see Jesus picking grain on the Sabbath and they go ballistic. Jesus and His disciples are breaking the 4th Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.

The Pharisees keep the letter of the law, but completely miss the spirit of it. The spirit of the law is that we (1) Love the Lord your God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and (2) love our neighbour as ourselves. In this case, we have a rich quality of life with God by resting from our normal work.

God's justice is not about following "the letter of the law" for the sake of following the letter of the law. God's justice is about (1) Loving the Lord your God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and (2) loving our neighbour as ourselves, too. God's justice is that His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, so that all people might know His love, His mercy, His grace, and new life in Him.

Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4. Notice what God's justice looks like. Justice is not a get-in-your-face-smack-down. Justice does not post angry memes on Facebook. Justice does not build walls between people.

God's justice perfectly reflects the fruit of Spirit in Galatians 5. God's justice is all about love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We are to be passionate about God's justice: His justice is that His Kingdom come and His will is done. We make this happen by walking in the Spirit: with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We live His love. If we find ourselves getting angry, bitter, fearful, resentful, judgmental, or stressed, we need to come back to Jesus. We need to listen to and learn from Him again ...

How can I act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God today? (Micah 6:8)

*I praise you, Lord, the God of love,
who has given your people a way to have perfect peace with you.
I praise you, Lord, the God of forgiveness,
who wants to bury your people's sins in the depths of your intentional forgetfulness.
I praise you, Lord, the God of perfect provision,
who has given your people everything they need to live the life you've given them to live.
I praise you, Lord, the perfectly holy God,
who reaches down to such imperfect creatures as us.
Lord, thank you for designing us so that we can praise you
from our hearts and with our mouths.
Thank you for allowing us to praise your name.
Let us simply look at who you are and what you mean to us ...
We WANT to praise your name with our whole beings.
Father, I don't always know how to praise you as you are worthy
– what words to say or actions to take –
I ask that you take all my words and all my actions
and make them into fitting praise to your name.
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Sunday, October 29: Galatians 3:23-29 and Romans 6:1-14

As followers of Jesus there are some things we "do" – not to be "religious," not to put on a show, not because they are magical, not because they earn us favour with God. We do them because:

- a. they help us grow spiritually
- b. they are modeled by Jesus
- c. they are commanded by Jesus and/or Scripture

Some of these we know very well: We pray. We read Scripture. We live by God's ethical standards. We give generously. We try to be more and more like Jesus in how we live. We gather together for worship, fellowship, and to encourage and build up one another: *"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another ..."* (Hebrews 10:24-25). These things are important for our (and others') spiritual growth, because this is what Jesus did, and because He commands them.

As people who say we follow Jesus, of course we obey Jesus. We follow those patterns of living, values, ethics, and practices that Jesus modeled and commanded.

In our tradition, we also have two "ordinances"³ or symbolic acts as part of our worship – baptism and communion. Some Christian traditions use the word "sacrament"⁴ – some traditions believe the sacraments have magical power in and of themselves, that God gives a special blessing through the action of the sacrament and only through the sacrament. Therefore, only a priest can administer the sacrament.

³ "Ordinance" from the verb, "to ordain" -- an ordinance is simply a practice Jesus ordained or commanded.

⁴ From a Latin word mean an oath of faithfulness. A great word in its original meaning - but it has taken on other connotations.

We believe ordinances are rich symbolic acts. They're not magical. They don't change us simply by going through the motions. They don't save us. They don't provide us with special status in the Kingdom of God.

They are however, important for our spiritual journeys – through them we obey Jesus, we publicly express our faith, and we remind ourselves of the central convictions of our faith in Jesus. We do them out of obedience to Jesus' command because they help us understand God's grace better, help us worship better, and bless us in our spiritual journey.

They are outward expressions of spiritual realities that have already taken place within us. They are public ways that we express our love, loyalty, and desire to obey Jesus.

This week we'll look at baptism. Is baptism something ordained or commanded by Jesus? In Matthew 28:18-19, Jesus says, "*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.*"

In Acts 2, as Peter concludes his sermon, "*Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter replied, 'Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be **baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.'*" (2:37-28).

Baptism, Paul explains in Galatians and Romans, is

- An expression of our unity with Jesus – Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3);
- It is like "*putting on new clothes*" – symbolically we publicly identify ourselves as His people;
- Through baptism, we symbolically "act out" the good news – as we go under the water we symbolically die to our old (pre-Jesus) life, and, as we come up out of the water, we are "resurrected" to a new eternal life as a follower of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit.
- We demonstrate, through our actions, that we are people who have accepted Jesus as our Saviour and do desire to live new lives with Him as our Lord.

Baptism is a powerful picture of what coming to faith in Jesus is all about.

Spend some time today reading these two passages. How is baptism a symbol of new life in Christ?

- If you have been baptized, think back on that even and reflect on what this means to you today.
- If you have not been baptized but do believe in Jesus, why not do it now? – talk to one of the pastors today. It is Christ's command.

If you have not been baptized but are not sure about your faith, think about the freedom that comes through Jesus – can you make the decision to follow Him today? Talk to one of the pastors today, too.

*We humbly beg you, Lord,
for the gifts and for the grace of the Holy Spirit.
Give us more love for you and for our neighbors.
Give us more joy in worship,
more peace at all times,
more long-suffering, gentleness,
and kindness of heart and manner.
May we know something of what it means to be filled with Holy Spirit.
May the memory of our baptism reaffirm our faith today.
Or may your Spirit move us to take that step of faith,
affirming you as Saviour, and following you as Lord.
For the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our King,
that His Kingdom come on Earth as it in Heaven.
Amen.*

Monday, October 30: Acts 8:26-40

What is the pattern in the Bible for people who believe in Jesus and want to follow Him?

1. They hear the good news about Jesus and the Kingdom of God.
2. They choose to respond in faith – they believe.
3. They are baptized.

Does the Ethiopian understand everything about Christian theology yet? Has he dealt with all the issues in his life yet? Does he understand all the implications of his new found faith yet? Probably not ...

Baptism is a starting point for him. He will need to continue to learn, grow, and become more and more like Jesus. Baptism marks the beginning of this process. An early church historian, Nicephorus, says the gospel-writer Matthew ended up in Ethiopia; Matthew may have helped this man grow more and more in his faith (Did you know that today 60% of Ethiopians are Christian, tracing their spiritual roots back to the 1st century? Pray for the church in Ethiopia).

In the future, when this fellow goes through tough times in his faith (as we all do), his baptism will be something he can look back on as a very significant moment in his life. He can look back and remember how he came to faith through reading Isaiah and through Philip's friendship. That legacy can encourage him tremendously in days to come.

Do you believe in Jesus as your Saviour?

- **If not**, take some time to reflect upon who He is and His invitation to you to follow Him as Saviour and as Lord ... Talk with some friends. Ask them about their experiences with Jesus.
- **If so**, and if you have not been baptized, why not? Jesus set the example. It is His command. It is the "norm" expected of believers.
 - Do you think you're not good enough yet?
 - Do you think you don't know enough yet?
 - Have you just not got around to it yet?
 - Do you want it to "mean" something magical?
 - Are you feeling too self-conscious about it?
 - Are you saying, "*I've been a Christian so long, so it seems silly now after all this time ...*"

What do you think Philip would have said to this Ethiopian traveler if any of these excuses fit his situation? I think Philip would have said, "*Get over it and get on with it.*" Maybe this is what God needs to say to us: "*Get over it and get on with it.*" (My kids might say, "*Suck it up and just do it.*")

Down the road, when difficult times come, your baptism can be a wonderful reminder of your commitment to Jesus. You will have that experience to look back on and draw strength from. We don't do this to be "religious" – we do it to be obedient to Jesus and to help ourselves (and others) grow in our faith.

Pray for those you know who need to make a commitment to Christ – maybe yourself?

*Lord Jesus, here I am.
Thank you that you are here with me.
You know who I am, what's going on in my life,
My joys, my fears, my hope, and my sorrows.
And you love me.
And you will walk with me.
And you will never leave me.
Thank you, Lord Jesus. Thank you.*

Amen

Tuesday, October 31: Acts 9:1-31

We first meet Saul (a.k.a. Paul) in Acts 8:1 – the Jewish leaders were infuriated with Stephen's confession of faith in Jesus and stoned him to death: "*Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.*" Zealous in his Jewish fervour, Saul now sets out to arrest, bring to trial, imprison, or stone to death as many Christians as possible (9:1-3). God, however, has other plans. As you read Paul's story, notice God is very much in control. He is the one who leads Paul to faith. He is the one who inspires people to accept Paul. He is the one who protects Paul. God can manage His Kingdom quite well.

Notice Paul is baptized (9:18). It's simply non-negotiable. Of course he is baptized. Like the Ethiopian, he is just beginning his Christian journey. Paul cannot begin to understand or imagine all the implications and consequences of his decision, but baptism is a key starting point for him.

Some people do have dramatic conversion experiences like Saul/Paul. Praise God for that. These folks can identify a clear "before-I-was-a-Christian" and "after-I-became-a-Christian" time.

Sometimes we imply everyone must have a Saul-like conversion. It must be dramatic. But many people have been raised in Christian homes, been part of children's ministries, youth programmes, churches, camps and other Christian influences all their lives. They cannot remember NOT being a Christian. There was no defining moment when they chose to put their faith in Jesus. They always believed. Sometimes these folks can be a bit jealous of the Saul-like folks who have had a dramatic conversion, their story is so much better.

Neither experience is better. Those who have been raised in Christian homes can be thankful for the upbringing they had. It's a tremendous blessing NOT to have experienced the hopelessness, fear, stress, and confusion that comes from not knowing God. It is not fun.

The challenge for those who have always been in the faith, however, is when do you get baptized? There isn't a dramatic conversion experience to mark a turning point from no-faith to faith-in-God. My advice? If you ask yourself the questions, "*Do I, personally, believe in Jesus as my Saviour? Do I, personally, want to continue to try to live for Him and follow Him as Lord?*" and you answer yourself, "**YES,**" then get baptized. There won't be a lightning bolt or voice from heaven (probably), but if you know that you believe ... go for it. It will help solidify and strengthen your faith. If this moment is such a time for you, let's talk about it. It is an important act of obedience to Christ, and a great spiritual step of faith for you to take.

Pray for the children, youth – and adults – in our church who do believe in Jesus but have not yet followed Him through baptism. Pray for them that they may have the courage, strength, and "push" from the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus through publicly confessing their faith in baptism. Pray for those who need to make that commitment to Jesus that leads to baptism, too.

A Workday Prayer (adapt to your own circumstances ...)

*Lord Jesus, as I enter this workplace, I bring your presence with me.
I speak your peace, your grace, and your perfect order into the atmosphere of this office.
I acknowledge your lordship over all that will be spoken, thought, decided and accomplished
within these walls. Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gifts you have deposited in me.
I do not take them lightly, but commit to use them responsibly and well.
Give me a fresh supply of truth and love on which to draw as I do my job.
Anoint my creativity, my ideas, my energy so that even my smallest task may bring you honor.
Lord, when I am confused, guide me. When I am weary, energize me.
Lord, when I am burned out, infuse me with the light of your Holy Spirit.
May the work that I do and the way I do it bring hope, life,
and courage to all I come in contact with today.
And, Lord, even in this day's most stressful moment, may I rest in you. Amen.*

Wednesday, November 1: Acts 10

The first Christians were Jewish converts. Most were quite content to keep Jesus in the Jewish family. But think of Jesus speaking to all sorts of people, Pentecost (Acts 2), Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8), now Cornelius, etc. God's plans for His Kingdom are far bigger than the early Christians imagined. God's desire is that ALL people – of ALL backgrounds – are welcome into His Kingdom. They don't have to become Jews first (and be circumcised). Everyone is welcome just as they are. This may seem common sense to us, but in the 1st Century it was radical. One miracle of the new Christian community in Acts 2:1-13 was the disciples' speaking in tongues: equally miraculous was that every nation was welcome and included.

Notice the same pattern in Acts 10 we have seen elsewhere: people came to faith and are baptized. That is that. No excuses. No debate. No exam. No hoops to jump through. It was just the norm.

This is the time when people had not yet experienced the Holy Spirit within their lives as we do. So their experience of the Spirit, initially, was more dramatic than it is for many of us. For those of us who are blessed with growing up in a Christian environment, the Spirit has been at work in our lives from the beginning – teaching us, guiding us, correcting us, encouraging us, convicting us, empowering us, etc. He is so much a part of our lives we may not be aware of his presence at all. We take Him for granted. But He is very much at work within us, actively shaping us to become more and more like Jesus.

Those who grow up outside the faith, however, may have a more dramatic encounter with the Spirit when He finally breaks through into their hearts. It's all new. It can be like seeing things with new eyes. It's not they are more blessed than those who have always known Jesus; they are just catching up!

Be assured if you do believe in Jesus, the Spirit is very much a key part of your life: He is the one who brought you to faith. He continues to teach and lead you. You can certainly pray that He helps you go on growing in your faith and become more and more like Jesus. He is with you always (Matthew 28:20); nothing and no one can ever separate you from Him (Romans 8:31-39). That's great news.

One of the wonderful gifts of baptism is that it is a PUBLIC way of affirming your faith. In Acts 10, the whole community of Caesarea would know about these people coming to faith. Baptism can be a tremendous witness to others who do not yet believe; your baptism can be a wonderful witness to family and friends. Baptism also affirms and confirms your faith. When you publicly confess Jesus as your Saviour and desire to follow Him as Lord, you are saying that before your friends and family – no turning back. And, they can – lovingly and encouragingly – hold you accountable and mentor you in your faith.

It is not always easy to live, publicly, as a Christian. Pray especially for students – elementary, middle/junior high, high school, college, and university – who seek to live for Jesus.

Pray that the Holy Spirit would break through and continue to strengthen, encourage, and empower us.

*Loving heavenly Father, thank you for your Holy Spirit
who fills our hearts with a serene assurance that we belong to you forever.
How wonderful to be a child of the great King over all the earth,
a God of love who does not desire that any should perish.
Take away doubts and fears when we become estranged to you or experience a dark night of the soul.
When suffering strikes or injustice happens, let us not blame you but understand that all things
inevitably work for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.
Grant us the things that lead to assurance –
greater faith, greater trust, and greater hope.
As we grow in assurance, than lead us to endurance,
knowing that we can overcome any obstacle, even death itself.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.

Thursday, November 2: Acts 16:1-15

The early church missionaries stayed in the Middle East and "Asia" (in those days that meant Asia Minor, present day Turkey – Lystra, Derbe, Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, and Bithynia are all in modern day Turkey). Even though they were now sharing the good news about the Kingdom of God and Jesus with non-Jews and Jews, geographically they had stayed in the east. Europe was an untouched mission field.

God, however, has plans to keep His Kingdom growing. The Holy Spirit leads Paul, Silas and Luke to go to Macedonia, in northern Greece (note the "we" from 16:10 on; Luke is the author of Acts). Philippi was a rough, tough Greek mining town, also home to pensioned off Roman legionaries. The Romans deliberately created these retirement outposts throughout the Empire. Having retired, loyal, tough, Roman combat veterans in the potentially unruly "colonies" was a great way to keep locals, like the Macedonians, in line.

Paul and his friends find some people praying along the river. They meet several women including Lydia, a wealthy merchant from Thyatira, Turkey. She "*worshiped God*" (a non-Jew who was a convert to Judaism). "*She listened to us,*" Luke writes, "*the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. She was baptized along with other members of her household*" (16:14-15).

Wouldn't it be great if more people today just "*listened to us,*" the Lord opened their hearts, and they accepted Jesus as Saviour? It seemed so easy back then. It wasn't. In Acts, Luke only records the few highlights from years of arduous travel, thousands of conversations, dozens of cities, and hundreds of debates. Occasionally, everything is wonderful. But there is more rejection than acceptance. Early Christians experienced a LOT of apathy, a LOT of opposition, and a LOT of persecution.

Our challenge is try to be open to wherever the Holy Spirit is leading us. Globally, God is opening the door for us to serve with Baptist churches in Cuba. Not many churches have this opportunity. The Cuban churches are small, struggling – and passionate about serving Jesus. We can encourage them. And we can learn so much from them. We can all be part of God's open door to Cuba, prayerfully and practically. Pray for our Cuba mission team: it is hard work (definitely NOT a vacation). It is an incredible blessing both for the Cubans, for our people who go, and for all of us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

We can also be willing to share our faith with whomever the Spirit brings across our path. Sometimes – praise God – it's all good. Sometimes people are open and really want to hear about Jesus. That's exciting.

But often we will be discouraged. Many people will be indifferent to Jesus, even hostile (remember the Parable of the sower and the seed in Mark 4:1-20?). That's OK.

Our call is simply to be faithful. During Jesus' own lifetime, far more people walked away from Him than accepted Him. Far more people ignored or refused to believe the good news about Jesus which Paul, Peter and the other disciples shared than chose to believe. But keep praying. Be open to the opportunities God brings into your life. You never know what God's Spirit may do ...

*Lord, when I read your word,
I can't help but see how unable I am to live out what it says.
Remind me every day that, in my own power, living and talking
the way you call me to live and talk is utterly impossible.
Remind me that it is only through the power of your Holy Spirit
that I can even come close to being all that I can be in you.
Show me every day areas in my life that I haven't given over to you,
areas where I am not relying on you to do through me what I can't do for myself.
Help me to see the open door to serve you,
And give me the courage to walk through it.
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Friday, November 3: Acts 16:16-40

Does believing in Jesus make life easier? If Paul had refused to believe in Jesus in Acts 9, he would be living a comfortable urban lifestyle in Jerusalem, well-respected by the powers-that-be, and for fun he could make an occasional road trip to arrest Christians. As it is, Paul is an itinerant preacher, hundreds of kilometres from home, poor, outcast, routinely at odds with the powers-that-be. He's now getting severely beaten.

If you hear someone claiming, "*total prosperity is available to every individual through the redemptive work of Christ*" (quoted from a Lethbridge church website), you might want to remind them of Paul's life ...

Will this jailer's life become "easier" because of his new-found faith? Probably not. Philippi is a tough, ex-military/mining/frontier town where city officials administer vigilante justice with no attempt at due process.⁵ Still, the jailer and his household choose to believe, are baptized, and will begin a strong church.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is written to this church (written when Paul is in prison in Rome, not exactly "total prosperity" either). Paul writes to the jailer and these people: "*You must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News. Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it*" (Philippians 1:27-30).

Let's be honest. As we choose to live for Jesus, it will not always be easy. When we take the step of faith to trust Him as our Saviour, as we publicly express our faith and are baptized, as we choose day-by-day to follow Him as Lord, as we try to be more and more like Him ... there will be tough times. It will be a struggle. But we can be encouraged. We are right in the thick of it with Jesus, Paul, and the rest of them.

Then why would anyone become a Christian? I would answer, because despite the challenges, knowing Jesus as Saviour and following Him as Lord gives ultimate meaning and purpose to life: we are loved, forgiven, and given new life now and eternally; His ethics and values work; it's exciting. It's so much more fulfilling, satisfying, meaningful, purposeful, adventurous – and challenging – than life without Jesus.

Listen to this great advice from Paul to this rough, tough, jailer: "*Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice. Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:4-7).

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
keep me, my God, from the stain of sin, just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray;
let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
help me to sacrifice myself, just for today.
And if today, my tide of life should ebb away,
give me the assurance of your presence divine, sweet Lord, today.
So for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
but keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today. Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

⁵ Paul and Silas were Roman citizens – few men (and no women) were actually citizens. The privileges of citizenship included the right to a legal trial, appeal decisions of magistrates, and appeal lower court decisions. A Roman citizen could not be tortured or whipped, or receive the death penalty unless he was found guilty of treason. To violate these rights, as happens here, was a serious offence!

Saturday, November 4: Philippians 2:1-18 and Philippians 3

From a Roman prison cell, Paul writes these words of encouragement to the newly baptized believers in Philippi, including the jailer and his household. We are "*united with Christ*" (2:1) through faith in Him **and** baptism (Romans 6:1-7). Baptism is our outward, public testimony that we are followers of Jesus.⁶ It doesn't save us. But it's just not an optional extra. It's assumed to be part of our obedience to Jesus.

Paul goes on to talk about the practical implications of making that decision. It can lead to challenges. As he reflects on Jesus' life and ministry, Paul reminds us that Jesus suffered, too. As we walk through life, it's good to remember Jesus' suffering. We may struggle, too. The early Christians appreciated that, as they suffered, they were drawn closer to Jesus. As they experienced some of what He experienced and were forced to depend on Him more and more, they grew in their faith. How do you feel about that?

In the Message translation, Eugene Peterson writes 2:12-18 this way: "*What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. 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.*

"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. You'll be living proof that I didn't go to all this work for nothing.

"Even if I am executed here and now, I'll rejoice in being an element in the offering of your faith that you make on Christ's altar, a part of your rejoicing. But turnabout's fair play - you must join me in my rejoicing. Whatever you do, don't feel sorry for me."

Following Jesus isn't always easy. But we have the privilege of shining like bright lights in a dark world. We have the opportunity to help people find new life in Jesus. And even though we may not have particularly "easy" lives we will have meaningful, fulfilling, purposeful, hope-full, and joyful lives.

Paul challenges us to think about what really is important in life (3:1-11). And he reminds us again that following Jesus can be a real challenge (3:12-14): "*I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*"

Would that describe your commitment to Jesus? If so, how are you living that out? If not, why not? Do you need to spend some time in prayer, working through some things with Jesus?

Paul ends his letter: "*I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me. I know you have always been concerned, but you didn't have the chance to help me. Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength ... And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.*" (4:10-13, 19).

"I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength ... He will supply all your needs ..." Lord, help me live my faith, today.

⁶ "... all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been **united** with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be **united** with him in a resurrection like his ..." (Romans 6:3-5).

*We give you honour and praise, Lord our God,
 for all the tender mercies you so freely give us throughout the week.
 Endless praise to you for creating us in your image,
 for redeeming us by the precious blood of your dear Son when we were lost,
 and for setting us apart through your Holy Spirit.
 We thank you for your help and support in our times of need,
 for your protection in the many dangers to body and soul,
 for your comfort in our sorrows,
 for granting us the continued gift of life,
 and for being so patient with us
 and giving us so much time to repent of our sins.
 For these and all your blessings we have received, only because of your goodness, we thank you
 and ask you to fill us continually with the Holy Spirit so that we can grow in your unmerited favour,
 remain sure in our faith, and continue on in doing good.
 Amen.*

John Knox (1513-1572)

Sunday, November 5: Ephesians 2 TIME CHANGE (Fall back ☺)

Who's "in"? Who's "out"? Who do I think should be "in" Canada? "In" my community? "In" my church? There is a lot of tension around being "in"/"out" racially and otherwise these days.

Travis Patron, leader of the Canadian Nationalist Party (who wanted to have a rally at the University of Toronto earlier this year), argues, *"In 1971, 97 per cent of Canada's population was of European ethnicity. Therefore, we demand the suppression of the founding Canadian people (Europeans), an agenda put forth by Pierre Trudeau and accelerated by Justin Trudeau, be discontinued immediately."*⁷ One of his party's official platforms is, *"Amendment of our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, removing its stance of multiculturalism."* In Patron's Canada, ethnically European people, supposedly the founding Canadian people, are "in." Non-ethnically-European people, including First Nations people, are "out."

Jesus was not European. Jesus, ethnically a Middle Eastern Jewish person, is "out" of Patron's Canada.

In the 1st Century, Jewish people were just as racist. In their world, only ethnically Jewish people were "in." Everyone else – Europeans, Africans, Arab peoples, and Asian peoples – were "Gentiles." Only the Jews had any place in God's favour or God's Kingdom. They selectively read God's blessing to Abraham in Genesis 12, *"I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you and make you famous"* by omitting the purpose of the blessing, *"and you will be a blessing to others."* The Jewish people were blessed to be a blessing. They were to be God's ambassadors, sharing His love with all the nations. They never understood that.

Jesus came to reboot God's mission that all people might know His love and be welcomed into His Kingdom. Jesus had no problem speaking to people of all ethnic backgrounds, genders, abilities, ages, and experiences. Jesus invited everyone to confess, repent, and put their faith in Him.

In Ephesians, Paul is writing to Christians in Ephesus, one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan centre located in (what is now) western Turkey. There are Jewish believers, but also Europeans (Romans and Greeks), what-we-would-now-call Turks, and probably dozens of other nationalities in the church. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is equal. Ethnicity is irrelevant.

What is relevant? *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (2:8-9). Faith in Jesus is relevant. That's it. Nothing else.

If we are the people of Jesus, if we value God's Word and truly believe the Bible is our authority for our

⁷ <http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/white-nationalist-group-not-welcome-on-campus-university-of-toronto-1.3548270>

beliefs and our conduct, who do we believe is "in"? Answer: those who, by faith, have welcomed Jesus as their Saviour are "in" the Kingdom of God.

The bigger question is, who does **God want** to be "in"? Answer: everyone.

"For we are God's masterpiece" Paul goes on. "He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (2:10). "The good things God planned for us long ago" refers to that call to be a blessing – to share God's good news of love, forgiveness, and mercy with everyone.

The exciting thing about our new multicultural world is that God is bringing the world to our door. We don't have to go halfway around the world to meet people who don't yet know Jesus – they live next door to us.

God has brought people who don't know Jesus to you. We could be frightened. We could "circle-the-wagons" the way the Jews in the 1st Century did, push back, and claim God's mercy is just for us. We could resent the non-believers among us, as they did. Or we can get excited about *the good things he planned for us long ago* – the opportunity to share His love in Word and in deed with the people around us.

Baptist pioneer missionary to India, William Carey (1761-1834), wrote, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, a little before his departure, commissioned his apostles to Go, and teach all nations; or, as another evangelist expresses it, Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. This commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves into every country of the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants, without exception, or limitation. They accordingly went forth in obedience to the command, and the power of God evidently wrought with them." God has brought the world to our doorstep. The power of God is with us. What an awesome opportunity we have to share His love.

Pray for your family, friends, and neighbours:

- God, make _____'s heart receptive to your Word. Like the seed that falls on good soil, give _____ a noble and good heart, help him hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (Luke 8:11-15)
- God, open _____'s spiritual eyes. Break the blindness on _____'s mind caused by the god of this age. Help him see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)
- God, give _____ ears to hear. Help _____ see with his eyes, hear with his ears, understand with his heart and turn, and you will heal him. (Matthew 13:15)
- God, give _____ faith to believe. Help _____ make a radical life-change before God and an equally radical trust in his Master Jesus. (Acts 20:21)
- God, give _____ the will to respond to you. Bring _____ to the point he declares with his mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believes in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, and he will be saved. (Romans 10:9)
- God, set _____ free from spiritual captivity. Help me gently instruct _____ when he is in opposition to you, in the hope that you will grant him repentance leading him to knowledge of the truth, and that he will come to his senses and escape from the trap of the devil. (2 Timothy 2:25-26)
- God, send people into _____ life to witness to him. Send more believers into _____'s life who will exemplify Christ and cause him to want to know Christ for himself. (Matthew 9:38)
- God, help me build a caring relationship with _____. Help me become whatever kind of Christ-like servant _____ can identify with so that by all possible means he will be saved. (1 Corinthians 9:22)
- God, bring me opportunities to witness to _____. Open doors for proclaiming the mystery of Christ to _____, even in our present difficult circumstances. (Colossians 4:3)
- God, give me boldness to witness to _____. Enable me to speak your word to _____ with great boldness. (Acts 4:29)
- God, provide an opportunity to invite _____ to a relationship with you. You want your house full, so give me opportunity and boldness to invite _____ to come home to you. (Luke 14:23). Amen