

A landscape photograph of rolling hills under a clear sky. In the foreground, a dirt path winds through tall, dry, golden-brown grass. The hills in the background are covered in similar vegetation and are bathed in the warm light of late afternoon or early morning, creating long shadows and a golden glow. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

April 2021

Act(s)ions Speak Louder than Words

**Readings in Acts,
Reflections,
and Prayers**

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Wednesday, April 7: Acts 1:1-11

The prayers this month (mostly) are from James S. Bell Jr & Tracy Macon Sumner, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Christian Prayers & Devotions* (don't let the title fool you – it actually is a very good anthology of prayers).

We just finished Mark's gospel. Today we're beginning to read through the Book of Acts, a sequel. Mark told us the story of Jesus' life and ministry. Acts begins where Mark ends, telling us about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the life of the early church. The good news of Jesus life, death, and resurrection will transform individuals and ultimately change the very nature of society in Israel, the Middle East, and the world.

There are a few "fulltime" evangelists (literally "good news"-ists) in Acts: Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. But most of the sharing of the good news will be done by ordinary people, just like us, who simply live their faith and talk about Jesus with their family and friends. Christianity mostly spreads by informal missionaries – ordinary people with ordinary jobs and ordinary families – simply sharing what Jesus means to them.

Michael Green, writing about the early church, comments, *"Here were men and women of every rank and station in life, of every country in the known world, so convinced that they had discovered the riddle of the universe, so sure of the one true God whom they had come to know, that nothing must stand in the way of their passing on this good news to others ..."* Wouldn't it be great if this were true of us??? *"What was the secret of such zeal?"* Green asks. His answer: *"They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ ..."* Do we understand something of the love that God has shown us in Jesus? If we do, then we would want others to experience that too, right?

What does Jesus mean to you? How does He encourage you? How does He help you? How does He inspire you? How does He give meaning to your life? We can just naturally share the life we know in Jesus. We are not trying to convert people to a belief system we want them to agree with intellectually. We want people to meet Jesus, to know Him, and to experience the same blessings from His Spirit that we have known.

David Watson writes, *"People are no longer converted to a doctrine. They can only be attracted to a way of life which they can see as a practical alternative to the values and assumptions of our competitive, alienated, materialistic society."* He goes on to say, *"We have been presenting Christianity (the system) and not Christ the person ... We have to present to the world a living Christ, fresh, always life-giving and nourishing ..."*

In Acts 1:1-11, Jesus is promising the Holy Spirit, God's personal presence. When His Spirit comes, His people will be His witnesses – at first locally (Jerusalem, where they were), then the local area (Judea), then further afield (Samaria), then everywhere. We live AFTER the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2). For us, this promise is fulfilled. He IS within each of us. He comforts us, teaches us, encourages us, AND gives us the right words to say to bless others.

Take a chance ... and invite a friend to discover the new life that comes through Him. What you know as "ordinary" Christian life, with its joy, love, and hope, is extraordinary to those who don't yet know it ...

Or maybe you need to know that extraordinariness yourself. Do you need to meet Jesus afresh? Pray about it.

*Lord, because you have made me, I owe you all of my love.
Because you have redeemed me, I owe you all of myself.
Because you have promised so much, I owe you all of my being.
Lord, please make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge.
Let me know by love what I know by understanding.
I owe you more than my whole self,
but all I can give you is all that I am.
Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love.
I am wholly yours by creation.
Make me all yours, too, in love.
Amen.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Thursday, April 8: Acts 1:12-26

After the heady heights of Jesus' ascension into heaven, this passage seems mundane – even offensive. Gambling to choose a replacement for Judas? Really?

But look closer ... **First**, 120 or more people "*all joined together constantly in prayer*" (1:14). When they shortlisted two candidates (1:23), they kept praying (1:24). It is good to pray – not just as a nice polite beginning or ending to a time together, but as the focus of our time. At our church staff meetings, we always **begin** with prayer; the prayer time can actually take up a lot of our meeting. That's a good thing. When you are facing a major decision, pray – really pray. Perhaps ask some trusted people to pray for/with you ...

Second, Peter goes to Scripture for counsel and advice. Of course, Scripture does not necessarily speak directly to every situation we face, and we have to be cautious of forcing texts out of context to apply to our circumstances. But often there are principles we can draw from Scripture that speak to our situations.

Third, they use an established means of making a choice. While casting lots seems like gambling to us, it was a long-established Jewish practice for discerning God's will (Numbers 27:21, Joshua 19, 1 Samuel 14:24-41 and 28:6, Nehemiah 10:34 and 11:1, and Luke 1:8-9). Remember that much prayer and Scriptural reflection had come first. "*The decision to cast lots is not a matter of leaving things to chance; it is a deliberate attempt to find God's will. And if we believe that God orders events why should he not determine the outcome of the draw, especially after prayer? It seems just as likely as him showing the way through a vote taken by fallible, sinful people.*" (John Grayston).

Once the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 2), the early church seems to move to a more direct dependence on the Spirit for wisdom (Acts 13:2, 15:1-28, 16:7). There are no later examples of casting lots.

The principles in this passage are good for all of us in our decision making:

- Pray – ask your trusted friends to pray with you.
- Search the Scriptures – what principles can you draw from God's Word?
- Be open to the Spirit's leading – don't pre-determine the answer you want from God. Be open to what He might say ... even if it's challenging. He will give you all the resources you need.

*God of love, we pray that you give us love:
love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing,
and love in the hidden places of our souls;
love of our neighbours, near and far;
love of our friends, old and new;
love of those who we find it hard to bear,
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;
love of those with whom we work,
and love of those with whom we take our ease;
love in joy, love in sorrow;
love in life, and love in death.
In the end, may we be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – forever and ever.
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

Friday, April 9: Acts 2:1-13

When I was at the Arab Baptist Theological School in Beirut, Lebanon, I was part of a series of lectures on Christianity and Islam. Some of the presenters spoke in English, while Martin Accad, a faculty member, translated simultaneously into Arabic. Other presenters spoke in Arabic. He translated simultaneously into English. How he could be listening to Arabic and speaking at the same time in perfect English astounded me. However, Martin Accad is a brilliant person, with Masters and Ph.D. degrees from Oxford.

In Acts 2, the 120 or so disciples of Jesus talking in all sorts of different languages are not brilliant Oxford Ph.D.'s. They are unschooled fishermen, labourers, farmers, and tradespeople ... It's all amazing.

Jerusalem is bustling with people – God-fearing Jews from all over the known world are gathering for the annual thanksgiving celebration and memorial of the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai, called Pentecost. It takes place 50 days after Passover (2:5). It is here – in the middle of Jerusalem, bursting with people who have come to seek God – that God shows up. No secret stable in obscure Bethlehem this time.

God, creator of the universe, who has existed from before the beginning of time, reveals Himself through His Holy Spirit. He is real. He is tangible. People sense His presence. We take this for granted. It is so much a part of our experience. But imagine a time **before** you could know Jesus personally in your life? Imagine a time when you could only know ABOUT God, but not really know God? This is a radical change ...

"Wind from heaven fills the whole house. Wind, just like that Elijah felt in the cave. Fire, like Moses saw at the bush that didn't burn up, like the pillar of fire that led the people out of Egypt, like the fire that consumed Elijah's soaking sacrifice. And God speaks. Not through a prophet or priest singled out from others, but through 120 uneducated, uncultured Galileans, so that everyone can hear and understand in their own language (v 8)." (Stephanie Heald).

This coming of the Holy Spirit is the story of the tower of Babel in reverse. At Babel, people were separated by their sin and their different languages. Now they are brought together by the good news of Jesus, by His love for all people, and by the work of the Spirit. It's a miracle: everyone understands in their own language. It's a miracle: Jesus unites people of ALL different cultures and backgrounds. God is un-Babel-ing the world.

- For some, Pentecost meant nothing. God came among them. They watched the Spirit work; it was interesting, but nothing more. They didn't allow the Spirit to touch their own lives, personally.
- For others, their lives were changed forever. God came to them. He spoke to them. They allowed Him to come into their lives. Nothing would ever be the same again ...

God comes to each of us. He speaks to each of us. Are we listening? More than that, are we willing to put our lives into His hands? Will we follow where He leads us?

*Lord, holy Father, show us what kind of man it was
who hung for our sakes on the cross?
Whose suffering causes the rocks themselves to crack and crumble with compassion?
Whose death brings the dead back to life?
Let my heart crack and crumble at the sight of Him.
Let my soul break apart with compassion for His suffering.
Let it be shattered with grief at my sins for which He dies.
Let it be softened with devoted love for Him.
Let my heart be moved with compassion for a broken world.
Let my soul move forward to care for those who suffer.
Let my hands be hands of healing and mercy for those who sin.
Let my life be a life of love, reflecting His undeserved and unconditional love.
Amen*

Bonaventure (1221-1274)

Saturday, April 10: Acts 2:14-39

One of the exercises we were supposed to do in preaching class was to take a video of ourselves preaching a sermon, watch the video, and then critique ourselves. I did NOT want to see myself on video. Somehow, I managed to avoid doing that assignment. So, until Covid forced us online, March 22 last year, I had never actually "seen" myself preach. It was not a pretty sight. I still find myself hard to watch.

If video technology had existed back in the 1st Century, Peter would probably not want to watch a video of this

sermon, either. Technically, it is not a great sermon (it would maybe get a "C+" in preaching class). But look at the amazing response in Acts 2:41. As someone who preaches, I ask myself, "What's with that?"

What's "with that," of course, is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, working in and through Peter's words, makes all the difference.

The Holy Spirit is just as real and just as present today, but for some reason (which we don't understand), rarely is the response to ANY sermon today like what it was back then, whether the preacher is Bruce or Billy Graham. Frankly, the responses to many of the other sermons recorded in Acts was nothing like this, either. In this, the very beginning of the church, the Spirit chooses to work in amazing, incredible – unique – ways. We cannot manipulate Him to replicate this kind of thing in our time. He does what He does. We pray. We reflect on Scripture. We commit ourselves to God. We pray again. We do our best. And we leave the results to Him.

It is interesting to note that Peter talks about the difference the Spirit makes **now** in our lives (he doesn't talk about resurrection and the hope of life with Jesus in eternity, although Peter certainly believes in that). People are excited that the Spirit can give them new life with Jesus **now**. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah/Saviour/Christ **now**. The Spirit has come **now**. There is good news **now**. That's the message people respond to.

In some of our preaching/sharing we link believing-in-Jesus simply to going to heaven when we die. Peter (and other early Christians) rarely speak in these terms. They emphasize the presence and power of Jesus **now**.

Jesus is Lord and Saviour **now**. His Spirit is with us and working right **now**. God is still doing amazing things **now**. He may not do some of the incredible signs and wonders He did back then, but He is still very active in ways we take for granted or subtle ways we don't even notice **now** ... He is:

- inviting people to life in Jesus and challenging them to repent **now**,
- forgiving sins and giving people a new start **now**,
- healing people physically, emotionally, and spiritually **now**,
- bringing hope and healing to people and relationships **now**,
- bringing justice and mercy around the world, through His people **now**,
- giving people hope for life now, and into eternity **now**,
- providing counsel and direction for people who need it **now**,
- blessing people with comfort and care **now**,
- providing the practical things people need (a job, a friend, daily bread, much more) **now** ...

We can think of real-life examples of each of these. And we can think of many, many more ways that the Spirit is active in our lives and our world **now**, too. Take some time to reflect on how God is at work in your own experience and circle of friends **now**. Thank Him. Praise Him. Pray for others. And pray that God would continue to be at work in our community, our church, and the lives of people around us ... **now**.

*God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry weigh us down,
when the road seems dreary and endless,
when the skies are grey and threatening,
when our lives have no music in them,
when our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage.
Flood the path with light.
Run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise.
Tune our hearts to brave music.
Fill us with Your Spirit.
Give us a sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age.
Quicken our spirits so we may be able to encourage all who journey with us on the road of life.
Give us grace to be always willing to minister to the needs of others,
and to extend the blessings of your kingdom over all the world.
Fill us with Your Spirit.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, April 11: Acts 2:40-47

When I was a student at Tsawwassen Junior High School, the “church” was the building across the street where the kids who wanted to fight would scurry behind, so they could trade punches out of sight of the teachers (now, working in a church across the street from a high school, with an office that looks on to the back lane, I can attest that fights and other “sketchy” things still do happen behind churches). Back in my junior high days, I had no idea, however, what really went on INSIDE a church. I wonder how many LCI students, do?

These verses, in Acts 2, give us the first real picture of “church”:

1. There is teaching and learning (inspiring people to grow in faith, knowledge, and wisdom).
2. There is fellowship (enfolding people into a community of care, compassion, grace, and love).
3. There is breaking of bread (worship and celebration of “being together” as the people of God).
4. There is mission (talking about their faith AND providing tangible help to those in practical need).
5. There is prayer – lots of prayer (‘nuff said).

I suspect most of us know all about church. Over the generations it has morphed and changed, but these five basic elements remain. The church may have become more than this, but it cannot be less.

1. Constant, lifelong **learning** is critical – so that we remain true to the teachings, values, and principles of Jesus so we can speak relevantly in and to our culture, and not just absorb the latest cultural craze.
2. **Fellowship** defines who we are. We care deeply for one another (modeled in the early church in very practical, financial ways). We live God’s Kingdom values of mercy and compassion. Even in Covid times we can find ways to connect and care for one another in tangible, meaningful ways.
3. **Worship** shapes us. Symbolized by the ordinance of Communion, we give thanks, celebrate, praise, and stand in awe of our Creator, Saviour, and the Spirit who is with us.
4. Through **mission**, we care for people outside and inside the community. We want them to know Jesus. We want to alleviate pain and suffering, seek justice, and see God’s Kingdom come and will be done.
5. In **prayer**, we listen to God speaking to us and lifting our **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication (needs) to God (note the helpful acronym **ACTS**, to help us have balanced prayers). In prayer we open ourselves up to God’s will for us, and we bring our issues to Him.

It’s interesting that “evangelism” is not listed and yet “*each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*” As the early Christians simply lived their faith, others were drawn to the church. Evangelism or mission was not a programme. Sharing Jesus’ good news simply happened as they lived their faith. By their words and example, people were drawn to Jesus as to a magnet.

How can we live our faith in such a way that people see our faith and are drawn to Jesus? “*They’ll know we are Christians by our love ...*” How can we model that love? How does this description of the church challenge you?

Pray that we might be this kind of a missional, loving, worshipping, learning – and PRAYING – community.

*Holy Jesus, you came from heaven to earth.
You paid the ransom on the cross for us.
You redeemed us from all sin.
You purified us to be your precious people.
We ask that you write your law on our hearts so we may understand it.
May we know you, and the power of your resurrection.
Help us turn from sinful ways.
Rule our hearts by faith.
May we live rightly.
May we grow in grace.
May we grow in practical knowledge of you.
May your kingdom come, and your will be done, through us.
Amen*

Henry Hammond (1605-1660)

Monday, April 12: Acts 3:1-11

Even during Covid, Sunday morning (online or in-person) **IS** an important part of the whole “church” experience. But being “church” is much, much more than just what happens Sunday morning (though that’s important). Peter and John are together, and it’s not a Sunday. But they are certainly in relationship with one another, with Jesus, and with the Spirit. “Church” happens when we keep connected (in Covid, perhaps creatively): Sunday in worship, Monday watching the NHL, Tuesday on Zoom, Wednesday Youth Group, Thursday going for a walk, Friday on the phone, etc. – **if** we CHOOSE to live that way.

Peter and John are going to the temple, the institution that represented old, established religion. They had every reason **not** to go. Worship was old-fashioned and boring. But Peter and John kept on going (“Church,” in-person or online, may not always be what we want it to be either, but we are challenged to keep on going ...)

They keep on praying. I’m sure they pray for their non-Christians friends, family, and neighbours; they don’t give up. They pray for their country; they don’t give up. They pray for their church; they don’t give up. What else do you think they prayed for?

This sounds like a crazy question, but it needs to be asked: Do you pray? Really? Regularly? What for?

We are the church when we see people’s needs. Just like Peter and John. We may not think there are too many needs in church, but there are. But needs exist in places other than our church community. There are also oodles of needs in our neighbourhood. At school. In our workplaces. In our condo building.

We are the church when we do more than see needs, when we – as we are able – begin to meet those needs. Just like Peter and John.

I was recently asked, *“What is our church doing in the community?”* In other words, *“What are we doing? Are we making any difference? What mission are we involved in beyond ourselves – both in Word (evangelism, sharing our faith) and action (caring for hurting people, the poor, the needy)?”* It’s a great question.

To answer, picture the faces of the babies and children in our church’s children’s programmes AND kids we touch but never see: in the community (food banks, etc.) and in other countries (through our support of missions like Cuba, Bolivia, Zambia, etc.). The youth in our youth ministries AND many students impacted at LCI, the University of Lethbridge, and Lethbridge College. The families who are a vital part of our church life AND families we help in our community around the world through our support of ministries like Food Banks, Benevolent Fund, our Cuba teams, and others in mission from our church). The seniors who are part of our church community AND seniors we care for through our staff, who you may not know.

Can we do more of these “programme”-type things? Of course. But programmes are not really what the church is all about. We are ALL the church, ALL the time. When you parent your children or grandparent your grandchildren, you are the church. When (in good times) you coach soccer or watch your child/grandchild/niece play soccer, you are the church. When you go to work/school/whatever, you are the church. When you call or encourage someone, you are the church. When you live the hope and joy of Jesus as you walk around your block, talk to your neighbour, smile at the checkout clerk, or support your relatives, you are the church ...

The church is people of God, intentionally choosing to live our faith, day-by-day, moment-by-moment, in our communities, 24-7-365½. Do you want to know what our church is doing in mission? Look around you. Think of all the lives, homes, schools, and workplaces we can touch for Jesus, with Jesus’ love – even during Covid times – if we choose to see it that way. You are the mission of the church. I am the mission of the church. Together we reach so many in our community and beyond ...

Church does happen on Sunday mornings – a little bit. But in this time – less than 2% of your week – we cannot expect too much (if you expect 1-2 hours per week to be enough, you will be disappointed). Church is much, much more than Sunday mornings. Most of “being church” happens the other 98+% of the week ... How can you be church the other 98% of your life? Pray about that ...

*Father Almighty, creator of everything that is good and satisfying,
 help us to be devoted to you with all we are and all we have.
 What I really desire is the grace to be more devoted to you and your Word.
 Forgive my wandering heart.
 that is always looking for something else to quench its insatiable thirst.
 I have a "God-shaped" hole that can only be filled by you, and you alone.
 Help me give to you wholly.
 my possessions, relationships, time, energy, and career.
 I know that disciplines of Bible study, meditation, prayer, and worship are important.
 Help me find time and space to cultivate these things.
 Amen.*

James Bell Jr.

Tuesday, April 13: Acts 3:12-26

In the Oscar winning movie, *Chariots of Fire*, runner Eric Liddell has just won a race. After the race, a group of fans gather in front of grandstand. Liddell says, *"You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul."*

"Where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, 'Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me.' If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race."

People have just seen Peter and John heal a crippled beggar. People *"were astonished and came running"* to hear what they had to say for themselves. Like Eric Liddell, Peter and John point them to Jesus.

They don't have to do that. They could bask in the limelight, enjoy the notoriety, and do a victory lap or two around the Temple. But they don't. Because they know that it was not them – Peter and John – in their own power, who healed the crippled man. They are nothing special. It is **Jesus** who heals.

Our challenge is to appreciate that life is a lot like running a race – a marathon rather than a sprint. It's a long, lifetime journey with Jesus. And it can be grueling. It does require concentration of will and energy of soul. Sometimes you wonder if you can keep going. The encouragement of Scripture is to yourself to the love of Christ and keep plodding: *"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith"*(Hebrews 12:1-2).

In the end, it is **Jesus** who gives us the strength to keep on keeping the faith. *"By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him"*(Acts 3:16). Jesus will get us through, too.

What do you need to talk with Jesus about today?

*Lord, let peace rule in our hearts,
 and may it be our strength throughout our journey.
 We commit ourselves to your care and keeping this day.
 Let your grace be mighty in us, and sufficient for us, and let it work in us,
 so we may have strength for all the duties of the day.
 Keep us from sin.
 May your Spirit rule over our own spirits.
 May we live together in peace and holy love.
 Prepare us for all the events of the day, for we do not know what the day may bring.
 Give us grace to deny ourselves; to take up our cross daily,
 and to follow in the steps of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

Wednesday, April 14: Acts 4:1-22

When was the last time you were stressed? Really stressed? Your heart was pounding. Your palms were sweating. The cortisol was pumping ...

"I wonder how Peter and John must have felt as they were questioned by the High Priest's court," writes Andrew Graystone. "Once again they found themselves standing where Jesus had stood before them. It must have occurred to them that they could suffer the same fate that he had." It was a very stressful situation.

The Sanhedrin was the Court of Jewish leaders. It consisted of as many as 71 men (just men). Most were Sadducees, the politically savvy, upper-crust, wealthy, priestly group. They wanted as little problem with the Romans as possible, so they were fine with compromising Jewish traditions if it maintained the peace. They didn't believe in any form of resurrection. The idea that Jesus was alive and active in the world was causing conflict with the Romans. And talk of resurrection challenged their theology.

The Sanhedrin also included Pharisees, men who took the Old Testament Law VERY seriously and were not afraid to offend the Romans if it meant being faithful to the Law. They did believe in resurrection. Their issues with Jesus included His breaking of their rigid laws (healing on the Sabbath), fraternizing with "unclean" people (Romans, Samaritans, Syrians, women, lepers), and, most importantly, His claims to be God.

Andrew Graystone continues, *"When Jesus was hauled before the priests, he spoke very few words. But Peter and John couldn't help themselves. They couldn't stop speaking about Jesus. There's a glorious naivety about Peter's message. He told them that the healing of the lame man was a picture of the salvation offered to everyone through Jesus alone. Either he didn't know what trouble he was getting himself into or else, more likely, he didn't care."*

"There is salvation in no one else." Peter says, *"God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved"* (4:12). This offended the Jewish leaders of his day. This kind of exclusive claim still challenges many people in a multi-cultural, multi-faith world. But that's what Jesus insists upon (John 14:6). We must always treat people from all (and no) religions with full dignity and respect. We can have respectful dialogue with people of other faiths. That does not mean we accept all religions as equally true.

Peter also says, *"Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard."* Our calling is simply to be faithful to what we know and believe. We do the right thing (like helping a crippled person, caring for the poor, sponsoring refugees, etc.). We say the right things, too. As the Spirit inspired Peter and John, He can give us the wisdom we need. And as God got them through the "fiery furnace" of the Sanhedrin, He can get us through whatever challenges we have. In a clash of loyalties, where does your first loyalty lie? Do you live like that?

Pray that God would give us the wisdom, the courage, and the heart of God to say and do what is right ...

*Lord, I do not know what to do with myself.
So, let me make this exchange:
I will place myself entirely in your hands,
if you will cover my ugliness with your beauty,
and tame my unruliness with your love.
Put out the flames of false passion in my heart,
since these flames destroy all that is true within me.
Make me always busy in your service.
Lord, I want no special signs,
nor am I looking for intense emotions in response to your love.
Let my love for you be pure.
All I am, I give to you.
Help me, O Lord, to live for you.
Amen.*

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)

Thursday, April 15: Acts 4:23-31 and Psalm 2

Some Christians face real life-threatening persecution (no, Covid protocols are NOT persecution – we can still talk about Jesus and worship, we just have to be creative!). If we were really persecuted, how would we pray?

How do we pray when people talk down our faith? How do we pray when “Christians” embarrass us with their hateful comments or irresponsible actions?

The early Christians routinely prayed, turned to the Bible, and sought the Spirit’s leading. In Acts 4:11, Peter had quoted Psalm 118:22. Now as they gather to pray, they cite Psalm 2:1-2. When the first Christians quoted single verses, they were not “proof-texting” (trying to find a verse, any verse, that met their circumstances, which they then yanked out of context). As people with a Jewish background, they assumed those hearing one verse knew the larger context. They assumed people knew the whole psalm they were citing. Quoting one or two verses was shorthand for referencing the entire psalm. (We need to be careful “proof-texting,” too.)

Have a look at Psalm 2. The psalm begins questioning the present state of affairs: why are things the way they are? But notice how the psalm continues. God is ultimately very much in control. In the end, His anointed King, His Son (the Messiah, Jesus) is the sovereign Lord over all of creation, including every nation, and every ruler. As the disciples pray through Psalm 2, they are reminding themselves that the Messiah, Jesus, is far more powerful than the Herods and Pilates of the world. Ultimately, He will set things right.

The “*Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them*” is with us. Who can be against us? He is more than able to “*Stretch out His hand with healing power.*” He is more than capable of doing “*miraculous signs and wonders through the name of His holy servant Jesus.*” Though the world seems out of our control (it is!), it is not out of God’s control. We cannot begin to appreciate how God is working, why He allows what He allows, or how He will set things right ... but He will.

When we face conflict or persecution for our faith, it shakes us. When other Christians bring shame on Jesus and His church, it embarrasses us. And it forces us to live by faith, not by sight. We must depend on God. And maybe it also pushes us to pray like Peter, John, and their friends did ...

*Lord, I am an empty vessel needing to be filled; my Lord, fill it.
At times I doubt and am unable to trust You.
I am weak in faith; strengthen me.
I am cold in love; warm me and make me passionate,
so my love may go out to my neighbour.
Amen.*

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Friday, April 16: Acts 4:32-5:11

How seriously do we take God’s command that “*There should be no poor among you ...*” (Deuteronomy 15:4)? Throughout their early history, the Jewish nation did not take this command seriously at all. Reading through the Old Testament, especially the prophets, it’s clear that the Israelites routinely (1) ignored the poor, (2) blamed the poor (it’s their own fault anyway, right?), or (3) said it was someone else’s problem.

The problem is, when we read the prophets, God debunks each of those excuses. The poor are poor often because they have hard times (widows, orphans, crippled), wealthy people are greedy and selfish, and economic and social systems are unjust. The prophets tell us to quit making excuses and simply “*Deal with it.*”

Acts 4:32-37 echoes back to Acts 2:44-45. It goes further back, to the Old Testament “Year of Jubilee”: every 50th year debts were to be forgiven, forfeited property restored, with the vision that (seriously), “*There should be no poor among you.*” God’s plan for Israel was that they should care for one another. They never lived up to that ideal. There is no evidence they ever even tried the Year of Jubilee. On this issue, they just didn’t take God’s Word seriously. They didn’t walk the walk. They didn’t even talk the talk anymore.

The early Christians did take God and His Word seriously. They did believe they should have compassion for the poor. They were demonstrating the kind of practical faith and Kingdom of God living that the Jewish priests, scribes, and Pharisees should have practiced, but didn't. Luke is emphasizing that the real Kingdom of God is now the Christian church, not the Temple, the Jewish authorities, or the nation of Israel.

People did not sell the roofs over their heads. People still had places to live and food to eat. But generosity to one another – and people beyond themselves – was a hallmark of the early church. Joseph, nicknamed "Barnabas," literally "Son of Encouragement" (what a great nickname!), was one of these generous people. He sold a field (not his home) and gave the revenue to bless to others. *"No wonder they were able to give such powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus,"* comments Tom Wright. *"They were demonstrating that it was a reality in ways that many Christians today, who often sadly balk at even giving a tithe (10%) of their income to the church, can only dream of."* (FYI the Canada Revenue Agency routinely asks for charitable receipts for people who give more than **5%** of their income, because it's so unusual. Wouldn't it be great if CRA asked more of us for our receipts?)

Ananias and Sapphira WANT to be known as generous people, but ... Notice, they didn't **have** to sell their property; it was their free choice. Neither did they **have** to give the full value of the property to the church; that, too, was their free choice. The problem was not their (lack of) generosity, but their lying.

A characteristic of the Kingdom of God is holiness – described by old-fashioned words like integrity, fidelity, honesty, and truthfulness. We rarely hear those words anymore. But God still takes them seriously. In the first churches, right/honest/truthful/generous living and the power of the Holy Spirit go hand in hand. When believers live lives of generosity, purity, faith, honesty, and holiness, God is at work doing amazing things, bringing people to faith, and building His church. When God's people seek to *"do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God"* (Micah 6:8), God works in incredible ways ...

The corollary also appears to be true. When God's people forget WHOSE they are (God's), compromise their ethics, ignore His principles, do not care for those in need, and twist truth, problems come. In the Old Testament, when the Israelites forgot about God and His holiness, their nation imploded, and was conquered by foreign power after foreign power. Today, churches become anemic and die the same way. So do countries.

Is there something God is saying to you? Is there something you need to deal with? Pray for our church. Pray for your own sense of calling and opportunity ...

*My God, I don't ask You to take me out of this life,
but to prove Your power within my life.
I don't ask for tasks more suited to my strength,
but for strength more suited to my tasks.
I pray for a vision that moves me,
strength that endures,
and the grace of Jesus, who walked our earthly life as a conqueror in triumph.
Help me overcome all challenges, so I might bring honour to your name.
Amen.*

William Edwin Orchard (1877-1955)

Saturday, April 17: Acts 5:12-16

A few years ago, Marianne and I were in Edinburgh during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the world's largest arts festival. In normal years, it spans 25 days, features more than 50,000 performances, 3,500+ different shows, using 300+ venues. Some "big name" entertainers in large venues cost a lot of money to see. Lesser-known acts were in small venues, with more moderate price tags. We found there was so much free entertainment on the streets and in the courtyards, that we didn't pay a penny to be well entertained (our Scots ancestors would have been proud of our thriftiness). Some of the famous acts were a bit put out that there was so much free street theatre: people (like us) were skipping the costly venues and enjoying the free shows.

In 1st Century Israel, the Temple was the "biggest show" in town – a several acre, gorgeous campus built

around the spectacular central Temple building. The priests who ran the official religion of Israel lived well on the offerings faithful Jews brought during the festivals and throughout the year.

But now people are crowding around followers of Jesus in one of the Temple courtyards. They are ignoring the official religion of the temple and the priests. People are coming to hear about Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is doing amazing things, such as healing people. This is "in your face," as far as the authorities were concerned (more drama to come in Acts 6). They are more than a bit "put out."

Why God chose to heal so spectacularly back then, but not now, we don't know. There are many mysteries in life. We live with both the grief, sorrow, decay, and death of the old age and the new life, power, and hope of the age to come. Here, Peter's shadow brings healing; nothing like that ever happens again in Scripture. In Acts 19:12, Paul just has to touch handkerchiefs and they have healing power; nothing like that happens anywhere else. John lives a long life; James is executed quite young. There is much mystery to how and why God chooses to act as He does (or doesn't) at various times, in various situations. He is God, not a computer.

The truth is that when God's people pursue what is "*true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise*" (Philippians 4:8), He can and does still do amazing things through His people. We do care for the poor, through our support of ministries like the Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Days for Girls, and others through the benevolent fund. We care for mercy and justice locally and globally through our support of ministries and missions locally and globally (like Cuba and sponsoring refugees). We care for God's creation. We are NOT perfect. Far from it.

The things we do may not be as spectacular as having someone cured simply by letting our shadows fall on them. But they do make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals. And they change the world, slowly but relentlessly. Through us, His Kingdom can come, and His will can be done, a little bit more on earth as in heaven. One person at a time. What is God saying to you?

*Christ Jesus, when all is dark, and I feel weak and helpless,
Give me a sense of your presence, your love, and your strength.
Help me to have perfect trust in your protecting love and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry me,
For, living close to You, I shall see your hand,
your purpose, and your will through all things.
Amen.*

Irenaeus (martyred in 202)

Sunday, April 18: Acts 5:17-42

Through the centuries, political rulers and leaders of other religions have tried to squelch the church – aggressively in places like China, the Middle east, and north Africa, and more passively in other parts of the world. But the church survives. It is GOD'S church. The "message of life" continues to spread, much to the consternation of some dictators, intellectuals, and pundits. God is not dead. Far from it.

"*The believers were meeting regularly **at the Temple** ...*" (Acts 5:12). For the Jewish powerbrokers (priests and teachers of the Law), the Temple, represents the very real presence of God Himself on earth. The priests are guardians of this most sacred of all places. They simply cannot tolerate these "heretics" (as they thought of the followers of Jesus) desecrating the most holy place on earth (and threatening their lucrative livelihoods). So, the priests have them arrested. They intend to eradicate Peter and his friends once and for all.

This "*message of life*" is an interesting descriptor of the good news. At this point, the followers of Jesus were still considered Jews, albeit very unusual and very errant ones. The word "Christian" had not yet been invented. It is interesting to think of ourselves as "**messengers of life**":

- Following Jesus (really following GOD) is a **way** of life – a way of life in which you take God seriously and actually try to love Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, AND a way of life in which, in faith, out of love, we care for those in need.

- Following Jesus is also the way **of life** – a new kind of life, a life empowered by the reality that Jesus has risen from the dead, that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in our lives, and that we live in and experience Jesus' presence and power moment by moment, day by day.
- And following Jesus is the way **to authentic life** – a risen, physical life, in the presence of God Himself.

The early believers live it AND they talk about it. They *"gave people the message."* We often quote the saying, *"Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words."* Of course, that's a great encouragement to actually live the principles of our faith. But it can also be an excuse to **say** nothing. Early Christians would have balked at the passiveness (in the verbal sense) the slogan implies. For them, it was not an either/or, but a both/and.

As Peter and the others are brought before the Sanhedrin, remember this is not the first time they have been here. In Acts 4, after they had healed a crippled man, the Council warned Peter, John, and the rest not to talk about Jesus anymore. They had not obeyed. At that time, Peter and John had replied, *"Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?"* (4:19). Now they are saying the same thing, *"We must obey God rather than any human authority"* (5:29). The Sanhedrin is "furious" – both at the debate sparked by their emphasis on the resurrection of the dead and by the blatant disrespect of their authority.

Gamaliel, a wise elder, intervenes, with an interesting compromise. If this movement is not from God, it will just fade away. Countless other religious movements have. But if Jesus' message is from God, nothing they can do will stop it. Wise words. As people who believe God raised Jesus from the dead, the Holy Spirit is at work, and Jesus changes lives, we know this is true. Nothing can stop the "message of life."

How God works, however, remains a mystery. In this case, Gamaliel "comes to the rescue." God dramatically and quickly releases Peter and John from jail. But in many other situations, there is no Gamaliel speaking words of wisdom. There often is no miraculous deliverance. Stephen and James will be executed. Paul will languish for years in a Roman prison and be beheaded for his faith. Why things happen differently in different situations is beyond our ability to understand, predict, or control. Ultimately, we trust in God – who does things in His way, in His time. We simply are called to trust ... and pray. Who can you pray for today?

*Who can tell what today may bring forth?
Help me, O God of grace, to live every day as if it were my last,
because for all I know it might be.
Help me to live now as I will wish I'd lived when it is time to die.
Enlighten me, good Jesus, with the brightness of your Spirit.
Cast out all darkness from my heart.
Grant me, Lord, to know what is worth knowing,
to love what is worth loving,
to praise what is worth praising,
to hate what is unworthy in your sight,
to prize what to you is precious,
and to search out and do your will.
Write your name, Lord, upon my heart.
May no adversity ever move me from your love.
Be to me a strong tower of defense, a comforter in tribulation,
a deliverer in distress, and a very present help in trouble.
Be to me a guide through the many temptations and dangers in this life.
Amen*

Thomas a Kempis (1480-1471)

Monday, April 19: Acts 6:1-7

In any group of people, for much meaningful to happen, there needs to be organization. Our church has a Council. We have staff who have specific responsibilities. We have volunteer leaders for youth and kids. If we didn't have this division of labour, based on people's gifts, we would have real problems. Some things would never get done. Other things would have too many people involved, all tripping over each other.

The same was true in the First Century. As the early church has grown, there needs to be organization. And the right people, with the right character and the right gifts, need to be doing what they do best. The apostles need to *"spend time teaching the word of God."* To run the food programme for widows, the group chooses seven people, who are *"well respected and full of the Spirit and wisdom"* (6:3). What a wonderful set of qualifications ... would I have qualified?

The word used to describe what the seven are to do is the Greek word *"diakonia"* which is usually translated *"servanthood"* (from which we get the word "deacon"). These "deacons" were servants who would see that the practical needs of people in the church and community are met (rather different from a traditional Baptist understanding of "deacons" as the "senior board of the church," isn't it?).

Isn't it great when the right people take on the right task – the task they are gifted for, are good at, and want to do? Isn't it unfortunate/stressful/bad when the wrong people are trying to do the wrong thing – the thing they are really not gifted at, are not good at, or don't want to do?

None of us is good at everything. That's why we need one another. The challenge for each of us is to be honest about our limitations. And to be honest about our strengths. And use them for God's glory.

What do really enjoy doing? What are you good at? What has your experience/education prepared you for? How can we help you find the place where you can contribute to God's Kingdom? Are you doing something that just doesn't fit you? How can we help you fulfill your true passion?

*God, whose I am, have mercy on me.
Have mercy on me so that, in love and faith,
in righteousness and humility,
I may follow You with self-denial, steadfastness, and courage.
May I meet with You in the silence.
Please give me a pure heart that I may see You,
a humble heart that I may hear You,
A heart of love so I may serve You,
and a heart of faith so I may live in You.
Amen.*

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)

Tuesday, April 20: Acts 6:8-15

Here's a quote to think about: *"The great masses of the people will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small one."* I would suggest we have seen that ring true in recent years. The person who said those insightful words knew exactly what he was talking about. The author of that quote was Adolf Hitler.

The "religious" Jewish leaders used false witnesses, who lied, to convict Jesus (Matthew 26:59-60, Mark 14:56). Now "religious" leaders are persuading more people to lie, this time about Stephen. What are we learning about the integrity of these leaders, their character, and their faith? What do you think that others, looking at the shenanigans of these religious leaders, thought of them and their "faith"?

When I read about religious people compromising their beliefs, integrity, and ethics for political purposes – whether religious people back in Jesus' day or Christians in 2021 – I am saddened. For instance, images from the January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol show a "Jesus Saves" sign displayed near a gallows. Video of the fur-hatted, Jacob Chansley (known as the "QAnon shaman"), during the assault, shows him leading a prayer thanking God "for allowing the United States of America to be reborn" through the attack. Then to read some Christian leaders excuse or support the violence and chaos ... I'm very troubled. I grieve.

What do non-Christians, looking at this "Christian" behaviour, think of His people? Of Jesus?

In contrast to some of the disturbing behaviour of contemporary Christian leaders and pundits, consider the description of Stephen and his character in Acts 6. As Stephen is going about his business, including caring for

the widows, he naturally shares his faith. Stephen is not one of those set apart for *"prayer and the ministry of the word"* (Acts 6:2-4). He is one of those overseeing the daily distribution of food to widows. But even as he volunteers in the food bank/soup kitchen of the day, he finds opportunities to live for God and talk about God.

Through *"God's grace and power"* (6:8), people can see the reality of his faith. The authenticity of his faith shines through the fruit of Spirit evident in his life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). His faithful integrity shines through – literally.

Stephen is accused of *"blasphemy against Moses and God"* (6:11) and *"speaking against the Temple and the law"* (6:13-14). For these Jews, Moses is as important as God – surprising? The Temple is as important as God's law – shocking? THIS is heresy. It is idolatry. How far the religious people have strayed from truth.

Billy Graham once said, *"When a brave man takes a stand, the spines of others are often stiffened."* We are invited to stand for Jesus – the real, biblical Jesus, not some politically-motivated parody. Standing for Jesus does not mean marching with "Jesus saves" signs, building gallows, praying bizarre prayers, or defending hooliganism. It does mean sharing our genuine, honest faith in Jesus: how He has changed our lives. And it does mean living with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

How am I doing with that?

When we genuinely live the fruit of the Spirit, the spines of others may be stiffened to do the same.

*My soul's desire is to see the face of God,
and to rest in his house.
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures,
And to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,
And to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my king,
and to sing his praise always.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires.
You alone can satisfy those desires.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Wednesday, April 21: Acts 7:1-53

Laurence Peter (of *The Peter Principle* fame) writes, *"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to the garage makes you a car."* For faithful Jews, in Stephen's day, they DID believe that going to the Temple DID make them God's chosen people. For them, God and the Temple were one-and-the-same.

Stephen, newly installed as a deacon, quickly finds himself in conflict with the Jewish powers-that-be. Once again, a member of the early church finds himself up on charges before the Sanhedrin (they are keeping busy). This is the same group before whom Gamaliel defended Peter and John, urging caution: *"Leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God."* (Acts 5:38-39). This is also the group who had Peter and John arrested, before God miraculously delivered them from prison (Acts 4).

Stephen, in his defense, chooses to emphasize the big picture of what "the God of Glory" (7:2) is doing. In Acts 7:2-16, Stephen begins with Abraham, the "father" of the Jewish people, the one to whom God promised future blessing for His people (Genesis 12). Stephen emphasizes that it was a despised and rejected son, Joseph, who ends up saving the entire nation (Does this remind you of Jesus? Do you see where Stephen is going?).

Stephen continues, talking about Moses. Moses tried to bring peace to his people but was abused. He was

called by God to deliver His people, but the one called to be the “ruler and deliverer” was rejected (7:33-35). This also sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn’t it? Do you see Stephen’s direction?

Stephen continues, emphasizing that, even though God miraculously delivered His people in the past, they kept drifting into idolatry – worshipping things other than God – time and time again. They made a golden image and worshipped it (7:39-41). They worshipped the stars (7:42-44). And when the Jewish people made the tabernacle (the “tent of meeting” where Moses met with God) and later the Temple, they worshipped the building rather than the God whose presence they represented. Especially in the 1st century, the Temple building was the focus of Jewish religion – more important than God Himself. The Temple was supposed to help people worship God, but the Temple, itself, had become the real object of worship. It was an idol.

After criticizing the Jewish leaders for being idolaters (worshipping the Temple), Stephen then blasts them for their long history of rejecting and despising God’s messengers.

Stephen never directly answers the charges laid against him. He does emphasize that God never changes: the same God who had raised up Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and countless other prophets, raised up Jesus. He does clarify that Moses was one of the prophets, not equal with God as some Jews seemed to believe. And he does suggest that the Temple (a man-made building) and the law (God’s word) are not the same thing ...

What can we learn from this?

- The Old Testament is a relevant part of our story. God began His task of saving us long before Jesus – at least as far back as Abraham. We can learn from ALL of Scripture.
- God does love us, His people. He wants to save us. We need to be careful not to push Him away.
- We need to be careful what we worship. Are we worshipping God, or a human creation or even a person (a building, a worship style, a country, a particular author, a politician, a political agenda?)
- We are called to worship God, and God alone.

Prayerfully ask God to help us love Him with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength ... and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Father, I don't understand why you trust me to share your love with my neighbours.

Too often I mess it up.

I make stupid choices.

I say the wrong thing or put my foot in it.

*But you **have** chosen me, with my weaknesses and faults.*

*I guess, if I was perfect or could do it all by myself,
people would focus on me, not you.*

I don't want them to focus on me.

You're the best thing that ever happened in my life.

*I want them to move from hearing about **my** God,
to them knowing you for themselves.*

So, I put myself in your hands.

I want to be more available to you, and to the people around me.

*I know that I'm nothing impressive or special,
but in my weakness let your strength be revealed.*

*As you and I work on making me more like you,
let people notice the changes in my behaviour.*

*I want to explain to them – **that's God, that is.***

Father, being vulnerable and sharing weakness can hurt.

*Please give me the courage to follow your path
and accept pain, ridicule or rejection.*

*But let me know the power of your presence,
both now and when those times come.*

Amen

Sarah Bingham

Thursday, April 22: Acts 7:54-8:3

Often God miraculously protects His people. He wonderfully provided for Peter and John (twice).

God must do the same for Stephen, right? Stephen is a faithful person. A very godly person. A person with so much potential to build Jesus' church ... What happens?

How can this be? How come God doesn't save Stephen? Are not enough people praying? Are people not praying hard enough? Does Stephen not have enough faith?

One of the challenges of Christian faith is living with mystery: sometimes God does do miraculous things; other times He does not. For instance, these days, God does sometimes miraculously heal people; other times He does not. How can this be? People have suggested answers. Some people suggest those who are not healed today, do not have a big enough prayer team, their prayer-people are not "strong" enough, or the ill person just doesn't have enough faith (I have had people suggest this given my chronic facial pain). Stephen has incredible faith and God does not save him. The truth is, we just don't know why God intervenes sometimes and not other times. God is God. The maxim, "*God moves in mysterious ways*" is true. In faith, we trust God is ultimately in control and knows very well what He is doing ... even when things don't work out as we'd like.

Think about Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus, God Himself, prays to the Father, "*My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine*" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus will be unfairly tied, tortured, and executed. Accepting the mystery that God's will and God's way may be bigger than we can imagine, we, too, are called to trust our lives into His hands.

How do I need to trust God?

Think about Jesus' experience with opposition. He did not fight back. He did not threaten legal action. He did not stamp about in protest. May we be as gracious as Stephen and Jesus who, when they were being brutally assaulted, prayed, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" / "*Father forgive them*" (Acts 7:60, Luke 23:34).

Who do I need to forgive?

Pray for ourselves and all God's people as we seek to live faithfully ...

*Lord, our God, teach us to ask you in the right way for the right blessings.
Please steer the ship of our lives towards yourself,
the tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls.
Show us the course in which we should go.
Renew a willing spirit within us.
Let your Spirit curb our wayward senses.
Guide us toward that which is our true good:
Help us keep your laws, and in all we do, rejoice always in your glorious presence.
For yours is the glory and praise from all your saints, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Friday, April 23: Acts 8:2-25

With a net worth of US\$760 million, the richest pastor in the world is Kenneth Copeland, founder of Kenneth Copeland Ministries. He and his wife, Gloria, live in a \$6 million mansion. I guess some people have literally "struck gold" serving Jesus. (FYI Pat Robertson comes in at a "modest" \$100 million; Benny Hinn and Joel Osteen, two other familiar names, are "poor" in comparison, with net worths only in the measly \$40+ millions).

In Acts 8, Simon senses an entrepreneurial opportunity, too. He sees Peter and John lay hands on people and pray they would receive the Holy Spirit. Simon wants that power to add to his bag of tricks. He sees real business potential. Excitedly, he pulls out his wallet, "*Sell me your secret. Show me how you did that. Name*

your price." He isn't concerned about God. He senses a chance to earn a few quick denarii.

Peter answers: *"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money."* or, we could literally say (as Eugene Peterson translates it): *"To hell with your money. And you along with it. You can't buy God's gift."* Simon completely side-steps Peter's challenge to repent. He asks Peter to pray that nothing bad will happen to him. But he doesn't do the one thing he needs to do – repent. He doesn't see the error of his ways. He says he believes, but, because he won't repent, he receives no joy and no blessing from his "faith." He won't allow Jesus to change his heart. Simon is still in charge of Simon. He is left the same old Simon in a city which now sees him as the charlatan he always was.

We're all sinners. We all make mistakes. Acknowledging this is the starting point of Christian thinking. But a genuine conversion requires repentance: we understand the foolish, misguided things we've done, admit the harmful consequences of our action in the world, AND demonstrate our new self. Real repentance requires real change. After John the Baptist called people to repent, he went on to say, *"Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God"* (Matthew 3:8).

Some folks present repentance as simply confessing our sins, claiming our sins are forgiven and then, with a shake of the head, thinking: *"Whew, I'm glad that's over. Back to business as usual."* Genuinely following Jesus is about showing real penitence before God. It's about changing our ways. The point is we DON'T go back to business as usual. Now we live as Jesus would have us live, as His followers.

Paul explains that those who are "in Christ" must show *"tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience"* (Colossians 3:12). As authentic people of Jesus, filled with His Spirit, we will grow in *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

How is Jesus challenging some of my attitudes? What might I need to change in my life? Will I do it?

*Lord, make me see your glory in every place:
if mortal beauty sets my heart to glow,
help me see your grace shining even brighter;
if natural wonders stop me in awe,
may your Majesty cause me to worship you even more.
You have given me on earth this spiritual soul,
a prisoner behind these weak walls of flesh;
how can that soul break free? How can my spirit find its true life?
Dear Lord, I cry to you for help.
Your Spirit alone can save me.
May your Spirit flow through my will and my senses,
redeeming what is sinful, empowering and inspiring what is good.
All goodness, Lord, must fail without your Spirit:
for you alone have the power and glory.
Amen.*

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

Saturday, April 24: Acts 8:26-40

Don't you love it when someone genuinely wants to hear about Jesus? When someone really does want to know the Messiah?

Yesterday we met Simon, the sorcerer, who only wanted to know Jesus as part of a get-rich-quick scheme.

The second person we meet in Acts 8 is an Ethiopian eunuch, the Minister of Finance for Queen Candice of Ethiopia. He is a genuine seeker. He really does want to know God. Somehow, he has come to believe in the one true God (he is an African convert to Judaism). Now he is returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Apparently, however, the Temple services did not meet his spiritual hunger. As he rides along, he is reading and trying to understand a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

This Ethiopian, like Simon, knows a lot about religion. He has studied the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) enough to be convinced God is real. He has come to love God because he believes what he has read and studied is true. But he feels there has to be more. His Judaism has no "life" to it. Philip introduces him to Jesus, and it all comes together. He finds new life in and through Jesus.

"They came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him." What the Ethiopian understands is what Simon never did. Belief is not just a matter of the head – it's also a matter of the heart. Simon went away as the same old Simon; the Ethiopian, who believed in Jesus with all his heart, *"went on his way rejoicing."* Jesus changes his life. He is a new person.

For faith to be real, yes, you do have to know, intellectually, that Jesus Christ came, lived, died for our sins, and rose from the grave. It is important to know He is coming again. But for faith to be real you also have to know that Christ came for **you**; He died for **you**; He will come again for **you**. More than that, you need to know the power of His Holy Spirit at work in your life **today**. He will change you, **today**. New life in Jesus begins **today**.

Faith in Jesus is a matter of letting Him into your heart, not just your head ... It's a matter of letting Him change you (genuine repentance). Will you let Him? How can you live that way today?

*My God, I believe most firmly that you watch over all who hope in you,
and that we will need nothing when we rely upon you in all things.
Therefore, I am resolved for the future to cast all my cares upon you.
People may deprive me of worldly goods and status.
Sickness may take from me my strength and the means of serving you.
I may even jeopardize our relationship by sin, but my trust shall never leave me.
I will preserve my faith to the last moment of my life,
and the powers of hell shall seek in vain to grab it from me.
Let others seek happiness in their wealth and in their talents.
Let them trust in the purity of their lives, the severity of their sacrifices,
in the number of their good works, and the enthusiasm of their prayers.
As for me, my rock and my refuge, my confidence in you fills me with hope.
For you, my divine protector, alone have given me hope.
Amen.*

Claude de la Colombiere (1641-1682)

Sunday, April 25: Acts 9:1-31

In a typical western, the hero and the villain settle their differences in a six-shooter showdown at high noon.

Occasionally, in Scripture, it all comes down to a show down (of sorts), too. Acts 9 is the story of just such an event ...

Consider one of the gunslingers. His name is Saul. Saul had known of Jesus when He was alive and knew all the circumstances surrounding His crucifixion. As far as Saul was concerned, Jesus had been a political anarchist and a religious heretic. Saul was leading the effort to rid Jerusalem of Jesus' followers; he had taken on the mission with fiendish delight. When Stephen was stoned, *"Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen"* (8:1). Acts 8:3 records that then, *"Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison."* In Acts 9:1, he is still *"uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers."*

Saul rides toward Damascus on a very high horse. But at high noon (22:6, 26:13), *"suddenly a light flashed around him."* Saul is flat on his back on the ground. A thunderous voice rings out, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"* (in his own account, Paul says the voice added, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (Acts 26:14)). Saul, sprawled in the dust, cries out, *"Who are you, Lord?"* And the Lord replies, *"I am Jesus,*

whom you are persecuting." Somehow during this, Saul clearly sees Jesus himself (1 Corinthians 15:8). Later, Paul will write that, Jesus "arrested" him when he was out to arrest His disciples (Philippians 3:12).

It was a dramatic high noon showdown. But it was no contest. A showdown with Jesus never is.

Goads? What are "**goads**" (used in Acts 26:14)? This phrase (*"It is hard to kick against the goads"*) was a well-known Jewish proverb. Jesus likens Saul to a lively, head-strong bull, and Himself to a farmer using a sharp, pointed stick (a "goad") to break his will. The implication is that Jesus is pursuing Saul, prodding and pricking him. This goading was hard (painful, futile) for Saul to escape or resist. Modern translations often say something like, *"It is useless for you to fight against my will,"* to convey the meaning of the phrase.

One goad might have been Saul's doubts. Publicly, Saul has dismissed Jesus as a heretic, "fake news." Subconsciously he can't get Jesus out of his mind. Saul may have seen Jesus – he certainly knew reports of Jesus' teaching and miracles, character and claims, and the persistent claim of many witnesses that He had been raised from death and seen alive. The over-the-top nature of Saul's persecution may betray his inner doubts. Carl Jung wrote, *"Fanaticism is found only in individuals who are compensating secret doubts."* Many people have "reasons" for not believing in Jesus, but they almost always have deep-seated doubts, too. That's because Jesus is pursuing them. *"Methinks he doth protest too much,"* Shakespeare would say.

Another goad would have been Stephen. Saul had been present at Stephen's trial and execution. He had heard Stephen's powerful speech to the Sanhedrin, his prayer that his executioners be forgiven, and his claim that he could see Jesus at God's right hand. He had seen with his own eyes Stephen's face shining like an angel's (6:15) and his courageous non-resistance while being stoned to death (7:58-60). There is something inexplicable about these followers of Jesus. The most powerful witness today is still the changed lives of people who know Jesus. The most powerful sermons are preached by our lives of integrity, compassion, and love.

Another goad would have been Saul's own self-image. Although he can claim to be faultless in external righteousness (Philippians 3:6), Saul knows his thoughts, motives and desires are not always pure. While Saul tries not to do anything wrong, he struggles with evil desires (Romans 7:7-25). Saul is aware he needs an inner peace he cannot find, apart from Jesus. People are still plagued by doubts about self-worth and guilt, they are still searching for true hope, peace, love and joy ... and they will never find it until they find Jesus.

C.S. Lewis in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, describes how he sensed God's relentless pursuit of him: he likens God to "the great Angler" playing a fish, to a cat chasing a mouse, to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, and finally to the divine chess player always a few moves ahead until, in the end, God has us in checkmate.

What "goads" might God be prodding you with these days? What is He saying to you, that you might be resisting? What is He challenging you about, that you might not want to deal with?

*I do not know, my God, what may happen to me today.
I only know nothing will happen to me that you haven't foreseen from all eternity,
and that is sufficient, my God, to keep me in peace.
I adore your eternal designs.
I submit to them with all my heart.
I desire them all and accept them all.
I make a sacrifice of everything.
I give everything to your dear Son, my Savior,
Through your Spirit, give me patience in troubles,
strength for struggles,
wisdom for challenges,
and perfect submission in trials.
Help me to be all you will me to be.
Amen.*

Madame Elizabeth of France, written in prison while awaiting the guillotine (1764-1794)

Monday, April 26: Acts 9:32-42

What has been your experience with divine healing? What is your understanding of healing? Where has that come from? How does it shape how you live your life?

What does this passage teach about healing?

- Healing is one blessing the Spirit can bestow. Healing can happen.
- People can come to faith by witnessing healings.
- The power to heal is God's – it is the work of the Spirit. Healings happen (or don't) at His will, not ours. God heals; Peter is just the person God uses.
- We might conclude God must ALWAYS heal everyone. But then no one would ever die. Jesus healed many, He did not heal everyone. Peter and others healed many, but not all. All these people died.

So what does all this mean for us today?

- Healing is still real. God does still heal. Healing, like all God's gifts, is His prerogative. God can heal whomever, whenever, however He chooses. We can pray for healing, for ourselves and others. Often God does heal; but often He does not. We do not know why. God's actions are often a mystery. We must live with that.
- He always hears and responds to the prayers of His people, but not always as we would like. Sometimes it takes greater faith to live with our pain/disability than to be healed; we may grow more through suffering than when all is great.
- Healing is great – for a season. But it is not permanent. The people Jesus healed eventually died. We all will die. Paul was able to say, *"I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better."* (Philippians 1:20-22)

There is something bigger than healing going on in this story. To focus only on the healing is to think too small.

The deeper reality is that God's grace is alive and active in our world. The Holy Spirit is at work among His people and in His world, doing creative, unexpected, life-giving things. God's grace manifests itself through the Spirit's gift of healing, but also through gifts of wisdom, administration, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, crafting, evangelism, knowledge, hospitality, discernment, mercy, compassion, forgiveness ...

Just as Peter steps forward with God's grace in the lives of Aeneas and Tabitha, God wants us to act graciously towards others through the power of the Spirit. God's desire is that our church be a "foretaste of heaven" – a place where (even during Covid) we pray, talk, listen, learn, forgive, care, encourage, worship, serve, seek justice, and so on and so on ...

We call people to a new reality. We call them to see an alternative vision for how to live. We call them to the Kingdom of God. We call them to *"Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed are those who take refuge in him"* (Psalm 34:8). We call them to Jesus. We call them to the Holy Spirit. We call them to their heavenly Father. We call them to grace. We call them home.

*Almighty and merciful Father, like lost sheep we have erred and strayed from your ways.
We have followed too much the plans and desires of our own hearts.
We have broken your holy laws.
We have left undone those things we should have done.
We have done those things we should not have done.
There is no health in us, but you, Lord,
have mercy upon us miserable offenders.
Spare us, God, who confess to you our faults.
Restore us who are repentant, according to your promises declared to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, most merciful Father, for Jesus' sake,
that from now on we may live godly, righteous, and self-controlled lives.
Amen*

Anglican prayer of general confession

Tuesday, April 27: Acts 10:1-23

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream: *"I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama ... will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South.*

"With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

The Old Testament taught that God's people were called to mission. By blessing one family, Abraham's family, God's intention was to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-4). The vision God set before His people was a beautiful dream of the Kingdom of God, in which peace, completeness, wholeness, holiness, harmony, free and open relationships, safety, health, blessing, freedom, and righteousness reign (Isaiah 2:3-5, 42:6-7, and Joel 2:28-29). This was to be their way of life, and the good news they were to share with all nations.

The tragedy was that Israel twisted this call (to bring God's love to **all** people) into a call to favouritism and privilege **only for Jews** (really only for Jewish MEN). Rules and regulations were created to define uncrossable boundaries between Jews and non-Jews (and even Jewish women). No Jew was permitted to ever enter the home of a Gentile/non-Jew, even a God-fearing one, or invite such a person into their home.

Jesus' message is that God's vision – that the good news of the Kingdom of God was for **all** people – IS truly for **ALL** people. He delighted in breaking down barriers (Luke 4:18-19). He proceeded to bring the good news of God's love to women, Romans, demon-possessed people, Syrians, and "sinners" of all types. With God's love, He touched untouchable people with diseases like leprosy. God's good news really is for everyone.

Most early Christians came from strong Jewish backgrounds. Entrenched prejudice ran deep in their lives without even thinking about it. Could non-Jews ever become Christians and be "equal" with Jewish Christians?

God shows Cornelius, through a dream, that he is to invite Peter to visit him (God speaks to Cornelius – the non-Jew – first). God then shows Peter that he should accept Cornelius's invitation.

The good news of Jesus is we are loved and accepted by God. We need to extend the same love and acceptance to others. **All** people are invited. Paul will say, *"In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith, for all of us who are baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:26-28).

Martin Luther King Jr. challenges us to live it: *"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last. free at last. thank God Almighty, we are free at last."*

*In you, Father all-mighty, our lives are held in love.
In you, Christ, we have our salvation.
In you, the Holy Spirit, we are clothed in marvellous grace.
Your love wraps us and embraces us.
You are our maker, our comforter, our keeper.
Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well,
and all shall be well,
and all manner of things shall be well.
Amen.*

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)

Wednesday, April 28: Acts 10:24-48

Racism believes that, on the basis of race alone, some people are better than others. If a Christian were to be racist, they would have to believe that God makes people from one ethnic group fully in His image, but people from other ethnic groups are made less in the image of God. Do you believe that? I hope not!

In Peter's **Jewish** world, most **Jewish** people believed only they were God's people. Everyone else – Romans, Syrians, Greeks, north Africans, Persians, northern Europeans (like me) – were less human, "Gentile dogs." Furthermore, God's love was only for the Jews. He was their God – no one else's. Good Jews were not to talk with Gentiles, go into their homes, eat with them, or do business with them. Even though Cornelius is "*a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews*" (10:22), he is still a Roman. As Peter explains it, "*You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you*" (10:28).

What does Peter do? Peter says, "*I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel – that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all*" (10:35-36). For Peter, from a Jewish background, this is revolutionary. It is a complete rejection of the Jewish exceptionalism he has been taught all his life.

Then to see the Holy Spirit come upon Romans? "*The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too*" (10:45). Clearly God is not racist. He loves **ALL** people, for all are His creation. He is pouring out His Spirit on people from all nations. That's great.

As we noted yesterday, Paul writes, "*In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith, for all of us who are baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:26-28). Explaining what it means to be "in Christ," Paul adds, "*Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us*" (Colossians 3:10-11).

Any form of racism, sexism, ageism, ability-ism, wealth-ism is TOTALLY inconsistent with biblical Christianity.

What subtle (or not so subtle) forms of racism or other discrimination do you see in our community? What are specific challenges First Nations people face? Poor people face? Older people face? Women face? Disabled people face? Moslem people face? Black people face? Kids/youth face?

How can we people who "become like Jesus," loving all people equally?

*You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong. You are great.
You are the most high. You are Almighty.
You, holy Father, are King of Heaven and Earth.
You are three and one, Lord God.
You are good, all good, Lord God, living and true.
You are love. You are wisdom.
You are humility. You are endurance.
You are rest. You are peace.
You are joy and gladness. You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.
You are beauty. You are gentleness.
You are our protector. You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage. You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith. You are our great consolation.
You are our eternal life. You are our great and wonderful Lord,
God Almighty, merciful Savior, blessed Spirit.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Thursday, April 29: Acts 11:1-18

One cynic said, "If there are two Christians in a room there are at least three opinions." That may be too harsh, but the reality is that people don't always agree on everything. Differences of opinion and arguments happen. While some folks enjoy a fight, most of us don't. Conflict was never God's plan for us. From the beginning, God's intent was a harmony in human relationships (Genesis 1-2). God's will for us is well-being within and between people. The Hebrew word for this harmonious, inner-outer, all-encompassing peace is "*shalom*."

Differences of opinion, although they may not be God's will, are not necessarily bad. In fact, different ideas can be healthy if we allow God to help us grow, learn, and work through them. The problem really isn't whether or not we disagree; the problem can be how we handle our disagreement.

One of the first principles about conflict is that it's NOT you and I who are disagreeing. That is, it isn't you as a person I'm disagreeing with. The problem isn't you. And (believe it or not) the problem isn't me. We disagree about an issue. The problem is the problem. And problems happen. Focusing on the problem, rather than the person, helps us work through things in healthy, constructive ways. When we keep the issue central, healthy conversation can actually build understanding and bring us closer together.

In Acts 11, there is conflict between the circumcised (Jewish) believers and Peter, who now accepts non-circumcised (non-Jewish) believers (thanks to Cornelius and his household). That may not sound serious to us, it is to them. No God-fearing Jew could do such a thing. Peter is challenging the Jewish-Christians' assumption of Jewish exceptionalism – you had to become a Jew to become a Christian, because Jews were "better."

When Peter hears the accusations against him, he "*explained everything to them precisely as it had happened ...*" That is good. It's always good to identify the facts and get the real (not the fake) news.

People listen. It is one thing to allow someone to speak. It is another to listen to and hear what they have to say. And, toughest of all, it is yet another thing to be open to learning something new. It's hard to admit you might be wrong and you might need to change your opinion. Mature people have the ability to be open to the Spirit, to be willing learn, and to have their attitudes changed. Another sign of a mature person is the ability to admit they made a mistake. Those things sound simple and easy. They're not.

The next time you find yourself disagreeing with someone over something, try this:

1. Ask yourself what the real issue is: is it really which show to watch or who's show to watch?
2. Decide if the conflict is going to bring you together or push you apart: are you insisting on spinach because it really is best, or because you know the kids hate it and you want to get at them?
3. Communicate. Talk about the problem. Don't make it personal.
4. Be open to having your mind changed.

*Here we are in front of you, Holy Spirit.
We feel the weight of our differences, but we are united in your name.
Come to us, help us, enter into our hearts.
Teach us what we should do.
Show us what path we should follow.
Be the only one to offer and guide our decisions,
Do not allow us to miss out on doing what is right.
Don't let pride lead us away from you.
Don't let our prejudices bias us.
Don't let people or positions influence us.
Keep us intimately close to you, so we may be as one with you.
May nothing separate us from your truth and love.
Amen.*

Isidore of Seville (560-636)

Friday, April 30: Acts 11:19-30

How do **you** extinguish a campfire? One old friend, wearing big boots, loved to stamp all over the coals. More often than not, the fire actually spread. The scattered embers would light new little fires in the underbrush. We would then have even more fires to put out. We had to take him aside and have a friendly, little chat ...

The Jewish powers-that-be are trying to stamp out the church. Despite the horrific persecution the followers of Jesus are facing, God is doing amazing things: *"the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God ..."* at first to Jewish people, but then to everyone (11:19). The Holy Spirit is lighting new fires, everywhere. The Spirit is bringing people to faith and building churches among **ALL** people.

One interesting note is that, *"It was at Antioch that the believers were first called 'Christians'"* (11:26). Until now, people who believed in Jesus were considered a subset within Judaism. Now, clearly, this is not just another Jewish group. Their first loyalty is to Jesus, not the Temple. They are sharing God's love with ALL people, not just Jews. Non-Jews – Gentiles – are being welcomed as full members. Circumcision is not essential. It is all SO different from Judaism. So other people (probably the Roman authorities, who liked to sort people in neat categories), coin a brand-new word to describe these people – "Christanoi"/"Christians"/"Christ-people."

The followers of Jesus did not choose the word "Christian" – **other people** did. It's a good word. It emphasizes Jesus as the essential centre of our faith. But is a "static" word. It describes our key relationship and primary loyalty, but it doesn't say much about how we live as His people. The assumption could be that if you once "make a decision for Jesus" you are now a "Christian," and that's it. Done. Complete. You're "in" the Kingdom. Now you can go back to your old, normal life, with the assurance that, when you die, you will go to heaven.

The early followers of Jesus **described themselves** as "followers of Jesus" or "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:1-2, 22:4-5). This is a much more "dynamic" phrase. Yes, you are a "Christ-person," but you also try to live "in Christ" every moment of every day. Being a "follower" of Jesus means no more of the old normal. Now you are living as the Holy Spirit would have you live. *"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,"* Paul writes. *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity"* (Colossians 3:12-14). You live "in the Spirit." Following Jesus changes everything.

What would it mean to you to think of yourself as a "follower of Jesus" at home? At work? At school? In the community? How might that change how you think, act, and speak?

*My God, I believe in you. Please strengthen my faith.
I love you. Please teach me to love you more and more.
I am sorry that I've offended you. Please increase my sorrow and my repentance.
I adore you as my first beginning. I aspire after you as my last end.
I give you thanks as my constant benefactor. I call upon you as my supreme protector.
My God, conduct me by your wisdom,
control me by your justice,
comfort me by your mercy,
and defend me by your power.
May all my thoughts, words, actions, and sufferings bring honour to you.
May I think of you, speak of you, and offer all my actions to your greater glory,
Give me strength to make it through whatever comes in my life.
Lord, I desire that in all things your will may be done.
Enlighten my understanding. Inflame my will.
Purify my soul.
Amen.*

Richard Challoner (1691-1781)

Saturday, May 1: Acts 12:1-19

Acts 12 introduces us to Herod Agrippa. He grew up in Rome as a friend of Caligula, a notoriously hedonistic, corrupt emperor. Herod's uncle, Herod Antipas, was the king who had John the Baptist beheaded on his wife's whim. His family are power-hungry, amoral, political opportunists. Herod has learned from his family, too, that one way to get support from the Jewish religious base is to mercilessly persecute the followers of Jesus.

Herod Agrippa has James, the brother of John, executed (12:2).

Herod, now immensely popular with the religious Jews, arrests Peter. He intends to execute him right after the Passover. *"But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him"* (Acts 12:5).

Peter's friends are praying **earnestly** for Peter ... a good thing to do. We don't of course know exactly what they are praying for. What do they expect? After all, James had been arrested. Surely, they prayed for him, too. He was executed. Would Peter be any different? Sometimes we are told we need to pray boldly and specifically for what we want, believing it will happen. We're promised that, if we have enough faith, we can claim those things as true; they WILL happen. I'm sure the early Christians prayed that way for James. But he was killed.

Both in Scripture and in our day, God does miracles ... sometimes (like with Peter) ... and not others (like with James). It's a mystery. God clearly answers some prayers positively first time ... others after much persistence ... others never (what we interpret as a "no"). There are no neat explanations.

What do the people praying expect? We don't know. James' death was fresh in their minds. Maybe they're just praying for Peter. Maybe they're just praying that, if it is God's will that he be released, he'll be released. Maybe they're also praying that, if it is God's will that he remains in prison, that God will sustain him. Maybe they're praying, too, that, if it is God's will that he dies, his death will be a witness to other people.

Some people might say such an "unfocussed" set of prayers reflects a lack of faith. I disagree. I think that "if-it-be-your-will" prayers allow God to be God. In humility, I know God is the One who really does know best. After all, Jesus Himself, in Gethsemane, prayed twice, *"My Father! I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Matthew 26:39, 42). More and more, I find I simply *"Pray to God for ____."* I don't worry so much about the specifics of what I want God to do for the person. The possibilities I can imagine are so limited. I find myself, as I simply *"Pray to God for ____,"* often saying, *"God surprise me."*

God certainly surprises Peter and his friends. Notice Peter's reaction (Peter doesn't always pick up on things that quickly). Notice what happens when he reaches the place where his friends are meeting: Rhoda, the servant girl, leaves him standing outside the door. We've gone from tragedy to comedy.

God does answer our prayers.

- Sometimes with a "Yes."
- Sometimes with a "No."
- Sometimes with a "Not right now."
- Sometimes with a complete surprise ... a Peter knocking at our door.

Our encouragement from this passage is simply *"to pray to God for Peter"* ... whoever the Peter might be in our lives. Maybe it's a relative who's ill. Maybe it's friend who's going through a family meltdown. Maybe it's one of the folks from our church community. Maybe it's our church. Maybe it's yourself. *"Pray to God for Peter ..."* Don't know what to pray? That's fine. Neither did Peter's friends. Just pray for Peter and let God be God in the situation. He knows what He's doing.

Pray to God for Peter. Watch for the answer. It may be a "Yes." It may be a "No." It may be a "Not right now." Or it may be a complete surprise ...

*Use me, my Saviour,
for whatever purpose and in whatever way you may require.
Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel;
fill it with your grace. Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Sunday, May 2: Acts 12:18-25

Titus Flavius Josephus (37-100 AD) was a Jewish historian who was born in Jerusalem to a father of priestly descent and a mother from royal ancestry. His first-person history of the Jewish people is the most detailed account we have of the politics of Judea/Israel in the First Century. This is what he says about Herod:

"When Herod Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city of Caesarea (close to Tyre and Sidon), and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar ... On the second day, he put on a garment made wholly of silver and came into the theater early in the morning. The silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays, shone out after a surprising manner. It was so resplendent as to blind those that looked upon him. Presently his flatterers cried out that he was a god. They added, 'Be merciful to us. Although we have only revered you as a man before, from now on we shall worship you as a god.'

"The king did not rebuke them. Neither did he reject their impious flattery. But then he looked up and saw an owl sitting on a rope over his head. Immediately he understood this bird was a messenger of ill tidings. He fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe, violent pain arose in his belly. He called together his friends, and said, 'I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life. Fate has rejected the lying words you just now said to me. I, who you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death.'

"When he said this, his pain became more violent. Accordingly, he was carried into the palace ... And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life ..."

Herod Agrippa was complicated. He built amphitheatres and baths. He rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. His public zeal for Judaism won him the support of the Jewish masses. But, his hedonistic association with the playboy Caligula, and his deference to the Emperor tainted his image. And this incident, recorded both in Acts and by Josephus, highlights his lack of genuine faith, arrogance, and lack of humility.

British Member of Parliament, Lord Acton (1834-1902), once remarked, *"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men ..."* Do we see that same tendency in politics today? We are commanded in Scripture to pray for our leaders ([1 Timothy 2:1-3](#) – written when Paul is a prisoner of the evil emperor, Nero). In obedience to God, pray for our Prime Minister and MP. Pray for our Premier and MLAs. Pray for our Mayor and City Councilors. Whether or not you agree with their policies.

*Lord, teach me to seek you.
Please reveal yourself to me as I seek you.
I cannot see you unless you first teach me.
I cannot 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 the finding.
Lord, have mercy on me.
Take away from me all my sins.
Set me ablaze with the fire of your Holy Spirit.
Take away from me the heart of stone, and give me a human heart,
a heart to love and adore you, a heart to delight in you,
a heart to follow and enjoy you, for Christ's sake.
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

Monday, May 3: Acts 12:24-13:3

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."*

Note in these few verses we have Jewish people (Barnabas, Saul, John Mark) an African (Simeon, called "the black man"), and two Greeks (Lucius and Manaen). The church is a multicultural reflection of Kingdom of God, God's good news for ALL people of ALL nationalities. And the church is composed of people from all different backgrounds, including a close personal associate of the king. People are getting along and changing the world because they are getting to know one another and are communicating with one another.

This was RADICALLY different from 1st Century Judaism, in which foreigners were NOT welcome. In fact, as we have noted, faithful Jews were not even supposed to speak to "Gentile dogs" – certainly not get to know them, fellowship with them, or worship with them.

This was RADICALLY different from the everyday Roman/Greek world where you stayed in your own social group, and didn't cross barriers of race, occupation, or social status. Masters did not get to know slaves; Greeks did not communicate with Romans. It was all very separate. And, in their minds, very "civilized."

Jesus' church overturned the apple carts of ordered society. Slaves and near-royalty, like Manaen, are talking with one another and getting to know one another. Africans, Jews, and Greeks are socializing and worshipping together. It was all very countercultural. And very strange. It was not Judaism anymore. No wonder people came up with a new name for this movement of the Spirit – "Christians" – followers of the Christ, Jesus' people.

Our church is very multicultural. We have people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and all over Europe. We are consciously trying to find ways to celebrate and appreciate our unique cultural blessings. So, for instance, we celebrate "Cuba Sundays" with Spanish songs and contributions from believers in Cuba. Matt finds worship music that reflects different cultures (including the steel pans!). We pray for our sisters and brothers around the world (for instance, in Myanmar and Thailand, where our Karen members come from).

It is hard to get to know each other during Covid. But when we can regather, try to connect with some of our folks from cultures other than your own. Talk with them. Get to know them. Celebrate our common faith.

Martin Luther King Jr. went on to say, *"The early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."* We can transform our society as we model the radical, inclusive, unconditional love of Jesus.

*Stay with me, Lord,
and I shall begin to shine as you shine, to be a light to others.
The light, Jesus, will be all from you.
None of it will be mine.
No merit belongs to me.
It will be you who shines through me upon others.
Let me praise you, in the way which you love best, by shining on all those around me.
Give light to them as well as to me; bring light to them through me.
Teach me to show forth your praise, your truth, your will.
Make me preach you without preaching –
not by words but by my example and by the influence of what I do.
May all I do be done out of the love for you.
Fill my heart, Lord, with overwhelming love for you.
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Tuesday, May 4: Acts 13:4-12

In my teens, when I began to think about life, began to read the Bible, and discovered Jesus, it all just made sense. Jesus perfectly fit the missing centre of my life. As I began to pray and trust Him, and as I opened myself up to possibility that God might love me and want to know me, personally, I discovered He actually did. My life changed as I followed His Way. I resonate with C.S. Lewis, who said. *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."*

On Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas encounter two very different people: one Jewish man named Bar-Jesus, and the Roman proconsul/Governor, Sergius Paulus.

Bar-Jesus was a character: *"a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet."* One translator describes him with a delightful phrase: *"he was as crooked as a corkscrew."* Jewish Law was clear: magic was evil. You didn't associate with people who practiced it. And the Law was also clear: you tested prophets for orthodoxy, and you didn't give false prophets the time of day. Yet the Jewish leaders tolerated this fellow; he had even been promoted to a position of influence. Even before Paul and Barnabas said anything, Bar-Jesus *"opposed them"* (Acts 13:8).

Bar-Jesus became literally (and spiritually) blind. Spiritual blindness, the resolute determination to close my eyes (and plug my ears) to the possibility of God and His work, is alive and well today, too. It is a condition in which a person reacts strongly when anyone talks about God: they know all there is to know; God doesn't fit in to their intellectual framework; they don't believe; therefore, God doesn't exist. The End.

Spiritual blindness can also afflict "religious" people: I can be sure I have God all figured out: who He is, how He works, every detail of theology or prophecy. If someone has different ideas, then they must be wrong. I don't need to go to church or a Bible study because I have done lots of reading (or at least YouTube-video-watching) on my own and no one at church could teach me anything ... I can become self-righteous (I would call it "self-assured"), arrogant (I would call it "confident"), obnoxious (I would call it "speaking truth"), and judgmental (I would call it "just being right").

Someone said spiritual blindness is a bit like bad breath: the person who has it often isn't aware of it.

The cure for spiritual blindness isn't easy. After all, the sufferer may not be aware of it. Or if they are aware of it, they may feel threatened and hunker down and dig in deeper. They can become aggressive, angry, and mean. They can cut you off. Do you know any Christians like this?

It's hard to admit we may not know it all. It's hard to admit we might be wrong. It's a hard to change. But the challenge Acts continually presents us with is this: will we allow Jesus to change us? Will we see Him with open eyes and accept His truth ... even if that challenges our prejudices and previous understandings?

Sergius Paulus (a non-Jew/Roman), the proconsul, *"an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Paul because he wanted to hear the word of God"* (v.7). He was open-minded enough to give Barnabas and Paul a hearing. Because Sergius Paulus is willing to hear God speak, he *"believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord."* His life is changed, because he is willing to listen, to hear, to learn, and to change.

Do we really hear the teaching about the Lord?

Think about Jesus' words, *"Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite. First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged"* (Matthew 7:1-3). Pray for the humility to recognize our blind spots ... and the will to change ...

*Father, this day may bring some hard task to our lives
 or some hard trial to our love.
 We may grow weary, or sad, or feel hopeless.
 But, Father, our whole lives have been one great proof of your ongoing care.
 Bread has come for our bodies, thoughts to our minds,
 love to our hearts, and all of these from you.
 So help us, we plead, while we stand this morning on this side of all that this day may bring,
 to resolve that we will trust you this day, to shine into the dark places of our souls,
 to stand by us in trials,
 and to give us rest as we need.
 May this day be full of resurrection power
 that shall bring us near to you and make us more like you.
 May we trust you this day, so that, when the day is done, our faith shall be firmer than ever.
 Then, when our last day comes and our work is done,
 we will trust you forever, in the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.*

Richard Collyer (1823-1912)

Wednesday, May 5: Acts 13:13-52

If we love Jesus and if we pray with faith, things will go well for us. Right? In some people's theology, financial blessing and physical well-being are the will of God for each of us. Faith, prayer, and donations to the right ministries will ensure health and wealth. After all, doesn't the Bible guarantee that if we only pray strongly enough and have enough faith in God, He will give us what we ask for: health, security, and prosperity.

The Bible doesn't actually promise that.

Sometimes things do go well for faithful, godly people. Paul and Barnabas are telling people about Jesus. People beg for more (13:42). Many Jews and devout converts to Judaism follow Paul and Barnabas (13:43). Almost the entire city turns out to hear them preach (13:44). In particular, the Gentiles are excited because, unlike Judaism, now they are included in God's love (13:48) and God's good news spreads throughout that region (13:49).

Sometimes things don't go well. *"When some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said. ... the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town"* (13:45, 50).

Even for people who love Jesus and pray faithfully, things can go wrong. Times can be tough. Paul will go on to talk about his hardships: *"I have been put in prison, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm"* (1 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Notice that, despite being run out of town, the believers *"were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit"* (13:52).

"I have learned how to be content with whatever I have," writes Paul. *"I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength"* (Philippians 4:11-13).

We may well go through struggles. But we can make it, through Jesus, who gives us strength.

*Today, I thank you for anything that happened to me,
 that made me feel life is really and truly worth living.
 I thank you for the blessings in my life, today,
 I thank you for the laughter that was in today.
 I thank you for moments when I saw the seriousness and the meaning of life.
 I thank you, too, for the strangers you bring across my path.
 May I love them as graciously as you loved me when I was still a stranger.
 I thank you very specially for those I love, for those who love me,
 for all the difference it has made to me to know them,
 and for all the happiness it brings me to be in touch with them.
 May I love them as you love me.
 Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Thursday, May 6: Acts 14:1-20

In an old Greek legend, two gods, Zeus and Hermes, once visited Lystra. They came disguised as men. No-one recognized them. People treated them horribly, except for one old couple. When Zeus and Hermes returned to Mount Olympus, they cursed everyone in Lystra, except the elderly pair. These two old folks were blessed. When the couple finally died, they were immortalized by the gods as two giant trees standing at the city limits.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas enter Lystra. They heal a lame man. The Lystrians, remembering the legend, are taking no chances this time. Maybe Zeus and Hermes have returned. So they shout, "*The gods have come down again.*" "*Zeus and Hermes are back.*" The temple priest hastens to prepare a great feast.

Few of us have ever been mistaken for gods. But sometimes people might make a fuss over us. Our heads can swell a bit (supposedly we all have 15 minutes of fame). We can begin to believe we're super-special. History is full of ridiculous characters (media celebrities come to mind) who thought they were so wonderful (above the law, more special than others, smarter than everyone else), only to discover they were very, very, human. We can think of all sorts of people whom our culture idolizes, whose personal lives are a mess, littered with broken relationships, addictions, health problems, and countless other disappointments and disasters.

More often than praise, many of us feel like we are regularly cut down, criticized, and discouraged.

Have you had someone make a cutting remark about you? That person looks at you in a funny way? He doesn't call or write when you think they should? She should apologize and doesn't? The email or text you receive seems a bit "edgy"? Even if we get positive feedback, one (possibly little) critical thing someone says cancels out all the good things other people have said. Why is that we can receive ten sincere compliments, but we fixate on the one little negative thing someone might have said about us?

Counselors and mental health professionals advise us to consciously **NOT** get our sense of self-worth from other people. There's a great saying by Eleanor Roosevelt which is very true - "*Remember, no-one can make you feel inferior without your consent.*"

Paul and Barnabas knew they weren't gods. They say clearly: "*We, too, are only human like you.*" They are honest with themselves and with others that they are not special. Paul and Barnabas routinely faced rejection, too (remember yesterday's reading, when they were run out of town). Yet they were secure enough in who they were that the insults and abuse people hurled (literally) didn't discourage them.

Scripture teaches that **WHO** you are is a special, unique, precious child of God. In the words of Psalm 139:13-16: "*You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the*

earth, Your eyes saw my unformed body."

Also remember **WHOSE** you are – you are **God's** daughter/son. Paul comments, "*If God is for us, who can be against us? He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:31-39)

That's good news for you and me. And it's good news for the world. Don't take those negative comments too seriously – keep them in balance with the encouragement you receive from others – and from God...

Who can you encourage today? Who can you bless with some kind words?

*O Lord Jesus, who came to be poor rather than rich,
have mercy on all who are in need and want.
Comfort them in all sorrows,
supply their needs,
raise up friends for them,
and give them grace to learn of you,
and always to put their trust in you.
Have mercy, blessed Saviour, on all who are living in sin,
who do not pray for themselves,
and who do not care for their own souls.
Turn them to yourself,
and teach them to see the things that really matter.
May I be of service any way I can to see your Kingdom come.
Amen.*

The Narrow Way

Friday, May 7: Acts 14:21-28

A couple of days we ago we noted that some Christians believe that, if we pray with enough faith, then things will go well for us. Christians are entitled to well-being and full lives. Because spiritual and physical realities are intertwined, well-being means physical health and economic prosperity. This prosperity theology implies, then, that if things are hard for us, something must be wrong with our spiritual lives. People who are suffering must have "issues" they need to deal with, then all will be good. They just need more faith.

The problem is, when you actually read through the gospels, Jesus suffered – He was tortured and brutally executed. When you read books of the Bible, like Acts, people who love and follow Jesus often suffer (read also 1 & 2 Peter). It's not because they have done anything wrong. It's not because they don't have enough faith. In fact, they are people who suffer **because** they are faithfully following Jesus. If they were not actively trying to live and share their faith, they wouldn't have these problems.

Believing in and living for Jesus may make life more difficult. In 14:22-23, we read, "*After preaching the Good News and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, **reminding them that we must suffer many hardships** to enter the Kingdom of God.*"

Peter Graystone writes, "*There are a few things that Christians are able to say (about suffering) with confidence. Firstly, you are not suffering because God hates you. Secondly, your suffering will come to an end, and there will be an eternity in which peace and justice will compensate you. And thirdly, knowing the presence of God alongside you will make you stronger as you face painful circumstances.*

"The Christian faith teaches that God hates suffering. It was not part of his intention for humankind. However, he has created a world that has two features. Both these features are wonderfully beneficial to humans, but also result in a planet where suffering is inevitable.

"First, the humans who are the part of creation that God loves are created capable of making choices. To a greater or lesser degree everyone chooses to do some bad things as well as some good things. Much of the suffering of the world is caused by humans in large numbers choosing together to do things that are evil. Wars, poverty and hatred are not caused by God. They are caused by people who are rejecting the ways of God. Tragically, people who are entirely innocent often suffer most.

"Second, the world is held in a delicate balance in which every part of creation is dependent on every other part. This is true from heaving oceans to microscopic seeds to meat-eating animals. Science calls this ecology. A planet that sustains human life as part of this glorious interdependent system needs certain features in its design. They include the movements of the planet's surface that set life in motion, but also cause terrible destruction through earthquakes and volcanoes. They include the viruses that bring death to humans but life to other parts of our ecology.

"How do we know that God cares about this? Christians recognise that God's loving commitment to a suffering world was so great that he visited it in person. Jesus was God. He experienced the very best and very worst of being human - living, dying in hideous circumstances and overcoming death. All we know of Jesus leads Christians to believe that wherever there is suffering, there is a sense in which God is alongside each human, hurting with them. Although Christians find pain terrible and hard to understand, this belief allows them to cling to the possibility that suffering is not meaningless and death will not be the end."¹

Pray through the challenges in your life ... And pray for those you know who are having a tough time ...

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection an example of how to endure,
so that we may live more fully and creatively.
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.
Enable us to go through our difficulties patiently and bravely,
trusting that you will support us.
Make us realize that it is only by dying to ourselves and our self-centered desires
that we can come to live more fully.
It's only by dying with you that we can rise with you.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Saturday, May 8: Acts 15:1-35

Every parent knows there are guidelines children must be taught for their own safety. Out of concern and love for our children, we establish certain rules – boundaries – for our kids' behaviour. The purpose of these guidelines is not to be petty or create an unnecessary burden, but to provide parameters for a responsible and rewarding life. For the child, those guidelines, when obeyed, keep them safe. And they bring approval from a parent. The idea that obeying rules brings rewards is developed very early in our development.

No parent intends that a child will obey only for a reward. The ideal is the child learns to obey out of love for and trust in the parent. But often, a *"Daddy-won't-love-me-unless-I-do-what-I'm-told"* and *"Mommy-loves-me-more-when-I-obey"* syndrome sets in. This can result in two possible scenarios:

¹ <https://christianity.org.uk/index.php/a/why-do-people-suffer-when-they-do-not-deserve-it.php>

- some children desire to please so much they make every effort to do what's expected: people-pleasers;
- other children test every rule and break most of them to assert their independence and to test the extent of the parent's love: rule-breakers.

What if a child, who has diligently kept every rule, sees another child break them? And then what happens if the obedient child is told that the parent still unconditionally accepts and loves the disobedient child? The obedient child has an inner conflict. Their parent is supposed to respond to how the child does or does not obey. It's just not fair.

Our sense of justice is often rooted in the "obey-to-please" principle. And we project it onto God as a cosmic parent figure. God ought to reward good behaviour. God ought to punish "sinners."

This understanding of right/wrong and reward/punishment existed in the church in Acts 15. God had given the Jews the Ten Commandments and other rules (see Exodus 20). They were good laws, designed for health and happiness (laws about hygiene, morality, relationships, and how to relate to God). One of these specific laws that marked Jewish men as different from cultures around them (and the catch-all word and symbol for obedience to God) was circumcision.

In Jewish theology, if you kept these rules, you're good with God; you could expect His blessing. If you didn't keep them, you were sinning; you can expect God's punishment.

The conflict in this story is that Jewish Christians wanted Gentile/non-Jewish Christians to play by their rules. Gentile Christians should have to keep the Old Testament Laws, too (symbolized by circumcision). Jewish believers were sure they were right. They were angry Paul and others saying that God could love people even if they didn't obey all the Old Testament rules (like circumcision). It just isn't fair. How can God love people who are not circumcised, don't observe all the rituals, and keep all the rules?

We all have our standards and values we think people should meet. Most of those standards are excellent; some are biblical; many are cultural. When people fail to keep **our** rules, it's difficult to believe they also know **our** Jesus. Some Christians insist that you cannot really be a Christian unless you:

- experience a distinct "baptism of the Holy Spirit" and speak in a strange language;
- accept a particular theory of the end times, age of the earth, or other non-salvation doctrines;
- practice the same cultural traditions we do – for some people, absolute abstinence from alcoholic beverages, no dancing, no playing cards, etc.;
- (although they wouldn't come out and say it) if you don't dress the way they do;
- have your whole house in order –have perfect children, perfect control of your temper, perfect house-keeping, perfect _____ ...

Jesus never said any of that. Paul and Peter have moved past that, too. What Jesus said is *"For God so loved the world that whoever **believes** in me shall not die but have eternal life."* (John 3:16). What Peter says is this, *"We **believe it is through grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as we are"* (15:11). Paul bends over backward to emphasize, *"It is **by grace we have been saved, through faith** – not because of anything we've done, it's the gift of God ..."* (Ephesians 2:8).

God reaches out with unconditional love to us – thankfully (reread the parable of the sons, [Luke 15:11-32](#)). He offers us new life in Jesus by His grace. He forgives us. He welcomes us. It is a wonderful, free gift.

He also challenges us to reach out with unconditional love to others. To forgive others. To welcome others. That is a real challenge. How can you do that, today? Pray about this ...

*Good Lord, give me a mind and heart that is:
humble,
lowly,
quiet,
peaceable,
patient,
charitable,
kind,
tender,
and loving.
May all my words and all my thoughts,
be filled by your Holy Spirit.
Good Lord, give me a full faith,
a firm hope,
and a fervent love for others.
May my love for you be so much more than my love for myself.
Good Lord, give me a longing to be with you,
not to avoid the misfortunes of this world
or simply to be in that joyful place called heaven,
give me that longing to be with you today and every day,
simply because I love you.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535 [executed by Henry VIII])

Sunday, May 9: Acts 15:36-41

God is all-powerful. But that's not the greatest thing about God. God knows everything. But that's not the greatest thing about God. God is everywhere, always. But that's not the greatest thing about God. God unconditionally loves His creation, including you and me. That's the greatest thing about God. After all, it was because of God's unconditional love that He gave His Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice, so we – and all of His creation – might be saved.

The Council of Jerusalem reaffirms the principle of unconditional love: God's unconditional love for us and unconditional love for one another. So far, so good. But sometimes there is a gap between theory and practice. A great principle, like unconditional love, is easy to talk about; it can be hard for us to live it out in real relationships.

Paul is discovering this. Paul and Barnabas are good friends who were perfectly suited for one another in their talents, temperaments, and gifts. They complement one another well. Yet when Barnabas in his customary forgiving, accepting, affirming way wants to take his cousin, a young man named Mark, along on their next journey, Paul balks. Barnabas is determined he is going to take Mark. Paul is just as determined that Mark was not coming.

Paul doesn't want John Mark because he failed them once before (15:38). Mark hadn't handled the pressures of travel or persecution. He deserted them. Barnabas wants to give him a second chance. Paul thinks Mark had his one chance.

Where is this unconditional love Paul had talked about at the council? All those noble virtues Paul had just defended seem to be forgotten.

Let's be blunt, Paul is wrong. He is making a mistake (see [Matthew 18:21-35](#)). It's good to know Paul is human, too.

Paul is a classic "task-oriented" person – someone for who the job at hand always came first, and if people get hurt along the way, so be it. But in the Kingdom of God people come before tasks. No programme, job, task,

or great idea is created in the image of God. People are. Paul will learn this life lesson; unfortunately, other people, like Mark, are hurt along the way.

Those of us who are Christians may hold up high standards for our own behaviour. But on occasion, like Paul, we can fall short. We aspire to great virtues like perfect honesty, complete integrity, purity of speech, grace, patience, and unconditional love ... but, on occasion, we blow it. Our challenge is to reflect on how we act/what we say and honestly ask if they are consistent with our Christian values or not. If not, we need to confess, repent, and change. It takes strength of character to admit you are wrong.

This is not the end of the story. Toward the end of Paul's life, he is imprisoned in Rome. He makes three comments about Mark, all saying Mark is now a close friend ([2 Timothy 4:11](#), [Philemon 1:24](#), [Colossians 4:10](#)). We have no idea what happened to change things. Perhaps, as Mark travelled with Barnabas, he proves his faithfulness. Perhaps Paul, in a more reflective moment, recognizes how wrong his response was, apologizes, and gave Mark a second chance. Or perhaps both things happen. Whatever happens, Paul's mistake will be made right.

Are there relationships in your life in which you struggle to model unconditional love? Are their relationships which have suffered because you have been so caught up in doing things? Have people failed you and you've had a hard time giving them another chance? Do you need to admit to someone that you're wrong?

Is there something you need to deal with? Do it ... today. Pray through this.

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
who is and was and who is to come.
I want to praise and exalt you, above all, forever.
Worthy are you, Lord, our God,
to receive praise, glory, honour and blessing.
I want to us praise and exalt you, above all, forever.
I want to bless the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
I want to praise and exalt him, above all, forever.
Praise God, all you his servants,
and you that fear him, both small and great.
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.
Let haven and earth praise his glory,
and every creature that is in heaven,
and on earth, and under the earth.
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)