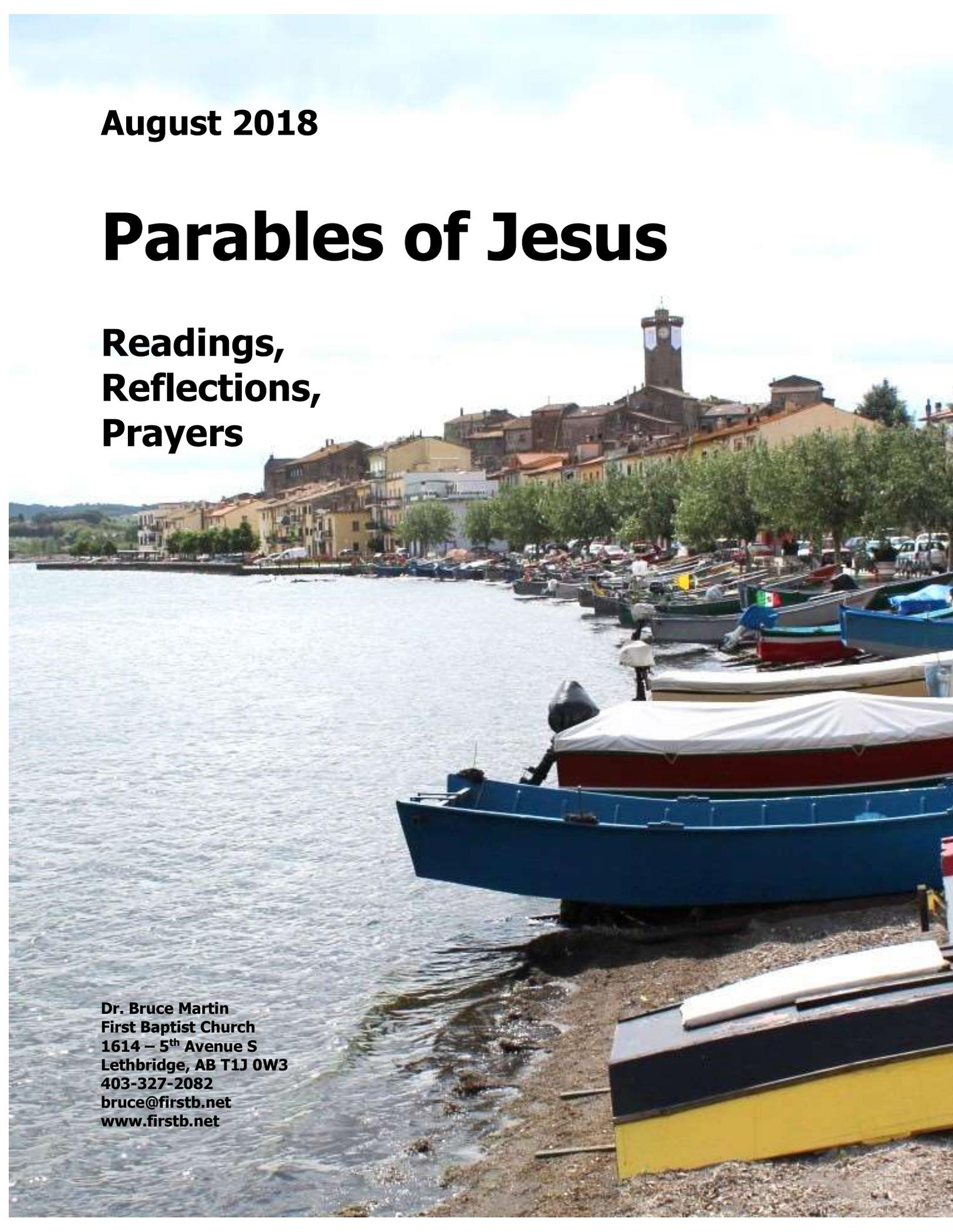


August 2018

Parables of Jesus

**Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers**

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Monday, August 6: Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23

The most unforgettable teaching form Jesus uses during his ministry is the parable. This month we will look at some of Jesus' parables. Parables are short stories – often using very familiar subjects – which help us understand much more complicated subjects (and many use natural imagery, celebrating God's creation ☺). Aesop's fables, Mother Goose stories, and many other tales are parables – for instance, Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare" is a great story in itself, but it speaks to deeper realities in human experience. Parables are stories or analogies that help us learn abstract truths through more concrete examples.

Jesus' parables are similar. For example, the familiar story of the "Good Samaritan" is a wonderful tale in and of itself. But it also has a much deeper message about compassion. Jesus answers the rather abstract questions, "Who is my neighbour?" or "What does it mean to be a neighbour?" with a concrete case study.

Why did Jesus tell parables? It was not the only way he taught; he dialogued with people who asked him questions (John 14); like other rabbis, he read Old Testament texts and commented upon those texts (Luke 4); he spent time with disciples and taught by the example of what he did (Mark 2). Like the prophets in the Old Testament, he taught the truths of God in clear and concise terms (Matthew 5). But Jesus loved telling parables. The beauty of parables is that

- they are memorable;
- They help us understand abstract truths in more practical terms;
- They use characters and situations that are familiar to us;
- They generate discussion as we seek to understand them;
- We can update the characters and the situations and apply them to our time and place.

Today's reading includes one of Jesus' most familiar parables. You may have heard sermons or read many interpretations of it. Jesus himself makes very clear what it means. What is clear is this:

- We grow best when our lives are uncluttered – busyness, distractions, temptations and many other things can choke out the Holy Spirit's call in our lives. What is the clutter in your life?
- We grow best when the soil of our lives is soft – we can harden our hearts, set our minds in stone, hide behind a mask, or become cynical or bitter. How does your heart or mind need to be softened?
- We grow best when we are deep people – when we allow God's Spirit to mold our hearts, minds, lifestyles, attitudes, values, ethics, decision-making, etc. very deeply – every part of our lives. What parts of your life do you keep from God?

Pray that God would help you to be the best soil you can possibly be.

- *The hard path represents the shut mind, that blocks out the word of God.*
- *The rocky ground, with a thin layer of soil, is the shallow mind that does not think through the word of God or its consequences, and forgets it when under pressure.*
- *The thorny ground means those whose lives are so busy that the things of God get crowded out.*

Lord, I will try to listen with a good heart and produce results.

*Who can tell what a day may bring forth?
Cause me, therefore, gracious God,
to live every day as if it were to be my last,
for I know not but that it may be such.
Cause me to live now
as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis

Tuesday, August 7: Matthew 13:44-46

Today's parables are parables of the Kingdom of Heaven. The "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God" is Jesus' message: "*Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news'*" (Mark 1:14-15).

The good news is much more than we sometimes present it as simply that you go to heaven when you die.

- Yes, the Kingdom of God includes a **future** meaning: one day someday all evil will be destroyed and God's will shall be done perfectly "*on earth as in heaven.*"
- But Jesus' message is just as much that the Kingdom of God is something that is real **now**: where God **rules and reigns** in our world and in our lives things change – **now**. For instance when the Holy Spirit moves into our lives and takes control, we think, act, live, and experience life differently: "*When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law.*" (Galatians 5:19-23). When we allow God to be King in our lives, He changes us. How has the Spirit made a difference in your life?

Paul goes on to say, "*Those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit ... if the Holy Spirit controls your mind, there is life and peace.*" (Romans 8:5-6) The Kingdom of God – when God reigns in our hearts and minds today – is exciting. It brings great joy (the first man, who sold everything to buy the field, did so "in his joy").

Jesus compares the coming of God into our world and into our lives as a wedding celebration or a huge feast. It's a good thing – a great thing. Sometimes Christian living is presented as gloomy and unpleasant: how do we get that impression? Does your faith bring you joy? How does your faith in Jesus change your life for the better? Praise and thank God for His Spirit.

What Jesus describes could easily happen in a troubled land like Palestine. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most treasured possessions. There were caches of coins buried all over the country, forgotten when the owner died.

Lord, you talk of the joy of discovery. That is the sign that I have found your treasure, a deep happiness that nothing can separate me from you.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him,
forever, in the next.
Amen.*

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Wednesday, August 8: Matthew 7:13-14

The coming of the Kingdom of God – inviting God to control our lives – brings joy. Welcoming Jesus into our lives is the most important decision we can make. The experience of knowing God – and following God by living a life controlled by the Spirit – is worth giving everything for.

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus tells us "*selling everything*" for the Kingdom is good, great, and joyful thing, because the treasure you gain is so much better. The cost is as nothing compared to the treasure. The men in Matthew 13:44-46 had a choice – to buy or not to buy – the treasure/pearl came at a cost; but it was a cost they were more than willing to pay.

Paul says, "*I once thought (wealth, power, and prestige) were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with him*" (Philippians 3:7-8).

Jesus was not in the entertainment business. He challenged people to change the way they live. When he said, "*Repent and believe the good news,*" he was literally saying, "*Turn around, turn completely around and live your life by a whole new set of values.*" Many of Jesus parables challenge us to make that kind of life-changing decision about our priorities and our ways of living.

The whole "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7) has been described as the manifesto of the Kingdom of God. It describes how we are to live as God's children, as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. It ends with pointed challenges to make a decision. Think about the image Jesus uses in Matthew 7:13-14: there are

- well trodden roads: comfortable, safe, popular, but they lead to destruction;
- and rough and ready paths: difficult, painful, relatively lonely, but they lead to life.

Jesus is very honest about the fact that following him has a cost. We don't talk much about that anymore: why not? What does following Jesus cost you? Is it worth the cost? Why? Why not? When have you chosen the "narrow way" over the "wide way"? What were the blessings? What choices do you face today?

Jesus said: "Take up your cross." It is not something you go looking for in faraway places. Sooner or later the Lord hands us a cross, and our job is to recognise it. For each of us there are events that made a difference. No two of us experience the same joyful or sorrowful mysteries. Maybe it was a meeting with a friend, a family member, or an enemy. Maybe it was a sickness, or a triumph.

We try to see our life through the eyes of faith, with a confidence that God in his grace can draw good out of the most awful and unwelcome happenings, as well as out of the moments of joy.

It is not that we have all the answers, but we have enough to sustain our faith and love. Our faith is based on God's faithfulness, not our own strength, wisdom, courage, or ability.

*Lord, let nothing disturb me.
Let nothing frighten me.
All things are passing.
You alone are changeless, O God.
If I have patience, I want for nothing.
If I have faith, I lack nothing.
If I have Jesus, I am rich beyond measure.
If I have You, O God, I have all things.
You alone suffice.
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Thursday, August 9: Matthew 7:24-27

One church presents their goal this way: *"To grow fully mature followers of Jesus who are faithful stewards of His resources, invested in increasing His kingdom, and who, through their giving, have experienced His pleasure in their life while storing up treasures in heaven."*

God calls us to recognize that real fulfillment comes when we aim to live by His principles – aiming to be *fully mature followers of Jesus*. Of course we're not there yet. But we really do come alive when we aim to be *faithful stewards of His resources, investing in increasing His kingdom, and who, through our giving, experience His pleasure in our lives.*" That seems upside-down in the eyes of our neighbours. But maybe it's not Jesus' values that are upside-down? Maybe Jesus' followers are the ones living right-side-up in an upside-down world?

Dallas Willard writes: *"Recently a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned the controls for what she thought was a steep ascent – and flew straight into the ground. She was unaware that she'd been flying upside down. This is a parable of human existence in our times – not exactly that everyone is crashing, though there's enough of that – but that most of us as individuals, and world society as a whole, live at high-speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upside-down or right-side-up. Indeed, we are haunted by strong suspicion that there may be no difference – or at least that is unknown or irrelevant."*

"Jesus says, 'I will give you my purity and I will empower you ... and you will indeed begin to look like me. When you begin to look like me, then this upside-down world will actually start being turned right-side-up ... You see, unfortunately we have become so naturalized in our sin that when Jesus shows us our true home it feels foreign ... Jesus calls us back home, back into His kingdom in which violence and arrogance and hatred and immorality and power games and one-upmanship is exposed as absurdity, as unbelievably impossible, as totally and utterly upside-down'" (G.K. Chesterton). It is in losing our lives that we find them. It is as we give that we receive. It is in learning to live right-side-up we discover life as it is meant to be.

Jesus challenges us to think about the foundations that our lives are built on: are we living right-side-up built on a solid foundation – or upside-down (or maybe better, topsy-turvy) with no foundation at all? Think of your faith as the foundation of your life: what difference does that faith in Jesus make in your life? How can Jesus be your "rock solid foundation" through the challenges of life?

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me,
and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let me look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus.
Amen*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Friday, August 10: Luke 12:13-21

Jesus – in fact the whole Bible – has more to say about money management than almost any other issue. Why? Because Jesus knows that, *"Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be"* (Matthew 6:21). And, like it or not, money is often where our heart is. Financial worries, goals, and plans sidetrack us more often than almost any other part of our lives. It's a huge temptation. It's no wonder the Devil tempted Jesus with the ability to turn stones to bread: think of the money he could make? Easy money. Isn't that what we all long for?

The danger, of course, is that our lives can be ruled by our desire for more and more and more and more wealth. Not many people ever have enough money, do they?

We live in a world that worries, dreams, and obsesses about money and the things money can buy. We all face pressures to drive a nicer car, wear better clothes, travel to more exotic destinations, and so forth. And we know money – well, credit – is easier than ever to get. The message we get (from our culture) is:

1. Earn money (or better, use credit);
2. Enjoy it (or better, over-enjoy it – debt isn't a big problem).
3. Repay your debt from overspending.
4. Save for the future if and when you're out of debt.
5. Give, if anything is left over. Or after you've made your billions.

We can easily find ourselves overspending, overstretched and in debt. There are consequences: we are stressed; our health suffers; our relationships suffer; our spirits suffer.

But when we live in the Kingdom of God, ***we may possess money***, but ***money*** – or the power of desire for money – ***does not possess us***. We are controlled, first and foremost, by the Spirit of God. So everything changes: God teaches us to manage our money by inverting the order after we've earned it:

1. Give, first,
2. Save, second,
3. Repay, third,
4. Enjoy, fourth.
5. In the process, avoid debt whenever possible.

We don't literally have to "sell everything." We may need to reorder our priorities. When we live by God's principles, we actually experience more peace, generosity, and financial freedom. "*Those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit*" – in their financial decision-making as much as any other part of our lives – "*think about things that please the Spirit ... if the Holy Spirit controls your mind*" – we might substitute "your financial decision making," for this is one thing that often occupies a lot of our minds – "*there is life and peace.*" Sounds good. Who wouldn't want "life and peace"?

What keeps us from this kind of faith?

Life can be very busy. A series of work, traffic jams, tired time with the family, hours of work in a house and on the job; we sometimes find it hard to sit down and just find ourselves.

We know we can find everything else and lose ourselves along the way; or we may lose the time for what's really important.

If we find time to enjoy our baby's new tooth, or an hour of reminiscing with the elderly about our family, we are ensuring we don't lose ourselves.

Finding a space for God and prayer each day also ensures that we don't lose ourselves.

We can lose a lot along the way of life – health, wealth, even reputation. The biggest loss would be to lose ourselves, for if that happens we lose God.

*May all I do today begin with you, O Lord.
Plant dreams and hopes within my soul,
revive my tired spirit:
be with me today.*

*May all I do today continue with your help, O Lord.
Be at my side and walk with me:
be my support today.*

*May all I do today reach far and wide, O Lord.
My thoughts, my work, my life:
make them blessings for your kingdom;
let them go beyond today, O God.*

*Today is new, unlike any other day,
for God makes each day different.
Today God's everyday grace falls on my soul like abundant seed,
though I may hardly see it.*

*Today is one of those days Jesus promised to be with me,
a companion on my journey,
and my life today, if I trust him, has consequences unseen.*

*My life has a purpose.
I have a mission ...
I am a link in a chain,
a bond of connection between persons.
God has not created me for naught...
Therefore, I will trust him.
Whatever, wherever I am,
I can never be thrown away.
God does nothing in vain.
He knows what he is about.
Amen*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Saturday, August 11: Matthew 9:12, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:31-32

As we move through the summer, it is good to remember what we have to be thankful for.

We can be thankful that God welcomes us into his kingdom. When Jesus comes bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God it is good news for all people – not just some people. He comes with good news for the needy, oppressed, depressed, sick, demon possessed, and sinners. Jesus' enemies expected all these people to be judged in the coming kingdom. Although they believed, in theory, that it was good to get sinners to repent, in practice they kept away from evildoers and the expected God to condemn them.

When Jesus mixed with such people and announced the coming of God's kingdom to them, he made his opponents very uncomfortable. Jesus undermined their pride and self-righteousness – and they protested loudly. In what ways are we sometimes like these Jewish leaders? Why?

God has no grey area: we are either perfect or not. We may not like to consider ourselves "tax collectors and sinners," but all of us have sinned and fall short of perfection. We all need Jesus. The good news is that Jesus comes with life, healing, and hope for us as much as for anyone else. Read John 3:1-21; 1 John 4:7-21. Give thanks to God today, for his love for you and for the whole world.

Real love is when someone else's life becomes more important than your own.

This is the love of God: for God's love for the world is such that he gave up his Son. The love of God is a power and an example for human love, and it is an active help to sustain human love. Can human love really last without love for God?

People – married and single – whose love for God is alive, find a motivation and a strength from Him to love others. Love isn't born just of itself; it is like a child of God, alive in each of us. Love is what makes each of us most a person, just as in the Trinity, love is the person we call Jesus, Son and Word of God.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
while on earth you had close and devoted friends
such as John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary.
You showed in this way that friendship is one of life's great blessings.
Thank you for the friends that you have given me
to love me in spite of my failures and weaknesses,
and to enrich my life after your example.
Let me ever behave toward them as you behaved toward your friends.
Bind us close together in you
and enable us to help one another on our earthly journey.
Amen*

Frank James Unger

Sunday, August 12: Luke 7:41-50

We cannot save ourselves. Jesus brings good news of God's forgiveness to those of us unable to pay our debts (to make amends for all our errors, mistakes, hurts, and sins).

Summer is a good time to think about all of the debts (sins) Jesus has forgiven in your life. This is not a time to wallow in self-pity (self-pity can be an unhealthy way of focussing too much on ourselves). It is a time to focus on **God**: Jesus does forgive every mistake, failure, and sin that we have ever committed. So let us give thanks.

May we guard against the temptation to look on others who have not yet received the grace of God with judgment. May we pray for them, that they to, may receive God's gracious forgiveness. May we pray for the strength to be able to forgive those who have sinned against us, as graciously as God forgives us.

The language of prayer is the language of the heart, a silent language.

Prayer is relaxing into the mystery of God's love, and words in prayer are sometimes only to keep our minds focused when we might otherwise be distracted.

The language of love and prayer are similar, and much of the language of love is silence. People can be present to each other when words don't seem to matter anymore – words may even be a hindrance to the sharing of love.

There is a side to prayer which is silent adoration, silent presence, and silent listening.

We don't have to make ourselves heard to God; God already knows us through and through, and our prayer is a time of sinking ourselves into that love.

*O Lord, we bring before you
the distress and dangers of peoples and nations,
the pleas of the imprisoned and the captive,
the need of the refugee,
the weariness of the despondent,
and the diminishment of the aging.
O Lord, stay close to them all.
O Lord, stay close to me.
Lord, hear my prayer.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Monday, August 13: Matthew 24:45-51

One of the common themes in Jesus' parables is to remind us that He will come back again, one day, some day. Parables are a helpful way of trying to explain this kind of truth that are just so difficult to understand.

If Jesus is going to return, how then do we live? We live in an awkward in-between time:

- On the one hand, the Kingdom of God has already come – in the sense that Jesus has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit who can reign and rule in our lives;
- On the other hand, the Kingdom of God is still to be completely fulfilled – in the sense that Jesus will return, judge and destroy all evil, and establish His perfect reign over all of creation.

As we enjoy summer, it is good to look forward to Jesus' return. One day, someday all evil, pain, suffering, and sin will be destroyed. Thank God for a wonderful future.

But Jesus also gives us several parables that help us think about how we can live wisely and well, **right now**. There is an old proverb: "*when the cat's away the mice will play.*" Jesus' message in this parable is that, even though he is absent in body, we ought to live lives that honour and serve him, in the interim. He is present, through His Spirit, all the time.

We are called to live according to His Word, every moment, in every circumstance. Living for Jesus is not something we just do Sunday mornings: it's the way we live 24 hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week. How does this challenge you in your life? As you go through your day, try to think about Jesus in each circumstance: how would he live his life if he were you? How would he respond to this circumstance if he were you?

On his return from meeting many famous people around the world, Mark Twain's child said to him, 'Daddy, you've met everyone famous now except God.' We can give time to everyone except God, like people who did not enjoy the bridegroom while he was with them.

Meeting God brings us in touch with the deepest ground of who we are, and ensures we live to the full in the present moment. With God we know ourselves truly. It takes time and space, and the willingness to spend time alone. There is a sense of God found in solitude which brings us to the still point of peace within us, the point where we feel a unity with everything in the world, and everybody we meet. When we meet God, we meet others in a new way.

*O Creator past all telling,
you have appointed from the treasures of your wisdom
the hierarchies of angels,
and have set out all parts of the universe so beautifully.
You are the true fount of wisdom.
You are the noble origin of all things.
Lord, please shed the beam of your light and warmth
on the darkness of my mind to dispel my ignorance and sin.
You make eloquent the tongues of children:
please guide my speech and touch my lips with graciousness.
Make me keen to understand,
quick to learn,
able to remember;
make me wise to interpret and ready to speak.
Guide my going back and going forward,
my coming home and my going out.
For You are true God and true man,
and live for ever and ever. Amen*

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Tuesday, August 14: Matthew 25:1-13

The story line of this parable reminds us that Jesus' return might seem to take longer than expected – but it still will happen. Over the past 2000 years there has been a lot of speculation about when Jesus will return; many of those theories have been spiritually and psychologically destructive. Prophecies that try to pinpoint the exact moment, hour, day, and year of Jesus return are not helpful or correct (Jesus states quite clearly that no one, not even he, knows the day or the hour of his return (Matthew 24:36)). All we can say with certainty is that Jesus **will** return – and that he will return when he is not expected.

Our task is to stay alert and be ready. This parable encourages us to think about the balance between:

- anticipation of and joyful hope in Jesus' return (future hope), and
- living each and every day for Jesus, as if He will never return (how we live, today.).

Simply "*standing by the window, waiting for a knock on the door,*" is not what God is calling us to. God is calling us to **active waiting**. **Active waiting** means:

- **Waiting** ... knowing Jesus will return to fully establish his kingdom – this is our certain hope. And,
- **Being active** ... doing everything we can to build his kingdom, today.

Jesus challenges us to serve God every day, while at the same time eagerly anticipating his return.

Do you ever think about Jesus' return? Take a moment to do so ... In what ways is that exciting? In what ways is it intimidating? How might keeping the reality of His return in the back of your mind be an encouragement to you in your daily life? How can you "actively wait"? How can you serve God today?

Lord, you are telling me that it is possible to miss opportunities, and there may be no way back.

We may take out insurance against motor accidents, fires and robberies. When it comes to my own soul, I cannot buy insurance, nor can anybody else cover up my foolishness. I have to act myself, and in time.

*O Lord, teach me to seek you,
and reveal yourself to me when I do seek you.
For I cannot seek you, unless you first teach me,
nor find you, unless you first reveal yourself to me.
Let me seek you in longing,
and long for you in seeking.
Let me find you in love,
and love you in finding.
You and you alone are all my soul longs for,
my Father, my Saviour, Holy Spirit of grace,
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397)

Wednesday, August 15: Matthew 25:14-30

The parable of the talents helps us understand what it means to be ready for Jesus' return. Put simply, we need to do our best with what God has entrusted to us, every day.

It's worth noting that the servants in the story are not all given the same amount of money by their master: God knows our different capabilities; He doesn't give us more than we can handle. God has given you gifts, talents, abilities, resources ... our tendency is often to either be too arrogant, or (more often) too modest. With what has God blessed you? God has given you some skills/experiences/talents/resources.

How can you use your gifts/talents/abilities/resources for God? Jesus is warning us against being paralyzed

by fear – we are invited to adventure. When our confidence is rooted and established in God, we can take risks, confident He is with us. In the same way children, who know they have the support of loving parents, are free to make mistakes growing up, we, too, are empowered by our Father to try, to grow into our gifts, even to fail (we sometimes learn best when we push too far.). Phillip Adams writes: *"It seems to me that people have vast potential. Most people can do extraordinary things if they have the confidence or take the risks. Yet most people don't. They sit in front of the television and treat life as if it goes on forever."*

Think about this: *"If we don't risk anything, do we risk even more?"* What are you willing to risk? When have you "risked" for God? What happened? What risk might God be asking you to take?

Those who practice a sport grow better at it. Those who use their brains grow brighter. Those who are good to others develop habits of generosity.

What are you telling me, Lord?

That by praying I come to know about prayer; that I should use everything I have, both in possessions and in talents, and not let them lie fallow.

It is in giving that we receive. It is in giving that we grow.

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

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Thursday, August 16: Matthew 21:18-23

The parable of the two sons is the story of:

- one son who initially refused to do the work his father asked him to do, then changed his mind, and
- another son who promised to go and work, but then failed to keep his word.

As we think about living in this in-between time – when the kingdom of God has come through the Holy Spirit, but has yet to be totally fulfilled in the return of Jesus – this parable challenges us, as it did the religious people in Jesus' day. How do we live as God's people?

Unfortunately, we all know how easy it is to say, *"Jesus is my Savior and Lord,"* and yet not actually obey His commands. It is also easy to judge other people who act this way. But Jesus is encouraging us to spend some time in prayer, reflecting on how we identify with each of these sons ...

- In what ways have we rebelled against God, and yet in the end decided to follow his word? Thank God for the work of his spirit in your life.

- In what ways have we said, in our words, that we are followers of Jesus, and yet our actions or the way we treat others has not been consistent with Jesus' commands to love one another and love our neighbor as ourselves?

Spend some time in prayer reflection, confession, and repentance. It is good to bring our souls, honestly and completely, before God, letting him encourage us, challenge us, affirm us, and convict us.

*Thank you, Lord, for this story.
I can feel for the impetuous boy who said "No";
he had made his plans for the day and hated having to change them.
But his heart was in the right place,
and he turned up to help his father.
Part of me is in the second son,
trying to please,
making promises and resolutions that seemed to satisfy his demanding dad,
but were soon revealed as empty.
I want to be like the first boy, Lord.
If I cannot be gracious, let me at least do what I should do.
Amen.*

Friday, August 17: Matthew 21:33-46

This parable is pointedly directed at the religious people in Jesus' day. On the one hand, Jesus clearly foreshadows His own crucifixion. In the parable Jesus makes reference to the prophets and himself calling out to the people of Israel, patiently urging them to bear fruit. And it is the story of their violent rejection of God's call.

On the other hand, Jesus also speaks to our hearts: how easily we take our lives, decisions, circumstances, and relationships completely into our own hands. We so easily ignore, forget about, or actively exclude God from part – or all – of our lives. We may not reject God as violently and viciously as the tenants in this parable, but in various ways at various times, we may shut him out of our lives. God may have no meaningful place in our lives anymore.

Are there parts of your life that you have excluded God from? Your relationships? Your finances? Your career? Your future plans? Your recreation? What about today?

Pray, asking God to show you if there are parts of your life from which you exclude his Holy Spirit? Will you ask him to fill those parts of your life with his Spirit as well? He may challenge you; he may change you; but the results (joy, peace) will be worth it.

*Stay with me,
and then shall I begin to shine as you shine;
so to shine as to be a light to others;
the light, O Jesus, will be all yours; none of it will be mine;
it will be you, shining on others through me.
Let me thus praise you in the way you love best,
by shining on those around me.
Let me preach you without preaching,
not by words but by my example,
by the influence of what I do;
the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.
Amen.*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Saturday, August 18: Matthew 22:1-14

There could hardly be a more important feast than a royal wedding. To refuse an invitation would be almost unthinkable. To do so on the grounds of routine business commitments would be doubly insulting. To beat up and kill the king's servants, would be to add further injury to insult. Not surprisingly the King of the story takes drastic action against the ungrateful guests.

The parable refers, like that of the tenants, to the rejection of Jesus and his gospel by his own people. But the parable speaks to us today, as well. *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven,"* Jesus says, *"but only the one who does the will of my Father."*

The sad little conclusion to this parable, when the improperly dressed guest is cast out, challenges us to recognize that Jesus is not just looking for people who call themselves "Christians," he is looking for people who really will follow him, as their teacher, mentor, guide, and Lord – who will live the life He calls us to (who "*obey my commands*"). Jesus looks for inner righteousness, not outward religiosity (see Matthew 5:17-48). Paul expresses much the same thought in his comment on Christian clothing: *"you were taught when you learned about Christ to throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life, which is rotten through and through, full of lust and deception. Instead, there must be a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must put on a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness – righteous, holy, and true."* (Ephesians 4:22-24)

None of us are perfect. But none of us ought to be content with our imperfection. Our call, as Jesus' followers, is to be actively becoming more and more like Jesus. How does that happen? It happens as we read Scripture. It happens as we invite the Holy Spirit to come into every aspect of our lives with wisdom and power. It also happens as we make the effort – and it may be very hard work – to change the way we live. We work in partnership with God's Spirit alive and active in our lives.

Ignatius Loyola started his spiritual journey as an almost illiterate ex-soldier,

- *In life, he literally went back to primary school, learning to read and write as an adult.*
- *"In prayer," he used to say, "God taught me like a schoolboy." With God's help, he watched the movements in his own heart. With the Holy Spirit, he reflected on his experiences. Through God's Word, his life was changed. Through humble willingness to let God convict and change him, he became a spiritual master.*

*Lord, make me your pupil too.
With God's help, help me keep an eye on the movements in my heart,
With the Holy Spirit, help me learn from my experiences,
Grant me a humble willingness to let God convict and change me.
May the Word of God transform me.
Help me start from where I am, not from where we would like to be,
Lord, make me who you truly created me to be.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 19: Luke 6:43-45

When you squeeze a lemon, you get lemon juice. When you squeeze a peach, you get peach juice. That's the way the world works.

When you squeeze a person who loves Jesus, in general, good things come out. When you squeeze a person with an evil heart ... well, nasty things are going to come out.

This does not mean that everyone who loves Jesus, when they whack their thumb with a hammer, is going to let out a hearty, "Praise the Lord!" (I have a good friend whose favourite expression under such circumstances is "Oh swear word!"). What it does mean is that under prolonged pressure, what's in our

hearts inevitably comes out because we gain strength from Him. When Jesus and His Spirit are in our lives, we may hurt, cry, and even grumble and, but have the inner strength to make it through.

As James, who was persecuted and executed for his faith, puts it: *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"* (James 1:2-4)

Paul – who also suffered and died for his faith – wrote, *"We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love"* (Romans 5:3-5). How do I know God's presence deep in my soul ...

*Lord, Almighty God, Maker and Ruler of all creation,
I pray that by your great mercy,
you would guide me better than I can guide myself.
Guide me to your will, for the good of my soul.
Establish my mind in your will, for the good of my soul.
Strengthen me against the Devil's temptations.
Remove from me foul lusts and all unrighteousness.
Shield me against my adversaries, seen and unseen.
Teach me to do your will
May I love you fervently above all things
with clean mind and with clean body.
For you are my Creator, and my Redeemer,
my Helper, my Comfort,
my Trust, and my Hope.
To you be all praise and glory now and forever and ever,
unto world without any end.
Amen*

King Alfred of Wessex (849-899)

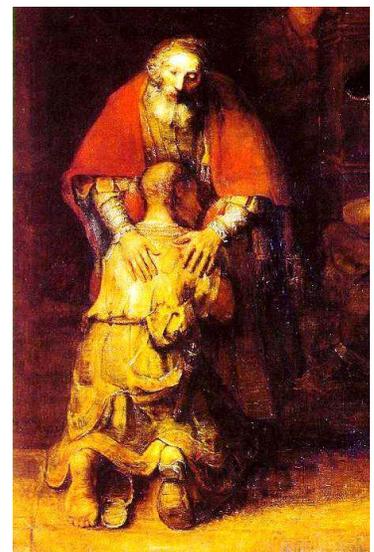
Monday, August 20: Luke 15:3-32

Jesus tells us how exciting finding something precious, that has been lost, is (whether a sheep, coin, or son (or two)). In the Kingdom there is profound joy when God finds one of His lost ones, and he comes home.

There are several kinds of lostness in the stories:

- there is the lostness of *bad choices* (by ignorance: the sheep)
- there is the lostness of *bad choices* (by deliberate choice: the younger son);
- there is the lostness of being *totally alone* and *not being able to help yourself* (the coin);
- there is the lostness of *anger, pride* and *self-righteousness* (the older son).

We can ask ourselves: how have we been lost, in the past? In what ways have we made bad choices? Been angry, proud, or self-righteous? How did God find us and bring us home? Are we lost – in some sense – right now? Do we need to come home to God?



We can also think of those we know who are lost, wandering away from God. Be encouraged – God is actively seeking them to bring them home. Pray for them, that they would respond to His call.

Jesus, this parable of the Prodigal Son was the closest you came to describing your heavenly Father: generous, tender, compassionate, watching out for me, not so much forgiving my sins as not noticing them – they are washed out of sight and mind by the Niagara of his love.

*You are the Father who welcomes home
the prodigal who has wandered far.
You are the Father who prepares a meal
when others would simply ignore.
You are the Father whose love extends
beyond our thoughts or minds.
You are the Father who knows our hearts
and yet loves us as we are.
You are the Father whose word we trust
in whose presence we have no fear.
You are the Father whose tender touch
makes a wounded spirit whole.
You are the Father whose only Son
was born that he might die.
You are the Father whose gracious love
we celebrate this day.
Amen*

fatihandworship.com

Tuesday, August 21: Matthew 18:23-35

Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the importance of reconciliation between people. Following this teaching, Peter asks a question about the limits of forgiveness: "*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*" Jesus said, "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times*" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Then Jesus tells us this parable. One debtor owes the equivalent of 15 years wages, a hopelessly large debt. The second man owes the equivalent of 100 days wages, a large debt, but not as impossibly large as the first man's obligation. The first man, a desperate servant, owes his debt to a mighty king. What a surprise: the king has compassion on him and forgives his debt totally. The second man is indebted to his newly forgiven countryman. Whereas the first debtor was set free by the generosity of the King, the second is severely punished by his countryman. The King is not amused. Jesus give us a clear explanation of God's will: ***we who are forgiven are required to forgive.***

There is a warning in this parable – a warning of love. The warning is that we, who receive the love of God, must allow that love to have its full, liberating effect in our lives: God's love must flow through us to other people. We are forgiven much, so we forgive freely.

The greatest debt we owe to our King is that we do not forget his forgiveness towards us by hoarding it. We keep His love alive, by passing it on to others. Whom do you find it hard to forgive? Why? Think about God's forgiveness in your life; how does Jesus' parable challenge you? How can you pass on God's forgiveness? How can you pass on God's love?

Forgiving can be so difficult, it is no wonder Jesus stressed it.

I search my soul for traces of rancour and resentment, of injuries that I have neither forgotten nor forgiven. Let me beg for the grace to shift this burden off my back.

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against our fellow men,
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry, and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.*

Be assured: Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, will have mercy upon you, and will pardon you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord (1 John 1:9).

Wednesday, August 22: Luke 6:46-49

Some parables are pretty straightforward.

In this story, we clearly understand how important a foundation is for a house in a flood prone area.

What is the spiritual truth to which Jesus links His parable? The true foundation is Jesus Himself. More than that, a true foundation exists in the life of someone who has done more than simply say, "Lord, Lord," but has does what Jesus says. Faith is about more than just repeating or saying you believe the right words, doctrines, and dogmas. True faith involves actual obedience to Jesus and His way of living.

In John 14:15-24, Jesus sounds like a broken record as He says to His disciples, "*If you love me, obey my commandments (14:15) ... Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me (14:21) ... All who love me will do what I say (14:23) ... Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me" (14:24).* Do you get His point?

"The most important commandment," Jesus says, "is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these" (Mark 12:19-31). After Jesus washed His disciples' feet (the job of a servant) and just before His comments about love and obedience in John 14, Jesus said, "I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35). What is Jesus saying to me?

*I can call you "Lord" with no difficulty.
Words come so easily.
What you love to see, Lord, is the evidence of love in my life.
May I go to you, hear your words, and act on them.
May I be as gracious and loving as you are.
Amen.*

Thursday, August 23: John 10:1-30

Jesus describes Himself as the only door to truth: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life ...*" Many people struggle with Jesus' exclusive claims. Why? How does Jesus show Himself to be the One in whom we can trust? How has He shown Himself to be truly God in your life?

Jesus also is the good shepherd: He *is* good. How do you see His goodness in your life?

And Jesus does shepherd His people. Billy Graham observes that there are (at least) four important truths about Jesus as our Good Shepherd:

- He ***owns*** the sheep: they belong to Him.
- He ***guards*** the sheep: He never abandons them when danger is near.
- He ***knows*** the sheep: He knows them each by name and leads them out.
- He ***lays down His life for*** the sheep, such is the measure of His love.

"How thankful we should be," Graham writes, *"weak, wandering, and foolish as we are, that we have such a shepherd. Let's learn to keep close to Him, to listen to His voice, and follow Him."* Jesus guides us, guards us, provides for us, protects us, knows us, and saves us. What part of Jesus' good shepherding has been most meaningful to you? Why? What characteristic of Jesus, your shepherd, do you need most now? Why?

Jesus has come that we may have abundant life. The signs of his presence are love, joy, growth, change and activity, which varies at different ages. Not necessarily health – we cannot control that – but love and growth as the years pass.

I wonder, have I more abundant life today than yesterday?

*Grant me, O Lord, to see everything now with new eyes,
to discern and test the spirits
that help me read the signs of the times,
to relish the things that are yours,
and to communicate them to others.
Lord, teach me your way of treating others –
sinners, children, Pharisees, Pilates and Herods, and John the Baptists.
Teach me your way of eating and drinking,
how to act when I'm tired from work and need rest.
Teach me compassion for the suffering, the poor,
the blind, and the lame.
You who shed tears,
show me how to live my deepest emotions.
Teach me your way of looking at people:
the way you glanced at Peter after his denial,
the way you touched the heart of the rich young man
and the hearts of your disciples.
Give me grace to live my life, within and without,
the way you lived your life, O Lord.
Amen*

Pedro Arrupe (1907-1991)

Friday, August 24: Matthew 20:1-16

This parable sometimes bothers us because it challenges our idea of fairness. Note, however, the early morning workers agree to a very fair wage, which the householder faithfully pays at the end of the day; they are treated fairly. The second, third, and fourth groups are hired at different times, but they work without having contracted for any specific amount of money in advance. Instead of a wage agreement, the Lord of the vineyard promises these later employees, *"to do whatever is right."* All day long, everyone is satisfied they will receive a fair wage – even though the later groups don't know what that is yet. The fact that the later workers receive a blessing above and beyond their expectations in no way hurts the all-day workers.

What we learn is that the Lord of the vineyard is generous. He keeps all the agreements he made, but he also may exceed our expectations. The Lord of the vineyard is gracious. As the Father teaches the older son in the parable of the prodigal sons, Jesus is teaching us about God's incredible love.

Part of our problem with this story is that we see those who have worked all day as somehow mistreated. They have worked hard while those who came at the 11th hour had all day to enjoy themselves and yet received the same benefit. But who are the really blessed ones in the story?

- Those hired at the beginning of the day – faithful all day long – were safe. They knew they would get a fair wage. They knew their families would eat that evening. They were content.
- Did those hired at the 11th hour spend all day having fun? No. They spent all day in fear – would they get any work? Would their children would starve? Stressed. Insecure. Miserable.

We, who know Jesus, and are faithful to him, are the truly blessed ones. We go through life, based on the solid foundation of God's love, with the confidence that He is with us always, and the assurance of eternal life with him. Those who live without Jesus, while they may seem to have more license and freedom, are actually not nearly as satisfied, peaceful, joyful, or fulfilled as we are. Living without Jesus is not fun. You are stressed. Insecure. Fearful. Without hope. Without joy. Without peace.

Let us give thanks for the wonderful life we have in Jesus. And let us pray for those who, while they seem to be free, are still searching for meaning in their lives – the joy and peace that only come from Jesus.

*The God who breathed this world alive
and sustains it day by day,
whose hands flung stars into space
and controls our destiny
says, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."*

*The God who filled the ocean depths
and set tides on their way,
who caused mountains to be raised up
and rainbows to display
Says, "I have called you by name, you are mine."*

*The God who made the fertile earth
and seed within to sow,
whose artistry creates butterflies
and the early morning dew
says, "You are precious in my sight."*

*God be my God both by day and by night, today and always,
in the best of times and in all times.*

Amen

faithandworship.com

Saturday, August 25: Matthew 25:31-46

As we read this parable, we are often disturbed by the theme of judgment. But we can also be wonderfully encouraged by what we learn about how we can live as God's people. We know Jesus says to us that we are to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. But what does that really mean? How do we love our neighbor as ourselves? The concept seems to abstract. We have no idea where to begin actually loving our neighbor.

Jesus gives us very practical ideas. There is a direct link between being a follower of Jesus and caring for the physical needs of those around us. Jesus came in love, to serve, and he asked us to love our brothers and sisters in the same way. What are some of the practical ways we can care for the needs of people in our congregation, who serve us overseas, and in our community? As a church we are active supporters of the food bank, soup kitchen, and other organizations that make a difference in our community. Beyond ourselves, we actively support ministries in Western Canada, nationally, and around the world through the [Canadian Baptists of Western Canada](#), [Canadian Baptist Ministries](#) and Days for Girls. Individuals in our

church serve in these organizations, volunteer in the community, and support others who bring God's love.

How can you be involved?

- By supporting our church through the regular budget and our Thank Offering (which is all designated for ministries and missions in our community and beyond ourselves);
- by volunteering in the church (children's ministries, youth, worship, ushering, cleaning, pastoral care, etc.), or by volunteering in the community (health region, coaching, clubs, etc.);
- by noticing needs of individuals (possibly financial, but maybe friendship, transportation, or other practical needs) and helping out;
- By supporting other organizations or individuals who are making a difference (possibly financially, but also with encouragement, prayer, and practical assistance).

Every group we meet, work with or live among, has those who are the 'least'. It can be the one in the family who is suffering from addiction, the confused and angry teenager who is always in the wrong, the person who is sidelined in work.

There are countries who are 'least' in the eyes of the rest of the world, where millions have less than basic human rights.

There are the bits and pieces of ourselves which are 'least' – those aspects of ourselves we find almost impossible to accept.

In all these 'least' there is the real, healing and intense presence of Jesus. God is very present among the very poor. God calls us to notice the neglected and to have compassion for the weakest.

Prayer during time of sickness (you may change it to reflect your struggles):

*O God, I am in your hands.
You know me from my mother's womb.
O Wise Creator, soothe my pain; heal my body and soul.
O Good Jesus, you went doing good and healing many.
Once your hands raised the dead to life:
 restore my health to me.
Once your hands gave sight to the blind:
 take me from the darkness of my fears.
Once your hands made the paralyzed walk:
 let me walk again with my family and friends.
Once your hands were nailed to the cross:
 strengthen me in sickness and pain.
O Holy Spirit, Giver of Life,
 Helper and Friend,
 Source of all good gifts,
bring peace and comfort to me.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 26: Luke 6:37-42

What is Jesus' point? Sometimes we look for profound, earth-shattering spiritual truths when Jesus simply wants us to change our behaviour and be nicer! It's not rocket science. It's common sense and decency.

Paul encourages us to reflect on our attitudes to people in the church in 1 Corinthians 13. Note, this chapter is between 1 Corinthians 12 (all about the church) and 1 Corinthians 14 (all about the church). Therefore

we can assume 1 Corinthians 13 is all about the church, too! While 1 Corinthians 13 may work well at weddings and other celebrations of romantic love, this chapter is really about our relationships in the church.

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.

If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind.

Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.

It does not demand its own way.

It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.

It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.

Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

... Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

How can I be more loving to people around me?

*Thank you, Father,
for those often quiet saints.*

*Thank you, Father,
for all those quiet saints
who do not argue their theology loudly,
engage in lengthy debates over complex doctrinal issues,
or make their presence felt within the hallowed space
of Church Council meetings,
but simply get on with doing
the business,
visiting the sick,
the aged,
and the lonely,
a shoulder to cry on,
a listening ear,
and the reassurance
of one who cares.*

*Thank you, Father,
for all those quiet saints,
who live their faith through their lives
in a world that often forgets
that you were never too busy to listen,
never too busy to minister to needs,
never too engrossed in work,
to bring hope and wholeness into lives.*

*Thank you, Father,
for your quiet saints.
Amen*

Monday, August 27: Luke 10:25-37

We can think of this parable as a practical application of the teaching in Matthew 25:31-46. How do we practically help someone? We notice them in their need, we stop, and we make a difference in their lives. This is a "change-your-world" parable. On the one hand, what the Samaritan and the innkeeper do is insignificant in a world of violence, terrorism, greed and evil. One man? Who cares. On the other hand, what the Samaritan and the innkeeper do makes an incredible difference – not just in the life of that one man who fell among thieves – but in the lives of everyone who hears the story.

A wise man once said, *"All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing."* The flip side of that proverb is, *"All it takes for good to triumph is for good people to do something."* Our small acts of kindness and righteousness may not solve the problems of international crime, violence, or global warming, but they will make a difference in our own families, church, and community. And as our example – or the story of what has happened – spreads, lives are changed, one at a time, as others learn that one good deed can be the Domino that changes communities.

Throughout history, real change does not happen through politicians, laws, or major conferences. Real change happens when you and I choose to live our faith. A *Christianity Today* online article tells this story of recent events in Lebanon (read it @ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/010/13.130.html>):

"Baptists worked alongside Church of God, Armenian Evangelical, Brethren, Alliance, and Presbyterian leaders to reach as many of the needy as possible. They found that it wasn't easy ministering to desperate people who had lost everything.

The refugees expressed frustration with having to live with 30 to 40 strangers in a single room. "They were stuck with each other, and sometimes they fought," Nabil Costa (who heads a Christian organization in Lebanon) said. "We helped them solve their problems. We earned credibility. We didn't just bring food and water and say goodbye. We wanted to make a difference in their lives." Besides offering relief, volunteers listened, offered Christian-based entertainment, and provided counseling.

Costa recounted a story involving a Baptist youth minister who met the father of a 17-year-old Shiite youth killed in an Israeli air strike on a southern Beirut suburb. During the burial ceremony, Israeli jets attacked the funeral procession and sent mourners scurrying to safety. Later, the father asked the youth minister, "Why are Christians helping Muslims?" The minister shared the story of the Good Samaritan and asked, "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The father responded, "The one who had mercy on him." The youth minister then recited the words of Jesus in Matthew 5: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." Touched, the father of the deceased boy said, "We have many Christian friends. But we never knew that you have these teachings."

What is God saying to me?

*Jesus, you came as one bringing peace,
and told us to greet people with a word of peace,
not hostility,
not judgment.
May your blessing flow through me,
so that when I leave people,
they may feel approved of,
contented and tranquil.
May they feel that when they have met me
they have met Jesus.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 28: Luke 18:1-8

Jesus introduces this parable with the comment, that his disciples should "*always pray and not lose heart.*"

God of course, is *not* like the corrupt judge. Jesus' point is that even a corrupt judge can be swayed by brief, frequent, and intense supplications ... so, imagine how much more willing to hear and respond to our prayers must be our loving, gracious God. We can come before the greatest of all judges, with confidence and freedom, knowing He will hear us. God delights to hear our prayers.

Does that mean that God will always give us what we ask for? Of course not. Ultimately, only He knows best what is truly right and good. So He may give us our desires; He may ask us to wait; or He may simply say, "no." Why? Often we never know the answer (this side of eternity). But because we know the character of the true judge, we trust Him, even though we may not like it. We are simply called to faith.

We are called to truly believe that in the overall scope of God's eternal plan, His choices are always right and best. We are called simply, "*always to pray and not lose heart.*"

*Your people,
a particular people,
chosen and cherished
from the beginning of time,
lavished and loved,
sheltered and shepherded,
through sunshine and storm.
Restore us O Lord,
make your face shine upon us,
that we might be saved,
and lead others to your salvation.*

*Your children,
prodigal children,
wandering far from home.
A wilderness people,
yet never forgotten,
never separated,
from the warmth of your love.
Restore us O Lord,
make your face shine upon us,
that we might be saved,
and lead others to your salvation.
Amen*

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Wednesday, August 29: Luke 18:9-14

Think about the atmosphere present among the listeners as they hear the story. Jesus tells of the prayers of a highly respected religious leader in society, one who really cares about justice, tradition and the coming Kingdom of God. Over against this, Jesus tells of a tax collector – a known oppressor of people, who decides to come into God's temple to pray.

The surprise of the parable is that we are told that the corrupt exploiter of the people was not only heard for his prayer, but that he went down to his house justified. The man most admired for his ethics, who fasted twice a week in order to give food to the poor, who is committed to truth, marriage, and financial integrity – he is the one who did not go down justified.

How does prayer go bad? The Pharisee begins well, by giving thanks to God. But there are problems:

- First, he is thankful for the wrong things. Rather than reflecting on the loving character of God (His grace, mercy, love, and compassion), the man's thankfulness is based on comparing himself with the tax collector. Does God need our judgment of others? No. Here is a man, supposedly at prayer, who is busily comparing himself to someone else, rather than giving thanks to God for His love.
- Second, he misses the chance to bring himself to the Lord. Instead he describes himself to the Lord. He delights in telling God how good he is. He misses a wonderful moment in which he could have brought himself into the generous presence of the Lord, seeking wisdom, truth, and blessing. Had the Pharisee come with an open, teachable, humble heart, God could have made him better.

The tax collector prays only one thing: with fear and timidity, he asks the Lord for mercy. He asks for the Lord's love, not the Lord's applause.

We are called to pray with humility, bringing our whole selves to the Lord, asking him to help us be all that we can be by his grace. How do I pray?

*May my prayer be like that tax collector's: Lord,
I want to speak to you from my need, and my desire,
and from my frustration.
I need your love.
I desire your forgiveness,
and I need your Spirit to change me from the inside out.
This story gives me hope and courage.
You are delighted when I come to you just as I am, warts and all.
I cannot hide behind a fancy façade,
pretending that I am some super spiritual saint.
You listen with good humour and heed my deepest desires.
You will change me, if I invite you in.
Change me, Lord Jesus. Change me.
Amen.*

Thursday, August 30: John 2:13-22

Maybe you haven't thought of this story as a parable? Jesus is using the destruction of the Temple as a parable – an acted parable – to describe what will happen in His life. Notice that according to the text, when Jesus acts to clear the Temple, He is not rebuked or threatened for his actions. Instead, the act is accepted, perhaps even welcomed, but most of the people.

The Temple represents the center of Jewish faith, hope, and identity. While the Jewish people do not understand the parable – that Jesus is really speaking about Himself as the true center of Jewish faith, hope, and identity – Jesus is inviting them to see that something much, much bigger than they are expecting, is happening among them. How is this parable fulfilled in the life of Jesus?

In the Old Testament, the Temple:

- represented the very real presence of God among his people; God, they believed, really was present in the holy of holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple;
- symbolized the very heart of their identity as the people of God;
- represented the hope that one day God would rule all the earth with his justice and love.

How does Jesus fulfilled these roles in our lives today?

- Through the Holy Spirit Jesus really is present within us – how is that an encouragement to you?
- Our primary identity is as God's people (not Canadians, teachers, students, parents, etc.) – how

- does that change how we live? How does that change how we relate to other people?
- One day Jesus will return with justice and love – how, then, should we live today?

Today we see Jesus' anger at the temple traders. Originally providing a simple service to pilgrims wishing to buy animals to sacrifice, the focus had shifted from God to money. Their presence was a distraction from the real purpose of pilgrims' temple visit – reverence for God.

The real purpose of our visit on earth is to love and to be loved by God. However there are things that, although good in themselves, can be a distraction from that purpose. Perhaps we are being invited to "declutter" our own temples and to keep only the things that really matter, things bring us to God. What does really matter in life?

*Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
and a generosity of service,
that gives without counting cost.
A life overflowing with Grace,
poured out from the One
who gave everything,
that we might show
the power of love
to a broken world,
and share the truth
from a living Word.
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,
and a yearning to share it.
Amen.*

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Friday, August 31: Mark 4:26-29

Think back to the parable of the sower and a seed (Matthew 13:1-9, Mark 4:1-9). Jesus has come and sown the seed of his Word in our world, yet we still see so much evil. How can that be? This little parable answers that question. The kingdom of God is like a farmer who, after he has sown the seed, does nothing until harvest, when he again goes to work, bringing in his crop. This story is incredibly encouraging to us.

Jesus is not only the one who sows but also the one who will bring the process to completion. He plants His Kingdom and He helps it grow. Jesus, like a farmer, tends His crop, waiting for the seed to come to fruition. The kingdom grows. How does this happen? In part it is a matter of spreading the good news: *"The Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then, finally, the end will come. You must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent."* (Matthew 24:14, 2 Peter 3:9)

Often God's Word takes time to bear fruit. We see that in our own lives: maybe we heard the good news when we were young but it took many years for it to become real in our lives.

This is an encouragement for us as we share the good news of God with others: it may take time for the Spirit to work in their lives, for the planted seed to bear fruit. Just because we do not yet see fruit, does not mean the seed is not growing. Keep praying for those who need God's Word to become real in their lives.

Pray the fruit of God's Spirit would be more and more abundant in our lives: *"If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* (Galatians 5:25, 22-23)

*Thank you, Lord, for this most consoling of images.
 I was not brought into this world to help you out of a mess.
 You above all are the one who is working.
 Your dynamism, active in nature from the beginning of time, should humble me.
 You are the force of growth –
 if you privilege me to add incrementally to that growth,
 that is your gift to me, not mine to you.*

*O Lord, I need your help today.
 I want to care for those you've sent into my life,
 to help them develop the special gifts you've given them.
 But I also want to free them to follow their own paths
 and to bring their loving wisdom to the world.
 Help me to embrace them without clutching,
 to support them without suffocating,
 to correct them without crushing.
 And help me to live, joyfully and playfully, myself,
 so they can see your life in me
 and find their way to you.
 Amen.*

Saturday, September 1: Mark 4:30-32; Hebrews 11

A mustard seed is very small – about a millimetre in diameter. The phrase, "*like a mustard seed*," was a proverbial way of referring to something very tiny. So when Jesus wants to speak of having just a tiny, tiny amount of faith, he speaks of "*faith as small as a mustard seed*" (Matthew 17:20). From this miniscule beginning, a mustard tree grows, reaching heights up to 3-4 metres within a season. Within a few short months, the tiny seed becomes a tree sturdy enough for birds to perch in its branches.

This is another kingdom parable. On the one hand, Jesus is addressing the doubts of those who have difficulty recognizing the kingdom of God and his ministry. Many people expect the kingdom to involve a great military general leading a revolution, but the change Jesus brings is nothing of the sort. His Kingdom starts off tiny. But from that very modest beginning, the kingdom of God will grow – almost unnoticed – but it would change everything, everywhere, for everyone, for all time.

On the other hand, Jesus is encouraging us that, even though each of us begins with "*faith as small as a mustard seed*," our faith will grow as we walk with Him. Read Hebrews 11. This chapter is all about amazing things that can grow out of mustard seed faith in people's lives. How can you live, more faith-fully, today? Pray that God would help you grow in your faith.

Sometimes we feel we have nothing to contribute. However, we all have at least a mustard seed of faith. We can all contribute a prayer. We can all contribute a word of encouragement. We can all contribute a tiny bit from our resources. With those small blessings God can change the world.

Jesus speaks of the word of God as something organic and growing.

Let me think back to seeds that have grown in my heart: probably happenings rather than preachers' words. I saw a kindness, a courageous stance, an example of honesty that cost the honest man dearly. That was the seed. It stayed with me, and was active in my heart.

In the same way I sometimes find, to my delight, that others have noticed something I did or said, and it became a seed in their heart, yielding good fruit over the years.

*May God support us all the day long,
till the shadows lengthen and the evening comes
and the busy world is hushed
and the fever of life is over
and our work is done —
then in his mercy —
may he give us a safe lodging
and a holy rest
and peace at the last. Amen.*

Sunday, September 2: Matthew 5:14-16

What an encouraging way to end our study of parables. Jesus uses the metaphors of salt and light to describe how He genuinely believes that we, through His Spirit, can make the world a better place. When we are actively involved in the world, we change things, for the better.

Jesus calls us to be salt. We think of salt primarily as a seasoning. In Jesus' day its main function was as a preservative, keeping things from spoiling and going rotten. Being salt in the world does not merely enhance the flavour of our communities – it is of vital to our survival and to keep things from going rotten. *"We don't fight against mediocre taste, we fight against corruption and rot. The difference Christians are meant to make is not that between chocolate and chocolatey-chocolate. The difference we're to make is between nourishing protein and putrid, rotten flesh"* (Conrad Gempf).

Jesus calls us to be light. In a world before electricity or streetlights, darkness was a place of fear, lostness, and confusion. It was a time when thieves broke in and stole, when enemies attacked, when you got lost ... you waited for morning, desperately (Psalm 130). With light come hope, truth, help, peace, and security.

Jesus gives us encouragement: each of us can make a dramatic difference in the world. Our lives matter. We can keep the world from rotten-ness. We can bring light into darkness. We can bring life and hope.

What difference can we make for God and for good through our daily lives? What small steps can we take to be salt and light?

- Talk to your neighbor?
- Listen to your colleagues?
- Volunteer in the community?
- Invest time with children, youth, or adults at the church?
- Work to improve some aspect of your neighbourhood?
- Recycle?
- Care for the environment?
- Offer a helping hand?
- Pray for someone in need?
- Make a phone call?
- Be an encourager?

*Lord Jesus, bless those who bring hope where there is none,
faith where there is doubt,
love where there is hatred,
peace where there is war,
sustenance where there is hunger,
water where there is drought,
and comfort where there is sadness.
For all love has it's source in You,
and every act of selfless giving brings a smile to Your face.
Amen.*