

The image shows the interior of a church sanctuary. In the foreground, there are rows of wooden pews with blue book holders. The stage area is elevated and features a large, empty white projection screen. Behind the screen is a large, arched window with a cross. To the left of the screen is a green banner with a white symbol, and to the right is a black banner with a colorful circular design. The ceiling is made of wood with recessed lighting. On the left side of the image, there are vertical banners in shades of blue and red.

November 2021

Church 2021

Part 3

**Readings,
Reflections
and Prayers**

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Monday, November 1: 1 John 1 – 1 John 2:2

I am good at seeing other people's problems. I can easily find faults in others. But I really don't appreciate it when other people remind me that I have issues, too ...

Yesterday we read Paul's words, "*I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love*" (Ephesians 4:1-2). How do you feel about that? How good are you at putting those virtues – bring humble, being gentle, being patient – into practice?

Would other people describe you as humble? As gentle? As patient? Able to handle other's faults?

John reminds us why we should remain humble, and gentle, and patient: "*If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth ... If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.*" John lived much of his later life (and, according to tradition, he is buried) in Ephesus. While 1 John is a general letter addressed to no specific church, he undoubtedly had the believers in Ephesus in mind as wrote it.

Honestly, we all have issues. We all need God's grace. We all need His forgiveness. No one is perfect, least of all me. So I do well to stay humble. And I need to be merciful, gracious, gentle, and patient with others.

The good news is this: "*If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness ... if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*"

Isn't that great?

In Proverbs 16:32, the wise teacher comments, "*Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city.*" There is much wisdom here. With whom do I need to more gentle? With whom do I need be patient? How do I need to be more humble today?

*Christ has no body now but mine.
No hands, no feet on earth but mine.
Mine are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.
Mine are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Mine are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Mine are the hands, mine are the feet,
mine are the eyes – I am his body.
Let nothing disturb me.
Let nothing frighten me.
All things are passing away, but God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing, for God alone suffices.
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Tuesday, November 2: 1 John 2:3-14

Have you ever been angry with someone? What did that do to your soul? Your heart? Your spirit? Being upset with someone doesn't actually hurt the person you're annoyed with. But it can do terrible things to your mental, physical, and spiritual health. You lose sleep. You grind your teeth. You get ulcers.

In Ephesians 4:3, Paul writes, "*Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.*" In today's reading, John is helping understand what this means: "*I am not writing a*

new commandment for you; rather it is an old one you have had from the very beginning. This old commandment—to love one another—is the same message you heard before. Yet it is also new. Jesus lived the truth of this commandment, and you also are living it. For the darkness is disappearing, and the true light is already shining.

"If anyone claims, 'I am living in the light,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is still living in darkness. Anyone who loves a fellow believer is living in the light and does not cause others to stumble. But anyone who hates a fellow believer is still living and walking in darkness. Such a person does not know the way to go, having been blinded by the darkness." (1 John 2:7-11).

John helps us see what being united in the Spirit and bound together with peace really looks like:

- we show the same kind of unconditional love that Jesus did (2:9-11).
- We love God, first, with all our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies: *"The world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions."* God offers so much more (2:15-17)
- We hold on to the truth. People will deny Jesus. They will reject our faith. But we need to keep faith and hold firmly to Jesus (2:18-27).

2:12-14 are a wonderful encouragement to us to hang in there.

- your sins have been forgiven through Jesus.
- you know Christ, who existed from the beginning.
- you have won your battle with the evil one (by coming to faith in Jesus).
- you know the Father; you are His child.
- you know Christ, who existed from the beginning.
- God's word lives in your hearts.

Lord, help us to live up to these wonderful promises.

"Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace," says Paul. With whom am I dis-united? What do I need to do about that? With whom am I not at peace? What do I need to do about that?

*You are holy, Lord, the only God, and Your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong. You are great.
You are the Most High. You are Almighty.
You, Holy Father, are King of heaven and earth.
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good, Lord God, living and true.
You are love. You are wisdom.
You are humility. You are endurance.
You are rest. You are peace.
You are joy and gladness.
You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.
You are beauty. You are gentleness.
You are our protector. You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage. You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life,
Great and Wonderful Lord, God Almighty, Merciful Saviour.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Wednesday, November 3: 1 John 2:15-29

A few years ago, I ran across this Romanian proverb: *"The person who chases after two rabbits catches neither."* If your next meal depends on whether you catch a rabbit, chasing two could be a problem.

I find that on any given day I can chase 5, 8, 10 or more rabbits. At work I can be pulled in any number of directions and be interrupted by lots of important things. Then there's housework. Shopping. Meals. Dishes. Laundry. Bills. That's not including time with my wife, my kids, calling Mom, getting together with friends. God??? Oh yeah, He should fit in there somewhere, too. How can I do it all?

I tend to start with the chores – at work I check emails, deal with the adminstrivia, etc. – maybe I get to some people stuff toward the end of the day. At home I do the chores and then, maybe, spend any time and energy left over with people. Time with God? Prayer? Well ... maybe if there's time left over.

With age, however, I am learning that if I start with Jesus, focussing my day on Him – and if, as I go through the day, I continually refocus and ask, *"OK, Jesus, what's next ...?"* – things get done. I spend quality time with Jesus. The people I love. I get my work done. I even get a few chores done. At the end of the day, if the leaves don't get raked or the vacuuming waits an extra day, it just doesn't matter.

One of the things I've noticed Jesus niggling me to do is to write down my big goals – those important things that I never get around to – and prioritize those. Jesus is the master-long-range-planner as well as the master-hour-by-hour-manager. I've found the more I rely on Jesus to guide me in the BIG things, and even in the mundane decisions, the better life tends to go.

Jesus says, *"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."*

"That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life - whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?"

"And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?"

"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need" (Matthew 6:24-33).

Today, ask Jesus, moment-by-moment, *"What next?"* The "what-next" may be as simple as calling an old friend or reading the Bible. It may be a bit bigger – like choosing to make more high-quality time for the people closest to you. Or it may as big as looking at your big-picture goals – to _____ (fill in the blank with what is on your heart) – and starting to work towards them.

*We pray to the God, Creator of all things,
to Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
and to the Spirit, our Comforter.
Please, Lord, be our help and our support.
Free us from our troubles.
Take pity on the lowly.*

... continued

*Raise up those who have fallen.
 Give help to the poor and health to the sick.
 Bring home those who have wandered away.
 Feed the hungry and ransom captives.
 Give strength to the weak and courage to the faint-hearted.
 Forgive us our wickedness and injustice, our sins and our transgressions.
 Do not weigh us down with the burden of our sins, but purify us with your love.
 Direct the paths we take so that we go forward in purity and innocence of heart,
 Lord, let your face shine upon us so that we may peacefully enjoy all good things.
 May your powerful hand preserve us from all wrongdoing.
 Give peace and harmony to us and to all the inhabitants of the Earth.
 You alone can give us these gifts and confer these favours on us.
 We put our trust in you through Jesus Christ, our high priest, the guardian of our souls.
 Amen*

Clement of Rome (died 99 AD)

Thursday, November 4: 1 John 3:1-20

Back in my college/university days, my friend, Doug, had an old Datsun 210. For a church young adult event, we were on a car rally through the streets of Vancouver. Doug was driving, I was navigating (a good task for a geographer). And as we zoomed out SW Marine Drive toward UBC, one of the cylinders in Doug's old car blew. We went from 90 km/h to 20 km/h in 0.3 seconds. The noise was horrendous. And the clanking, sputtering, hissing, wheezing, and gagging from under the hood were horrid. When a car runs well, it purrs along wonderfully. When something major goes wrong ... well ... it's bad.

When the church is running well – when people are humble, gentle, patient, united in the Spirit, bound together by love, living at peace – it's great. It purrs along wonderfully.

John says, *"This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another ... If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life ..."* When a church models God's unconditional love and grace, it's great. Living His love, we are the body of Christ – we model His love to the world. We reach unchurched people. We bless people. We share Jesus with our city.

"But," John adds, *"a person who has no love is still dead ... We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion – how can God's love be in that person? ... Dear children, let's not merely say we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God."*

When we blow a gasket – when we lose our temper with one another, criticize one another, gossip about one another, lie about/to one another, judge one another, fight with one another, send nasty emails to one another (basically when we sin) – we become like Doug's old car – dysfunctional, embarrassing, and useless.

If we want to be a relevant church in our community, we do well to listen to John. In this letter John comes back to the same themes over and over again because they are SO important:

- He talks about the incredible love God has for us again (1 John 3:1-3)
- He talks about the importance of obedience and the reality of sin again (3:4-10).
- He talks a lot about how we should model the same unconditional love Jesus has for us in our relationships with one another – again (3:11-20).

What is God saying to you through these verses?

How can we show our love for one another – and for our community – through our actions? What will that look like in your life, today?

*O God, listen to my prayer, bend your ear to my voice.
 Come, King of Glory, to protect me from all evil.
 You are the King of life and mercy –
 You are the Saviour of all who trust you –
 You are the Spirit of truth and grace –
 more than able to protect me with your power.
 Since I came into the world, I have deserved your wrath.
 Grant me your forgiveness, merciful God of all, God of all grace.
 Anything that is evil in me or may witness against me when I come before you:
 Show it to me; banish it from me; root it out of my heart.
 God, be with me on this your day, Amen.
 To me and with me, on this your day, Amen.
 This day and all days, Amen.*

Gaelic prayer based on 'Achanaich Choitcheann' and 'Dhe bi Maille Ruinn,' *Carmina Gadelica*

Friday, November 5: 1 John 3:21 – 1 John 4:6

I have a passion to see people who do not yet know Jesus get to know Him. That usually begins through conversations, through genuine friendship. It often continues in the context of the church, as our friendship continues. How do we, as a church, welcome people who are not yet part of the Christian community? Here are a couple of my thoughts.

1. ***People who are not-yet-Christians have some rough edges – can we accept that?*** (let's be honest, we all have "issues") The good news of the gospel is that being perfect is not a pre-condition for salvation. We are saved by what God has done for us in Jesus, not by what we've done for God. Can we welcome non-perfect people without judging them? (I hope so ... otherwise I have to leave). It's not complicated: *"We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us"* (1 John 3:23) – the Holy Spirit will then chip away at our rough edges throughout our lives. We begin simply by accepting His loving grace and mercy – and extending that grace and mercy to others. Can we love as unconditionally as Jesus does?
2. ***Can we roll with tough questions?*** A welcoming church needs to be a safe place to ask hard questions, talk about difficult issues, express honest struggles, recognizing that the Bible doesn't give nice, neat answers to every question. *"I like to think that every question has an answer,"* admits Carey Nieuwhof. *"I think one of the reasons unchurched people flee churches is they feel shut down when every question they ask has a snappy or even quick answer. They will find answers, but you need to give them time."* In 1 John 4:1-6, John affirms that we are united by our basic convictions (as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-6: *"there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future; there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all"*). But we can accept lots of discussion – even different opinions – on some of the other things.
3. ***We are honest about our struggles.*** Maybe ***you*** have ***your*** life all together, but ***I*** don't. People appreciate it when we're honest that we're struggling to make it through, figure out life, raise kids, build relationships, balance work-and-the-rest-of-life, care for hurting family members, deal with health issues – just like they are. Our church isn't perfect; we will disappoint people (so will every other church). One of the marks of Christian maturity is that we can be honest about our mistakes, deal with our problems, and still love one another. We love one another. We help one another.

Jesus, in His love and grace, forgives us, restores us, and empowers us by His Spirit. That is good news. *"The One (the Holy Spirit) who lives in you is greater than the one (the spirit of the age) who lives in the world"* says John (1 John 4:4). How does that shape how I live today?

Martin Luther's Morning Prayer:

*My Heavenly Father, I thank You, through Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son,
that You kept me safe from all evil and danger last night.
Save me, I pray, today as well, from every evil and sin,
so that all I do and the way that I live will please you.
I put myself in your care, body and soul and all that I have.
Let Your holy Angels be with me, so that the evil enemy will not gain power over me.
Amen*

Martin Luther's Evening Prayer:

*My Heavenly Father, I thank You, through Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son,
that You have protected me, by Your grace.
Forgive, I pray, all my sins and the evil I have done.
Protect me, by Your grace, tonight.
I put myself in your care, body and soul and all that I have.
Let Your holy angels be with me, so that the evil enemy will not gain power over me.
Amen.*

Saturday, November 6: 1 John 4:7-21 (Time change tonight – Fall back one hour)

I've never been to a perfect church (have you?). Every church – because it is made of real people, like me, who are imperfect – is, by definition, imperfect. Different churches I have been to – and different people I have known – have handled this reality in different ways:

- **Some people pretend they're perfect.** They give off an impression of having it all together. They have answers for everything (usually with a neat "proof text" attached). They convey the message that, if you just became just like them and believe just like them, you'll be perfect, too ... The problem comes when you become just like them and still have problems. How do you handle that? You feel guilt and you struggle trying to hide your issues give off that I-am-perfect vibe. It can be crippling. Sooner or later, the truth comes out ... What happens when people realize you are not so perfect? (Ask some high-profile personalities who have fallen ...)
- **Some people know they aren't perfect, but don't know what to do about it.** In fact, they almost glory in their misery. You come away from talking with the person – or meeting with the church – they're a mess. They need help. They have SO many unsolvable problems. And they really don't want or know how to change. Perhaps there is a great ministry opportunity here, but ... If you are looking for a mentor (or a good inspiring church), they don't have much to offer.
- **Others people recognize they are not yet perfect – and never will be – but they are resolutely working away at the rough edges.** They know they will never be perfect or have everything figured out, but they are moving forward finding constructive and creative new opportunities. They repent. Pick up the pieces. And try again. They love Jesus, yearn to be like Jesus, and continue to try to keep taking two steps forward (even if they take one step backward now and then). Those are the people – and the churches – I find myself attracted to.

"God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them," says John. "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect" (1 John 4:16-17).

Notice how simple – how annoyingly simple – John presents the gospel to be: know God's love, love God, love your neighbour, love one another. It's simple, but it's NOT simplistic. Living this out is one of the most complicated, demanding, overwhelming – and wonderful, exciting, fulfilling – adventures we can possibly take on. I cannot pretend I'm perfect at it. In fact, I won't even say I'm very good at it. Living out these words in 1 John is a moment-by-moment struggle for me.

Read through this passage a few times. It's so basic. But it's so challenging.

At the end of the day, John is wonderfully – frustratingly – practical: *"Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. ... If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers."*

What is God saying to you? How can you practically show love to someone today? Give it your best ...

*All glory to you, Holy Father of Glory, ever-kind, ever-loving, ever-powerful,
because of all the abundance and favour you have given us in our need.
Whatever blessings befall us as your children - in our portion, in our lot, in our path -
we thank you for the gifts of your hand and the blessings of your mouth.
We are sinful, O God, in spirit, in heart, in thought, in word, and in act.
We pray for the power of your love to cleanse us.
Leap over the mountains of our transgressions,
and wash us in the true blood of your forgiveness,
that we may be like the fresh snow on the mountain, like the lily of the lake.*

*In the steep path of our calling – be it easy or uneasy to walk,
be it bright or dark for us to follow – guide us with your strong hand.
Be my shield against the wiles of the deceiver; protect us from his arrows of temptation.
Be our helmet and our buckler so that every secret thought of our minds is holy,
every word of our mouths is pure, and every step we take honours your name.
Be the valiant Shepherd of glory near us:
protect us though dogs and wolves would try to take us from your fold.
Whatever matter, cause, or propensity would bring to us grief, pains, or wounds,
hide it from our eyes and drive it forever from our hearts.*

*Shield and save us from all harm.
Be at the beginning and end of our race.
Give us songs to sing in glory, in peace, in rest, and in reconciliation.
Bring us safely where no tear shall be shed, where death comes no more.
Glory to the Father who created each creature,
Glory to the Son who paid ransom for His people,
Glory to the Holy Spirit, Comforter of might.
Amen*

Gaelic prayer based on 'Athair Naomha na Gloir,' *Carmina Gadelica*

Sunday, November 7: 1 John 5 (Time Change last night – did you “fall back”?)

John comes back, one last time, to his major points. Following Jesus involves:

- *Believing in Jesus as fully God and fully human (5:1, 5)*
- *Loving God AND loving other people as God loves us (5:1)*
- *Obeying His commands (5:2-4)*

Ultimately, we cannot **prove** the existence of God. We cannot rationally convince anyone of the truth of the Christian message. At the end of the day, it is a leap of faith to believe in God (interestingly, it also a leap of faith to believe there is **no** God, the universe is a cosmic accident, and this life is all there is). However, those of us who have taken that leap of faith to trust God do so with good reason AND typically experience a strong spiritual affirmation that the good news is true. While this feeling of support and encouragement by the Spirit is not definitive proof of God's existence, it is a wonderful blessing to those of us who believe.

John goes on to summarize his major points one last time:

- God loves us, gave His Son for us, hears our prayers, and blesses us with eternal life (5:13-15)
- We are to love one another, including helping people through their struggles (5:16-17)
- We are to live in obedience to God's commands (5:18-21)

It is good for us to end with the beginning. Let's reread 1 John 1:1-6: *"We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us.*

"We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

"We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy. This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin."

What is God saying in my heart today? What will I do about it?

*Thank you, Lord, for being there for me
and allowing me to cry out to you in my times of need.
It is amazing to me that the Lord of the Universe
would take time to listen to me and to care about what I say.
God, there are things happening around me right now that I do not understand.
Some of these things make me feel weak, helpless and afraid.
Even in the midst of this, I know that you are the Lord.
I know that the situation is in Your hand, and I trust You.
I beg you for strength and for wisdom that I would be able to endure this situation
and be able to handle it in a way that would bring glory to Your name.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Unknown

Monday, November 8: Revelation 2:1-3

Wouldn't it be great if God said about us: *"I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting."*

Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It can be tough. It can be challenging. It can be a long, hard, endurance-testing trudge through difficult places. But it's worth it.

There is one other reference to the church in Ephesus in the Bible: in Revelation 2, in John's vision of spiritual realms and spiritual warfare, Jesus says these words to the church in Ephesus. There are great things going on in Ephesus that any strong church can emulate:

- ***They work hard.*** They are sharing God's Word – in Word and in deed. People are coming to faith. They care for those in need. God's Kingdom is growing. A great church shares God's good news though people talking about their faith and through providing practical care and compassion. Churches are not just about singing, sermons, Sunday School, and Bible study – they are about changing the world in Jesus' name (services and studies are tools for a bigger task).
- ***They are going through hard times and have suffered much.*** It has not been easy. They

have been attacked (Acts 19), battled evil (Ephesians 6:10-17), and kept the faith. Our hard times may be different, but we can expect times of testing, struggle, discouragement, and frustration. We may not talk about the devil as much as previous generations did, but he's still up to his old tricks, trying to divide and discourage us. We shouldn't be surprised when times get tough.

- ***They have patiently endured.*** It is one thing to plod through struggles with grumbling, whining, and complaining. It's another to endure patiently. Can we see God's hand of grace, strength, and provision through the bad times as well as the good? Can we grow spiritually in tough times, too? The old saying, "*when the going gets tough, the tough get going*" is better understood: "*when the going gets tough, the people of God find strength in Jesus and wisdom in His Spirit.*"
- ***They can discern good from evil. They know the difference between truth and error.*** We know the truth about the essentials of Christian faith (Ephesians 4:1-6). When we "*let the Spirit renew our thoughts and attitudes*" and, "*put on our new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy*" (Ephesians 4:23-24), we live differently. It can be difficult to think through how God's truth applies to some of the situations we face in 2021. Following Jesus means being well-informed, well-formed, and well-transformed to be more and like Jesus.
- ***They have not quit.*** It's a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus. We are called to keep at it, hour-by-hour, day-by-day, year-by-year. "*I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us,*" Paul says (Philippians 3:14). We keep the faith – in good and bad, in sickness and health, for richer and poorer ...

If a televangelist were to say – "*Yes, come to Jesus. You'll have to work hard. You'll have to patiently endure hard times. You'll suffer, but don't quit. You'll work hard to think through the difference between what's right and wrong. You must strive diligently to live by the highest, purest, most demanding ethical standards*" – how many people would respond? But that's what the church in Ephesus is commended for. And that kind of faith can cope with the real challenges of real life.

What struggles do you have? What challenges do you face? Paul prays for you: "*I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your heart as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*" (Ephesians 3:16-19)

*Thank you, Lord, for making all things beautiful in their time,
and for putting eternity into our hearts.
O most high, almighty, good Lord God, creator of the universe,
watch over us and keep us in the light of your presence.
May our praises continually blend with that of all creation,
until we come together to the eternal joys which you promise
in your love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
O God, our Father, we would thank you for all the bright things of life.
Help us to see them, and to count them, and to remember them,
that our lives may flow in ceaseless praise, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*

J.H. Jowett (1841-1923)

Tuesday, November 9: Revelation 2:1-7

Many churches are pretty good at Revelation 2:1-3: they speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15); they endure; they don't quit. Do you know churches like that? Do you know Christians like that? They are BIG on "truth" – at least as they define it – but rather short on the love side of things? "*Yes, but,*" they might bluster in their defense, "*it is loving to blast them with truth. And the Bible says the truth hurts.*" (FYI the Bible says no such thing.)

In my experience, however, some of those really truth-y churches need to hear Revelation 2:4-5: "*You don't love me or each other as you did at first.*" After all, Paul, in Ephesians 4:15, says, "*Speak the truth **in love**, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.*"

Curiously the only people Jesus blasted with "the truth" were Pharisees – very religious people who thought they had the corner on faith, mercilessly judged others, and unlovingly used their "truth" as a weapon of mass destruction. With everyone else – non-Jews, "sinners," outcasts, sick people – Jesus was loving, compassionate, merciful, and gracious. He did speak the truth, but always in sincere and authentic love.

Apparently the church in Ephesus struggled with getting this balance right. They knew the truth. But they were not very loving. Remember that John, who lived much of his later life in Ephesus (and, according to tradition, is buried there), wrote, "*If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers*" (1 John 4:20-21). I wonder if John was directly responding to the attitude of some of the believers in Ephesus.

Love for God and sincere love for one another go hand in hand. If we say we love God – who by His very nature is love – we will love one another: "*God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them*" (1 John 4:16). If we say we genuinely love one another, we will be more and more like Jesus: "*We love each other because he loved us first*" (1 John 4:19). Isn't that annoying? I am fine with loving God – but do I really have to love other believers? Really? The short answer is ... YES.

John writes (probably to people in Ephesus – certainly to us.), "*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us*" (1 John 4:7-12).

Who do you struggle to love? What are you going to do about it? C.S. Lewis advises: "*Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him.*" Try it.

*Glory to you, O God, Creator and Father,
for the universe in which we live,
And for men and women, girls and boys, all made in your image.
Glory to you, O Christ, who took a human body and redeemed our fallen nature.
Glory to you, O Holy Spirit, who made our bodies, the temple of your presence.
Glory to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
whose will it is that we should be made whole in body, mind, and spirit.
Glory to God, to all eternity.
Amen.*

George Appleton (1902-1993)

Wednesday, November 10: 2 John

If you had to write a letter about what was most important in your life, in 250 words or less, what would you say? 250 words may sound like a lot, but try it. It's about one page. It's harder than you think.

2 John is 245 words long (in the original Greek). It is written to a "*chosen lady and her children*" – perhaps an actual lady and her family – more likely this was a code phrase for a church and its members (these were times of intense persecution of Christians, so this kind of coded greeting would avert suspicion from imperial

authorities). This may well be written to the church in Ephesus. Keep in mind that Ephesus was one of the churches John was part of for years and knew well (he is purported to be buried there).

To whomever this letter is written, Paul emphasizes three things:

1. **Know the truth** (verses 1-3). Paul uses the word "truth" four times in verse 1-3. "*We must not only **learn the truth** with our minds, but we must also **love the truth** in our hearts and **live the truth** by our wills. Our total persons must be **yielded to the truth***" (Warren Wiersbe). The truth, as John, defines it, is very simple: Jesus is fully human and fully God; He showed His love for us by dying and rising for us; we have life in Him and through Him by faith in Him; our love for God is shown in our love for one another (see 1 John 4). We love God – and our neighbour as ourselves.
2. **Walk in the truth** (verses 4-6). John emphasizes exactly what Jesus taught: if we love Jesus we will walk in His ways. We will want to honour Him with our lives. That includes figuring out how to "*love one another.*" We speak the truth – ALWAYS in love.
3. **Stay faithful to the truth** (verses 7-11). Be wise. There are people who distort the truth. So we need to be careful
 - a. **not to go backwards and hold onto the past** (v.8) – the message remains unchanging, but we do need to find new ways to communicate to new generations; and
 - b. **not to get all excited about the latest spiritual or church 'fad'** (v.9) – a lot of ideas sound exciting, dynamic, well-intentioned, and neat ... but may be shallow, off-base, or downright wrong. We need to be well-educated, discerning, and wise in the truth.
 - c. **Not to add to the truth with extra rules, regulations, and interpretations** (John was specifically warning about the Gnostics – people who denied Jesus was a real person, and who claimed "secret" knowledge only "true Christians" – them – knew).

How are you doing loving AND living the truth? How can you continue to grow?

Morning Prayer:

*O God, our Father, you make the light to shine out of the darkness.
We thank you for waking us to see the light of this new day.
Help us to waste none of its hours; to soil none of its moments;
To neglect none of its opportunities; to fail none of its duties.
Bring us to the evening undefeated by any temptation, at peace with ourselves,
At peace with our fellow-travellers, and at peace with you. Amen*

Evening Prayer:

*O God, our Father, we thank you for this day that is passing from us now ...
For any glimpse of beauty we have seen;
For any echo of your truth we have heard;
For any kindness we have received;
For any good we have been enabled to do;
And for any temptation which you gave us grace to overcome ...
we thank you, Lord.
We ask forgiveness for anything which has spoiled or marred this day –
For any word which now we wish had never been spoken;
For any deed which now we wish had never been done;
For everything which makes us ashamed when we remember it ...
forgive us, Lord.
Eternal God, who gives us the day for work and the night for rest,
grant us a good night's sleep, and wake us tomorrow,
refreshed and better able to serve you and the people around us.
We ask this, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978), *A Book of Everyday Prayers*

Thursday, November 11: James 3:13-18 (Remembrance Day)

On Remembrance Day, we remember and give thanks for the courage and sacrifice of those who protected and preserved peace and freedom in the past. We remember, give thanks, and pray for those who seek to bring peace and freedom to our world today. We don't need to be reminded we live in a world that's in conflict and desperately needs wisdom – God's wisdom – to deal with its crises.

James, the brother of Jesus and author of this letter, suffered and died for Jesus during intense persecution (he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple by the Jews, then, as he didn't die immediately, he was beaten to death with clubs). He writes: *James 3:13* "If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

"But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness."

- Pray for our Prime Minister, Cabinet, and government leaders that they might have God's wisdom. Pray for global leaders that they might have God's wisdom (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
- Pray for peace in our world.
- Pray for those who, like James, suffer for their faith.

Jesus says to us (Matthew 5:6-10):

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
- *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
- *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*
- *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
- *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
- *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*

We struggle to hear those words in our violent world. But this is the life and the love to which Jesus is calling us: *"You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father"*(Matthew 5:14-16). Lord help me know what this means for my life today ...

*O God, in my deeds, in my words, in my wishes, in my reason,
and in the fulfilling of my desires,
in my sleep, in my dreams, in my repose,
in my thoughts, in my heart, and in soul always,
may your Holy Spirit, the promised Lord of Glory, dwell.
God with me lying down, God with me rising up,
God with me in each ray of light,
There is no ray of joy without You, not one ray of joy without You.
Christ with me sleeping, Christ with me waking, Christ with me watching,
every day and night, each day and night.
God with me protecting, the Lord with me directing, the Spirit with me strengthening,
For ever and for evermore, ever and evermore, Amen.*

Gaelic prayer based on 'Uirnigh' and 'Dia liom a laighe,' *Carmina Gadelica*

Friday, November 12: 3 John

What are the essential qualities of a follower of Jesus? What would you say?

John's third letter – which may, again, be written to people in Ephesus – is about three men:

- **Gaius** (verses 1-8) – faithful to the truth, walking in the truth, hospitable, generous. Gaius is a faithful, godly person who has taken to heart the values Paul writes about in letters like Ephesians. He appears to have a great balance in his life of truth AND love.
- **Diotrephes** (verses 9-11) – self-righteous, proud, a malicious gossip (literally "a person who brings false testimony"), inhospitable, judgmental. He is not a nice guy. Diotrephes probably thinks he is "doing the Lord's work" but his actions prove otherwise (v.11). Does he model truth and/or love? Not much of either. What might a modern-day Diotrephes look like? Someone who is judgmental and self-righteous, who loves to be in command, who won't worship/work well with others, who won't be hospitable or volunteer, who will not let others have their own opinions?
- **Demetrius** (verses 11-14) – "everyone speaks highly of him." John doesn't give us details. What qualities of character do you think he might have? What is a person like who is "well-spoken of by everyone" or of whom "everyone speaks highly"? How is he different from Diotrephes?

Verse 11 is key to this letter: "Remember that those who do good prove that they are God's children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God." Our good deeds do not save us. But if we truly have faith, our faith will be shown in how we live. Our good deeds and the fruit of the Spirit flow from our hearts transformed by the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control). The truth inside us comes out in our lives. We speak the truth in love. We live the truth in love.

Gaius is a great role model to emulate. I wish John were more explicit about why Demetrius has such a great rapport with everyone. Reflect on our readings in 1 John and Ephesians: what qualities of character might he have had? How can I integrate some of those qualities of character into my life?

*Lord of reality, make me real,
not plastic, synthetic, pretend, phony, an actor playing out his part – hypocrite.
I don't want to keep a prayer list – but to pray.
I don't want to agonize to find Your will – but to obey what I already know.
I don't want to argue theories of inspiration – but to submit to Your Word.
I don't want to explain the difference between 'eros' and 'philos' and 'agape' – but to love.
I don't want to sing as if I mean it – I want to mean it.
I don't want to tell it like it is – but to be like You want it.
I don't want to think another needs me – but I need him, else I'm not complete.
I don't want to tell others how to do it – but to do it.
I don't want to have to be always right – but to admit it when I'm wrong.
I don't want to be a census taker – but an obstetrician.
O don't want to be an involved person, a professional – but a friend.
I don't want to be insensitive – but to hurt where other people hurt.
I don't want to say "I know how you feel" –
but to say, "God knows," and "I'll try if you'll be patient with me,"
and meanwhile I'll be quiet.
I don't want to scorn the clichés of others – but to mean everything I say
Including this. Amen*

Joe Bayly (1920-1986)

- There are three different Greek words typically translated into English as "love" – "eros" is passionate/emotional (including sexual) love; "philos" is brotherly/family-type love; "agape" is unconditional, self-sacrificing love.
- Among other challenges, Bayly endured the deaths of three of sons. He wrote several books including *Heaven and Psalms of My Life*. "Christians won't escape the pain and hardship of being human," he wrote. "The difference comes in the way they appropriate God's strength and live His will, even in times of tears and loneliness."

Saturday, November 13: Ephesians 4:11-24

The day before our wedding, my buddies and I went for a drive down the French Shore of Nova Scotia (along the Bay of Fundy). It was a hot day, we were wedged into a small car, we were wearing ratty old t-shirts and shorts, we ate take-out scallops and chips, we went on a couple of beaches, and we got sand through our shoes. I think I got a soaker from a bigger-than-normal wave. When we got back to Digby, we were sweaty, dirty, and smelled like dead fish, seaweed, fried food, salt, and male body odour. Not nice. In fact, downright nasty. Keep that unpleasant image in your mind (and nostrils) – we'll come back to that ...

Paul has a vision for church, as the body of Christ. He hopes we will function as a healthy, strong, fit body: *"When everything is each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"*(4:16). Jesus, the head, can help that happen. He does this through inspiring gifted leaders, teachers, pastors, encouragers, and volunteers who *"equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ"*(4:12).

As we learn and grow – through good teaching, mentoring, studying, praying, etc. – *"we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church"*(4:13-16).

What does Christian maturity look like?

- We are united in faith and knowledge of Jesus – we know Jesus is Saviour and follow Him as our Lord. Jesus unites us.
- We desire to be more and more like Jesus (measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ, growing in every way more like Him).
- We are not influenced by theological or cultural fads that are not biblical.
- We speak the TRUTH about who Jesus is in LOVE. Truth and love are inseparable.

Back to the stinky guys and I ... What would need to happen before Marianne's and my wedding? We would need to shower and change clothes. You'll be glad to know, we did.

In the same way, Paul says, before you knew Jesus, spiritually and morally you were dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting people (he's a bit overstating the case, but ...). Jesus washes us cleaner than all possible cleanness. He forgives us our sins. Spiritually, we are completely forgiven by Jesus. Now, completely washed whiter-than-white by Jesus, we are invited to the wedding – so to speak – to be united with Jesus' people to celebrate and worship our King, Jesus. Jesus has cleansed us and clothed us in pure white.

Biblical maturity includes realizing that, once Jesus has forgiven and cleansed you, you **don't** put on those old stinky, sweaty, ratty clothes again. You don't go back to wallow in the muck of your old life. You choose to live a radically different life, a life shaped by, guided by, and obedient to Jesus.

You put on the brand-new dress/tuxedo of a righteous/holy/pure/redeemed/liberated life in Jesus – and you choose to live up to that high standard. One of the metaphors in Scripture is that of a wedding: Jesus is the groom, we (the church) are the bride (Ephesians 5, Revelation 19). If we think of ourselves as a bride preparing for her wedding to the perfect groom (Jesus), how then should we live?

"Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy"(4:21-24). What is Jesus saying to me? How then should I live?

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
 Help me to pray and concentrate my thoughts on you; I cannot do this alone
 In me there is darkness, but with you there is light.
 I am lonely, but you do not leave me.
 I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help.
 I am restless, but with you there is peace.
 In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience.
 I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me.
 I praise and thank you for all the goodness and faithfulness throughout my life.
 You have granted me many blessings.
 Now let me also accept what is hard from your hand.
 You will lay on me no more than I can bear.
 You make all things work together for good for your children.
 Lord, I hear your call and follow; help me.
 Lord Jesus Christ, You were poor and in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am.
 You abide with me when all men fail me;
 It is your will that I should know you and turn to you.
 I remember in your presence all my loved ones,
 my fellow-prisoners, and all who in this house perform their hard service.
 Lord have mercy.
 Lord, whatever this day may bring,
 Your name be praised.
 Amen.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945, executed at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp)

Sunday, November 14: Ephesians 4:21-32

You're going to a wedding. You got a haircut. You had a shower. You are dressed in your gorgeous dress/snappy suit and best shoes. You look good. Everyone stops to notice. How do you feel? Like a million bucks. It's interesting how the way you groom yourself/dress changes the way you feel about yourself. There is something about having a fresh haircut, just being out of the shower, and being well dressed, that changes your self-image. You feel more self-confident. More self-assured. More human.

Paul says this is what it should be like for us, as people loved by and saved through Jesus. *"Put off your old self which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires,"* Paul says, *"and be made new in the attitude of your minds, putting on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:22-24). Our old torn, stained, stinky clothes (our sin, guilt, shame) are gone – thrown away, burned, destroyed by the gracious, holy love of God in Jesus. Our scrapes, cuts, and bruises have all been cleansed and healed. New life through Jesus makes us totally new people. He gives us brand new, holy, clean, "righteous" clothes (Galatians 3:26-27). We are completely made over. We can be more self-confident and self-assured because, through our new birth in Jesus, we are forgiven, restored, remade people.

When God looks at you, He sees His holy son/daughter, made pure and spotless through Christ. You are more perfectly human than you have ever been before. How does that make you feel?

In Revelation 19:6-8, John describes a great multitude like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: *"Hallelujah. For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb (Jesus) has come, and his bride (His church – us) has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."*

That's the great-big-picture-theology.

But Paul wants the rubber to hit the road in practical action:

- Don't lie or in any other way compromise the truth (4:25)
- Don't be angry or hold onto grudges (4:26)
- Don't take what isn't yours (don't steal) (4:28)
- Work hard – at things that matter (4:28)
- Don't criticize, tear down, or discourage; only say what is helpful for building others up (4:29)
- Don't grieve the Holy Spirit (reject God's love, turn your back on Jesus, refuse His wisdom) (4:30)
- Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, and every form of malice (4:31)

The bottom line? *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"*(4:32).

You are God's beloved daughter/son. How can you live in a holy and righteous way today? Who can you forgive today? How can you be kind and compassionate today?

*Lord God, help us to love those whom we find it difficult to love.
Give us a heart that reaches out to those we would otherwise ignore.
Give us the strength not to cross on the other side of the road,
but to play the part of the Samaritan.
This will not be easy, Lord.
It is not in our nature.
We spread our love thinly among those we can relate to,
those who share our values,
and those who do not threaten our comfortable lifestyle.
It's not easy, Lord, and on our own we shall fail.
But with your help all things are possible.
You led the way, and it is your example that we look to.
You turned the values of this world upside down.
Do the same with us, Lord.
Help us live the reality of your Love.
Amen*

John Birch

Monday, November 15: Ephesians 5:1-20

Back in September, we noted that people who had faith in Jesus in the early church called themselves "followers of the Way" – the Romans invented the term "Christians." "Christian" is a static term – you can believe in Jesus as the Saviour and be "Christian" – but not change anything else in your life (if right belief were enough, the Devil would be a "Christian" – he believes all the right things about Jesus – but he doesn't live out what he knows). "Follower of the Way" is a much more dynamic term – it implies that, every moment of every day, I decide if I will actually do what Jesus would do if He were in my shoes ... or follow another way. The devil certainly is NOT a "follower of the Way"!

"Follow God's example as dearly loved children," Paul urges us, *"and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us ..."* And how did Christ love us? What is the way of love Jesus modelled? *"He gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* Jesus set an example of unconditional, selfless, self-giving, sacrificial love. The Way we are called to follow is a Way that chooses to love God, love other people, and love one another, just as unconditionally, just as selflessly, just as self-givingly, and just as sacrificially.

"Once," Paul says, *"you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise ..."*

Paul goes on to spell this out in very pragmatic, practical terms. On the negative side there are some (pretty common sense) "do not's":

- Do not allow even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity
- Do not be greedy
- Do not talk in obscenities, in foolish ways (gossip, slander, racist or sexist remarks) or coarse joking
- Do not let anyone deceive you with "empty words" (hollow promises or strange ideas)
- Do not have anything to do with "the fruitless deeds of darkness" (anything negative, from lying, cheating, stealing, coveting, bad-mouthing, criticizing, hurting, tearing down ...)
- Do not be foolish (we can think of all sorts of practical examples of this.)
- Do not get drunk on wine,

On the positive side, Paul gives us some great "do's":

- Do find out what pleases the Lord (hint: love Him, love your neighbour, love one another)
- Do make the most of every opportunity (when you have the opportunity to bless/encourage/build up someone – take it.)
- Do be filled with the Spirit: allow God to lead you every step of the Way.
- Do encourage and build one another up in faith with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.
- Do sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,
- Do always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rich Mullins sings, "*Oh God, You are my God, and I will ever praise you. And I will seek You in the morning, and I will learn to walk in Your ways. And step by step You'll lead me, and I will follow You all of my days ...*" ([Watch the video here](#)). May that be your prayer today ...

*I cry tears to you, Lord. Tears because I cannot speak.
Words are lost among my fears, pain, sorrows, losses, hurts – but tears.
You understand my wordless prayer. You hear.
Lord, wipe away my tears. All tears.
Not in distant day, but now. Here.
Lord, my heart fears.
I know you have said, "Fear not," but my heart fears.
Thoughts flash across the track of my mind:
thoughts of evil not good, loss not gain, suffering not joy.
My thoughts are out of control.
They exhume the past, bury the future, make the present a heavy burden.
Lord, I cannot control these fears, these thoughts.
I cannot look at the future with peace.
But I trust you.
These fears run wild, careening thoughts of evil may make it seem that I don't, but I do.
Lord, I do trust you.
Amen.*

Joe Bayly

Tuesday, November 16: Colossians 3:1-11

If you had the choice between getting dressed in old, smelly, unwashed, mucky, tattered, sratchy, flea-infested, cheap, threadbare rags ... or in a brand new, freshly laundered, wonderfully made, high quaiity, incredibly comfortable wardrobe, which would you choose? Just to be ornery and contrary, you may say, "the old rags," but realistically we both know you would choose the new clothes.

In the same way, Paul says, "*Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him*" (Colossians 3:10). In both Ephesians and Colossians, Paul uses the metaphor of getting rid of all that old stuff – that old rude, crude, amoral, immoral, self-centered, self-absorbed life (the old rags) – and instead "*putting on Christ*" (fine, new, clean clothes).

Jesus wants to change us from the inside out – He wants to change His heart through His Spirit – and then empower us to live in holy, right, honourable, godly ways. It's not rocket science, is it?

Writing to another church, Paul puts it this way: *"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. 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. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect"* (Romans 12:1-2). God transforms us, completely, from the heart, through our minds, and into our lives. We are informed, formed, and transformed by His Spirit to be more and more like Jesus.

Pray that God would continue His work of informing, forming, and transforming your life. None of us ever "arrives." We are all life-long learners on this journey. We all make moment-by-moment, day-by-day decisions about which Way we will follow. May God help us choose to follow the Way of Jesus ...

*God was all-complete, all-blessed in Himself,
but it was His will to create a world for His glory.
He is Almighty, and might have done all things Himself,
but it has been His will to bring about His purposes by the beings He has created.
We are all created to His glory – we are created to do His will.
I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created.
Whether I be rich or poor, despised or esteemed by man,
God knows me and calls me by my name.
God has created me to do some work which He has not committed to another.
I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.
Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his.
He has not created me for nothing.
I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.
I shall do good, I shall do His work;
if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling,
I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it.
Therefore I will trust Him.
Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him;
in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him;
if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.
My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us.
He does nothing in vain;
He may prolong my life, He may shorten it;
He knows what He is about.
He may take my friends or throw me among strangers,
He may hide the future from me – still He knows what He is about.
O my God, I give myself to You. I trust You wholly.
You are wiser than I – more loving to me, than I am, myself.
Fulfill Your high purposes in me whatever they be; work in and through me.
I am born to serve You, to be Yours, to be Your instrument.
I ask not to see, I ask not to know – I ask simply to be used.
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Wednesday, November 17: Colossians 3:12-17

I wanted to be angry. When that no-good-so-and-so accused me, saying, "You're not really a Christian, are you?" I was annoyed. It felt good to seethe with rage. I wanted people to see me fume and ask, "Who are

you mad at? What happened?" Then I could tell them about how unfairly that wretch treated me. Honestly, it felt good to be angry. And it would be great therapy to tell the world about it.

But in the long run being upset and telling people all about it, time and time again, wore thin. People got tired of hearing my sob story. They got sick of my self-righteousness. I wasn't acting very Christianly.

What made it worse, the other person didn't seem to notice or care. They went about their lives oblivious to my flustering and blustering. For them, the whole incident was over and done and they had moved on.

Even more seriously, I couldn't sleep at night. I was grinding my teeth. My jaw hurt. I was snapping at my wife and kids. My work suffered. My hiatus hernia started acting up. I was probably getting an ulcer.

When you're feeling angry, it's really annoying to read Colossians 3: *"Clothe yourself with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace."* Really? Really??

I've learned, however, that when I choose to follow the Way of Jesus and live according to Jesus' (and Paul's) wisdom and let my rage go, I am much more content, much more joyful, much more at peace ... I am much more healthy – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Amazingly enough, God knows best. When we do let go of our anger, bitterness, resentment, and grudges, we are so much better off.

Whatever anger you are holding on to, whatever pain you won't let God heal ... let it go. You will be so much healthier in every way. Your family, friendships, church – and everyone else around you – will be blessed too. Choose the Way of Jesus. Choose to let it go. Choose health. Choose life. Choose love.

*Lord, take me from myself and give me to yourself.
O eternal Trinity, my sweet love.
Light of our lives, give me light.
Wisdom of all ages, give me wisdom.
Supreme Strength of all strength, strengthen me.
Today, eternal God, let the clouds covering my heart melt away.
May I perfectly know and follow your Truth in truth, with a free and simple heart.
God, come to my assistance.
Lord, make haste to help me.
Lord, take me from myself and give me to yourself.
Amen.*

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Thursday, November 18: Ephesians 5:21-33

Relationships. Ogden Nash wrote to husbands: *"To keep your marriage brimming with love in the loving cup, when you're wrong admit it. When you're right, shut up."* A friend of mine used to joke, *"Marriage is a great institution – if you want to spend your life in an institution"* (FYI he has been happily "institutionalized" now for 30+ years). We could go on and on with the jokes about marriage, but that isn't helpful. Instead, let's consider what Paul has to say. In Ephesians, Paul writes about "life" – real life in the real world and how that works with our relationship with God. He talks practically about morality and ethics (4:17-5:20). Now he wants us to think about how following Jesus shapes our relationships (5:21-6:9).

Remember these words were originally written to followers of Jesus in Ephesus, a multicultural melting pot, a bustling political, commercial, and religious centre at the crossroads between Europe and Asia. Ephesus is home to the temple of Artemis/Diana, the goddess of fertility (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). It is a world where adult men (who were not slaves) have all rights, privileges, and power. Women, children, and slaves have absolutely no rights at all – they are property not people (just like livestock).

Imagine yourself in the courtyard of a home in Ephesus. People who believe in Jesus – and those wanting to learn more – gather with you to hear a letter from Paul. The first thing you hear is *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (5:21). That gets your attention. "Submitting" is something women, children, and slaves do – on pain of a beating or death – but free men never submit to anyone except Caesar. Paul is crystal clear, though: submit to **one another** ... women, children, slaves ... and husbands, fathers, and masters. This is radical teaching. No one has ever taught this kind of equality before Jesus (and Jesus' followers, like Paul). It will upset the whole social order. In the majority of countries in the world today, women and children still are, at best, second class citizens. Even in Canada, women still fight for equal opportunity and equal pay. Some churches continue to be part of the problem, denying women equality. We still need to hear, *"submit to one another."* Why do we do this? Out of reverence for Christ.

In that courtyard in Ephesus are a husband and wife. The wife has no rights. She might as well be owned by her husband as married to him. Legally she is a non-person. He is free to abuse her verbally or physically. He is free to walk away any time, leaving her destitute. He can have as many mistresses as he wishes, but she dares not be unfaithful to him. She cannot even go out of her own home by herself.

"For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her ..." (5:25-31). Paul gives a lot of instructions to husbands (94 words in Greek compared to 39 to wives). The key metaphor for husbands is the love between Christ and the church. Jesus was born, His whole life lived, His death finally sealed, out of love for us – His church. The gospel is this: God so loved the world that He **gave** His one and only son – Jesus (John 3:16). Jesus loved us – the church – completely, sacrificially, putting our lives and needs before His own, ultimately giving everything He had and was, for us. Christ loved us sacrificially, compassionately, gently, lovingly, faithfully, patiently, long-sufferingly, without condition or compromise: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health ...

This is the same love husbands are to have for their wives. Husbands are to love their wives completely, sacrificially, putting their lives and needs before their own, ultimately giving everything they have and are for their wives. The word Paul uses for "love" (Greek *"agapé"*) means a kind of love that chooses to do what is best for the other person, expecting nothing in return. We can use the word "submission" (in the sense of choosing to do what is best for the other person) as a synonym for this kind of selfless, sacrificial love.

This is inconceivable in the 1st Century. Paul says to husbands: just as Jesus put our interests before His own, you look after your wife's interests first. It's revolutionary now. Society tells us to look after our own interests first. Culture tells us we need to have our needs met. Paul says: Forget your needs, spend your life meeting the other person's needs just as Jesus gave his life to meet yours. The paradox is that when we give ourselves completely to someone else – call it love or submission – we find ourselves. *"He who loses his life,"* Jesus says, *"finds it."* (Luke 9:24). We find ourselves when we give ourselves away to someone else.

"For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (5:22). Paul's words that wives are to submit to their husbands is not surprising in 1st Century Ephesus. But the reason why is. Instead of the reason being "because you are his property" it is **"as to the Lord."** As people loved by God, we choose to love and follow our Lord because we love Him and want to please him. It's our response to God's love. If a husband is living by the Christ-like ideals Paul has just set forth – loving his wife selflessly – He should be worthy of love. So a wife submits to her worthy husband in the same way we submit to Jesus.

We may get a bit squeamish when we read: *"For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church ... as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands ..."* (5:23-24). Christ is the head of the church, but remember, He gave himself completely and sacrificially for the church. So as the "head" of a household, a husband, is called to give himself up, completely and sacrificially, for his wife and family. Headship in the Bible is all about care, NOT control; it is about responsibility, NOT rule; it is about love and submission NOT power and authority. Jill Briscoe writes, *"A man of quality is never threatened by a woman of equality."* I might add, *"A woman of equality need never be threatened by a man of quality."*

This whole discussion of the roles of husbands and wives – headship and mutual submission – is not about power: it is all about love – selfless, sacrificial "agapé" love. It's about choosing the interests of the other person over one's own. It's about finding real self-fulfillment in self-giving. It's equal. It's mutual. Marriage, as Paul sets it out here, is a voluntary choice by both husbands and wives to give up their personal rights and personal power to serve one another. Marriage works when you come to the place where the other's well-being is more important than your own. The ideal only happens when BOTH husbands and wives are committed to the relationship "out of reverence for Christ" (5:21).

Let's be honest. If you are married you know that to submit to one another, to love each other for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, can be very challenging. But don't give up on the ideal. When you fail, admit it. Ask for (and freely give) forgiveness ("A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers" – Ruth Bell Graham). Get up, and try again. It's hard work. But, by God's grace and in His strength, it's more than worth it ...

If you are not married, what does this all mean to you? The principles of selfless, sacrificial "agapé" love are relevant for all good, healthy relationships. How can you live (and love) well today?

Morning Prayer:

*O God, our Father, bless us and keep us through today.
At our work, make us diligent, showing ourselves workmen with no need to be ashamed.
In our pleasure, help us find delight only in such things as bring no regrets to follow.
In our homes, make us kind and considerate, trying to make the work of others easier, not harder.
In our dealings with other people, make us courteous and kind.
In our dealings with ourselves, make us honest to face the truth.
And in every moment of this day, make us always remember that you, God, see us,
and that in you we live and move and have our being.
May we do nothing that brings shame to ourselves, grief to those who love us, or sorrow to you.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Evening Prayer

*O God, our Father, you have asked us to pray for others: we remember tonight those who specially need our prayers.
Bless those who are lonely, and who feel their loneliness worst of all at nighttime.
Bless those who are sad, and who at night feel most the absence of someone whom they loved and lost.
Bless those who are ill and will not sleep this night,
and those who will wake to care for those who suffer.
Bless those who have no home, and no family circle to call their own.
O God, who is present everywhere, bless this, our home.
Help us to remember that Jesus is always our unseen guest.
Help us never to do or say anything which would bring Him sadness.
Keep us this night in the dark hours, and grant us kindly sleep.
Make us feel around us and about us the clasp of your everlasting arms that will never let us go.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978), *A Book of Everyday Prayers*, 26-27

Friday, November 19: Ephesians 5:21, 6:1-4

Yesterday, I asked you to imagine yourself in the courtyard of a home in Ephesus. People who believe in Jesus – and those wanting to learn more – gather with you to hear a letter from Paul. The first thing you hear is "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). "Submitting" is something women, children, and slaves do – on pain of a beating or death – but free men never submit to anyone except Caesar. But Paul is crystal clear: **submit to one another** ... women, children, slaves ... and husbands, fathers, and masters. No one has ever taught this kind of equality before Jesus (and early followers like

Paul). Yesterday we thought a bit about what that means for wives and husbands: we BOTH choose to love one another sacrificially, selflessly, and completely, to bless the other person.

Also in that room in Ephesus are a father and his daughter. The young girl has been brought up to think of herself as his property. She knows she must do everything he tells her to do without question or be brutally punished, even if that involves physical or sexual abuse. She knows he can marry her off to whomever he chooses, he can sell her into slavery, or he can send her into prostitution at the temple. She has no choice.

"Fathers" says Paul, "do not exasperate your children ..." (6:4). Notice, parents have a huge responsibility toward their children. First, Paul presupposes children have value. This is something new (a legacy of Christian values in the West that still doesn't exist in some parts of the world today). Second, Paul emphasizes parents are ultimately responsible for their children's education, particularly in matters of faith. We are to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). Third, we are to do so in a way that does not "exasperate" (NIV) them or "provoke them to anger" (NLT, NKJV). Remember what "exasperated" you as a child? Don't do those sorts of things to your child. – criticism, nagging, abuse of power, ridiculous expectations, etc., etc. Physical and verbal abuse are never acceptable. Love, of parents for children, finds balance between teaching right and wrong and building up the child through love, affirmation and support. Do you encourage and praise much more often than you scold or correct?

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord." Children are encouraged to obey and honour their parents, just as they obey and honour Jesus. It is possible to obey without honour – but Paul says we need both. But notice – if the parent is following Paul instructions to train and teach in a loving way – honour and obedience will normally follow naturally. Children are to obey their parents, but parents ought to be treating their children in such a way that the children will want to obey. The bigger onus is on parents to be "honourable" – honour-worthy – people so children naturally honour them. Being "honourable" parents is essential.

In all our relationships – with kids, parents, friends, coworkers, neighbours – the principles of selfless, sacrificial "agapé" love are relevant. We are called – encouraged – challenged – to love our neighbour and love one another with the same kind of gracious, merciful, sacrificial, patient, long-suffering, forgiving love Jesus shows to us. How can you live (and love) well today?

*God of the moon, God of the sun,
God of the globe, God of the stars,
God of the waters, the land, and the skies,
You are the King of promise, whom I praise.
The star of guidance went up early,
covering Mary fair, who came upon her knee before you.
It was the King of Life who lay upon her lap,
who destroyed darkness and tears,
and illumined the land, illumined the world,
illumined doldrum and current.*

*I come this day to the Father,
I come this day to the Son,
I come to the Holy Spirit powerful;
I come this day with God,
I come this day with Christ,
I come with the Spirit of kindly care ...
God, and Spirit, and Jesus,
From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet;
I come with my reputation and I come with my whole being
To praise you, Jesus. To praise you, Jesus.
Amen*

Gaelic prayer based on 'Dia na gile' and 'Thigheam an diugh,' *Carmina Gadelica*

Saturday, November 20: Ephesians 5:21, 6:5-9

Back in Paul's day, the basic economic structure was one of (very few) wealthy masters and (many, many) slaves with no rights, no protection, and no value except for their labour. Slavery was part of the culture and essential to the economy. Slaves owned nothing – not the clothes they wore, not the sandals on their feet, not even their own lives. They were not people. They were possessions alongside sheep, wagons, or jugs. Slaves were bought, sold, beaten, or even killed at a master's whim.

With you in that courtyard in Ephesus are a wealthy Christian man and his Christian slave.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," Paul writes (5:21). *"Masters,"* says Paul, *"treat your slave the way you want to be treated"* (6:9). That gets peoples' attention. Slaves are people? Really? And they should be treated the way masters would want to be treated themselves? Really?

"Slaves," Paul says, *"obey your earthly masters ... as you would obey Christ."* On the one hand this is nothing new. Slaves had to obey their masters – or be brutally punished. But if masters are obeying their command, slaves will want to obey such a master. If a master were to treat his slave the way he would want to be treated, with dignity and respect – wow. That would be a master you would give your life for. Paul goes on to say, don't obey out of legal obligation, but work as if you were working for Jesus.

Let's bring this up to 2021. Paul has spoken about marriage, about kids-parents, now he is talking about work relationships. And the principles are these:

- If you are an employer or boss, however you want your employee to behave toward you, behave that way toward them. If you want respect, show respect. If you want to receive service, give it. If you want to be loved, love. *"Do not threaten them."* Threats can be weapons in relationships when we have the power – don't abuse your power. Ultimately, both master and slave (or supervisor/boss and employee) are in the same position before God ... One day bosses will have to answer to their Master for how they loved (in that selfless, sacrificial *"agapé"* love sense) those who work for them.
- As an employee, don't just do the bare minimum you need to do when the boss is watching: work with integrity and energy all the time. Whatever our field, our work can be an offering to God. Our work, no matter how menial, can be a holy offering to God, when we work at it for Him. But when we work in a substandard, slipshod, unethical manner, we lose credibility with our colleagues and shame God. How about your work? Do you work at it as for God?

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," says Paul. What does that mean for you, today? How can you live (and love) well today?

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we your unworthy servants give you most humble and hearty thanks
for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all people;
We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And we beseech you, give us that due sense of all your mercies,
that our hearts may be sincerely thankful,
and that we show forth your praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service,
and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory,
world without end.
Amen.*

Anglican Prayer of Thanksgiving

Sunday, November 21: 1 Corinthians 13

How do we express this kind of mutual love and submission, we have been thinking about, in practical ways? One intriguing theory is that we don't all "feel" love through the same means or in the same way. Some of us really appreciate words of affirmation (people telling us verbally they appreciate us), others need quality time (you don't have to say anything, but spend time with me), others value gifts (a thoughtful token of appreciation), others like acts of service (do something nice to help me out and I'll light right up), and still others really value physical touch (an appropriate pat on the back, fist bump, or hug).

This is true in marriages, relationships with kids/parents, with colleagues in the workplace, or with good friends. Over the next five days we'll think about each of these "love languages." Today we're thinking about **words of affirmation**.

1 Corinthians 13 is very familiar, of course (we read it back in September). While we often read it at weddings, it is not really about romantic love. It's about the love that ought to exist in a church community (check out the context: 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 are all about relationships in the whole church). This is the kind of love that ought to characterize our friendships, workplaces, families, with singles, and in marriages.

How does this love get expressed? Much of it is through actions – the way we treat people. But sometimes you must verbally – out loud – tell people we appreciate them. People don't always know they are valued by osmosis. Sometimes just doing the best things isn't enough. Some people really, really need to hear us say that we appreciate them (or love them) out loud. Or words of appreciation are important.

One of the ways God lets us know His love is through words – Scripture, for instance. Our knowledge of God's love would be so much poorer without His Word. How can you express your love to God through words: through prayer, through writing a journal, or even through a letter to Him?

If you know someone you know (or think) might really value words of appreciation, try to say (or write – or both) every day, "*I really appreciate you*" (or, if appropriate, "*I really love you*"). Every day try to give one sincere compliment. Look for their strengths and tell them how much you appreciate those qualities. Note that "words of ENCOURAGEMENT" do NOT include words of DISCOURAGEMENT. Discipline yourself to give NO negative feedback for a week, a month, a year – or forever. People need your affirmation – they get enough criticism. We all get enough flak already. We get relatively little sincere encouragement.

Even more broadly, write a note of appreciation to someone you may not know well, but whom you really appreciate. When someone in a store or restaurant does something nice for you, give them a sincere verbal compliment (even better, say it in front of their boss.). If someone at church does something well, say something encouraging (even better, in front of their friends, parent, or spouse).

Our prayer is an old Irish prayer of commitment to God, *Rop tú mo Baile*, attributed to Dallán Forgaill (530–598). There are several English translations of it, the most popular being this one, by Eleanor Hull:

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else naught to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.*

*Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
Be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
Be thou my great Father, and I thy true son;
Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.*

*Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;*

*Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.*

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise:
Be thou mine inheritance now and always;
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart;
O Sovereign of Heaven, my treasure thou art.*

*High King of Heaven, thou Heaven's bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won.;
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.
Amen.*

Monday, November 22: Mark 6:30-34

When was the last time you really spent **quality time** with a close friend? a colleague? someone from the church? your child? your parent? your spouse?

Jesus wanted to spend time with His disciples. Unfortunately, life was always busy. And yet, although He spent lots of time teaching and caring for the crowds, He prioritized time with His closest companions, too.

For some of us, words are not enough. We need time – real quality time. People can say "we really appreciate you" or "we love you" all they want, but unless they are willing to set aside some time – prime time – for us and really focus on communicating with us, we just don't get it. For us, quality time is critical.

Showing people our appreciation/love through quality time means giving them the best time of the day – when we're alert, energetic, and pleasant – not the leftovers when we're too tired, distracted, and stressed to really focus. Too often we give 99.9% of our energy to work/school/whatever and, when we do spend time with the people we really value, we are present in body, but not in heart, and certainly not in mind.

Communicating our care through quality time means listening at least as much as talking – or even more. Many of us are much more comfortable talking about *our* day and *our* lives ... and we forget to ask, first of all, how the other person is doing. Or if we do ask, we constantly interrupt with how our day was tougher. Or we offer advice. Or we try to solve their problems. Most likely our friend/child/spouse/parent just needs us to listen. And not talk. And not try to fix things. Can you do that? Can you just listen?

God would LOVE to spend quality time with you – through reading, prayer, and meditation ... How can you spend some quality time with Jesus?

Of course, spending quality time – whether it be with a person or with God – also means NOT answering the cellphone, not texting, not surfing the web, not watching TV, not reading, not ____ (add your favourite distractions here). There is nothing that makes a person feel worse than when they think you are having a genuine conversation with you, but you are really distracted by someone else. Quality time means focussing on the person you are with – and **only** on the person you are with. Turn off the phone. Turn off the TV. Face one another. And listen. And focus. And care.

Try it. Try setting aside some focussed, single-purpose, high-quality time for a friend, family member, or colleague. Really hear them – listen. Really get to know them. Don't keep checking your watch. Don't read the text.

Really communicate how much you care by giving them the gift of your undivided, uninterrupted time ...

*Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you raise me up from last night, to the gladsome light of this day,
 to win everlasting life for my soul, through your blood shed for me.
 Praise be to you, O God, for ever, for the blessings you give me:
 My food, my speech, my work, my health ...
 And I pray, today, that you would
 shield me from sin, and guard me from ill.
 God guide me with Your wisdom.
 God chastise me with Your justice.
 God help me with Your mercy.
 God protect me with Your strength.
 God fill me with Your fullness,
 God shield me with Your shade,
 God fill me with Your grace,
 Give me wisdom along with your grace.
 Protect me on sea and on land.
 Lead me on from step to step, to the peace of the Everlasting City.
 For the sake of Your Anointed Son, Jesus Christ of the seed of David,
 Visiting One of the Temple,
 Sacrificial Lamb of the Garden, who died for me.
 Amen.*

Gaelic prayer based on 'Urnuigh Maduinn' and 'Dhe stuir mi,' *Carmina Gadelica*

Tuesday, November 23: 1 Samuel 18:1-4

I have chronic pain – kind of like a wasp sting – on the left side of my face. It is there 24/7/365¼. When the pain first began about 25 years ago, doctors tried a variety of medications. Many had nasty side effects – I was nauseous, dizzy, or foggy-headed. Some days I couldn't get out of bed. It took over two years of stress, worry, and nasty side-effects to get a diagnosis (atypical facial pain) and find a medication that controls (though it doesn't eliminate) the pain, with minimal side-effects.

I remember some days, when I couldn't even get out of bed, one of our (then preschool) sons would make little Lego creations, sneak into the bedroom, and put them beside the bed. These little Lego gifts were his way of letting me know he loved me, expressing his love and concern.

For some people **gifts** – whether they be Lego, chocolates, gift cards, flowers, whatever – are how they experience appreciation. Words are not that important. Time is not too critical. But a "Thank You" note, a small gift card, a handmade token of gratitude, a book, a gift-to-a-charity in the honour of a person – that matters. Gifts don't have to be big or expensive – they can be as simple as a tiny Lego person.

Jonathan chose to give David his robe, tunic, sword, bow, and belt. That's a bit more extravagant.

What are the "gifts" God has given us? Of course, there are "spiritual gifts" (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4) – God given talents, abilities, and skills. Much more importantly He has given us the gift of Himself – Jesus – and all the blessings that come through Him. Spend some time reflecting on the amazing blessings we receive through our relationship with Jesus.

What gifts can you offer to Jesus? Time? Skills? Energy? Resources? Caring for other people? Caring for His creation?

Do you know someone who is a "gift person" – either in your family, a friend, a colleague, or someone at church? How can you encourage them and show them you appreciate them?

Think about ... writing a card ... making something (aren't handmade things that much more special?) ...

giving a gift card ... tickets to a play or concert ... a gift to a charity in their name ...

It truly is more blessed to give than to receive ...

Morning Prayer

*O God, our Father, who asks us to live in harmony with one another,
keep us today from everything which would make us difficult to live with.
Help us never to speak thoughtlessly or deliberately in such a way
that we would hurt another's feelings or wound another's heart.
Keep us from all impatience, from all irritability,
and from a temper which is too quick.
Keep us from eyes which are focussed to find fault
and from a tongue which is tuned to criticize.
Keep us from being touchy and quick to take offence,
and slow to forget it.
Help us not to be stubborn or obstinate.
Keep us from the selfishness which can see nothing but its own point of view,
and which wants nothing but its own way.
We pray that you would grant us this day something of the grace and beauty
which shone upon our blessed Lord.
Hear this prayer, for the sake of Your love and glory,
Amen.*

Evening Prayer

*Eternal God, forgive us for those things we did not do today ...
Forgive us any word of comfort, praise, or thanks that we might have spoken and did not speak.
Forgive us for any help we might have given someone in need, and did not give.
Forgive us if we made things more difficult for anyone today.
Forgive us if we have set a bad example, by word or deed,
and made it easier for someone to go wrong.
Forgive us if we have been disloyal to any friend
or have hurt the hearts of those whom we ought to cherish.
Grant us the gift of sleep tonight.
And grant us grace that we may walk closer to you tomorrow.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978), *A Book of Everyday Prayers*, 28-29

Wednesday, November 24: 1 Samuel 20

The text message read: "*Anything I or we can help with? Anything anytime please know that.*" Some people say words or send text messages like that and you think to yourself, "*Yeah, right. Sounds great, but they're just empty words ...*" In this case, however, I know the person who sent me that text. He was very, very sincere. He's a great friend to have.

Actress Marlene Dietrich once said, "*It's the friends you can call up at 4 a.m. that matter.*" It's true, isn't it? Do you have any 4 a.m. friends? I hope you do.

For some of us, we don't need to hear words of appreciation, we don't need you to spend a lot of quality time with us, we don't need gifts, but if you can help us out now and then, we sure love it. That's how we feel appreciated/loved – through **acts of service**.

The great friendship between David and Jonathan was clouded by Jonathan's father, King Saul – a person whom today we would consider mentally ill. Saul alternated between loving David as a second son and trying to murder him. Jonathan shows his true friendship for David by risking his life to save David's.

Jesus, as He anticipates His own death on the cross, says to His disciples, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). That is exactly what Jesus – God Himself – does for us. He willingly gives up His own life so that we can have new life – eternal life – through His death and resurrection.

But notice the larger context of Jesus' words: "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow. This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. **There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.** You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:91-17).

Jesus links His great act of service for us – laying down His life for us – with our acts of service/love for one another. We are to love each other in the same way He loved us.

Who can you serve in some way? What act of kindness/service can you do for a friend, family member, or colleague? How can you encourage someone by doing something nice for them?

*Teach me, my Lord, to be sweet and gentle in all the events of my life,
in disappointments, in the thoughtlessness of others,
in the insincerity of those I trusted,
in the unfaithfulness of those on whom I relied.
Let me forget myself so that I may enjoy the happiness of others.
Take away my little pains and heartaches so that I may not burden others with them.
Teach me to profit by the suffering that comes across my path.
Let me so use it that it may mellow me, not harden or embitter me;
that it may make me patient, not irritable;
that it may make me broad in my forgiveness,
not narrow or proud or overbearing.
May no one be less good for having come within my influence;
no one less pure, less true, less kind, less noble,
for having been a fellow traveler with me on our journey towards eternal life.
As I meet with one cross after another,
let me whisper a word of love to You.
May my life be lived in your Spirit, full of power for good,
and strong in its purpose of living for You.
Amen*

Anonymous

Thursday, November 25: Luke 5:12-14

Some people are huggers. Some people are not. "Hug-gy" people may not care if you say anything, give anything, do anything, or spend any time with them – but when they see you, you'd better give them a BIG hug. That kind of (healthy and appropriate) physical touch is what expresses appreciation and love for them. **Physical touch** is one of those love languages that, of course, can be rather problematic in our contemporary culture (both given appropriate boundaries AND Covid). But if we can get it right, it can genuinely convey honest care for some people in ways nothing else can.

As you read today's short passage, it's important to know that in Jesus' culture, no one would ever touch a leper. To do so would make you "unclean" according to the Jewish law – you would have to quarantine yourself. And you might even catch the disease (it was believed to be highly contagious – it's not). So for

Jesus to reach out and **touch** this man – a person who would not have been touched by another human being for years – was a huge act of kindness, mercy, and love.

Imagine if everyone avoided you – being around you, talking to you, touching anything you had touched. No one would EVER touch you. How would you feel? (We have a popular expression, "They treated him like a leper" for a reason). Now imagine someone reached out and touched you? How would you feel?

Although Jesus cannot physically reach out and touch us, when we feel Him at work in our lives – whether it's a profound sense of His presence, a warm glow from His Spirit, His love through the touch of a friend, His healing, His forgiveness – He is tangibly touching our lives. How do you "feel" God? Rejoice in that.

And, when it is appropriate, share physical touch with a person who needs it: it may be as simple as a pat on the back, a quick handshake, a high five, or a fist bump. In times of crisis (or in an appropriate relationship) it may be a hug. In our culture this can be a bit tricky – we are (legitimately) concerned that touch is not perceived as sexual harassment or abuse. Our challenge is not to abandon all APPROPRIATE touch. When used wisely and appropriately, in a trusting and trusted relationship, touch can convey genuine appreciation, care, and concern – ALWAYS ask permission, first. Never assume.

To whom can you express your appreciation in an appropriate way? Even if it's as simple as a high five or a fist bump show your appreciation to a person who really seems to value that kind of encouragement ...

*Lord, you are a forgiving God.
So I come today asking for your forgiveness.
Father, my desire is to do your will, to be more like you,
and to please you in every way.
I know that it is your desire that I be holy as you are holy.
So Father I ask that you would wash me and cleanse me of all unrighteousness.
Forgive me for using my words as weapons instead of for encouragement.
Forgive me for any thoughts that caused you shame.
Forgive me if I repaid evil for evil instead of doing good.
Search my heart oh God,
and reveal to me anything that is not pleasing to you.
(Take a moment right here and listen to what God reveals to you.
If God brings any sin to your mind include it in your prayer)
Thank you, Father, for forgiving me, for washing and cleansing me.
Thank you for loving me even when I fall short of your glory.
Thank you, Lord, that you keep no record of my wrong.
Thank you that I am a new creature through Christ Jesus.
I love you Father and I know that you love me.
I will bless your name forever more,
Amen.*

Anonymous

Friday, November 26: Ephesians 6:10-17

We live in a hyper-individualized world. It's *me*-against-the-world. *I* have figure out *my* life for *myself*. *I* need to pull *myself* up by *my* own bootstraps. The most important person in *my* life is Number One – *me*. *I* am really only responsible for one person – *me*. What matters is that *I* become the best *I* can be. At the end of the day, if *I* have the most toys, *I* win.

Spiritually we tend to think in very individual terms, too. Jesus loves *me* (which is true). *I* need to make a personal commitment to Jesus (which is true). *I* need to keep growing spiritually (which is true). In the spiritual battle against the forces of evil (which Paul talks about in Ephesians 6), *I* need to stand firm in *my* faith in Jesus and resist temptation (which is true). BUT, Ephesians 6 is all written in the **plural**. Paul writes these words to the whole church – everybody – in Ephesus. He does not have in mind the image of a

lonely, solitary person standing against the powers of darkness: Paul sees ***us all standing together*** as an army of God's people, shoulder to shoulder, side by side. ***We*** are in this together. ***We*** are not alone.

The motto of the Three Musketeers was "*All for one and one for all*" – that's what the church is like. We are all in this together. We support one another, encourage one another, help one another, care for one another, carry one another's burdens – we are brothers- and sisters-in-arms against the powers of evil.

Remember Paul is writing this during the height of the Roman Empire's power. He is actually writing from Rome itself (albeit in prison). He knows about the power of a Roman legion: well-armed, well-trained, well-disciplined soldiers, all in a tight formation, covering one another's flanks and backs, were unstoppable. A solitary Roman soldier was easy pickings for the enemy. But a legion was both resistant to attack and irresistible in advance. That is Paul's vision for the church. Lone Ranger Christians can wander away or get sidetracked into weird places. In a church we are strengthened, encouraged, and safe. We're unstoppable.

Together, we put on every piece of God's armor so you we will be able to resist the enemy ...

- Together we stand our ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness.
- Together we put on boots, the peace that comes from the Good News so that we will be fully prepared.
- Together we hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil.
- Together we put on salvation as our helmet,
- Together we take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

You are not in this alone. We – your friends, family, and fellow followers of Jesus – are with you. Always.

When do you feel all alone in the world? How do you handle that? Reach out to the people around you. They will be there for you. You need them – and they need you. They can help you overcome ...

Who do you know who may feel like it's them against the world? Reach out to them. Encourage them. Support them. Walk with them. ***Together*** we can win the battle ...

*Oh Lord, I am so tired.
It seems like the lists of to-do's get longer each day,
the frenzy in my home each night gets wilder.
It seems like the holidays have barely started
and already I am behind.
Help me, dear Jesus.
Let me feel your loving arms
wrap me tightly in the warm embrace of your endless love.
Teach me to make choices about my time,
to remember what is important this season
and to say "NO" whenever my "YES" would take me away from your peace.
Fill me with patience, love and a sense of humor.
Remind me of your deep love for me
and let the fire of that love be something I can share with everyone around me.
Amen.*

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Saturday, November 27: Ephesians 6:18-24

This is going to sound heretical ... but let's be honest: do you ever wonder if prayer is worth it? Do you ever wonder why we pray? It's not like God needs to know what's on our hearts – He already knows. Do you ever feel like, when you pray, the words/thoughts just bounce back from the ceiling? Someone once commented that most sermons are simply exhortations to read the Bible more and pray more ... but many of

us feel guilty because we don't do either enough. And when we do, neither really seems to do a lot of good. Do you ever feel that way? Here's the good news, if you do feel like that, you're not alone.

Of course, someone may say, "*Don't you know the Bible says, 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of ... ?'*" The problem is that's not actually a Bible verse. It was written in the late 1800s by the British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Tennyson's words may well be true, but they are not from the Bible.

Paul, however, does seem to believe that prayer really is important. But his approach to prayer may be a bit different than we have been taught. We have often been told: "*Take 20 minutes (or an hour or two or three) and talk at God.*" Many of us find that really, really difficult. And even if we are disciplined enough to do that, the other 21-23.67 hours of the day we get on with our lives and never give God a second thought.

Paul says, "*Pray in the Spirit **at all times and on every occasion.***" He goes on to say, "*be **persistent** in your prayers for all believers everywhere ... And pray for me, too ...*" For Paul, prayer is less about taking a special dedicated time for prayer (although that is very good) than living a life in which prayer is an integrated part, 24/7/365¼. What does that mean? What does that look like?

It means that as you go through life, briefly talk with God about every decision you make, at the time. When you face a challenging task, pray about it – right then. When a person comes to mind, pray for them at that moment. When a concern comes up – pray for it there and then. When we do this, we recognize that God is actually with us every moment of every day. He never leaves us even if we may forget about Him or ignore Him. And when we do this, we invite Him to give us direction and wisdom in each aspect of our lives. We become much more holistic people – our faith is essential and integrated into everything in our lives – when we remember to speak with God through the big – and the trivial – issues of our lives, as they arise.

Prayer is not just speaking **at** God – listing all our concerns and issues. Prayer is as much listening **to** God. I have tried to discipline myself to ask God every morning, "*Who can I encourage today?*" And do you know what? When I pray that prayer inevitably a person comes to mind.

Does God answer prayer? Without fail He seems to answer **that** prayer. If you are struggling with prayer, try praying for others. Try praying, "*Who can I encourage today?*" When a person comes to mind ... do it. Maybe it is when we pray for others that God answers most clearly. Yes, more things can be wrought by prayer than this world dreams of – as we pray ... and then encourage one another.

*I sit here with my list, Lord, and I know I need help finding a balance.
Lord, there is SO much to do. When will it all get done?
How will I maintain any semblance of inner peace in this "peaceful" season?
I think, Lord, that I need some balance in my life.
I feel so torn between wanting to cook
and fill my house with wonderful welcoming smells,
and wanting to finish decorating the house.
I have shopping to do, the house to clean and cards to write and mail.
When? How? Help me, guide me, Lord.
Help me to set priorities around doing those things that will bring me closer to you.
Maybe my house really is clean enough.
Can the cards wait until a quiet afternoon after Christmas?
Can my house decorations be simpler?
Is there more than a little ego involved
when I want so desperately to have my house "magazine perfect" for the holidays?
Help me rediscover the joy of simplicity, Lord.
Help me to remember what I am celebrating.
Help me to find it in my heart to call out, "Come, Lord Jesus."
Amen*

Sunday, November 28: Psalm 45 (1st Sunday in Advent)

In traditional wedding vows, I ask the groom (and then the bride, changing the words as appropriate), *"Do you come today to take this woman to be your wife, to live together following God's law, in the holy estate of marriage? Do you promise, with God's help and to the best of your ability, to love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her through all the circumstances of life, and forsaking all others, keep only to her as long as you both shall live? Please answer, 'I do.'"* Hopefully he (and she) says "I do."

Then, in the "repeat-after-me" part, the groom says to the bride (and the bride says to the groom, changing words as appropriate): *"In the presence of God, and before these witnesses, I ____, take you, ____, to be my wife/husband: to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow. I promise to love you and cherish you and to be faithful to you alone, as long as we both shall live."* Think about the commitment made in those few words. Wow.

At face value, Psalm 45 is about a royal wedding. It celebrates the union of a man and woman, as husband and wife, in the Lord. But there is a much deeper meaning, too. The New Testament writers use the wedding image to describe Jesus (the groom) and the church (the bride), including in Ephesians 5:23-33 (see also 2 Corinthians 11:2, Revelation 19:1-8, Revelation 21, and Revelation 22:17). Paul, John and the others used phrases from Psalm 45 as they described the coming of Jesus. The description of the King (45:2-9) is reminiscent of some of Isaiah's descriptions of the coming Messiah.

Speaking about the bride, Derek Kidner writes, *"A royal wedding emphasizes with special clarity the parting and new beginning which are fundamental to all marriages. Here the brunt of it falls on the bride, as a king's daughter, whose old loyalties must not compete with the new."* It's interesting to think about this in terms of us – the church – and our relationship with Jesus.

Reread the vows above in terms of our relationship with Jesus. Certainly, these amazing commitments describe His unconditional love for you and I as individuals, and for us as a church corporately. How well do they describe **my** commitment to Jesus? Hmmm ...

To follow Jesus – to be united with Jesus – we put away our old loyalties and make a completely new start in Christ. Jesus refers to this as being "born again" (John 3:1-18). Paul describes it as dying to our old selves and rising to new, resurrected lives with Jesus. It is interesting to think about Christian discipleship – living as a Christian – in terms of being as faithful to Jesus in all things as we would expect a great spouse to be faithful to their spouse in all things. Have you thought of your loyalty to Jesus in those terms?

What would it be like to use this kind of wedding language at a baptism? Or when a person publicly professes their faith? Or as a rededication of our own lives to Jesus? As we prepare for Advent and Christmas, how can we remain faithful to Jesus? It is so easy to divide our loyalties – there is so much temptation to get caught up in the materialism, glitz, and sentiment of the moment ... and forget about what life (and Christmas) is really all about. How can you keep Jesus at the centre of Christmas this year?

Can you promise to love Him, honor Him, and keep with Him through all the circumstances of life, and forsaking all others, keep only to Him as long as you shall live (and beyond...)?

Will you take Jesus to be your Lord: to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow?

Will you promise to love Him and cherish Him and to be faithful to Him alone?

You will not be perfect ... but, with God's help and to the best of your ability, will you try?

*My brother, Jesus, it happens every year.
I think that this will be the year that I have a reflective Advent.
I look forward to Sunday and this new season, Jesus.
But all around me are the signs rushing me to Christmas
and some kind of celebration that equates spending with love.*

*I need your help.
I want to slow my world down.
This year, more than ever, I need Advent,
these weeks of reflection and longing for hope in the darkness.
Jesus, this year, help me to have that longing.
Help me to feel it in my heart
and be aware of the hunger and thirst in my own soul.
Deep down, I know there is something missing in my life,
but I can't quite reach for it.
I can't get what is missing.
I know it is about you, Jesus.
You are not missing from my life,
but I might be missing the awareness of all of the places you are present there.*

*Be with me, my dear friend.
Guide me in these weeks to what you want to show me this Advent.
Help me to be vulnerable enough to ask you to lead me to the place of my own weakness,
the very place where I will find you the most deeply embedded in my heart,
loving me without limits.
Amen.*

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