

September 2021

Church 2021

Part 1

Readings, Reflections, Prayers

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Labour Day Monday, September 6: Luke 18:1-14

8 months ago, did you make any New Year's Resolutions? Do you even remember? How are you doing with them? Although January 1 is technically the beginning of the calendar year, practically, my life has always been more ordered around the school year. When I was a student, the beginning of September was the time to refocus and set new goals. As a parent, the start of school was the time to get the kids school supplies, new clothes, and into a new grade. At church, too, we find that most of our programmes and plans flow with the school year.

And so, as we begin a new "school year"/"church year" – as we look ahead and imagine where we will be by Labour Day 2022, what goals would we like to accomplish? What might we want to be doing differently?

Thomas Groome writes, "*Toward the end of Jesus's public ministry, we hear him wonder, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8). ... Jesus' musings come as somewhat of a surprise, just after a teaching about perseverance in prayer and the inspiring story of the 'persistent widow.'* Jesus' question reads like a throwaway line or a rhetorical rumination to himself. Taking it at face value, however, it looks as if he really was wondering whether his own mission would endure over time. Jesus was asking, 'Will there be faith on earth?'" Will there be faith on earth in 2022? It is a disturbing question, isn't it?

It's also a motivational question. **If** there will be faith on earth when Jesus' returns, **then** what needs to happen? We BELIEVE God will build His church, His Spirit will continue to lead people to saving faith, and Jesus will draw people into a personal relationship with Himself this year. Those are all wonderful, biblical truths. But there is a constant danger that, in our "faith" in the power of God, we abdicate all responsibility.

This month, we will begin to think about the church – who we are, what we are, and who we are called to be – we will think about how we can be part of the answer to Jesus' haunting question: "*Will there be faith on earth?*" What can we do? How can we build up, encourage, bless, and help one another?

Among many other things, as God's people – as His church – we are called to **inform, form, and transform** people in Christian faith:

- To help people know and understand Jesus, His teaching, and His wisdom (to inform)
- To help people become more and more like Jesus in their thinking and character (to form)
- To help people live lives that are holy and meaningful, loving God and loving others (to transform).

MY goal for the coming year is that **we ALL** would learn more about Jesus and His wisdom, get to know Him personally more, become more like Jesus in our character and thinking, and make a difference in our homes, schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and world by sharing and living the love of Jesus.

How can the Spirit of God inform you, form you, and transform you this year ...?

*Lord, give me grace to hold righteousness in all things.
May I lead a clean and blessed life.
May I prudently flee evil.
May I understand the treacherous and deceitful falseness of the devil.
Make me mild, peaceable, courteous, and temperate.
Make me steadfast and strong.
Also, Lord, give Thou to me that I be quiet in words
and that I speak only what is appropriate.
May I speak the truth, but only in genuine love, the love of Jesus.
May I love my neighbour as Jesus loves me – with compassion and forgiveness.
Lord, make me like Jesus in all things.
Amen.*

John Wycliffe (1328-1384)

Tuesday, September 7: Luke 18:15-30

"When the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith? (or, "Will he find faith on the earth?")" Jesus asks (Luke 18:8). As we think about our world, our city, our circle of family and friends, our church ... will there be faith? It's a disturbing question. As I pray for my kids, my neighbours, my friends, our church, our city – and myself – I pray that we ALL might have a vibrant faith.

What is faith? What does it look like? In today's reading we have a dramatic contrast between a gaggle of young children and a wealthy man.

Consider the children: "*The Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children,*" Jesus says. "*I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.*" What is it about children Jesus celebrates? What do you think? They come to Him, simply to enjoy His presence. They love Him. They listen to Him. They trust Him. They want to please Him. They want to have fun with Him. They enjoy Him. They own little or nothing, but they enjoy life – and Jesus. They (for the most part) would probably follow any advice He gives them. How do young children exemplify godly faith?

Consider the wealthy man: what is his issue? What do you think? He has it all – a good wardrobe, a new donkey, a great house, a well-stocked pantry. He follows the letter of the Law. But when push comes to shove, his real confidence is in his portfolio of Jericho Olive Oil stocks and TFSA's in Jerusalem Trust Bank. He likes Jesus. He likes to talk with Jesus (and other people) about spiritual things. He hears what Jesus has to say, and ... Rather than follow Jesus' counsel, he walks away. He doesn't follow Jesus' wisdom. Why does he respond to Jesus as he does? Does he have faith in Jesus? What do you think?

I empathize with this man. No, I cannot empathize with his lucrative financial position. But I can empathize with his tendency to trust in his assets. I find that most of us – maybe all of us – feel secure if our finances are in good shape. We spend a lot of time and energy prioritizing our portfolios. That's not bad. It is good to be financially responsible, so we are not a burden to our family or society. But is that the source of our identity? Does that define who we are? And at the end of the day, is it a case of "in-our-bank-account-we-trust"? Or – genuinely – "in God we trust"?

Can I appreciate that my real identity is as God's beloved child? Do I know that ultimately my life now – and my future – is safe in Jesus' hands? Can I come to Jesus, like a child. Can I simply enjoy His presence? Do I love Him? Listen to Him? Trust Him? Please Him? Enjoy Him? Do I really trust my life into His hands? Do I actually follow His wisdom? Or do I walk away?

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

Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, September 8: Acts 18:18-28

As we consider the question, "*Will there be faith on earth?*" this Fall, we'll look at a case study, the church in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. Ephesus was home to one of the earliest, strongest, and most missional churches in the first centuries of the Christian community. At one time Turkey, called Asia Minor in New Testament times, had a large Christian population. Turkish journalist, Uzay Bulut, comments, "*Even though*

Christians are a tiny minority in Turkey today, Christianity has a long history in Asia Minor, the birthplace of many Christian Apostles and Saints, including Paul of Tarsus, Timothy, Nicholas of Myra, and Polycarp of Smyrna. All of the first seven Ecumenical Councils were held in what is today Turkey. Two out of the five centers (Patriarchates) of the ancient Pentarchy – Constantinople (Istanbul) and Antioch (Antakya) – are also situated there ... Turkey is also home to the Seven Churches of Asia, to which John sent the Revelation. During the centuries that followed, countless churches were established throughout the region ..."

We are first introduced to Ephesus in Acts 18. At that time Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of "Asia" (western Asia Minor). Ephesus had an estimated population of 175,000, second in importance and size only to Rome. Paul planted the first seeds of Christian faith in the city. Later Apollos served there. Note Luke's comment about Apollos, *"He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately"* (Acts 18:25-26). What do we learn about Apollos' character?

- Apollos loves to teach others about Jesus enthusiastically. Isn't that great?
- He has learned a lot about Jesus, but still doesn't know everything (he knew you could confess and repent of your sin, but nothing about the new life that comes through Jesus and the Spirit).
- He is teachable. He is willing to learn. He is willing to be corrected. He is humble.

Being teachable is a wonderful character trait. What about us? Are we teachable? Are we willing to learn more about Jesus? Do we think deeply? Are we open to being corrected? Let's be honest: most of us are quite happy to tell others what **we** know, but we're not so good at being teachable ourselves. We certainly don't like to be corrected. Many of us are sure we never need to be corrected anyway; we know it all. If someone has a different understanding than us, they must be wrong. We dig in and defend ourselves rather than consider we might need to change our opinion. We aren't always as teachable as we think we are ...

For us to be a healthy, welcoming church we need to be a place where the Pauls, Apolloses, Priscillas, and Aquilas (and others) can have deep, meaningful conversations. People really grow in their faith when they feel safe to ask questions – even heretical questions – and discover biblical answers. We come aside from our busy-ness, we work together through the big questions of life, and we grow spiritually. We welcome one another, listen to one another, encourage one another, love one another, and learn from one another.

Note Luke's follow-up comment on Apollos: when he went on to Achaia, *"He refuted the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them that Jesus was the Messiah"* (18:28). Aquila and Priscilla's investment of time AND Apollos' teachability paid off – big time.

Who can you invest some time in? Who can you encourage in their faith? Who can you mentor a little bit? Only God knows what that investment can mean in one person's life – and in His Kingdom.

*Almighty God, we bless you and praise you.
We have wakened to the light of another earthly day.
Our days are yours, so let them be spent for you.
Our days are few, so let them be spent for you.
We ask you to shine on this day, for this day is your gift to us.
Lord, as we go to our daily work, help us to take pleasure in it.
Show us clearly what our duty is and help us to be faithful in doing it.
Let all we do be well done, fit for every eye to see.
Give us patience to bear ill and strength to do good.
Let our courage never fail.
When we cannot love our work, let us think of it as your task for us.
May everything we do shine in the light of your great love.
Amen.*

George Dawson (1821-1876)

Thursday, September 9: Acts 19:1-7

The church in Ephesus got off to a sputtering start. Very few people came to faith from Paul's initial visit, his friends who stayed behind (18:19), or Apollos' enthusiastic preaching (that mediocre start is encouraging to me – it's not all "success"). Despite Priscilla and Aquila straightening Apollos out, the new believers in Ephesus only knew about John's baptism – the need to confess and repent of your sin. They didn't understand the blessing of forgiveness and new life that comes through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

What is the good news? What is the "gospel"? Sometimes it is presented like this: simply repent for your sins: *"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life ... In Your Name. Amen."* This is a fine prayer. It's good to pray it. But many people pray it almost superstitiously: if you pray the right words, you're saved. If you get it wrong ... well, you're in trouble. Interestingly, there is **no** prayer like this in the Bible. Jesus never instructs us to pray this prayer. No one in Scripture who chooses to follow Jesus prays a prayer like this (take a look). In fact, this prayer is simply "John's baptism" – repentance – not well-rounded Christian theology. There's nothing in it about new life with Jesus.

Instead, in the New Testament, people *"believe in Jesus"* (Acts 19:4 – see also John 6:29, 6:35, 11:23, 20:31; Acts 11:17, 16:31; Romans 3:22-26, 10:1-10; 1 John 3:23, 5:1). *"Believing in Jesus"* in Scripture is a lot more than just believing *"He died for my sin and rose from the dead"* – although that's (an important) part of it. *"Believing in Jesus"* involves a wholesale devotion to Jesus that's about far more than just saying a prayer to be forgiven from sin. David Gushee writes, *"Anyone can, and most Americans do, 'believe' in Jesus rather than some alternative savior. Anyone can, and many Americans sometimes do, say a prayer asking Jesus to save them. But not many embark on a life fully devoted to the love of God, the love of neighbor, the moral practice of God's will, and radical, costly discipleship."* The Biblical understanding of *"believing in Jesus"* includes a whole "new birth" and "new life" in Christ that is far more transformative than just repenting from sin (John 3:1-18). This is what Paul is helping the Ephesians understand.

"Believing in Jesus" includes following the Holy Spirit's leading, guiding, encouraging, empowering, correcting, teaching, and transforming (read Galatians 5-6). Ultimately the Spirit is the One who informs, forms, and transforms us so we become more and more like Jesus. It also means being in community.

Paul calls the people in Ephesus to more than an altar call. They had already come to the foot of the altar and confessed their sin. They had prayed a prayer. That's good. But it's only a starting point. If the sinner's prayer were enough, John the Baptist would have been enough of a prophet for Israel (he invited people to repentance). But God sent a Messiah, Jesus. Confession is only a starting point for a person who believes in Jesus, the Saviour. Jesus does want us to pray for forgiveness for our sins, BUT He wants to give us new life. He wants us to be born again – with new hearts, minds, and souls – so we live completely new lives. He wants us to follow a new path: *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it"* (Matthew 16:24-25).

Coming **TO** the altar is good. But it's not enough. Paul challenges us to hop up **ON** the altar and offer ourselves – our bodies, souls, hearts, and minds – to God: *"Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to **give your bodies** to God because of all he has done for you. **Let them be a living and holy sacrifice** – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him"* (Romans 12:1). This is much more than just praying a prayer of repentance. This is a complete offering of myself to God, a total life commitment. We die to our old self and are raised as new people – informed, formed, and transformed – by Jesus (Romans 6:1-11). *"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think,"* Paul continues, *"Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect"* (Romans 12:2).

Have I made that kind of a commitment to God? Do I really believe in Jesus? Will I give myself heart, soul, mind, and strength to Him?

God to enfold me,
God to surround me,
God in my speaking,
God in my thinking.
God in my sleeping,
God in my waking,
God in my watching,
God in my hoping.
God in my life,
God in my lips,
God in my soul,
God in my heart.
God in my sufficing,
God in my slumber,
God in mine ever-living soul,
God in my eternity.
Amen.

Celtic Prayer

Friday, September 10: Acts 19:8-20

Power. The great capital cities of the world are built to overwhelm visiting dignitaries by demonstrating power and inspiring awe. The Houses of Parliament in London, the Capitol in Washington, the Kremlin in Moscow (even the Parliament buildings in Ottawa and Legislative Buildings in Edmonton) are designed to impress us with a sense of power, strength, even wonder, and awe.

Ephesus is a city of power. It is the capital of Roman Asia, second only to Rome in size and grandeur. It is home to one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. Antipater of Sidon, who compiled the list of the Seven Wonders, describes the temple: *"I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand.'*" By ancient standards it was huge: almost 140 m long, 70 m wide and 20 m high, with more than 127 gleaming marble columns.

When Paul speaks and preaches about Jesus in Ephesus, people notice. There is a lot about **power** in this reading – not political power, but spiritual power. The events taking place in Ephesus are summarized by Luke (author of Acts) this way: *"the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in **power**"* (19:20). We'll see tomorrow that people associated with the Temple of Artemis are not happy about this new power.

The Apostle John, who lived in Ephesus for many years (and may be buried there), writes to his friends about the spiritual battles we can face: *"Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here. But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because **the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world**"* (1 John 4:1-4).

Isn't it great to know that the Holy Spirit, in us, is greater than the spirit who is in the world? We may be tempted to think that, as the people of God, we are powerless. Global politics, national politics, provincial politics, even local politics seem out of our control. Some political leaders are obsessed with gaining, wielding, and holding on to power. But their power is only temporary and transitory. The only real power in

the universe is God. As one person – you – allows the Spirit to inform, form, and transform yourself, the world around you is transformed a little bit, too. The world is changed more for the good through ordinary lives like yours and mine than through the political or business “power-players” out there.

Person-to-person change happens slowly. We want change, BIG change, right now. But genuine change – transformative change – happens when hearts are changed. Real change comes as the Spirit comes into our lives and flows through us. That takes time. How can you make a little change in your world, today?

*Through the dark hours of this night
protect and surround us,
Father, Son and Spirit, Three.
Forgive the ill that we have done.
Forgive the pride that we have shown.
Forgive the words that have caused harm.
May we sleep peaceably.
May we rise refreshed to do your will.
Through the dark hours of this night
protect and surround us,
Father, Son and Spirit, Three.
Amen.*

John Birch

Saturday, September 11: Acts 19:21-20:1

In 1994, Andres Escobar, was shot 12 times by three men. According to witnesses, one assassin shouted, “Thanks for the own goal.” Escobar, a defender for the Columbia national soccer team, had scored an own goal in the World Cup, leading to Columbia’s elimination. Columbians take their soccer seriously. Many people around the world take their soccer seriously. You really don’t want to be an Italy fan in Wembley Stadium (London). England fans are banned (or “caged” in fenced-off sections) at some European venues ...

The theatre in Ephesus is crammed with 30,000 people. They are as rabid as any Columbia or England soccer fan. They are chanting the home team cheer over and over: “*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.*” “*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.*” “*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.*” They want blood. This theatre is used for concerts, plays, religious, political, and philosophical discussions – and for gladiator and animal combat. Here, bloodshed is normal. In fact, it is good entertainment.

What’s happening this day is bigger than a soccer game. Thanks to the incendiary remarks of Demetrius, people believe the soul of their city is under attack. They believe Paul, Gaius, Aristarchus, and Alexander, by insulting Artemis, are destroying the soul of their proud city. Perhaps more importantly, they see Paul and the others undermining the economy: Ephesus is a place of pilgrimage for tens of thousands of people eager to stay in hostels, eat and drink in local pubs, buy souvenirs, and visit brothels. If anything threatens the ability to make money, it has to be bad ... right? It’s all about business. Making money matters most. How often do leaders use the spectre of economic disaster to sway our opinions?

The city clerk – a non-Christian – saves the day with good solid logic and common sense (at least someone stays rational through the insanity of the moment).

As we think about Jesus’ church – and our lives – over the coming months, let’s keep our heads and do some good thinking about tough issues. We can learn. We can think. We can make good plans. We can make wise choices (one of Paul’s wise choices was to get away and stay away for a while (20:1)).

Jesus’ theme throughout His teaching was “*the kingdom (or reign) of God.*” He begins His ministry announcing the coming of the kingdom (Mark 1:16-17). Over and over again, He says, “*The kingdom (or reign) of God is like ...*” As He teaches us to pray, “*Your kingdom come*” He immediately adds, “*Your will be done*” – the coming and fulfillment of His kingdom is intertwined with **us** doing His will and being His people

(Matthew 6:10). He invites us to be participants in the process by doing His will ... What we do matters. In fact, through our loving actions, we're God's answer to the issues in our world. Isn't that exciting?

As you face the opportunities and difficulties, the possibilities and the snares of life, God invites you to pray, "*Lord, Your kingdom come.*" Also invites you to pray, "*Lord, your will be done.*" How might He be challenging you to do His will in your life, today?

*Lord of the nations, God in whom we trust,
you alone are holy, good, wise,
and the source of every blessing.
In trouble and turmoil, be our peace.
In our hearts and minds,
give us the peace that surpasses understanding.
In our mouths put words of peace,
and make us peacemakers,
that we may be called your children.
Let the truth of your Word govern and guide us,
when we are inclined to be like Pontius Pilate and say, "What is truth?"
When we are unsure of all things, draw us to you,
our faithful God, steadfast in love,
our rock, refuge, fortress, and truth.
Amen*

Paul Stratman, January 6, 2021

Sunday, September 12: Ephesians 1:1-3

Jesus taught us to pray, "*Your kingdom come; your will be done ...*" But what is God's will? We can get caught up wanting to understand this in very specific terms: where should I work? What should I study? Where should I live? What should I do on vacation? But at a much more general level (and a much more profound level) God's will for ALL people is to know Him personally, to live with faith, hope, joy, and love, with peace and justice, with mercy and compassion, with holiness and wholeness of life, and to be His people in our hurting world. The details of where and what are less important than those BIG truths.

Paul writes his letter to Ephesus from prison in Rome, 4-8 years after the visits recorded in Acts. Paul is helping the "saints" (in Greek, literally "the holy ones") understand what the will of God is for them. He wants them to rediscover their calling – their vocation – as the people of God. He is not really concerned about choices of jobs, houses, investment options, or vacations. He wants us to see our lives in much, much bigger terms. He yearns for us to comprehend God's will for us, as God's holy people.

God created Adam and Eve to be His "holy ones" – people, created in the image of God – who would be His priests to all of creation. They were called by God to the vocation of caring for His sacred space, His creation, on His behalf. They were called to "*tend and care for*" God's good world as God's stewards (Genesis 2:15). Of course, when Adam and Eve chose to make themselves the centre of the universe by disobeying God and trying to steal wisdom, they messed it all up (Genesis 3). They sinned. And sin infected all of God's good world. Adam and Eve lost their way. They lost their mission and purpose.

When we are saved, we are "born again" as God's holy people. We are not just saved **FROM** our sin. We are saved **TO** a renewed and restored relationship with God as His "holy ones," His "saints," His "priests." As such, we are re-called to Adam's vocation to be His wise stewards, bringing His love, His order, and His good care to our world. God's will for you is more than just a little life – His will for you is to be His steward, His ambassador, and His image – a mirror reflecting God's love to the world.

Jesus teaches the kingdom of God as a symbol of hope and a command, as a promise and responsibility, as comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable, as already present in Him and yet to come in its fullness, as a reward in the hereafter and as real in the here-and-now, as personal holiness and social

justice, as deep spirituality and gritty reality ... As He does so, He says to us "*I have come that (you) may have life and have it to the full*" (John 10:10). A "full" (or "abundant") life, according to Jesus is one that is forgiven – but also has purpose. We embody His love to our hurting world.

We are re-called to be God's "holy ones" – bringing order, care, and love into God's creation. How can you share God's love with someone today?

*Creator God, we thank you today
for the splendour and beauty of creation;
for the ordered succession of seasons;
for your love which made the world.
We thank you for the good and fertile earth;
for the fruits of the earth in their seasons;
for the life that sustains our life;
for the food that we daily enjoy.
We thank you for those whose labour supplies our physical needs;
for those who harvest our crops, those who transport them,
those who process them, those who sell them.
We pray for those for whom this year's crop has been poor.
Help them through the tough times.
Amen.*

Baptist Union of Great Britain

Monday, September 13: Ephesians 1:1-14

"The average person on Sunday morning is not waking up and thinking about what church he or she should attend. These people know that they have seemingly much more intriguing and urgent things to do with their time. No attractive programming (at church) is going to woo them back," writes Gary Nelson. We live in increasing secular times when less and less people are interested in church.

And yet people are still interested in spirituality. They are still interested in Jesus. No wonder. As you read through this passage in Ephesians, reflect on the spiritual blessings that come from Jesus.

What truth speaks to you from this passage? Jesus is amazing.

What good news is there in this passage, for people in your life? Your children? Your parents? Your friends? Your fellow students or colleagues at work?

Gary writes, "*We are discovering, or perhaps rediscovering, the mission agenda of the church where we, as followers of Jesus Christ, see ourselves not simply as a 'called together' people but also a 'called out' people ... God call us to live a missionary existence in the world not just as something we do, such as education and worship, but as the very essence and character of the church.*" That's challenging.

We have amazing good news about Jesus. Now we have to live it in our lives. Jesus invites us to reflect on His word and apply it to our lives, then live it out in relationship with others. We pray for those around us. And we take the opportunities God gives us actively to share Jesus' love and encouragement.

That is who we are called out to be as His church. How can I live His love in my life today?

*Lord of all things,
we thank You for the women and men You have called to work in education.
Bless their hearts with Your love, joy and peace.
Season their words with Your patience, kindness and goodness.
Fill their minds with Your faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
When they respond to a broken-hearted child, show them how to be big-hearted.
When they reach out to a rebellious teen, remind them to be obedient to You.
When they advise a lonely mature student, help them to be Christ Jesus to them.
When they meet with an angry parent, let them see a child of God.
When they give advice to a discouraged colleague, give them helpful and encouraging words.
When they speak to visitors and strangers, grant them the gift of hospitality.
Amen.*

Prayerforschools.org

Tuesday, September 14: Matthew 16:13-18

If Jesus were to ask you, "*Who do you say that I am?*" how would you answer?

Simon (Peter) answers that question, "*You are the Messiah (or the Christ), the Son of the living God*" ("Messiah" (Hebrew) or "Christ" (Greek) are synonymous titles meaning "the Anointed One" (English) – a title associated with the royal Saviour, promised in Old Testament Scripture).

Jesus says, "*You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.*" ("Petros" is the Greek word for "rock." In John 1:42, Jesus calls Simon "Cephas," Aramaic for "rock." Peter is the original "Rocky")

What is "the rock" upon which Jesus will build His church? As we think about "church" this Fall, this is a key question to ask. Jesus only uses the word "church" three times. This is the first time He says it (the first time "church" is used in the New Testament). The Greek word is "ekklesia," a word for an assembly or gathering, literally meaning "called out people"; French/Spanish speakers will recognize this as the root word for "église"/"iglesia." Some people believe Jesus is referring specifically to **the person Simon/Peter** – this **man**, Simon, is the foundation of the church: thus Peter is celebrated as the first Bishop of Rome/Pope. Most scholars, however, believe it is not the person, but Peter's **confession of faith about Jesus** that is the foundation of the church. What matters is Peter's conviction that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Whatever else the church is, it is, first and foremost, the assembly of those who believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, fully God and fully human. Belief, as we have noted, is more than just an intellectual assent that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ. What Simon Peter and other believers model for us are people who believe in Jesus **and** act on their belief. Their faith in Jesus informs, forms, and transforms their lives.

They will have their weak moments and times of abysmal failure. Peter will bluster about staying faithful to Jesus, then deny Jesus three times in quick succession. But in his better moments, Peter will remind us that we are re-called to that amazing vocation Adam and Eve had in the beginning – to be God's holy people, reflecting His love into His world: "*You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests ... You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, **you can show others the goodness of God**, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:4-10).

Just like Peter, you are I are His royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. He has called us out of the darkness into his wonderful light. As a result, we can show others the goodness of God. We will fail and fall, too; but just as God restored Peter, He can restore you and me.

He continues to call us to share His love and light with the world. To whom can I show the goodness – the love and mercy, the grace and forgiveness, the blessing and hope, the peace and joy – of God, today?

*May there always be work for your hands to do.
May your purse always hold a coin or two.
May the sun always shine upon your window pane.
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.
May the hand of a friend always be near to you and
May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.
Amen.*

Gaelic Blessing

Wednesday, September 15: Matthew 18:15-35 (and Matthew 6:9-15)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all lived God's love perfectly? Wouldn't it be fantastic if Christians did love one another, other people, and their enemies? In Ephesians 1, Paul shares God's vision for His church: *"God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth"*(1:9-10) – a wonderful vision of God's people fulfilling Adam and Eve's original calling to care for God's creation (Genesis 2:15), under the lordship of Jesus.

"Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan. God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago"(Ephesians 1:11-14) – a great picture of love and unity within the church.

But it doesn't always work that way, does it? We are not always united **with** Christ or united **in** Christ. Jesus uses the word "church" for the first time in Matthew 16: *"Upon this rock (Simon Peter's affirmation that He is the Messiah) I will build my **church**."* Shortly afterwards, Jesus uses the word "church" a second time, when He is talking about conflict (here, Matthew 18:17). Even those following Jesus occasionally squabble, argue, hurt one another, disagree, and struggle to forgive one another. Isn't that annoying? And yet isn't it encouraging this was reality, even among Jesus' own disciples, those who knew Him personally?

One person (in Calgary, a total stranger) randomly sent our church a Facebook message: *"In my opinion the three words that best describe a Christian are rude, remorseless, and dishonest."* What unfortunate experiences has this person had that he would bother sending such a message to a random church, with whom he has no connection, in a different city? (Pray for him) His words are a good reminder, however. How we treat one another in the church matters. It sends a powerful message to the world about who we are, what we believe, and how much we have allowed the Spirit to truly transform us.

Jesus challenges us: *"I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples"* John 13:34-35). How does that command work together with Matthew 18?

When we don't forgive one another, what is God's response? (Is Jesus serious about this forgiveness thing?)

Read the "Lord's Prayer" [Matthew 6:9-13] – then read Matthew 6:14-15 – the only subject in the prayer Jesus feels it necessary to elaborate on is what? The forgiveness bit. *"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins"*. Being the church – being a follower of Jesus – means being a **good** forgiver.

When we don't forgive, we think we're punishing the other person. Most often, however, they don't even know we are angry with them. They are getting along with their lives just fine. However, we stew and fume, lose sleep, give ourselves ulcers, grind our teeth, and annoy our loved ones with our grumpiness. Forgive, forget, and get over it. For your own health (and the health of your loved ones).

*Holy Spirit, please forgive us for not being forgiving.
 Forgive us for thinking evil thoughts and seeking revenge against people who have offended us.
 Forgive us for hatred and for not walking in love.
 Forgive us for gossiping, lying and for rehearsing in our minds what was said or done to us.
 Lord, help all of us to forgive people who have hurt us.
 Heal our emotions that have been wounded and teach us how to love unconditionally.
 Continue to extend Your love and mercy toward us.
 Please remind us daily to use Your power living on the inside of us which helps us in all things.
 Lord, help us to forget the past so that we can move forward to the future
 as we press toward the mark of our higher calling in Christ Jesus.
 Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from the evil one.
 Amen.*

The Prayer Institute

Thursday, September 16: Acts 2:38-47

"If I am going to go to church, I am going to go to a church where ____." How would you fill in the blank?

The church Jesus established really gets going after His death, resurrection, and ascension. As the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus' followers, Peter preaches and the Spirit leads thousands to believe, to be baptized, and to become part of the church.

What can we say about this church, the first church? It is a church where ...

1. **People believe in Jesus.** The church is a mixture of believers and seekers, but the core of the community is made up of people who believe IN Jesus and actively FOLLOW Jesus. The church's *raison d'être* (reason for being) is JESUS. If it's not all about Jesus, it's not a church.
2. **Those who believe are baptized.** Baptism is not "magical": it is a public affirmation of the decision people make to believe. Baptism is a starting point for people on their journey with Jesus: people believe and are baptized – spiritual growth and following Jesus are a lifelong journey.
3. **Those who believe are eager to learn more.** This is a community of learners who know they need to keep growing in their knowledge (information), understanding (formation), and new life (transformation). They have good teachers and are eager to learn from them.
4. **Those who believe are in "fellowship" with one another.** The Greek word is *"koinonia"* – a rich word meaning communion, partnership, sharing, caring, teamwork, a strong commitment to *"good and good"* – an *inner* goodness toward virtue, and an *outer* goodness toward social justice. These are not spiritual Lone Rangers; they are people in Jesus-centered community – church. Nowhere in Scripture is the concept of being a follower of Jesus separate from being part of the community of other believers. Church is where we learn, grow in Christian character, and put our faith into practice (as we struggle through the loving-one-another bit we thought about yesterday).
5. **Those who believe share meals with one another,** including (but not limited to) the Lord's Supper. Hospitality, friendship, camaraderie, and worship are intertwined. They have fun together. Of course, with Covid this has been a challenge, recently, but it is still important.
6. **Those who believe worship (Lord's Supper) and pray together.** They meet regularly to praise, pray, and celebrate. They are worshippers. They are joyful. It's all about Jesus.
7. **Those who believe care for one another** – and those in need in the non-Christian community – through practical, sacrificial service and ministry. They share God's love in deed and in word.
8. **Those who believe live their faith and share their faith** in such a way that people see Jesus in them and are drawn to Him. They *"enjoyed the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."*

Would you go to this church? If not, why not? Is so, why?

Is our church like this? We're not perfect (Matthew 18 reminds us of that). But we do consciously use this description of the church as a template for who we are and what we aspire to be ... Pray for us as a church

that we may be more and more like this.

Of course, our church is people – you and I. None of us is perfect at being a member of this ideal church. What part of this do you struggle to put into practice, personally? Pray that God would help you to be an awesome part of His amazing church ...

*The blessed in your eyes
are not those who have everything, but those who have nothing.
Not the rich in earning, but the rich in spending,
who give their all for you.
Your ordinary saints,
being your hands, feet and words in their ordinary lives,
doing extraordinary things for you.
The blessed in your eyes
are not those who desire honour,
but those who merely seek to serve.
Thank you for the servants in your kingdom.
Amen.*

John Birch

Friday, September 17: Acts 11:19-30

Life in the church – life following Jesus – is not always a walk through a rose garden. Sometimes people in the church fight among themselves (Matthew 18). Other times Christians are attacked by those outside. Shortly after the wonderful description of the church in Acts 2 (yesterday), the Jewish authorities begin a brutal persecution campaign (like what is happening to some Christians in parts of the world today – no, not in Canada, thankfully). People who followed Jesus scatter. As they do, paradoxically the church grows as they share the good news about Jesus in more and more places. Local churches and the church (the entire Christian movement) mushroom. What looks like disaster, God uses to build His Kingdom.

There is an interesting note in 11:26: *"It was at Antioch that the believers were first called 'Christians'."* The Romans coin that term. The Romans were the first fans of "big data" – they wanted to know everything about everyone, including their religious convictions. They quickly recognize that Jesus' followers are not just a subset of Judaism, they represent a whole new movement which they label "Christian."

Early "Christians" do NOT use that term to define themselves. The word "Christian" is a static description – it simply describes someone who self-identifies with Jesus. That's Ok. But it is a passive term.

The first believers call themselves *"followers of the Way"* (Acts 9:2, 19:9 and 23, 22:4, etc.). They understand believing in Jesus to be a dynamic process – you name the name of Jesus AND you actively follow Him. You self-identify with Jesus AND you make following Him your whole Way of being and way of living. Believing in Jesus means a total life transformation. You live out your faith moment-by-moment.

More people come to believe in Jesus as they see *"followers of the Way"* live and share their faith. It is the transformed lives of the people of Jesus – not intellectual arguments – that lead people to faith in Jesus.

Paradoxically, the church today is growing more quickly and is stronger in some of the most intolerant parts of the world (China, southeast Asia, India, North Africa, Middle East) than in "Christian" North America and Europe. As "followers of the Way" live their faith in these nations, the Spirit of God is doing amazing things. Praise Him. Pray for the persecuted church.

Also pray we may actively live our faith with integrity – truly following the Way in our lives and in our love. May we be the forgiven and forgiving, the beloved and the loving, the grace-receiving and grace-giving, the blessed and blessing people of God ...

*Loving God, when we are weary, give us fresh energy;
When we are sleepy, give us rest;
When we are frustrated, give us calmness;
When we are sad, give us comfort;
When we are disappointed, give us hope;
When we are happy, rejoice with us;
When we are hopeful, give us the courage to share;
In everything, turn us back to focus on you,
The One who has given us all things
through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.
Amen*

Stephen Smith

Saturday, September 18: Acts 12:1-17

Is being a "follower of the Way" – a "Christian" – all health, wealth, and prosperity? Not in the 1st century it isn't (12:1-4). But notice what the church is doing? "*While Peter was in prison, the church **prayed** very earnestly for him*"(12:5). What is the result?

Prayer is an essential part – of who are a church and who we are as individual believers.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "*We tend to use prayer as a last resort, but God wants it to be our first line of defense. We pray when there's nothing else we can do, but God wants us to pray before we do anything at all. Most of us would prefer, however, to spend our time doing something that will get immediate results. We don't want to wait for God to resolve matters in His good time because His idea of 'good time' is seldom in sync with ours.*"

Martin Luther put it this way: "*I have so much to do today that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.*"

I'm not good at doing this. My natural inclination is to "manage" life on my own. That does not usually work out too well.

When I do pray more, at least three things inevitably happen:

1. As I place my issues where they belong – in God's hands – I am calmer, more content, more relaxed and more at peace. It's not up to me to solve all the problems in the world.
2. My focus changes from "me-trying-figure-out-how-to-solve-my-problems" to listening to God, for His wisdom, His insight, and His guidance. Prayer changes **me** as I take time to listen to what God might be saying to me. I often see new possibilities – new great possibilities – I had not thought of.
3. Sometimes my problems do get dealt with. Other times, I appreciate that what's worrying me is just not that important. I begin to appreciate that there are all sorts of other people I can pray for. It's not all about me and my issues. As my concern and love goes out for others, my own problems come into perspective: God is calling me to bigger, nobler, more important things.

I need to constantly remember that prayer is a dialogue. Prayer is as much a matter of listening to God as it is talking to God ("*Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts*" – Mother Teresa). Through that process, I may discover God is doing more amazing things than we can possibly imagine.

Pray for our church today. Pray that we might be a church centred on Jesus, living and sharing His love. Pray about those you know who need God's care and comfort (how can you, perhaps, be the answer to that prayer?). Pray for your own issues and concerns. Place all these things in God's hands. Trust them into His care. He can handle them.

*Lord, grant that I may always allow myself to be guided by You.
 May I always follow Your plans.
 Help me to perfectly accomplish Your Holy Will.
 Grant that in all things, great and small,
 today and all the days of my life,
 I may do whatever You require of me.
 Help me respond to the slightest prompting of Your Grace.
 May I be Your trustworthy instrument for Your honour.
 May Your Will be done in time and in eternity by me, in me, and through me.
 Let nothing disturb me. Let nothing frighten me.
 All things will pass away but God never changes.
 Whoever has God lacks nothing.
 God alone suffices.
 Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Sunday, September 19: Acts 15:1-11

Racism was alive and well in the 1st Century. Many Jewish-background Christians believe the good news is really only for them, not for anyone else (all non-Jews – Roman, Greek, African, Persian, Indian, Celt, Asian – are lumped together with the pejorative term “Gentile”). If, by some (unfortunate) circumstance Gentiles are becoming Christians, they need to become “Jews” first – *“The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.”*

Really? Is that the good news? Peter speaks directly to this misunderstanding. *“God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith”*(15:8-9).

Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources and founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism, wrote a reflection piece for churches about Sunday mornings: *Seven Things Church Members Should Say to Guests in a Worship Service:*

1. **“Thank you for being here.”** *It’s just that basic. I have heard from numerous church guests who returned because they were simply told “thank you.”*
2. **“Let me help you with that.”** *If you see someone struggling with umbrellas, young children, diaper bags, purses, and other items, a gesture to hold something for them is a huge positive. Of course, this comment is appropriate for member to member as well.*
3. **“Please take my seat.”** *I actually heard that comment twice in a church where I was speaking in the Nashville area. The first comment came from a member to a young family of five who were trying to find a place to sit together.*
4. **“Here is my email address. Please let me know if I can help in any way.”** *Of course, this comment must be used with discretion, but it can be a hugely positive message to a guest.*
5. **“Can I show you where you need to go?”** *Even in smaller churches, guests will not know where to find the nursery, restrooms, and small group meeting areas. You can usually tell when a guest does not know where he or she is to go.*
6. **“Let me introduce you to _____.”** *The return rate of guests is always higher if they meet other people. A church member may have the opportunity to introduce the guest to the pastor, other church staff, and other members of the church.*
7. **“Would you join us for lunch?”** *I saved this question for last for two reasons. First, the situation must obviously be appropriate before you offer the invitation. Second, I have seen this approach have the highest guest return rate of any factor. What if your church members sought to invite different guests 6 to 12 times a year? The burden wouldn’t be great; but the impact would be huge.*

Today, say one of these great things to someone at church ... May we be a welcoming people. (FYI other forms of racism are alive and well in Lethbridge in 2021 – may we truly welcome ALL people in Jesus’ name)

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know.
 To love what I ought to love.
 To praise what delights You most.
 To value what is precious in Your sight.
 To hate what is offensive to You.
 Do not let me judge according to the sight of my eyes.
 May I never pass sentence according to the hearing of my own, ignorant ears.
 Help me to discern with a true judgment what is true and good.
 Above all, may I always ask You what is the good pleasure of Your will.
 Lord, You know what is best.
 Give what You will, as much as You will, when You will.
 Do with me as You know best, as will most please You.
 Place me where You will and deal with me freely in all things.
 I am in Your hand; turn me about whichever way You will.
 Here I am, Your servant, ready to obey in all things.
 Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Monday, September 20: Acts 15:12-31

How do people in a church handle disagreements? (Yes, disagreements DO happen) How do the first church handle them? They talk their problems through in a mature, responsible way. At the end of the day, they come to a consensus that works for everyone. Isn't that great? That's the way churches **should** work.

Some people in the early church still feel strongly that all believers should follow Jewish rituals. But they are able to recognize that there are essential doctrines ("we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus"(15:11)) and non-essential doctrines – if some people want to be circumcised that's just fine, but it is not necessary for salvation.

As the global Christian church, today, we can agree on essential doctrines, too. Hopefully we can recognize that other beliefs (perhaps ones very dear to us) are NOT essential to faith in Jesus. We often use one of early creeds or a more contemporary statement of belief to summarize the **essentials** of what we believe in common. The oldest well-known creed, the Nicene Creed (325 AD), reads:

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
 of all that is, seen and unseen.
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
 God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father, through him all things were made.
 For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven,
 was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became truly human.
 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.
 On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
 who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.
 We believe in one holy universal (or "catholic" – Latin for "universal") and apostolic church.
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
 We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Of course, this is a **human** summary of many of the great truths of our faith. But it gives us a basis to celebrate the common faith we share with people from many, many Christian traditions. We can agree to disagree on some non-salvation things (the role of clergy, organization of local churches, understandings of

the Lord's Supper, interpretations of parts of Scripture) – but on the BIG doctrines, we can find unity.

The church – the universal (beyond all time, space, and denomination) church – is stronger for our diversity. Some people relate well to God through charismatic expressions of church, others through liturgical types of church, others through contemplative styles of church, and others through First B Lethbridge! The important thing is that message of Jesus is preached (Philippians 1:11).

As a church, we affirm the "Statement of Faith" of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. This unites us with believers in churches across Canada and around the world:

- *The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*
- *There is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
- *Our Lord Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh; we affirm His virgin birth, sinless humanity, divine miracles, vicarious and atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, ongoing mediatorial work, and personal return in power and glory.*
- *The salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit.*
- *The Holy Spirit enables believers to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *The Church, the body of Christ, consists of all true believers.*
- *Ultimately Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all persons: either to an eternal presence with God or to an eternal separation from God.*
- *There are two ordinances for the Church, regularly observed in the New Testament: Believer's Baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper.*

Let's not get hung up on the non-essential things – the non-salvation issues – that might divide us and instead, let's celebrate our unity in the Body of Christ ...

*Majestic sovereign, timeless wisdom,
your kindness melts my hard, cold soul.
Your beauty fills my dull, sad eyes.
I am yours, you made me.
I am yours, you called me.
I am yours, you saved me.
I am yours, you loved me.
I will never leave your presence.
Give me death, give me life.
Give me sickness, give me health.
Give me honour, give me shame.
Give me weakness, give me strength.
I will have whatever you give.
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Tuesday, September 21: Acts 15:32-39

Church, we are right in saying, is people, not a building. But people can be difficult, unfortunately. People can disappoint us (like John Mark). Even great saints of the faith, like Paul, can be aggravating. I'm far from perfect – it's hard to be "church" with me ☺. How about you? Yes, church can be great – and church can be challenging. The Our challenge is to find ways to be church with messy people just like us.

We can opt out. Many people do. "*The church is a bunch of hypocrites,*" they might say (if we think we are perfect, we would be right to do so). But honestly, none of us is perfect. More accurately, "*The church is a*

bunch of people who believe in Jesus, trying to follow the Way." Sometimes we do OK. Sometimes we don't. Hopefully we admit it when be blow it. We are all honest strugglers, trying to get it right.

The church is the place where "the rubber (of our faith) hits the road." Here, in community with other messy people just like us, we try to figure out how to love as Jesus loved, forgive as Jesus forgave, care as Jesus cared, teach as Jesus taught, celebrate as Jesus celebrated, mourn as Jesus mourned, rejoice as Jesus rejoiced ... That's tough. It's challenging. It's hard work. There are times I want to give up, too.

But God calls us to be church – people of God, in community. Donald Miller, a Christian author who struggles with "church," said in an interview, *"I think one of the problems with the current model of evangelical traditional whatever-you-call-it that we're doing is a lot of people walk into a church and they feel the agency to be a disciple of Jesus is given to one person in the room, or maybe five or six – and that's the pastoral staff. I would love to see a model of church where the pastor stands up and says, 'you are all pastors.' Just buy a box of sheriff badges and give it out and read Hebrews and say, 'You are a pastor, and this Sunday meeting is time to equip the thousands of little churches that will leave here and take place in your homes around your dinner table.' That, I think, would terrify most evangelical audiences. We don't want that kind of agency because it gives us responsibility. If I'm a disciple of Jesus, a real disciple of Jesus, I can't give my pastor the agency for me. I have to take it in my relationships with my neighbors and the way I do communion."*

We are all the church. Opting in or out is not a choice we can make. As people who believe in Jesus, we are all called to love others in His name. You have been deputized – sheriff-ized – by Jesus to be His servant in your community – to be His church. We can all "be the church" in our homes, at work, at school, in our neighbourhoods ... and here in First Baptist. We are church when we love Jesus. We are the church when we allow Jesus to form and transform us. We are all pastors.

We are church when we love one another ... and love our neighbour. May the Lord help us be people who believe in and love Jesus and seek to follow His Way ...

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

Celtic prayer

Wednesday, September 22: Acts 15:32-16:5

A lot has been written through the centuries prophesying the decline and fall of the Christian church. People are leaving and not returning. Membership is declining. Churches are closing. At least as much has been written about what to do about these trends.

If we think "the church" – the global Christian movement – is struggling in 2021, imagine how the first leaders of the first churches must have felt? Christians were being brutally persecuted. They were forcibly scattered. There were doctrinal controversies (Acts 15:1-31). The few good leaders/pastors there were, like Barnabas and Paul, were sharply disagreeing and parting ways. In the midst of this, despite their differences, Barnabas and Paul were concerned to *"strengthen the churches"* (15:41) and to *"encourage and*

strengthen their (believers) faith”(15:32, 16:5).

What does it mean to “*strengthen a church*”? What do you think?

How could **our** church be encouraged or strengthened?

- It may include – it must include – a fundamental commitment to Jesus – faith in and a desire to follow Him and Him alone. If we ever lose sight of the fact we are HIS church and HIS body, we have lost our way. First Baptist is not OUR church but JESUS’ church.
- It may include – it must include – good solid teaching. We need to learn from Scripture, and we can help one another apply His truth to our lives. We encourage one another in Jesus’ name.
- It may include – it must include – loving, supportive, encouraging, caring fellowship. Community – real caring, supportive, sacrificial community – is a hallmark of Jesus’ church (this kind of loving, forgiving, compassionate community is unheard of in mainstream, contemporary culture).
- It may include – it must include – worship and prayer. As we keep our focus on Jesus, our own issues and needs come into proper perspective. And we get excited about God’s mission ...
- It may include – it must include a sense of mission in both deed (remember in Acts 2, how people provided for those in need?) and in word (sharing the good news of Jesus with others). We are recalled to the task given to Adam/Eve, Abraham (and the nation of Israel) to be God’s blessing, sharing His love and mercy, care, and compassion with the world.

Pray that our church might be “strengthened.” Ultimately, Jesus and His Spirit will build/strengthen the church. But we all can be a part of that process. Pray for people in our church. Pray for our leaders. Pray for our pastors. Pray for our families. Pray for our witness and mission to our community. Pray for volunteers. And pray the Spirit would show you how you can actively “strengthen” our church ...

*Alone with none but you, my God
I journey on my way.
What need I fear, when you are near,
O King of night and day?
More safe am I within your hand,
Than if an host did round me stand.
Be O Lord,
a guiding star above me,
a smooth path below me,
a kindly shepherd behind me,
and a bright flame before me;
today, tonight and forever.
Amen.*

Columba (521-597)

Thursday, September 23: Acts 20:16-21

What is really important?

In Paul’s travels to plant, encourage, and strengthen churches, he makes one last stop in Ephesus, recorded in Acts 20. As he meets with leaders of the church, he reminds them of his basic message, the basic message of the church: “*I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike,*” he says, “*the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.*”

On one hand, this whole “being the church” thing is not complicated – we simply invite people to repent of their sin, turn to God, put their faith in Jesus ... Boom. That’s it. But as we have seen, believing in – or putting your faith in – Jesus means more than just an intellectual assent to the theoretical proposition that Jesus is the Messiah (just *information*). It also includes a commitment of our heart, mind, soul, and strength (our whole being) to God. It includes being *formed* and *transformed* by the Spirit of God so we LIVE as

Jesus would live if He were He living in our place. That's a wonderful – challenging – frustrating – liberating – demanding – exciting – only-possible-through-the-Spirit – whole new life in Jesus.

Let's be honest. There are times when we feel close to God, our prayers are a rich time of conversation with God, we love the church, we love our fellow believers, we love worship, we love Bible study ... following Jesus is the most wonderful thing in the world ...

But there are other times when God seems far away, our prayers seem to bounce back from the ceiling, the church annoys us, other believers irritate us, worship is dull, reading the Bible seems irrelevant ... we wonder if there's anything to this whole "being a Christian" thing ...

In those hard times, it is good to remember the foundational truths of our faith. The truth is this: Jesus is the way to God. The truth is this: He is the truth about life, the universe, and everything. The truth is this: we do have life – new birth and new life in the Spirit – through Him. We may not always FEEL those truths. But those are the facts. This is the truth. At times we need to remind ourselves that our faith is not based on feelings, but on solid, objective, dependable truths. Ultimately *"nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:39).

"Be sure of this," says Jesus, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). This is His unconditional promise to you. No if's. No and's. No but's. Be encouraged. Be strengthened in your faith. He is with you, right here, right now ... and He will never leave you.

*Come, Jesus Christ, come my way;
showing me your way, through these disorientating days,
and opening my eyes to your accompanying presence.
Come, Jesus Christ, come my way;
teaching me your truth, through these confounding days,
and opening my mind to your living Word.
Come Jesus Christ, come my way;
revealing to me your life, through these bewildering days,
and opening my heart to the fulness of your being.
Amen.*

Colin Sinclair

Friday, September 24: Acts 20:16-27

In 2015, the religious historian Owen Chadwick, died at age 99. He was a true "gentleman and a scholar." He wrote dozens of academic books on church history, held two Cambridge University research chairs and was its vice-chancellor during student unrest in the late 1960s. *The Guardian* newspaper commented:

"Chadwick was immune from arrogance and self-importance. He retained a relaxed warmth and easy good nature, with an infectious reactive laugh. Indeed he had the unusual ability never to laugh at his own jokes and always to laugh at other people's. It was an aspect of his most priestly and humane quality: the ability to listen. He could (rarely) switch off and appear uninterested, but never when people presented him with their sadness or anxiety. Pastorally he (had) a strong streak of paternalism, and this brought balm to hundreds of people he met. He had the rare ability to make people feel better about themselves.

"At Selwyn (College, Cambridge) ... day after day he would wander into the court and round up undergraduates to help him make tea. He often knew far more about students than their tutors or directors of studies and his short, brilliant references adorn the files of a majority of those who were students in his 27 years as master.

"It was that unhurried quality, the ability to make people think he had all the time in the world for them, and his unassuming manner with whomsoever he met, that made him special. He was equally accessible – and yet unfathomable – to all he encountered. His wider interests spanned painting, music, sport and sailing.

He spent much time in his later years in Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, of which he was also priest in charge. He was fully active and alert academically and pastorally well into his 80s."

Isn't that a wonderful tribute? Note some of the wonderful qualities the (secular) news media comment on about Chadwick ... Despite being a renowned academic (with many publications and honorary degrees from several universities), he was still serving God as "priest in charge" of a rural parish well into his 80's.

Paul – a highly-educated and decorated academic himself (Philippians 3:5-6) – says about himself: *"My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God"* (Acts 20:24).

I wonder what they will say about me when I pass on at 99 ...? What will they say about you at 99?

May I live my life with a passion to tell others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God. May I make people feel better about themselves. May I have that unhurried quality, the ability to make people think I have all the time in the world for them. May I listen to others. May my life be always growing in the fruit of Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ...

*For all that is good in life, thank you,
For the love of family and friends, thank you,
For the kindness of good neighbour and Samaritan stranger, thank you.
May those who are vulnerable, hungry or homeless, experience support.
May those who are sick, know healing.
May those who are anxious or bereaved, sense comfort.
Bless and guide political leaders and decision-makers, with wisdom.
Bless and guide health workers and key workers, with strength and well-being.
Bless and guide each one of us, as we adapt to a new way of living.
And may the light, shining from our windows,
across road and field, valley and mountain, stream and path,
be reflected in our hearts, and hands, and hopes.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Church of Scotland

Saturday, September 25: Acts 20:28-38

If you had an opportunity to give some final counsel to those closest to you – your family and closest friends – what would you say?

What does Paul say?

You do have the opportunity to share what is most important to you with those you love, right now. You don't need to wait until the end is imminent. It may not always be appropriate or practical to say what you want to say in person. But you could put in writing how much you love those closest to you. You could write down what your faith means to you. You could share the deepest, most meaningful truths in your life with those you love, by putting them into print. Why not take some time to put into words what you want those you love to know?

Or, if you can, actually do express your thoughts verbally.

Let the people you love know your heart for them. And for the Lord. That might be the greatest gift you could ever give.

Almighty God, maker of all good things:
 Father, Lord of all creation,
 in Christ you have shown us the purpose of your providence,
 and call us to be responsible in the world.
 We pray for all the nations ...
 our own country ...
 those in authority ...
 the peace of the world ...
 racial harmony ...
 those who maintain order ...
 Almighty God, we give you thanks for the order of created things,
 the resources of the earth, and the gift of human life ...
 for the continuing work of creation, our share in it,
 and for creative vision and inventive skill ...
 for your faithfulness to us in patience and in love,
 and for every human response of obedience and humble achievement ...
 May we delight in your purpose and work to bring all things to their true end.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Church of Ireland

Sunday, September 26: Ephesians 1:15-23

Last Sunday we read *Seven Things Church Members SHOULD Say to Guests in a Worship Service*:

1. "Thank you for being here."
2. "Let me help you with that."
3. "Please take my seat."
4. "Here is my email address. Please let me know if I can help in any way."
5. "Can I show you where you need to go?"
6. "Let me introduce you to _____."
7. "Would you join us for lunch?"

Thom Rainer also comments on *Ten Things You SHOULD **NEVER** Say to a Guest in a Worship Service*:

1. **"You are sitting in my pew/seat."** This sentence was actually said to me when I was a visiting preacher in a church. The entitled church member did not realize I was preaching that day. I had the carnal joy of watching her turn red when I was introduced. Yes, I did move. She scared me.
2. **"Is your husband/wife with you?"** This question is rightly perceived as, "We really don't want single adults in our church." Members see their church as family friendly as long as "family" meets their definition.
3. **"Are those your children?"** This question is becoming more common with the growth in the adoption of children who are not the same race or ethnicity as their parents. One parent with an adopted child was asked if he got to choose how dark his child would be. I'm serious.
4. **"The service has already begun."** This sentence is rightly understood to mean, "You are late, and you will be disrupting the service." I saw that happen recently. The family left. I was late, too, but I stayed since I was preaching.
5. **"There is not enough room for your family to sit together."** I was visiting a church a few weeks ago that did just the opposite. When larger families came in the service, members actually gave up their seats to accommodate them. Now that's true servanthood. I bragged on the members when I spoke that morning.
6. **"You will need to step over these people to get to your seat."** No. Please request those seated to move to the center. It's a church worship service, not a movie theater.
7. **"That's not the way we do it here."** Of course, you can't have a worship service where any behavior is acceptable. Most of the time, however, the varieties of worship expressions are absolutely fine. I heard from a lay leader recently who witnessed that sentence spoken to a guest

- who raised her hand during the worship music. She never returned. What a surprise.
8. **"You don't look like you are a member here."** Perhaps when this sentence was spoken, the church member meant to convey, "Are you visiting us?" But to the guest it sounded like, "You don't belong at this place."
 9. **"Have you considered attending the church down the street?"** I'm not kidding. Someone shared that comment with me on social media. She was new in town and was visiting churches. She had no idea why the man in the church said that to her, but she never returned to the church.
 10. **"The nursery is real full."** To the young parent, this sentence is interpreted one of two ways: "There is not enough room for your child" or "Your child probably won't get good care."

Has anyone said something similar to you? "Did you forget to shave this morning?" (when I began growing a beard one year). "You look like you've put on weight" (yes, someone said this to me). Maybe they were trying to be funny; they came across as "judgy." If I were not the pastor, I might not have returned.

We are the body of Christ. God calls us to be a welcoming community. An encouraging community. A loving community. May people see Jesus in us as we gather as His people today ...

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

Tracy Macon Sumner

Monday, September 27: Ephesians 1 (a quick review) and Mark 12:28-33

Who am I? To election candidates, I am only a potential vote, on the census I am just a gender/age statistic, to the City I am a source of tax income, to (far too many) telescammers I simply represent a potential dupe, and to the Canada Revenue Agency I am a SIN number (a.k.a. "social insurance number" – I always get a chuckle out of that abbreviation, especially when they audit my charitable donations). But none of these "entities" cares about me as a real person. I am a "thing."

Let's unpack Ephesians 1. Going through the whole chapter, what do we learn about who we are? As you read through these Scriptures, pause, and reflect ... these describe YOU and YOUR relationship with Jesus:

- We are "God's holy people" – "saints" – who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus. (1:1)
- We are "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ." (1:3)
- "God loves us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes." (1:4)
- "God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure." (1:5)
- He has "poured out on us glorious grace." (1:6)
- "He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins." (1:7)
- "He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding." (1:8)

- *"Because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan."* (1:11)
- When we hear and believe *"the truth, the Good News of God saves you."* (1:13)
- *"When you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people."* (1:13-14)
- God can *"give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God."* (1:17)
- God can *"flood your heart with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called – his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance."* (1:17-18)
- There is an *"incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand."* (1:19-20)
- *We are "his body, made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself"* (1:23)

Isn't that incredible? You are much more than a SIN number to the One who matters most – God.

In response, how are we to live as His holy people, His blessed people, His adopted children, His forgiven people, His saved people, His Spirit-filled people, indispensable parts of His body, His church?

"The most important commandment is this," says Jesus, *"Listen, O Israel. The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."* It sounds so simple. But we all know it is very difficult to live out these commands – especially the *"Love your neighbour as yourself"* bit.

"We love each other because he loved us first," writes John (1 John 4:19). May the Lord help us know who we are – God's beloved children. And may the Lord help us to love one another – as God's beloved children.

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

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

Author unknown

Tuesday, September 28: John 13:1-17, 34-35

I am the photographer in our family. I take 99% of the pictures. There are lots of photos of Marianne and the kids and (thankfully) relatively few of me. A few years ago, I "digitized" my older negatives. Up until 2002, all the pictures I took were either colour print films or slides (even a few black and white print films). It has been an interesting trip down memory lane seeing the old photos and scanning in the negatives. One

of the things that comes out when you undertake this kind of project is that things – like clothing styles, hairstyles ... and our physical bodies – change over time. As you look at early pictures of the kids you can see the resemblance to who they are today, but you could never have predicted what handsome men they would become (no paternal bias there at all). As I look at pictures of myself, you can see the resemblance to who I am today, too ... but things have changed.

The church is – you and I – are “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:23). What does that mean?

Think about our bodies. Our bodies are physical things. Our bodies are the first thing people see when they meet us. Although we know we are much more than flesh and blood, like it or not, our bodies are essential parts of who we are. They help define us.

As the body of Christ, the church – you and I – are what people see first when they are looking for Jesus. We are the body, the physical presence, of Jesus to our world. When the world is looking to know who Jesus is and what He is like, they look at you and me. Isn't that scary?

This is why Jesus reminds us of the great commands: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.”* The second is equally important: *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* This is why He sets an example of humble, loving, sacrificial service, tells His people to do as He does, and then gives them another great command: *“Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples”* (John 13:34-35). If we were to follow these three great commands, people would see Jesus, alive and well in us, in 2021. That's the theory.

The reality is none of us can love God completely, none of us can love our neighbour purely, and we struggle genuinely to love one another as Jesus loves us. But we try. And when we fail, we confess our sin to God and to one another. And we try again. And we confess again. And we try again. And again. And again. We never stop trying to be the people God has called and commissioned us to be.

“I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father,” says Jesus. *“If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth ... Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me”* (John 14:12-21). We do our best. The Holy Spirit helps us. He is *“the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him, the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 1:19-20). He is in you.

Ultimately, we are HIS church. We are not “our” church. *“God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And the church is **his** body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself”* (Ephesians 1:22-23). With us, through us, in us – and perhaps even in spite of us – Jesus is building HIS church.

May the Lord help us to be more and more the holy ones He created us to be. May I learn what it is to **love the Lord my God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength**. May I learn what it is to **love my neighbor as myself**. May I learn what it is to **love each other** in the church. Lord help me ...

*We humbly beg you, Lord, for the gifts and for the grace of the Holy Spirit.
Give us more love for you and for our neighbors.
Give us more joy in worship, more peace at all times,
more long-suffering, gentleness, and kindness of heart and manner.
May we know something of what it means to be filled with Holy Spirit.
For the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Wednesday, September 29: 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Unconsciously my brain sends messages to various parts of my body – and things work. My lungs breath and my heart beats, even when I don't think about them (neuroscientists could give us the details). That's how bodies work. Most of the time, anyway. When our bodies work well, life is great. When they don't – when parts of our body don't work or (worse) work against us – we have problem. We need a doctor.

Paul uses the metaphor of the church as "the body of Christ" to help us understand the church (Ephesians 1:23). He elaborates on this more in 1 Corinthians. The body of Christ – the church – in Corinth was having problems. Some of the signals from the brain/head – Jesus – were getting muddled. The believers in Corinth, the body of Christ/the presence of Jesus, were quite literally hearing voices. But the voices weren't from Jesus. And they were causing major health problems. Paul has a doctor-patient talk with them.

They were struggling with the concept of "spiritual gifts" – blessings Jesus gives to different ones of us to be good at certain things (and, by extension, not so good at others). One issue is around speaking in tongues. These were not "known languages" (like Greek or Hebrew), but spiritual languages, inspired by the Spirit. Paul broadens the discussion to help us appreciate God gives a great diversity of gifts to His people. There are many, many gifts but they all came from **one** Lord and are to be used to build **unity** among His people, so the body is healthy. The Corinthians were obsessing about only one gift ... and it was causing division.

12:1-3 emphasize the key purpose of spiritual gifts, including speaking gifts, is to exalt Jesus as Lord. If Jesus is the focus, then people see Jesus in and through us. We are the body of Christ. If people are glorifying God, great. That is as it should be. But if we use gifts to be admired, seek glory for ourselves, cause dis-unity, or disconnect from the world ... then we're not in step with the Holy Spirit. Paul goes on to emphasize that diversity – not uniformity – is essential for a healthy church. If everyone in the church were only speaking in tongues, the church would be dreadfully impoverished and have no mission in the world. The work of the Holy Spirit is much, much bigger than just one gift.

Paul's point is we cannot put God into a box. He is giving examples of **some** of the many gifts God can give His people, but this is not exhaustive. We dare not say, "These are all the spiritual gifts there are." Our God is a very creative; He will always surprise us. Paul's point is that we are all different. But the unique talents, gifts, abilities, interests, skills, education, experiences that God has given us are all good; they are all gifts from Him; and they can all be used to praise Him, to serve others, and to build His church.

What are you good at? What do you enjoy? What interests you? What experiences and education do you have? These are God's gifts to you. Use them for His glory. Yes, God can also give extra special spiritual gifts – perhaps just in a particular situation, perhaps as part of who we are – great. Use them for His glory.

Take the opportunities God gives you to serve – right now, where you are – and pray for the ability to do them well. Do the challenges seem overwhelming? You may discover God gives you all the gifts you need to serve Him, here and now. Do something. Do anything. Be faithful to God, right where you are ...

*We see signs of summer's passing in golden leaves,
shortening days, misty mornings, autumn glow.
We sense its passing in rain that dampens,
winds that chill, Harvest's bounty placed on show.
Creator God, who brings forth both green shoot and hoar frost,
sunrise and sunset,
we bring our thanks for seeds that have grown,
harvests gathered, storehouses filled, mouths fed.
And, as your good earth rests through winter's cold embrace,
we look forward to its re-awakening when kissed by Spring's first touch.
Amen.*

John Birch

Thursday, September 30: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

My Mom, a nurse, often said that she was amazed that any of us is ever healthy because our bodies and natural health systems are so complicated and delicately balanced. Given how some of us treat our bodies (thinking about our diet and exercise [or lack thereof]), it's amazing we're as healthy as we are.

Our church, Paul says, is like a human body. When we think of all the different people involved and all the interconnected relationships/ministries/activities, etc., it may be amazing that our church is relatively healthy, too. Paul reminds us that each one of us is critical to health of the church.

- That ornery person who drives you crazy is an important part of the church ... how do you feel about that? Perhaps we need to see their redeeming qualities? (They're the one teaching us patience!)
- **You** are a vitally important part of the church. Even though you may feel you don't have much to offer, you are essential to the overall health of the body. There are no unimportant people in the church. Perhaps your gift can be as small as coming to worship on a Sunday morning: your presence may be the bit of cheer someone else needs. Perhaps you can call someone: that call may make their day. Perhaps you can pray for/call/visit/email/Facebook someone you haven't see in a while. Perhaps you can volunteer in the nursery, raking leaves, decorating for the Fall ...?
- No one "just comes to church" – we are all "pastors," a team-in-action, not a spectator event. Whether it's involvement in a small group, helping out here and there, calling a shut in, encouraging a visitor before or after a service, praising a child, praying for our staff, or picking up garbage off the lawn, we can all make a meaningful contribution.
- Choosing not to be part of the church hurts the church – we all need one another, including you. We all suffer when people are not actively involved, even if it's only in the smallest of ways.
- Choosing not to be part of the church is bad for you – none of us can be all that God created us to be apart from the larger body of Christ, the church.

There is tremendous diversity in the church. But all this variety is designed to work together to create a dynamic unity and a healthy body. Everyone matters.

In this body analogy, is it possible to be a solitary Christian, apart from a church community? I guess an ear could "exist" apart from a body, but it wouldn't have much of a "life" would it? And somewhere a body would be missing an ear. Whether we like it or not, God expects us to be part of a church community. We need a church. And a church needs us. Bruce Barton writes, *"Believers are in the world together – there is no such thing as private Christianity. When we follow Christ, we find ourselves in mixed company. Christ makes us one, even when we wish otherwise."*

The Holy Spirit builds His church. Our challenge is to take the opportunities He sets before us and serve Him faithfully. He will supply the gifts and resources we need. What is His invitation to you, today?

*May your day be filled with blessings
Like the sun that lights the sky,
And may you always have the courage
To spread your wings and fly!
May the blessings of light be upon you,
Light without and light within,
And in all your comings and goings,
May you ever have a kindly greeting
From them you meet along the road.
May dawn find you awake and alert, with dreams, possibilities, and promises.
May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.
May you go into the night blessed, sheltered, and protected.
May God's Spirit calm, console, and renew you. Amen.*

Gaelic Blessing

Friday, October 1: 1 Corinthians 13

1 Corinthians 13 is probably one of the best-known passages in the Bible. We often read it at weddings and other celebrations of romantic love. But notice the context – it is in the middle of a letter about problems in the body of Christ, a church (if you read all of 1 Corinthians, you would read about people backstabbing their leaders, having serious ethical problems, arguing about what they can/can't eat, having messed up worship services, and obsessing about speaking in tongues. They are not a healthy "body" at all).

To this chaotic, mixed up, dysfunctional, conflicted, fragmented – even heretical – church, Paul talks about Christian love. Thankfully, we're not nearly as troubled as the Corinthians were. But it is good for us to reflect on what Paul is saying to us as a church – and to each of us individually.

In 13:1-3, Paul reminds us we can do all sorts of amazing things. But if they are not done in the spirit of love (defined in 4-7), they don't amount to anything. Remember this is immediately following 1 Corinthians 12, in which Paul has talked about the many different gifts present in a church, and how we are all important parts of Jesus' body, the church. But our attitude, an attitude of love, is essential.

The Corinthians are looking good spiritually – talking out loud in tongues, spouting prophecies, putting on a display of their faith and even of their charity. But it is showmanship. These great looking things are really for their own edification. They are not being done out of love for God or love for anyone else. They are done to impress people. (Do we ever do things "to look good" and forget about God?)

In 13:4-7, Paul defines "love" – the kind of love God has shown to us and the kind of love we are to have for one another: *"Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous. Love is not boastful. Love is not proud. Love is not rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable. Love keeps no record of being wronged. Love does not rejoice about injustice. Love rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up. Love never loses faith. Love is always hopeful. Love endures through every circumstance."* Reflect on each of those phrases. How does this describe God? How can I be more and more like this?

In 13:8-13, Paul tells us things change. We change. The church changes. But if our foundation is love – God's love for us, and a genuine love for our neighbour – we'll be just fine. We know this is true: over time our physical bodies and mental abilities change (sometimes for the better, sometimes not), but if our focus is on loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbour as ourselves, we can always find life full, rich, and meaningful. The older I get, the more I appreciate that relationships – with God, family, and friends – are most important. Focusing on them is what really matters most.

Paul says, *"Three things will last forever – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is **love**."* The story goes that when a famous Swiss Alpine guide died on a mountainside, they wrote on his grave: *"He died climbing."* Wouldn't it be wonderful if, when we pass, they were to write, *"He/she died loving"* – loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. Would they write that epitaph of me?

*Help us to help those who are struggling through this day.
Neighbour, relative, stranger or friend.
Where we see a need, rather than walk away, may we stop awhile.
Share a hand, a listening ear, a smile, a prayer, compassion, love.
Just as you would do.
All I am, and all I have, I offer, Lord, to you.
I offer you these hands, that you might use them in and through my daily work.
I offer you these feet, that you might lead them to someone who needs my help.
I offer you these shoulders if you should them to help lighten another's load.
I offer you this voice that you might use it to speak up for those in need.
All I am, and all I have, I offer, Lord, to you.
Amen.*

John Birch

Saturday, October 2: 1 John 2:1-17

Priorities: what matters most? What matters most **to you?** Good things happen when we get our priorities straight AND act on them. But what are our priorities, really? Do you ever think about it? If someone were to look at your life from the outside and evaluate your priorities based on:

- what you spend your time on.
- what you spend your money on.
- what most influences your decision making.
- What you think about when you lie awake at night.

what conclusion would they come to about what your priorities really are?

John challenges us to think about those priorities:

- What really matters?
 - *That we love one another.*
 - *Love for God: that we know Christ and the Father.*
 - *That our sins have been forgiven through Jesus.*
 - *That, through His power, we win our battle with the evil one.*
 - *That God's word lives in your hearts.*
- What doesn't really matter?
 - Stuff
 - Achievements
 - Pleasure

These are NOT bad. We may give the impression that all things, achievements, and fun are bad. That's not true at all. Many can be very good: it is good to strive to achieve and do what you do exceptionally well. And it is good to enjoy life: God created fun. We can enjoy His good gifts. We can love life.

But we have to be careful that GOOD things don't replace the BEST things in our lives. Things that are good can squeeze out what's really best. It's a matter of balance – making sure our love for God and our neighbour – family, friends, coworkers, neighbours – are always our TOP priorities. When we keep our priorities straight then, paradoxically, we enjoy ourselves, our accomplishments, and our possessions much more. Life becomes more fun as we live for God and as we live in good relationships with others.

We **KNOW** this. Our challenge is to live it. What is Jesus saying to me?

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

John Knox (1513-1572)

Sunday, October 3: Ephesians 2:1-10

We are the body of Christ. Our challenge is to keep reminding ourselves of who we are as parts of His body. We are all important. We are all connected. We all have a role to play.

In Ephesians 2, Paul continues to remind us who we are. We are God's beloved, adopted children – His holy ones – saved by our faith in Jesus – NOT by our good works, or by following rules (like what we eat/don't eat, drink/don't drink, etc.). That's great news. Every other religion or variant of Christianity emphasizes we **earn** our way into God's favour (or to a better incarnation next time round). Jesus alone teaches that salvation is God's free gift to us. We don't deserve it. He just gives it.

However, Christian freedom does not mean "anything goes." The body is not going to look very good to the world – or function in a healthy way – if we all use our freedom in ways that hurt ourselves or others.

I read a story of a psychiatric patient who had destroyed his life exercising his "freedom." Exercising his freedom, he chose to use drugs, abuse alcohol, and get involved in several destructive relationships (for himself and others). A counsellor helped him work through his issues. His big breakthrough came when he said to his counsellor, "**You mean I don't have to do everything I want to do?**"

We can think "freedom" means I can – I must – do everything I want to do. True freedom actually means choosing NOT to listen to every desire, to be a slave to my impulses. My wants may be self-destructive. Robert Farrer Capon writes, "*The reason for not going out and sinning all you like is the same as the reason for not going out and putting your nose in a slicing machine: its dumb, stupid, and no fun. Some individual sins may have pleasure still attached to them because of the residual goodness of the realities they are abusing: adultery can indeed be pleasant and tying one on can amuse. But betrayal, jealousy, love grown cold, and the gray dawn of the morning after are nobody's idea of a good time.*"

True freedom – freedom in Christ – recognizes that what **I want** may not be the best thing for me – or for others. So I freely choose to follow God's commands, to live with the love of Jesus, to listen to the Holy Spirit, to love my neighbour as myself. Christian freedom means I *choose* to do what is best for me and for others ... by opting to live by God's way, His will, and His wisdom. In complete freedom, I choose to be a servant of Jesus. I do "good works" – not because I have to, but because, in freedom, I choose what's best.

May we be the (healthy) body of Christ today ...

*Gentle ... yet powerful.
Lowly ... yet almighty.
Shepherd ... yet King.
In your gentleness, guide us.
In your power, strengthen us.
In your lowliness, strip from us our selfish pride which only destroys us.
In your greatness, lift us up that we might aspire to greater things.
As a shepherd, call us to be your servants.
As a King, call us to be your royal priesthood.
O God, who is our shepherd and our King;
O Christ, who was crucified and is now risen from the dead;
O Spirit, who comforts and empowers;
O great One in Three, Holy Trinity, set us free to worship you.
Amen.*