



January 2022

**Real Faith
Real Life
1 Corinthians, Part 1**

**Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers**

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Monday, January 3: Acts 16:1-10 and Isaiah 6:1-8

Today through Easter, we will be focusing on Paul's first letter to Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians). It's a letter about how followers of Jesus – people like us – live our faith in the real world. It's about how we live our faith in Jesus' church; this can be challenging, too. Along the way, we'll read familiar texts (like 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's great celebration of Christian love), and some not-so-familiar passages.

To set the stage, we are going back a few weeks before Paul gets to Corinth. He's in the Roman province of Asia, what we now know as Turkey. He has had a wonderful time leading people to faith, planting churches, and encouraging believers. Among the people who have come to faith in Jesus during his travels have been several non-Jewish people, Romans and Greeks. However, much of his work has still been among Jewish-background people.

Now that is all about to change. Paul is being called by God to move into Europe. This is the first time a Christian leader has left the Middle East and Turkey. He will be moving into territory where there are some Jewish people, but far fewer. He will be, first and foremost, sharing the Good News with "Gentiles" – non-Jewish people, like Greeks, Romans, and other people from other European backgrounds.

This is going to be challenging. Jewish people knew all about the long-awaited Messiah. Paul could draw on their heritage and expectations to prove to them that Jesus was the Saviour for whom they were waiting. However, Greeks, Romans, and other Europeans had none of this background. They had no knowledge of or interest in a Jewish Messiah. They had no desire for a Jewish Lord. Paul is going to have to find new ways to communicate God's Good News to a completely non-Jewish, pagan culture. Paul is taking on a huge challenge. What is Paul's response to God's call? If you were Paul, would you have taken that leap of faith?

As we begin a New Year, what might God be saying to me?

Read Isaiah 6:1-8. Oswald Chambers writes, "*God did not direct His call to Isaiah – Isaiah overheard God saying, 'Who will go for Us?' The call of God is not just for a select few but for everyone. Whether I hear God's call or not depends on the condition of my ears, and exactly what I hear depends upon my spiritual attitude.*"

God is probably not calling us to go as a missionary to a foreign land (or maybe He is?). But we can all share the love of God, right where we are. We can share His love with our families, our friends, in our workplaces, at our schools, in our condos, on our street ... Are our ears open to hear God calling us to say an encouraging word, to help someone out, to pray for someone, to call someone, to be His Good News?

*May I know God's love in a new way in this New Year.
May God make this new year a blessed one.
Not by shielding me from all sorrows and pain,
but by strengthening me to bear it, as it comes.
Not by making my path easy,
but by making me sturdy to travel any path.
Not by taking hardships from me,
but by taking fear from my heart.
Not by granting me unbroken sunshine,
but by keeping my face bright, even in the shadows.
Not by making my life always pleasant,
but by showing me when people and their causes need me most.,
And by making me anxious to be there to help.
May I know God's love, and live God's love, in a new way
in this New Year.
Amen*

Unknown

Tuesday, January 4: Acts 16:11-15

How do people respond to God's love? Why do some people love Him? And some people ... don't?

Paul is now in Greece, in the city of Philippi (named after Alexander the Great's father, Philip II of Macedonia). Philippi was a mining town; the city is populated by native Greeks, mostly rough, tough miners. But Philippi is also a retirement community for former Roman legionaries. The Roman authorities want to keep the uppity Macedonian Greeks in line, so they provide free homes for loyal retiring legionaries willing to live in Philippi. And there is a small Jewish community.

Paul seems to have had little success reaching out to the Greeks and Romans. Tough Greek miners and tough retired Roman soldiers are a hard lot to win to faith in Jesus. So, on the Jewish Sabbath, he goes to find the small Jewish community. It is so small they have no synagogue. Jewish people can worship anywhere, but for a synagogue to be established, ten men must come together for prayer. Apparently, there are not ten Jewish men in Philippi, so a handful of the faithful gather outside town to pray.

One of them, Lydia (from Thyatira, back in Asia/Turkey), hears Paul. And *"the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying"* (16:14). Notice, Paul does not "lead" Lydia to faith. Paul simply shares the Good News about Jesus, and **the Lord** opens her heart. The Lord leads her to believe in Jesus.

We can all talk about Jesus. We can share how He has made a difference in our lives. We can talk about the comfort, strength, love, peace, hope, and joy we experience through Him. We can talk about His birth, death, and resurrection. But ultimately, **we** cannot "convert" anyone. Only the **Lord** – God, Jesus, the Spirit – can do that. He can certainly use our words and our lives to help in that process. But, in the end, it is **God** who leads people to "open their hearts" to Jesus. To me, that is encouraging. And liberating.

- We have just come through the Christmas season, when it was a bit easier to talk about Jesus with friends and family. How can I speak about Jesus this year?
- With whom can I share the hope, peace, love, and joy that I have experienced through Jesus?
- Pray for someone you know who needs Jesus, that the Lord would open their heart to Him?

*Out of this muddle, I cry to you, God.
I cry to you, who has ordered the universe, in whose hand the cosmos is secure.
Guide me to make a right beginning.
Help me do those things that are most needful.
Allow me to know when to stop and rest.
Grant me good humor and a light spirit in the face of what seems overwhelming.
Make my hands steady at their work.
Make my heart steady at its prayer.
Let me, in all things, navigate by love,
for Your love's sake.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 5: Acts 16:16-40

Is it easy following Jesus in a world where He is unknown (at worst) or misunderstood (at best)? Not at all. In a rough and tumble world, following Jesus can be difficult.

Paul does something (we might think is) good – he heals a person whose life is miserable. Unfortunately, others don't like what he does at all. What are the consequences for Paul and Silas? How do they respond?

In our workplace, school, or community, we might do things that are good and right, too. We may stand up for what we think is true and good. And sometimes we get treated rather poorly, as well. However, none of us is likely to be severely beaten and thrown into jail for doing good. Chances are, anything you suffer for

doing what is right is far less severe than Paul and Silas endure.

How do you respond to your misfortunes? Do you get angry? Bitter? Do you complain. Lash out? Post nasty things online? Or can you respond to your problems by "*praying and singing hymns to God*"?

When I respond to life's lemons, do people see me argue, complain, moan, and bellyache? Or can my response to problems be a testimony to the love, grace, and power of God? Can people see that God gives me strength to not just endure – but to overcome? Can my example draw people to God themselves?

Paul and Silas inspire me to deal with my problems more constructively. Whether my issues are being misunderstood for my faith, or aches and pains related to my health ... whether my frustrations are a lack of appreciation for what I do, or ways in which life (or other people) treat me unfairly ... can I respond with prayer? With thanksgiving? With praise?

Lord, help me live my faith, in the tough times as well as the good times.

*Dear Jesus, how desperately I need to learn to pray.
And yet when I'm honest, I know that I often do not even want to pray.
I am distracted.
I am stubborn.
I am self-centered.
In your mercy, Jesus, bring my "wants" more in line with my "needs"
so that I can come to want what I need,
rather than need everything I want.
Most of all I need and want to know you.
Be the centre of my heart, soul, mind, and strength.
Be the source of every word I say and every thing I do.
Amen*

based on a prayer by Richard Foster

Thursday, January 6: Acts 17:1-10

Covid has been a LONG haul. I'm exhausted by having to make difficult decisions, day in and day out. I'm done with emails supposedly telling me the "real" truth (from questionable sources). I'm annoyed with (a very few) grumpy complainers. I have stopped "following" on Facebook three Baptist pastors and a couple of other people who keep telling me to "be afraid, be very afraid" about this, that, and the other thing (I wonder if they have read the 150+ times in Scripture when God says, "*Do not be afraid*" or "*Fear not*").

If I think I've had it tough, I just look at Paul's life. I wouldn't blame Paul if he felt exhausted, fed up, and annoyed with people after his visits to Philippi and Thessalonica as well. In Philippi, he and Silas were severely beaten, thrown in jail, and kicked out of town. In Thessalonica, people form a mob, start a riot, and force the believers to post a bond. Paul sneaks away at night. Greece is a tough place to be.

Do you get the sense that Paul is "afraid, very afraid" (to quote one of my Christian friends)?

I don't.

In fact, I get the sense that Paul is so confident of the presence and power of God, that he is more than able to handle all of this and a lot more. Paul takes God's encouragement to "not be afraid" to heart. He lives it.

Of course, this "talks" easier than it "walks." I'm not always as strong in my faith as Paul is.

Interestingly, Paul speaks to people like me, who struggle. At the end of Paul's first letter back to these same Thessalonians, he writes, "*Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak.*"

Be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus"(1 Thessalonians 5:14-16). What do I need to hear in those verses?

This is Paul's prayer for God's people (us): *"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful"*(1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

*Give us, O Lord, steadfast hearts,
which no unworthy thought can drag downwards.
Unconquered hearts,
which no tribulation can wear out.
Upright hearts,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God,
understanding to know You,
diligence to seek You,
wisdom to find You,
and a faithfulness that may finally embrace You.
Amen.*

Friday, January 7: Acts 17:10-15

There have been silver linings, even through Covid. Back when we were doing homemade music videos, families, individuals, and couples made amazing music together, sometimes for the first time. Some people connected to small groups on Zoom more deeply than they ever did before. We figured out how to do services online, so that now, going forward, our shut-ins, snowbirds, and others who are not able to make in-person services can still be part of our services. We have discovered that our "church" extends far beyond Lethbridge, but includes other parts of Canada, the U.S., and even Africa.

As Paul makes his way south, through Greece, it's not all doom and gloom either. In Philippi, Lydia, the jailer, and their families came to faith and begin a church. In Thessalonica, some people come to faith and begin a church. And in Berea, *"the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures, day after day, to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men."* I'm sure that does Paul's heart good. Even in times of suffering, God is at work.

A few cranks from Thessalonica make the 80 km journey to make Paul's life miserable (Aside: what motivates people to travel that far, on foot, just to abuse another person? These are NOT hopeful, joyful, loving people). Overall, however, Berea is one of those silver linings in Paul's journey through Greece.

Notice what the Bereans are praised for: they are more "open-minded" or "noble" (depending on your translation). They listen. Then they *"searched the Scriptures, day after day, to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth."* Isn't that great?

Speaking as someone who teaches/preaches, I'm always thrilled when a person searches the Scriptures. We all should do that more than we actually do. Of course, "searching the Scriptures" is more than just hunting for proof-texts to prove your pre-determined opinion (you can yank a verse out of context to prove almost anything you want to). Genuinely "searching Scriptures" means reading God's Word regularly, widely, and comprehensively, looking at the BIG picture of what God is saying, studying verses in their contexts, and using good Bible study techniques (such as recognizing and appreciating different genres of literature: poetry, history, prophecy, letters, wisdom literature, etc.).

As we go through the Bible together in these readings, "search the Scriptures." Do read what I suggest, but

feel free to read much, much more, too. Search the Scriptures. Use these daily readings as a starting point for a deeper dive into the riches of God's Word.

*O God, I thank You for this universe, my great home:
for its vastness and its riches,
and for the diversity of life which teems upon it and of which I am part.
I praise You for the arching sky and the blessed winds,
for the driving clouds, and the constellations on high.
I praise You for the salt sea, and the running water, for the hills,
for the trees, and for the grass under my feet.
I thank You for my senses by which I can see the splendor of the morning,
hear the jubilant songs of love,
be invigorated by the frosts of winter,
and be rejuvenated by the breath of the springtime.
Grant me, I pray, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty,
and save my soul from being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion
that I pass heedless and unseeing
when even the thorn-bush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God.
Amen.*

Saturday, January 8: Acts 17:16-34

In Canada, in 2022, many people are "spiritual." They believe there is a spiritual part to their being and their life. But they are not "Christian" (or Moslem, Jewish, or any other major religion). They simply have a vague sense that there is more to life than simply what they can touch, see, hear, feel, or taste ...

Paul finds himself among "spiritual" people as he moves from Thessalonica and Berea (northern Greece) to Athens (southern Greece). In the northern cities, Paul was dealing with Jews and God-fearing Greeks who knew the Scriptures (they checked up on him, Acts 17:11). In Athens, he is speaking with Greeks who, if they have ever even heard of the Jewish Scriptures, do not care about them, if they know them at all.

Most people in Athens are "spiritual." There are signs of spirituality everywhere. Paul notices they even have an altar dedicated "To an Unknown God." He could lambaste them for not believing in the one true God. But he doesn't. His starting point is positive; he establishes common ground: "I'm thrilled to see you believe in a God – let me tell you who I've discovered this God really is." People want to know more ...

Poll after poll does show most Canadians still believe in a "God" of some sort. They may not believe in **our** God, but they are "spiritual." If people know of the Bible, they are not familiar with what it really says (though they may **think** they know what it says).

How do we speak to these people? They don't need judgment. They don't need a lecture. Or a YouTube video. They need to discover who God – Jesus – really is. They are often open to us sharing our personal experiences with God. They find genuine faith fascinating. When we talk about what we have experienced, they are often intrigued. I've also found it's helpful to build common ground, appreciating their spiritual search. Trying to prove them wrong, or arguing theology when they aren't yet Christians, is NOT helpful.

For instance, as a geographer, I find many people have a deep appreciation for the universe as more than just a cosmic "accident." Our world is so amazing, beautiful, and finely tuned. We love and value the natural world. The Greeks know all sorts of things about the natural world; Paul uses that as a point of contact to share his faith (Acts 17:24-27). In our world, people still love and wonder at nature. When we see a gorgeous sunrise, it moves us. When a baby is born, it is a spiritual moment. When someone comes through major surgery it is a "miracle." These are opportunities to help people ask the question: "Don't you ever wonder why ...? What does it all mean ...?" Of course we know the answer: Jesus.

God has also given human beings the ability to create amazing works of art, literature, and music. Where does this genius come from? Ultimately it comes from God. Paul cites a non-Christian poet to help him speak with the folks in Athens (Acts 17:28). We can share our faith with family, friends, or neighbours by seeing opportunities to build bridges through popular culture like songs, books, art, movies, quotes, etc.

All the bridges Paul is building with the folks in Athens – their sense of something more, their wonder about creation, their appreciation of genius – are leading to this: ***God has revealed Himself to the world through Jesus Christ.*** Unlike every other religion, we have a clear picture of who God is: Jesus. He loves us: He chose to come to earth for us and He was even willing to die for us, all because of His incredible, unconditional love. We want people to meet this amazing Jesus. (We do need to ensure we are introducing them to the Jesus of ***Scripture***, not some of the strange political or “church-y” version of Jesus out there).

We have good news to share. Continue to pray that God will give you opportunity to share His love ...

*Keep me from deliberate sins.
Don't let them control me.
Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin.
"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:13-14).
O Holy Spirit of God, abide with us.
Inspire all our thoughts.
Pervade our imaginations.
Guide all our decisions.
Order all our doings.
Be with us in our silence and in our speech,
in our haste and in our leisure,
in company and in solitude,
in the freshness of the morning
and in the weariness of the evening.
Always give us grace, humbly to rejoice in Your presence.
Amen*

Sunday, January 9: Acts 18:1-10

We live in a multicultural, multifaith community. This makes Lethbridge an interesting place to live our Christian faith. We regularly interact with people who have no religious faith at all, have another religious faith, or share our Christian faith (but perhaps a different expression of Christianity than our own). How will God's church survive? How can His church thrive in our city? How do we live out our faith?

We first visit Corinth, with Paul, in Acts 18. Corinth is about 80 km west of Athens, Greece. It is a bustling commercial, political, and religious (NOT Christian) city on the narrow strip of land that joins the Peloponnesian Peninsula to mainland Greece.

Corinth was settled as a Roman colony – Roman freedmen (ex-slaves on their way up the social scale) and Roman businessmen. As a trading centre it was a melting pot of every ethnic group and religion in the Empire. Corinth was wealthy from shipping, business, wine-making (and wine-consuming), and the 1000 prostitutes based in the (in)famous temple of Aphrodite. The Greek philosopher, Aristophanes, coined the verb "*korinthiazomai*" – "*to live like a Corinthian*" – as a term for a person with absolutely no moral inhibitions. It was the Las Vegas of the ancient world. Corinth makes Lethbridge look very, very tame.

Corinth is a city where Paul spends an extended time. Later, he will write at least four letters to the church in Corinth (only two survive, which we call 1 & 2 Corinthians). New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, comments on Paul's letters to the Corinthians, "*Paul, as a by-product of his urgent pastoral and theological concerns, shows us Corinth as a lively and lascivious city, with its class distinctions and its law courts; its*

temples, markets, and brothels; its dinner parties, weddings, and festivals. We watch, in a way we cannot do with any of Paul's other churches, as a community comes to terms with what it meant to be Messiah people in a world full of challenges and questions ..."

On the one hand, Corinth is another tough, tough town in which Paul tries to share the good news about Jesus. The Jews in Corinth, as in Philippi and Thessalonica, make life miserable for him. The Romans are hardly about to accept a **Jewish** Lord above all other Lords (including Caesar). They certainly aren't going to accept a **crucified** Lord. Every Roman knows crucifixion is the most shameful and horrible death imaginable. How could such a person possibly be the Lord of lords and God of gods? Paul's answer, of course, is that God raised Jesus from the dead, proving He is God. But everyone knows resurrection can't happen. That message simply convinces Paul's hearers he is completely mad (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

Paul perseveres. Some people do come to faith in Jesus. Paul finds a community of people who do share His faith in Jesus. God builds His church. It's amazing. It's a miracle. It's ... God!

We can get discouraged, too. So many people do NOT share our faith. They may mock our faith. When we do try to share about Jesus and His resurrection, they may reject that as a possibility, too. Hang in there. People are still coming to faith in Jesus. Here, in the church, we are a community who do share your faith, who can encourage you, support you, pray for you, and care for you.

God is still building His church. It's amazing. It's a miracle. It's ... God! Pray for our church today ...

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know.
To love what I ought to love.
To praise what delights You most.
To value what is precious in your sight.
To hate what is offensive to You.
Do not suffer me to judge according to the sight of my eyes.
Help me not to pass sentence according to the hearing of my ears.
Help me to discern, with a true judgment, between things what is right and what is not.
Above all, help me always to inquire what is the good pleasure of Your will.
Amen.*

Thomas À Kempis (1380-1471)

Monday, January 10: Acts 18:9-18

Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do?

In Corinth, Paul is hauled up before the local Roman governor, Gallio, by members of local Jewish synagogue (FYI, Gallio is brother of the famous philosopher, Seneca). The charge? They accuse Paul of "*persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to our (**Jewish**) law.*"

At the time, Jews had official permission to worship their own God. Three times a day, faithful Jews would recite their prayer of allegiance to their God: "*Hear, Israel, the LORD or God, the Lord is one.*" This was the motto of every faithful Jew. Paul, however, has changed the prayer: "**There is one God, the Father, by whom all things were created, and for whom we live**" (so far, so good). Then, Paul adds, "**And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live**" (1 Corinthians 8:6). Paul, the Jews argue, is not a true Jew anymore. Paul is claiming Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the embodiment of Israel's God. The synagogue members are angry, accusing Paul of creating a new religion, not officially sanctioned by Rome. Therefore, they argue, Paul should be silenced.

Gallio is simply not interested in what he sees as Jewish infighting. He literally has the Jews thrown out of his courtroom in an undignified heap. Unlike in Philippi or Thessalonica, the wrath of the mob does not fall on Paul and the other followers of Jesus, but on Sosthenes and the Jewish synagogue leaders.

Consider Paul's experience through all this. Initially, he must have expected another rough time, probably another mob beating, possibly more time in a (brutal) Roman jail. His heart would have been pounding. His mind racing about how he can defend himself in court. He would be praying. Instead ... a Roman governor comes to his rescue. Paul is allowed to go freely about his business. The mob beats Sosthenes, leader of the synagogue. Disturbingly, Gallio and the Roman police simply walk away and pay no attention.

When we are falsely accused, we may go through various emotions:

- **Shock.** It doesn't seem possible that someone would say these things about us.
- **Anger.** How could anyone accuse us of this after all the good we have done and how hard we have tried? We may find ourselves wanting to lash out. We write emails/letters defending ourselves and arguing our innocence to anyone who will listen.
- **Doubt.** Even though we know we are completely innocent, we begin to question our motive. False accusations do that. You wonder, "Did I have the wrong intent? Did I somehow make this mistake without even realizing it? Did I do all I could, or should I have done more?"
- **Fear.** We worry about every possible long-term scenario. We lose sleep. We get ulcers. We get sick. We worry. Will this break us financially? Will our friends and family turn against us? Will our worst fears be realized?
- **Resentment.** When we are falsely accused, we easily become resentful. We doubt everyone and trust no one. We may begin to disconnect and pull away from people. We tune out all emotion in an effort to numb from the pain.
- **Bitterness.** We've all met people who have given in to long-term bitterness. Talk to them for more than a few minutes and their painful situation is the first thing they bring up. They begin to see the world through the lenses of their suffering. They have not found healing.

"Don't be afraid. Speak out. Don't be silent." God tells Paul, *"For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me."* This is encouragement for us, too. We love and serve a **risen Saviour** who is more than able to be with us, encourage us, and help us in difficult times. We will find in 2 Corinthians that we may go through suffering, pain, and attack, but God is always with us. He never leaves us. He is faithful. He will get us through.

God spoke through Moses saying, *"Be strong and courageous. For the Lord your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you ..."* (Deuteronomy 31:6). That is good news for us.

*"Lord, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."
O, You who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
I lift my heart to You.
Guide me in your Way this day.
Enlighten me with your Truth.
Grant me the more abundant Life which You alone can give.
This I ask, not that I may selfishly get good or glory for myself,
but that I may do good to others and so glorify Your name.
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 11: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Is First Baptist "our" church? Or are we "God's" church? Does the distinction matter? What do you think?

After Paul left Corinth, he travels through what is now Turkey (Acts 19). In Ephesus (present day western Turkey), he apparently wrote a letter back to the church in Corinth, which we do not have (Paul refers to this lost letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9). As well, the Corinthians have been in touch with Paul, asking some questions (1 Corinthians 7:1), and letting Paul know about some of the "issues" in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11). So, the letter we have, named 1 Corinthians, is actually probably 2 Corinthians (and what we call 2 Corinthians is really 3 Corinthians ...) – but that gets far too complicated. Let's simply remember this letter

is part of an ongoing dialogue between Paul and his friends in Corinth.

As we read through the letter, we'll see this church has major problems. There are nasty divisions, serious moral issues (not surprising in Corinth), leadership crises, heresies and doctrinal misunderstandings, issues regarding worship ... and on and on. It's messy figuring out how live Christian-ly in the real world.

How does Paul begin? He reminds them

- He, Paul, is "*chosen by the will of **God** to be an apostle of Christ Jesus ...*"
- They, the church, are "***God's** church in Corinth ... called by **God** to be his own holy people.*"
- They are "*made ... holy by means of **Christ Jesus.***"
- **God** has given them "*every spiritual gift (they) need.*"

GOD – Father, Son, and Spirit – is the One in control, here. **GOD** is the One who has created this church, called it into being, saved people, is making them more and more like Jesus, and has given them all the gifts they need. That's good news for us, too.

- We are "***God's** church in Lethbridge ... called by **God** to be his own holy people.*" We have been called into being by **God**. We are **His** church. We are **His** people. **He** is our Lord. We can trust our church in His hands, knowing that as we do so we are in the best of hands. (Of course, we are not God's **ONLY** church in Lethbridge. We are part of the larger Christian Church in Lethbridge made of many Christian congregations. The important thing to note is that **we** have been **called into being by God**. We are **His** church. We are **His** people)
- We are "*made holy by means of **Christ Jesus.***" The church in Corinth was far from holy – yet. But the Spirit of God was at work teaching them (through Paul and others), helping them become more and more like Jesus. We don't have nearly the issues Corinth had, but we can be confident that the Spirit is at work in our midst, too. Jesus is actively working among us.
- God has given us "*every spiritual gift (we) need.*" If a church as problem-filled as Corinth had all the gifts they needed, clearly God doesn't expect perfection before He blesses His church. The faithfulness of God, uniting us with Jesus, provides us with all the gifts we need to serve Him faithfully, too (1:9). Our challenge is to use our gifts – personally and corporately – for His glory.

We are **His** church, empowered by **His** Spirit, to be **His** people in the world. **He** is in control. Praise Him.

*I pause for a moment and reflect on God's life-giving presence
in every part of my body,
in everything around me,
in the whole of my life.
I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise:
the noise that interrupts, that separates,
the noise that isolates.
I need to listen to God again.
In God's loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.
What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side,
and share my feelings with him.
Thank you, God, that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Thank You for what I have learned and how I have grown.
Amen.*

Wednesday, January 12: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Comedian Emo Philips is credited with this story: *"In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, 'Are you Protestant or Catholic?' My new acquaintance replied, 'Protestant.'" I said, 'Me too. What franchise?' He answered, 'Baptist.' 'Me too!'" I said, 'Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?' 'Northern Baptist,' he replied. 'Me too!'" I shouted.*

"We continued to go back and forth. Finally, I asked: 'Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?' He replied, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912.'

"And I said, 'Die, heretic!'"

I'm sure we all know how draining it is when we don't get along in our nuclear families. It's also spiritually draining when we can't get along in our local church family, or in the larger Christian community. Disunity is exhausting. And the world at large looks at us believers – when we fight among ourselves – and shakes its head in disgust at the lack of grace, love, and compassion we can show our Christian brothers and sisters.

It is good for us to remember the key confessions that unite us – it's all about Jesus. As Paul writes to another church, *"Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For 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"* (Ephesians 4:2-6). Those are the essentials.

To the Corinthians, Paul says: *"Live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose"* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

As a church we are a community – a *"com"* (Latin for "with") *"unity"* (Latin for "oneness"). Unity is not optional. It is God's explicit command. If we are not living in harmony, united in thought and purpose – if we are divided – we are NOT living God's will for us. We need to confess our sin. And start again ...

The Greek word for *"agree"* in this passage is the word which gives us the word *"symphony,"* meaning *"to sound together, primarily of musical instruments."* It could be translated into English as *"harmony."* So ... unity is not *uniformity*. As a symphony orchestra needs many different instruments, playing many different – but complementary – roles, the church needs many different people, playing many different – complementary – roles. The key to an orchestra is that everyone follows the conductor. And the key to the church is that everyone follows the conductor – Jesus.

We come as one people (a community) with incredible diversity. But we work together in harmony to follow Jesus, to make Him known, and to serve Him in our city. Pray for unity-diversity-harmony-vision of our church as we seek together to serve Jesus.

*God, help us
to be generous in our opinions of others,
to be considerate of all we meet,
to be patient with those with whom we work,
to be faithful to every trust,
to be courageous in the face of danger,
to be humble in all our living,
to be prayerful every hour of the day,
to be joyous in all life's experience,
and to be dependent upon You for strength in facing life's uncertainties.
Amen*

Thursday, January 13: Romans 14:1-23

Can we have different opinions on issues? Or do we all have to agree on every little thing?

Paul routinely distinguishes between essential "salvation" issues and non-essential, non-salvation issues (see Ephesians 4:2-6). There are issues which we may feel very strongly about are important in our obedience to Christ, but which are not necessarily essential to our salvation. We can allow people to play different instruments in the symphony. In "humility and gentleness," we make allowance for our differences.

Consider Romans 14: *"Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong ... Who are you to judge God's servants? ... Why do you judge your brother? Why do you look down on your brother? ... Let us stop passing judgment on one another ... Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification ... Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourselves and God."* (Romans 14:1, 10, 13, 19, 22).

It's interesting that Paul's says those who are caught up in disputes are those who are "weak in faith." Those who are weak in faith may define true Christians by outward appearances or non-essential doctrines: what church one attends, what Bible version one prefers, what authors one reads, etc. In my experience, some Christians who are critical or judgmental of others are **afraid** of something: afraid the church will not survive change, afraid of thinking about issues, afraid of new ideas, afraid of this and that. Essentially, they are afraid that God/God's Word/God's Church are too fragile to survive differences of opinion. But remember, *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear"* (1 John 4:18).

Christian maturity recognizes that outward appearances are notoriously deceiving. God looks on the heart. The Kingdom of God is within you. The love of Christ is so vast, that it can cover a variety of differences and diversity. The essential common denominator is faith in Jesus.

Mature Christian love doesn't need to be afraid. Mature Christian faith knows the power of God to defend His own holiness and honour. He doesn't need to us to be His pit bulls. Mature Christian love knows the Holy Spirit will do the convicting – justly and lovingly. It's not up to us to be judge and jury (John 16:8-10).

God can care for His church quite well. He can defend His own honour. Our task is to aim for perfect love for one another – the unconditional, self-giving, compassionate, grace-full love modeled by Jesus.

*Lord, what I'm trying to do is set aside time to focus on my life –
both temporal and spiritual.
Jesus, I try to imagine that You are sitting here beside me,
and I talk over with You what has been going on for me.
Jesus, I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways
You enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.
But life is fast and full.
Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.
I know that. I want to do something about it.
Knowing that You love me unconditionally,
I can afford to be honest about how I am.
How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Thank You, Lord, that I can share my feelings openly with You.
I try to become still and receptive to what Your Holy Spirit might want to impart to me.
Thank You for these few moments spent alone with You.
Amen.*

Friday, January 14: John 17

If Jesus were to pray for us – for His church – what would He pray? We know exactly! John 17 is just such a prayer. This is the prayer the Lord, Himself, prayed for us on the night before He was crucified.

A key component of the prayer are these words: *"I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one ... May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me."* (John 17:21-23).

Within the global Church (including all sorts of denominations, traditions, and local churches) and in our own local church we have many diverse ideas, opinions, and even theologies. We don't all agree on everything. But where we agree on the core issues of our faith, we can work together.

The problems of divisions today are nothing new. Even before the church began, Jesus was praying about unity. In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, the Corinthian Christians were throwing rotten eggs at one another: some were members of Apollos Baptist Church; some were members of St. Peter's Anglican Church; some formed the Cephas Independent Congregational Church. And some called themselves the Jesus Fellowship. Paul reminded them that the personal (or denominational) traditions they celebrated were not from God.

Unity does not mean uniformity – there is incredible diversity within Jesus' Church. The global church is a symphony, too – made richer by a variety of languages, cultures and traditions. The Kingdom of God moves across the boundaries of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches. There are true followers of Jesus in Coptic, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Alliance – even Baptist – churches.

Jesus' prayer is that we recognize that together, those of us who share genuine faith in Jesus Christ, who are filled by His presence, are the Kingdom of God. We work together to show to this cynical, skeptical, hopeless world that we are Christians, by our love. They'll know we are Christians by our love.

We need to hear Paul's challenge: is Christ divided? Of course not. If there are those who genuinely love Him who have different opinions than us, we dare not attack the body of Christ, our own family? *"All of you **together** are the temple of God and the Spirit of God lives in you. God will bring ruin on anyone who ruins this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you Christians are that temple"* (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

*I slow myself down for a moment.
I try to realize that God is present.
To me. Here and now.
He is present in what I do, in the people that I meet,
and the situations I find myself in daily.
How can I make this reality real for myself?
God, please help me to be free from my own preoccupations.
To be open to You in this time of prayer.
To come to love and serve You more.
How am I within myself today?
Am I tired, stressed, or off-form?
If any of these characteristics apply,
can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
I take time to read the Word of God, slowly, a few times,
allowing myself to dwell on anything that strikes me.
Do I notice myself reacting as I pray with the Word of God?
Do I feel challenged, comforted, angry?
Imagining Jesus sitting or standing by me,
I speak out my feelings, as one trusted friend to another.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him.
Amen.*

Saturday, January 15: Ephesians 4:1-16

Jesus prays that we “be one” and that we have “perfect unity” (John 17:21-23 – yesterday). What do we unite around? What are core tenets of belief that bind us together in love?

Writing to followers of Jesus in Ephesus, Paul encourages us to be committed to unconditional, rather than conditional, love for one another. It is a lot easier to love those who agree with us, who share common interests, and have no irritating qualities. But anyone can have that kind of love. Christ-like love goes much deeper (Matthew 5:43-48). The New Living Translation translates Ephesians 4:2, *“Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults, because of your love.”* Unity comes, not as we seek to change one another, but as we appreciate that each of us has our faults – we are all “works in progress” – and we decide to love one another, despite our shortcomings.

In the church, we hold on to unity on the essentials – an absolute commitment to, *“one faith, one God and Father who is over all and in all and living through all, one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism, one body, and one glorious hope for the future.”* These are the foundations of our faith. These are salvation issues – issues which fundamentally define whether we have genuine Christian faith.

We rally around those essentials. On other issues, we can celebrate that unity is NOT uniformity. We are created differently. We can have diversity of opinions and functions. The Holy Spirit uses us differently. A symphony that is all flutes – all playing the same thing – isn’t much of a symphony. A symphony needs horns, percussion, strings, woodwinds, etc. – diversity, playing in harmony. Musicians play the same piece, but in a variety of ways, working together to create something, the sum of which is more beautiful than the parts. Paul emphasizes that appreciating this diversity within our unity (on essentials) is spiritual maturity.

In any natural ecosystem, biodiversity – a wide range of plants and animals – make the ecosystem strong, resilient, able to resist disease and adapt to changing conditions – and interesting and beautiful. Ecosystems with only one type of plant or animal are rather boring and are easily wiped out. Diversity – within unity – is what makes the church interesting, effective, beautiful – and resilient and strong. Churches with people-diversity – gift-diversity, personality-diversity, interest-diversity, skill-diversity, even **non**-essential-belief-diversity – are strong, resilient, able to adapt to changing conditions – and interesting.

How can we be united (on essentials), even if we are not uniform? How can our diversity make us more interesting, resilient, and strong?

*I remind myself that, as I sit here now,
God is gazing on me with love and holding me in His hands.
I pause for a moment and think of this.
“In these days, God taught me as a schoolteacher teaches a pupil” (Ignatius).
I remind myself that there are things God has to teach me yet.
I ask for the grace to hear them and let them change me.
I remind myself that I am in the presence of the Lord.
I will take refuge in His loving heart.
He is my strength in times of weakness.
He is my comforter in times of sorrow.
The can teach me to recognize His hand at work in my daily living.
He can and will teach me through His Word.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present
and will reveal whatever this passage has to say to me.
Lord, help me read reflectively.
Help me listen with the ‘ear of my heart’ to what is going on within me.
Jesus you speak to me through the words of the Scriptures.
May I respond to Your call today.
Amen.*

Sunday, January 16: 1 Peter 3:8-16

I find it most difficult to respond to situations Christian-ly when I am under stress. When I'm in tough, it's hard to live out love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I find it so much easier to live out those values when things are sailing along smoothly ...

Peter writes this letter to Christians enduring intense persecution by the Emperor Nero. In the midst of brutal suffering, Peter reminds us to, "*be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.*" Is that realistic? When times are tough? Think about each one of those phrases.

- What does it mean to be like-minded with one another?
- What does it mean to be sympathetic to one another?
- What does it mean to really love one another (with the same self-giving love Jesus showed to us)?
- What does it mean to be compassionate to each other?
- What does it mean to be humble in relationship with one another?

Do these attributes describe me? Would people say that

- I am **like-minded** with other followers of Jesus?
- I am a **sympathetic** person?
- I **love** my brothers and sisters in Christ, with the love of Jesus?
- I am **compassionate**?
- I am **humble**?

Am I becoming more and more like this – or less and less like each of these virtues? Which of these qualities of character do I need to work on?

Peter also reminds us to be careful what we say and how we say it. Speaking the truth in **love**, "*with gentleness and respect*" (3:15), is key. How can I put this into practice, this week?

*Jesus Christ, Son of God, make yourself known through me.
Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, speak through me to others.
Almighty God, by your grace you have given us new life in Jesus Christ,
and by your Spirit you have called us to proclaim his name throughout the nations:
Awaken in us such a love for you and your world
that we may so boldly proclaim Jesus Christ
by word,
and by deed
that all people may come to know him as Savior and follow him as Lord,
to the glory of your Name.
Jesus Christ, Son of God, make yourself known through me.
Amen.*

Anglican Fellowship of Prayer

Monday, January 17: Galatians 1

Some churches end up splitting into "camps." Some support (or don't support) the pastor. Some like (or don't like) the worship. Some want things changed; some definitely do NOT want things changed.

One of the challenges in Corinth was that various factions had emerged within the church – the Paul-ites, the Apollos-ians, the Peter/Cephas Church ... (1 Corinthians 1:12). Clearly the church was forgetting what was really important – Jesus – and majoring on minor issues (their choice of favourite author/teacher).

It also happened in the churches in Galatia (northern Turkey) – and many other places. It has continued to

happen right down to the present day (we all know how many denominations, groups, independent churches there are; some people like certain authors/teachers and really don't like others ...).

Galatians is written to several churches who struggle with similar divisions. Paul reminds them, as he reminded the Corinthians, that our faith is really all about Jesus: He is Saviour and Lord of the world, His church, and individual lives (like Paul's). What unites us is SO much more important than what divides us. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus. And only on Jesus.

A divided kingdom is so much easier to defeat. Satan loves to divide and conquer the Church. Don't let him do that in our congregation. If you are feeling angry or divisive – deal with it. Division is not from God!

Our challenge is to focus on what unites us with our brothers and sisters – in our own church, and in other churches – Jesus. Centered on Jesus, we can encourage one another, build one another up, love one another, and help the Kingdom of God grow stronger, more vibrant, and in mission. If God can convert Paul – once an intense persecutor of the church – He certainly can still do miracles in our time.

Pray for our church's mission in our community and beyond. Pray for a sense of unity, mutual encouragement, and shared mission among the churches of our city. And in our own church community.

*"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me.
I let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations
and open to what God may be saying to me.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk with Jesus, may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Thank You, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us,
to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.
Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus
through all generations forever and ever." (Ephesians 3:20-21)
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 18: Galatians 2

How important are religious "things" – like prayer, going to church, etc. – to our salvation?

Paul continues to tell the story of his own faith journey (you can read it in more detail in Acts). His point is summarized in Galatians 2:15-21: we are not saved by religious observances, traditions, sacraments, or activities. We are saved by our faith in Jesus. What church we may (or may not) belong to doesn't save us or condemn us. We are saved by our faith in Jesus. If observing certain practices or being part of a specific church could save us, then Jesus died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). We are saved by our faith in Jesus.

Our relationship with Jesus defines who we are and how we live. Our Christian faith is not an "add-on" (kind of like a nice set of clothes you could wear to a wedding or formal occasion). Sometimes we think we can live life just like everyone else ... and on certain occasions we may "put on" our "Christian clothes" and act in a "Christian" way. As followers of Jesus, He is the be all and end all of our lives.

But Paul says, *"My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Our faith is at the core of who we are. It defines us. It shapes and forms our thoughts, values, ethics, and actions. It is NOT something we put on or take off – it is the core of who we are. Our relationship with Jesus is like the skeleton in our bodies – it is the framework on which everything else depends for its shape, purpose, and meaning. Without that central focus on Him, life falls apart.

Religious activities – reading Scripture, prayer, church attendance – are all GOOD things – GREAT things. Do them. But they don't save us. They help us draw closer to Jesus. They are important ways that we grow in our faith. They are steps of loving obedience. They don't save us.

Eugene Peterson translates Galatians 2:19-21 this way: *"What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So, I quit being a 'law man' so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not 'mine,' but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that."*

How can we live in faith? How can things like reading God's Word, prayer, and church help us grow?

*Dear heavenly Father,
Give me clean hands,
clean words,
and clean thoughts.
I stand on holy ground.
Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong.
Save me from habits that harm.
Teach me to work as hard, and play as fair, in Your sight alone,
as if the whole world saw.
Forgive me when I am unkind.
Help me to forgive those who are unkind to me.
Keep me ready to help others.
Help me to do those things I already know I ought to do.
Inspire me to do even better things than I can imagine, through your Spirit.
Help me to say the things I already know I ought to say.
Inspire me to say even better things than I can imagine, through your Spirit.
Amen*

Wednesday, January 19: Galatians 3:1-25

It is so easy to be judgmental of other people, especially other Christians. They are just SO wrong ...

The Christians in the Galatian churches – even more than the Corinthians – were caught up in rules and regulations. They were particularly obsessed with obeying all the picayune laws in the Old Testament. Paul's point is that the old laws help us appreciate that we all sin – none of us can keep all those legalistic regulations perfectly. We all fail. So, therefore, it is clear we need a Saviour. We need Jesus.

The Old Testament laws are not bad. In fact, it is God's will that we try to obey principles like the Ten Commandments. The problem is that – on our own – we just can't do it perfectly. We all fail.

1. We need forgiveness for the times we have failed and continue to fail – Jesus offers that. As we confess our sins, He freely forgives us. It's His gift of grace – we don't earn it. He gives it freely.

2. We need strength to get up again, try again, and hopefully succeed – through the Holy Spirit. Jesus helps us with that. To revisit Galatians 2: *"I identify myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central ... Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not 'mine,' but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* When we approach life in that way, we can do better. (We will still blow it on occasion, but overall, through the Spirit, we can do better and better.)

Do we ever try to impress God? To earn His favour? Do we bargain with God (*"If you get me out of this jam, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life ..."*)? It doesn't work that way. We can never live up to those bold promises. Jesus simply freely forgives us and welcomes us, by His love and grace.

Jesus wants us to be the people God created us to be. He wants us to fulfill our God-created potential to be like Him. He yearns to live in us through His Spirit. He desires to guide and shape us into being God's people. He asks us to make Him the centre – the Lord – of our lives. Will I allow Him to be that?

What part of my life do I need to give over to Him, to allow Him to control? Will I do it?

*Lord God, you are everything to me.
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
When I was lost, thank you for seeking me and for finding me.
Without you, I can do nothing.
You are good, O Lord, and you are always ready to forgive.
Thank you for your plentiful mercy in my life,
which I always receive when I call upon you.
You are always there to help me.
You truly are a very present help to me.
I am receiving your help even now as I pray.
Thank you, Father.
You are my refuge and strength.
Because this is true, I will not fear anything or anyone.
You are in my midst, and I will not be moved.
Thank you for enabling me to bear lasting fruit in your name.
You are with me, Lord.
Knowing this, I will be still.
Amen*

Thursday, January 20: Galatians 3:26-4:7

French novelist and poet, Arsène Houssaye, writes, *"Tell me whom you love, and I will tell you who you are."* Who do you love? What things do you love? What do your answers say about who you are?

Paul wants us to understand how wonderful the love of God really is. Because our sins are forgiven through Jesus, we are God's children, sons and daughters of the King of Kings, princesses and princes in the Kingdom of God. We have the privilege of coming freely, honestly, without fear into our loving Father's presence. We call Him, "Abba, Father" ("Abba" is the down-to-earth Aramaic word for "Daddy").

What do we learn about who God is? God, our heavenly Father, loves us SO much that He gave us Himself – His one and only son, Jesus – to die on the cross for us. He loves every person – regardless of their ethnicity, race, status, or gender. He loves His entire creation so much, that He will redeem and restore it, one day some day. He loves us so much, we are welcome to approach Him as our Daddy, coming like a little child to enjoy His presence, to talk about anything and everything with Him, and to learn from and be guided by His wisdom. Since we are His children, we will ultimately be with Him, forever; we will "inherit" the Kingdom of God. We are always safe in His loving hands, eternally.

Paul uses the metaphor of "putting on Christ, like putting on new clothes." We don't look, act, or live the same as we did before. We are completely new creations in Jesus.

Who are we? Are we people who love Jesus, first and foremost? Do people see that in our lives?

How can we "put on Christ" and live for Him?

*O most sweet and loving Lord,
you know my weaknesses and my needs.
You know how many bad habits and vices I have.
You know how often I am burdened, tempted, and stained by sin.
I come to you for healing.
I pray to you for comfort and support.
You know my inmost thoughts.
You alone can adequately comfort me and help me.
You know what good things I need most,
Feed me, for I am hungry.
Inflame my coldness with the fire of your love.
Illuminate my blindness with the light of your presence.
Make me forget all that leads me from you.
Lift up my heart to you,
and let me not wander aimlessly about the world.
From now on, you will be my only delight,
you alone are my food and drink,
my love and joy,
my sweetness and whole good.
Oh, that by your presence you would set me fully on fire
so that I would become one spirit with you.
How wonderful it would be if I were wholly consumed for you,
since you are a fire always burning and never consuming.
Your love that purifies my heart and enlightens my mind.
Amen*

Thomas À Kempis (1380-1471)

Friday, January 21: Galatians 4:8-5:1

Free at last. Praise the Lord, we are free at last. We are "free" in Jesus. But what does that actually mean?

Paul tells us that Jesus sets us free from legalism. We are free from being forced into a straitjacket of rules, regulations, and laws. We are also free from the condemnation that comes from breaking God's law, since we are forgiven through Jesus. But our freedom is not a license to go crazy and do anything and everything. Rather, our freedom makes us free to follow Jesus and allow Him to be Lord in our lives.

Lesslie Newbigen, Bishop of Madras, wrote, "*Freedom' in the Bible is always seen as a change of regime or jurisdiction, from the false dominion to the true, from serving Pharaoh to serving God, from serving sin and death to serving God.*"

He goes on to say, "*From the point of view of the Enlightenment (mainstream society), the biblical idea of freedom is paradoxical – freedom means **servicing the true master**. From the point of view of the Bible, the freedom celebrated in the Enlightenment (society at large) is the freedom offered by the serpent to Eve: the freedom to make one's own decisions about what is good. By accepting that offer, we put ourselves under the domination of powers that lead to destruction. We become, as Paul says, slaves of sin.*"

Paul's point is that "You've gotta serve somebody" (to quote Bob Dylan) – the idea that you can be totally

“free” to make your own decisions is an illusion. If we think we’re making our own decisions all on our own, we’re only fooling ourselves. The values of popular culture, advertisers, media, our own impulses, and countless other forces shape our decision-making, whether we recognize it or not. Or, in contrast, our lives may be shaped by our love for Jesus and desire to live for Him. The reality is ... we serve someone.

Paul challenges us *intentionally* to choose to follow God. To live for Jesus. To allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives. What does that mean for your life?

*God of all blessings, source of all life, giver of all grace:
We thank you for the gift of life:
for the breath that sustains life,
for the food of this earth that nurtures life,
for the love of family and friends without which there would be no life.*

*We thank you for the mystery of creation:
for the beauty that the eye can see,
for the joy that the ear may hear,
for the unknown that we cannot behold, filling the universe with wonder,
for the expanse of space that draws us beyond ourselves.*

*We thank you for setting us in communities:
for families, who nurture our becoming,
for friends, who love us by choice,
for companions at work, who share our burdens and daily tasks,
for strangers, who welcome us into their midst,
for people from other lands, who call us to grow in understanding,
for children, who lighten our moments with delight,
for the newborn, who offer us hope for the future.*

*We thank you for this day:
for life, and one more day to love,
for opportunity, and one more day to work for justice and peace,
for neighbors, and one more person to love and by whom be loved,
for your grace, and one more experience of your presence.*

*We thank you for your promise:
to be with us, to be our God, and to give salvation.
For these, and all blessings, we give you thanks,
eternal, loving God, through Jesus Christ we pray.
Amen.*

Vienna Cobb Anderson

Saturday, January 22: Galatians 5:1-21, 26

We are free to be the people God created us to be. We are free to love Jesus. We are free to invite His Spirit to fill us. We are free to live for Him.

Galatians 5 has tremendous practical application for our lives ... I’ve rearranged Paul’s sentences a bit to clearly indicate the negative (today) and positive (tomorrow) practical counsel he has for us.

Paul begins describing the challenge we all face: *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions."*

The negative possibilities:

- *don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature.*
- *if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out. Beware of destroying one another.*
- *When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear:*
 - *sexual immorality,*
 - *impurity,*
 - *lustful pleasures,*
 - *idolatry,*
 - *sorcery,*
 - *hostility,*
 - *quarreling,*
 - *jealousy,*
 - *outbursts of anger,*
 - *selfish ambition,*
 - *dissension,*
 - *division,*
 - *envy,*
 - *drunkenness,*
 - *becoming conceited,*
 - *provoking one another,*
 - *wild parties, and other sins like these.*

Let me tell you again that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

We are all human. Chances are at least one or two of these "issues" show up in our lives from time to time. How do we handle it when that happens?

John writes, *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness"* (1 John 1:8-9). What might you need to confess to God? Will you do it now ...?

He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. You are forgiven. You are free. Give thanks ... Live in your freedom, with the joy of being forgiven by Jesus.

*Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:
Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God:
Have mercy on me, a sinner.
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God:
Renew me and all the world.
Amen*

N.T. Wright (1948-)

Sunday, January 23: Galatians 5:13-26

We are free to love Jesus. We are free to invite His Spirit to fill us. We are free to live for Him. We are free to be the people God created us to be.

Galatians 5 has tremendous practical application for our lives ... I've rearranged Paul's sentences a bit to clearly indicate the negative (yesterday) and positive (today) practical counsel he has for us.

Paul writes: *"For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." So I say, let the Holy Spirit*

guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves" (Galatians 5:13-16).

The positive possibilities:

- *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. (So leave them there!)*
- *Use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*
- *The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives:*
 - *love,*
 - *joy,*
 - *peace,*
 - *patience,*
 - *kindness,*
 - *goodness,*
 - *faithfulness,*
 - *gentleness, and*
 - *self-control.*

Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" (or "let us keep in step with the Spirit").

How is God speaking to you? How can you follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life? How can you walk in step with the Spirit?

*Gracious and holy Father,
Loving and compassionate Saviour,
Spirit of life and truth:
Give us wisdom to perceive you,
intelligence to understand you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to see you,
a heart to meditate on you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the Spirit,
through the power of Jesus Christ our Lord,
and through the power of the Father,
Amen.*

Monday, January 24: Galatians 6:1-10

Living for Jesus in Corinth in the 1st Century was difficult. Living for Jesus in Galatia in the 1st Century was difficult. Living for Jesus in Lethbridge in 2022 can be difficult, too.

Here is more good counsel from Paul:

- *If another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path.*
- *Be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.*
- *Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.*
- *If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important.*
- *Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else.*

- *We are each responsible for our own conduct.*
- *Those who are taught the word of God should provide for their teachers, sharing all good things with them.*
- *You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.*
- *Let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up.*
- *Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith.*

Imagine if we all could live by these principles. This is the ideal toward which we are called. Pray for yourself – and for all the rest of us, too – that we may desire these noble goals. And pray that we would have the strength to work towards attaining them.

*God is with me, but more,
God is within me,
giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence in my body,
my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.
What most often stops me achieving freedom
is my tendency to be caught up in fears and expectations
about what I 'ought' or 'should' be.
My usual automatic responses tie me down
and inhibit me from exploring new areas of growth.
I ask and pray for a greater sense of inner freedom and that I might reach
the fresh and challenging possibilities that God wishes me to realize.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
Teach me to recognize Your presence in others.
Fill my heart with gratitude for the times
Your love has been shown to me through the care of others.
Amen.*

Tuesday, January 25: Galatians 6:11-18

What matter most in life is ____? What counts is ____? How would you answer those questions?

Here are some possible answers:

- *"The most important thing is to enjoy your life. To be happy is all that matters." (Audrey Hepburn)*
- *"It doesn't matter how rich, talented, educated, cool, or attractive you are. How you treat others ultimately tells all. Integrity matters most." (Author Unknown)*
- *"Save the excuses. It's not about having the time; it's about making the time. If it matters you will make the time." (Author Unknown)*
- *"Being who you are is what matters. Not what you've done or will do." (Author Unknown)*
- *"What matters most is to focus on what matters most." (Roy Bennett)*
- *"It doesn't matter what you've done. What matters most is what you choose to do from here." (Author Unknown)*
- *"I've learned that it's not what I have but who I have in my life that matters most." (Author Unknown)*

Some of these insights are profound and worth reflecting on. But here is how Paul answers that question: *"What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation"* (6:15). What matters most is whether we genuinely love Jesus, invite Him into our lives, AND allow His Spirit to begin to transform us ...

It is indeed true, that it's not what we have or what we do, but WHO we have in our lives that matter most. Yes, key people – family and friends are essential. But the WHO that really, really matters most is Jesus. When we know Him, love Him, and seek to walk in step Him, life will be most fulfilling, purposeful, and go well for us. Is Jesus the most important Person in your life?

*Dear Jesus, flood my soul with Your spirit and love.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.
Shine through me and be so in me
that every soul I meet may feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Wednesday, January 26: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

A church is not a building. It's a community – a "with-one-ness" of people. A church is a unity of people who believe in and love Jesus ... and therefore choose to love one another. That can be very, very challenging. People who believe in and love Jesus are forgiven, saved, and are brothers and sisters – children of God ... but they are still people. And all people (this side of eternity) still have "issues." They still let us down. They are still stubborn. They still bicker. They still complain. They still hurt us. They still squabble. They still can be selfish. Hopefully we're all becoming more like Jesus, but **we all** still sin.

Paul has been addressing concerns about different factions in the church – some followed Apollos, some Paul, and some Peter/Cephas. Paul is emphasizing that what really matters is loving Jesus, following Jesus, and trying to live for Jesus.

When we do take our faith seriously, we may find people wondering a bit about us: especially when we choose to pull ourselves out of bed on frosty Sunday mornings in January, that seem perfect for sleeping in – and we go to church. (Have you noticed that lots of people do get going early enough, for things that really matter to them? The parking lots at ice rinks are full at unearthly hours on the coldest mornings. When stores have sales, folks line up for hours in the bitter cold to get a deal on the latest tech).

The reactions we sometimes get when people discover we love Jesus can be interesting. At a wedding rehearsal a couple of years ago, while we were waiting for the bride and groom to arrive, I was talking with the best man. After a few moments, he asked, "*So why are **you** here? Who are **you**?*" To which I answered, of course, that I was the minister. I would love to have a photo of his shocked face as he blurted out, "*But you're so ... normal.*"

I wonder what his experience of Christians in general – and pastors in particular – had been? I have been a Christian long enough (and now a pastor long enough) that I have become used to some people thinking I am a bit odd because I take God seriously. As a pastor, I must be REALLY strange.

Paul reminds us that, to many people, our faith will seem incomprehensible, irrelevant, or even crazy. But we know it is the truth. It makes sense. It defines our relationships. It clarifies our values. It gives us hope. It just works. We can be confident knowing we have the truth, and the truth has set us free.

We are not perfect yet. We never will be. But – in the community of diversity that is God's people – we aim to become more and more like Jesus, gradually but inexorably. We are never satisfied with who we are right now. We yearn to be the people God created us to be.

May God help us, individually, to become more like Jesus.

And may God draw us together, with all our diversity, into a community that shares His love ...

*Thank You, thank You, thank You, generous God.
You have injected life with joy,
thus we know laughter.
You have dabbed creation with color,
thus we enjoy beauty.
You have whistled a divine tune into the rhythm of life,
thus we hear music.
You have filled our minds with questions,
thus we appreciate mystery.
You have entered our hearts with compassion,
thus we experience faith.
Thank You, God, Thank You. Thank You.
Amen.*

Thursday, January 27: Romans 1:1-17

In the book (and movie) *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, set during the French Revolution, English lord Sir Percy Blakeney and his nobleman friends act like pampered playboys – in public. People think they are frivolous, superficial idiots. As they flit through society circles in eighteenth century Britain their dandy manners cause them to *"suffer the mockery of others, being taken for fools, fops, nitwits, even cowards."*

Really nothing is farther from the truth. As anyone who has read the classic story knows, Blakeney and his friends put on the foolish façade to hide their true selves. Behind closed doors, they are the secretive "League of the Scarlet Pimpernel." In disguise, they make frequent trips to France, risking their necks (literally) to rescue French aristocrats from the guillotine during the French Revolution. Their elaborate schemes, brilliant disguises, and dashing courage – all in secret – are in marked contrast to the ridiculous, foolish, foppish public persona they show in refined English society.

Many people have been mocked as fools over the years, only to be vindicated in the end. People thought Columbus was mad for sail across the Atlantic. Public opinion snickered at Copernicus and Galileo who were convinced the planets revolved around the sun. In the 1960's, the CEO of IBM scoffed at the idea of personal computers in every home.

Over the years, some people have thought those who believe in God (and choose to live their lives according to His priorities) are a little bit loony too. The David Livingstones and Albert Schweizers of the world (wonderfully talented people, potential smashing successes in Europe) who choose to follow God, serving Him in other ways, have always been the object of skepticism and scorn – sometimes even in the church.

Paul, in the Roman colony of Corinth, in Greece, is thought to be a fool, too. Who would believe that the Lord of lords could be Jewish? Surely Caesar was the ultimate lord. Who could believe that a crucified man could be God incarnate? Crucifixion was the most hideous, ignoble, lowly, and despised way to die.

Eugene Peterson translates yesterday's reading in Corinthians 1:18-31 like this: *"The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written, 'I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots.'*

"So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it

came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb – preaching, of all things. – to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

"While Jews clamor for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle – and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself – both Jews and Greeks – Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's 'weakness.'

"Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?"

In today's reading, Paul writes, *"I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks,"* Paul writes, *"both to the wise and the foolish ... For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes"*(1:14-16).

We are "The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel" of 2022 – we may *"suffer the mockery of others, being taken for fools, fops, nitwits, even cowards"* – but we are in the business of saving people from death to life in Jesus. As we reach out in love to others, we are the real heroes our City desperately needs. How can I live for Jesus, today?

*The fruit of silence is prayer:
Lord grant me silence,
The fruit of prayer is faith:
Lord, help me pray.
The fruit of faith is love:
Lord, grant me faith.
The fruit of love is service:
Lord, gift me with love.
The fruit of service is peace:
Lord, help me serve.
Lord, grant me your peace.
Amen*

Friday, January 28: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Have you ever said something and immediately thought, *"That was the stupidest thing to say ..."* But you blurted it out. You can't take it back. You can either apologize or dig yourself in deeper ...

Paul had the natural ability to be a fantastic orator and persuasive speaker. The Book of Acts records several of his brilliant speeches and debates with the great minds of his day. But that isn't what it's all about. Ultimately wonderful speeches and profound arguments don't win the day. God's Spirit does.

Billy Graham was a case in point. I heard him speak in-person on a couple of occasions, watched several of his broadcasts, and read his writings. From a technical point of view, they are not great. His speeches are not particularly well written. His delivery is slow and relatively unemotional. His writing is not as brilliant or profound as many others. But the Holy Spirit has done – and continues to do – incredible things through Billy Graham. I suspect that Graham could say with Paul, *"I came to you in weakness – timid and trembling. And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God"*(2:3-5).

I find this tremendously encouraging. I want to share my faith with other people, but “fear and trembling” may be an appropriate phrase to describe how I often feel about actually doing it. I don’t feel particularly adequate to the task. I don’t have all the answers. I’m afraid I’ll say the wrong thing. I’m not particularly gifted or talented. I don’t want to drive people AWAY from God.

It is God’s power – His Spirit – that does the convicting, converting, and building up – not me.

Yes, it is good for me to think (twice or thrice) before I speak. But at the end of the day, it’s not all about me and what I do or do not say.

I simply need to keep my life centered on Jesus ... and let Him do the rest. He can take my foolishness and use it for His glory.

He can take whatever you offer to Him, and use it for His glory as well. Simply offer all you are to Jesus ...

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

Saturday, January 29: 1 Corinthians 2:6-13

"If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things," says philosopher René Descartes (of "I think, therefore I am" fame). Descartes, one of the masterminds who influenced the Enlightenment and our modern worldview, believed we should reject every example or custom from the past (including Christianity), question everything, and choose only to believe in things that makes sense to **us**, personally.

The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement which transformed the world of ideas in Europe in the 18th century and shaped our modern/postmodern worldviews. Among Enlightenment ideals are an emphasis on logic and reason as the true sources of authority and knowledge, a questioning of religion and traditional wisdom as truth, and a belief in unlimited human possibilities (humanism). Enlightenment values are explicitly enshrined in the U.S. Constitution’s emphasis on "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (note: this was written by Thomas Jefferson – a person influenced by Epicurean (hedonistic), deist (rationalist), and Christian beliefs. It is NOT in the Bible). Ideally, people are “freed” from religion to enjoy their own truth.

Taken to an extreme (as many have done), Enlightenment/modern/postmodern philosophy says there are no absolute truths – only what **we** choose to believe. This sounds like freedom. It sounds wonderful.

And yet ... does life work that way? I am working to improve my French. I may **WANT** to speak and write French any way **I** want (in the way **I** like to speak French) ... but the reality is there are rules to French grammar, rules to French spelling, specific meanings to French words, and definite French idioms which restrict my freedom. To be “free” to speak French, I must follow the rules of French. More than that, I must immerse myself in French culture because the language is part of something much, much bigger and more profound. The challenge of learning a language is that you must submit to an authority beyond yourself and learn a whole worldview/culture. Isn’t that annoying?

Submitting to authority and learning culture is true in all sorts of areas of life from driving a car, to thriving at work or school, to functioning within the laws of Canadian society, to honouring our commitments, to eating in ways that keep us healthy, to playing a sport (like hockey), to obeying the basic laws of physics (like the law of gravity). All have “rules.” They are all part of a reality much, much bigger than us.

Whether we like to admit it, we are not as “free” as we’d like. And yet, paradoxically, when we accept those truths and work with them, life is a whole lot more enjoyable. When we work with, rather than against these absolutes, we are truly free to be the people God created us to be.

Paul is reminding us of God’s wisdom. Last summer we reflected on wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. We reminded ourselves that the good God who created the universe and established those laws of physics, gives us principles for good social and interpersonal relationships, counsels us with wise ethics, and invites us into a personal relationship with Himself. If we want to be really “free,” we work with, rather than against, God’s basic principles and learn the culture of God’s Kingdom. Just as I need to learn “real” French and immerse myself in French culture to be free to enjoy French, to have a full and meaningful life, I need to learn the ways of God’s world, God’s Kingdom, and God’s Spirit. I need to accept His truth and walk with His Spirit.

We choose to submit ourselves to our God’s good authority, so we can really be free. Following Jesus, we can be the people He created us to be. We learn it so we, personally, have full and complete lives.

As a church community, we are invited to learn God’s wisdom. We learn God’s ways and truths so we, as a community, grow and work together well. And we learn God’s wisdom, so we model God’s truth and ways of life to a world that desperately needs Jesus. We invite people to find Jesus, so they immerse themselves in an alternative way of life that will change them and change their world ...

*You, O Lord, who commands us to ask, grant that we may receive.
You have put us on a journey, seeking.
Let us rejoice in finding you.
You have bidden us to knock.
We pray you open the door of your heart to us.
Please direct and govern all our thoughts and actions.
Now and forever, may we see you and entirely devote ourselves to obeying you.
Draw us to yourself, that we may always be yours by obedience and love.
O Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever,
fill our souls, guide our hearts, and direct our steps.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Sunday, January 30: Psalm 57

The email I received was abrupt, blunt, and rude. Apparently, I was doing not only doing nothing right, I was doing everything wrong. It came out of the blue. I was rather taken aback.

A couple of weeks later I bumped into the author in a store. We had a perfectly “normal” conversation. It was as if that previous email had never happened. But when I reread it ... it was really nasty and hurtful.

Isn’t it interesting that some people feel it is OK to send an email/text/Facebook message with words we would never actually say to someone’s face? Email and texts now provide us with a forum to say things which are so rude that, in the past, we would never have expressed them ... Now, anything goes.

Sometimes people don’t treat us with the love, sympathy, and compassion we would like – or expect. Even in church, people do not always act in “Christian” ways (that email? Yes, it was from a Christian). People – even people who believe in Jesus, love Jesus, and (most of the time) try to live for Jesus – can do, say, and write un-Jesus-like things. Christian people are people who still struggle with sin, unfortunately. We are not (yet) perfect people. We can be hurtful to one another. We cannot EXCUSE poor behaviour. It is always wrong, always sinful, and always should be confessed. But, alas, we should not be surprised by it.

Psalm 57 reminds us that we do not strike back at those who attack us or sin against us. Indeed, we must not retaliate. God is the One who ultimately sees justice is done. We don’t have to take matters into our

own hands. ("Vengeance is mine," says the Lord"[Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19]). Let it go.

What can we do when we are hurt? Our responsibility is ...

- to trust in God – to have a steadfast heart (57:7),
- to worship Him – always, in all circumstances (57:8-9, 11), and
- to remember and celebrate His unconditional, faithful love (57:10).

*Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day
in the person of your sick.
While nursing them, I minister to You.
Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise
of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable,
may I still recognize you, and say:
"Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve You."
Lord, give me this seeing faith,
then my work will never be monotonous.
I will ever find joy in humouring the fancies
and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers.*

*Sweetest Lord, make me appreciative of the dignity of my high vocation,
and its many responsibilities.
Never permit me to disgrace it by giving way
to coldness, unkindness, or impatience.
And O God, while you are Jesus my patient,
be a Jesus who is patient with me,
bearing with my faults,
looking only to my intention,
which is to love and serve You in the person of each one of Your sick.
Lord, increase my faith,
bless my efforts and work,
now and for evermore,
Amen.*

Mother Teresa

Monday, January 31: 1 Corinthians 2:13-3:4

In my youth, I took five years of music lessons on an electric organ. I learned to read music. But I just could never "get it." I struggled to play even the simplest pieces – and then not well.

I still cannot clap on beat. I am a lousy dancer. I enjoy music, but it's a struggle to really "feel it" the way some people naturally do. Some people seem to have music flowing through the depths of their being. They can dance/clap/tap their toes in perfect rhythm without even thinking about it. They can play anything – by ear. Music is a totally integrated part of who they are. I envy those people. I'm not like that at all.

Paul is drawing a contrast in this passage between those who really know Jesus in the depths of their souls (who have the music, rhythm, culture of God's Kingdom deeply embedded in their being), and those who may know about Jesus (they can "read the music") but God hasn't changed their lives, their worldview, their values, their ethics, or their relationships. They know the right things. But God is not deep in their souls.

Paul talks about people who are "spiritual," "filled with the Spirit," who "can understand what the Spirit means," "who can know the Lord's thoughts," and "who have the mind of Christ." And he talks about those who "aren't spiritual/filled with the Spirit," "can't receive these truths from God's Spirit," to whom "it all sounds foolish," and who "can't understand it."

Paul is encouraging us to allow God's Spirit – His Spirit of wisdom – to move so deeply into our hearts, minds, souls, beings, and lives, that His Spirit flows naturally and freely in us and through us.

It is possible to keep our knowledge of God at a superficial level: we ascribe to an orthodox statement of faith; we see all the moral evils in the world; we criticize those who are wrong; we judge the sin in the world brilliantly ... but we don't know Jesus in a personal way. We haven't really allowed God's Spirit to transform and change us to be more and more like Jesus. A "person living for Jesus" is not who we really are.

To these people, Paul says, *"I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world?"* If we find ourselves bitter, judgmental, angry, rigid, in conflict, easily annoyed, impatient, unkind ... there's a problem. Jesus wasn't like that.

How did Jesus handle the problems in His world? Did He turn a blind eye? No ... He loved the individual people He met. But He did not start a petition. He did not make angry Facebook posts. He was not cynical. He did not insult people. He did show love and compassion. He did invite people to change – to immerse themselves in the culture of His Kingdom. But He did it in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). He did it through personal relationship.

How do we handle problems in our world in a Christ-like way? We do it through loving the individual people we meet. Through inviting them to learn His ways by immersing themselves, with us, in God's Kingdom. We invite them to meet Jesus. No angry posts. No insults. No sarcasm. No cynicism ... Instead, love and compassion. We do it in genuine love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We do it through personal relationship. Can you do that?

*As I adventure with you today be the compass that guides me,
the light that shines on my path, the only one I follow.
As I adventure with you today be the word that encourages,
the hand that reaches out each time I stumble.
As I adventure with you today let me glimpse our destination
and appreciate the places through which you lead me.
As I adventure with you today be the strength I need to follow
and as the day draws to a close let me rest in your embrace.
Amen.*

John Birch

Tuesday, February 1: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Stop for a moment. What are you thinking about?

- Are you angry with someone? Frustrated with another person?
- Are you thinking about work/school?
- Are you worried – about money, relationships, health, whatever?
- Are you thinking about how thankful you are for your blessings?
- Are you reflecting on God's goodness?

Today, Paul is writing about challenges of dis-unity in the church in Corinth. He asks them a similar question: What are they thinking about? About how some like Paul? And some like Apollos? And how they really don't like one another? They are choosing to think about all the worrisome, bothersome, irritating things in life ... rather than celebrating their blessings. God has given them new life through Jesus. He has given them freedom, through the forgiveness of sin. He has given new friends and a new family – the

church. He has given them purpose and meaning. But they are only seeing the little picky problems.

Imagine waking up on a beautiful spring day (use your imagination ☺). The air is sweet and fresh. The sun is shining. Birds are singing. Flowers are blooming. You have the day off – not a care in the world. You're with the people you love the most. But all you see is that the neighbour's dog has made a mess on the sidewalk. That mess ruins your whole day. You stare at it. You fume. You complain about it. The whole day is just horrible because of that mess. What if you just picked it up? What if you just moved on?

Do we ever behave like that? God is so good to us. Do we see it? Do we appreciate it? Do we enjoy it? Or do we just focus on one little irritant? Dispose of the mess – deal with it – and move on. Enjoy the day. Whatever your irritations are, turn them over to God – let them go – enjoy the day. Part of growing up in Christ is being able to see the wonder of God's gifts and keep our problems in perspective. Enjoy the day.

- You are part of God's field (3:9) – He is at work in your life. Can you see it? Take some time to pray and reflect on how He is at work in your life ... how will you respond? With thanks? With praise? With prayer? If there is a problem, deal with it. Turn it over to God. Enjoy the day.
- You are part of God's building (3:9) – He needs you as He builds His Kingdom. You are essential. You have a key role to play. Have you ever thought about that? Prayed about it? The Kingdom of God is not complete without you ... ask Him to help you see how you can encourage someone, pray for someone, do a random act of kindness, volunteer somewhere, reach out to mend a broken relationship, send an encouraging note, call someone ... Enjoy the day.

*For each step that I might take
Be my guide, O Lord of life.
For each load that I might bear
Be my strength, O Lord of life.
For each mountain I might face
Be my power, O Lord of life.
For each river that might impede
Be my safety, O Lord of life.
For each place where I might rest
Be my peace, O Lord of life.
For each sunrise and sunset
Be my joy, O Lord of life.
Amen*

John Birch

Wednesday, February 2: 1 Corinthians 3:10-23, Matthew 7:24-27

The most important part of any building is the foundation. If you have a solid foundation, with straight walls and square corners, and a level top, the rest of the building will go up strong, straight, and square. But if you cheat on the foundation – if you don't spend the time making sure you get it level, straight, and solid – the whole building is in jeopardy. Without a good foundation the walls won't be straight; the corners won't be square; the floors won't be level; the basement may leak; the whole building may come tumbling down.

It's always worth spending a bit of extra time and money making sure your foundation is perfect – everything else will go so much easier and better. In the long run, if you make sure that foundation is perfect, you will save time, money, stress, aggravation – and grief.

According to these passages, what/who is the perfect foundation for your life? For our church?

- What happens if you build your life on a less than perfect foundation? Anything but Jesus? What does it look like to build *a life* with Jesus as the foundation?
- What happens if we build God's church on a less than perfect foundation? Anything but Jesus?

What does it look like to build **a church** with Jesus as the foundation?

Paul refers to us (corporately, as a church) as God's temple. A temple, in Old Testament and Greek times, was where they believed the presence of the god to be. A temple was literally the god's house. So Paul is saying, we – as God's church – are where the God genuinely is ... He is actually present in us. This is true, of course, because the Holy Spirit fills each of us. And we, individually and corporately, are the presence of God in the world. People around us look at us, as His church, to be God's presence in the world.

So what? We treat the church with honour and respect. We treat one another with honour and respect. We don't criticize. We don't nit-pick. We find ways to constructively build one another up. We strengthen one another. We encourage one another (there is no spiritual gift of discouragement, criticism, or judgment!). We care for one another. We bless one another. We forgive one another. We love one another. We help everyone become all that God desires them to be.

If we are criticizing the church, we are really criticizing ourselves, aren't we? – "**we** are that temple" (3:17).

Pray for our church. Pray that God would help you see how you can be a church-builder, encourager, and helper. What specific thing can you do, today, to build up the church? Who can you build up? Encourage? Forgive? Care for? Bless? Pray for? Love in the name of Jesus? Now ... just do it!

*I enter this day with joy –
knowing you are with me every step of the way,
knowing there is a purpose to each breath that I take,
knowing there is a hope toward which I walk.*

*I enter this day with faith –
knowing you are the strength which I depend on,
knowing you are the love that is all embracing,
knowing it is your peace which calms my soul.*

*I enter this day with praise –
knowing that I worship with service as with voice,
hoping that my words might reveal your truth,
hoping that your grace might touch another heart.
Amen*

John Birch

Thursday, February 3: Ephesians 2:1-10

Mother Teresa said, *"I always say I am a little pencil in God's hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything, and sometimes it is really hard, because I am a broken pencil and he has to sharpen it a little more. Be a little instrument in his hands so that he can use you anytime, anywhere. We have only to say 'yes' to God."*

There are so many wonderful truths in this passage.

- 2:1-9 reminds us that we are saved by God's grace – it's His gift to us – we don't earn it. We are saved by God's amazing grace.
- 2:10 challenges us to live out our faith in action. God has things we CAN do in His kingdom. How do we know what they are? Look around you: who needs encouragement? A helping hand? A kind word? A prayer? A call? Often we look for big, dramatic things, when God actually gives us lots of small opportunities to make a difference many times a day. They seem "small" – in our eyes. But God can do "big" things through those small encounters. Only God knows what the ripple effects of one of your "small" acts of kindness might be.

"Be a little instrument in his hands so that he can use you anytime, anywhere. We have only to say 'yes' to God." Today, who can bless in the name of Jesus? Take a moment to look at the opportunities God has given you, right in your own home, at work, at school, among your friends, in your neighbourhood.

Pray that God would help you see one little thing you can do to bless someone else. And do it ...

*If we had a fraction of the faith in you that you have in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed a fraction of the love that you show to us
then this world would be transformed, Lord
If we possessed a fraction of the patience that you display with us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we shared just a portion of the blessings that we have received from you
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed as much trust in others as you have shown in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we claimed just a fraction of the power you promised to your Church
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
Transform us first, Lord, that we might transform this world
through your love and your power.
Amen.*

John Birch

Friday, February 4: Ephesians 2:11-21

Yesterday we read Ephesians 2:1-10. Paul emphasizes that

1. *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (2:8-9). We are saved by God's amazing grace. It is His gift to us. We do not earn His favour.
2. *"We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago"* (2:10). We are saved for a purpose; to share God's wonderful love with the world. We can encourage, care for, and bless people in all sorts of ways.

Now, in Ephesians 2:11-19, Paul goes on to talk about how we are all "one" in Jesus. There are not first-class (in his case, Jewish) and second-class (non-Jewish) citizens in the kingdom of God. We are "one body," equal citizens in the Kingdom of God, all together in God's family. All thanks to Jesus.

Paul then uses the metaphor of building a temple – the place where God "dwells" (2:20-21).

- The cornerstone is Jesus. The cornerstone is the most important block in the foundation. This is the stone from which every other stone takes its reference. Get the cornerstone right and the foundation will be level, the corners square, the walls straight, and the building strong.
- The foundation is God's Word, given through the apostles and the prophets. We build on the solid truth of God's Word. It is our God-given baseline.
- If we build our lives – and our church – on Jesus and God's Word, the building will be perfect, beautiful, strong ... it will work. Building on any other foundation will lead to disaster.

The other key truth in this metaphor is that we – you and I – are all key "bricks in the wall." What does a building with missing bricks look like? How well does it function? Who we are, how we live, and the "good works" we do are all important. We matter. Without us, the temple will not be complete. It will not function well. It will be less than God desires it to be.

Sometimes we feel we don't have much to contribute. We think we're not important. Nothing could be

further from the truth. The “little” differences you make in the lives of those around you, the prayers you offer on behalf of others, the encouraging words you give ... these all help build God’s Kingdom. Without you, the temple – the church – God’s Kingdom – will be less than God intends it to be.

Today, who can bless in the name of Jesus? Take a moment to look at the opportunities God has given you, right in your own home, at work, at school, among your friends, in your neighbourhood. And do it ...

*May the strength of God pilot us,
May the power of God preserve us,
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the way of God direct us,
May the shield of God defend us,
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Patrick (390-460)

Saturday, February 5: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

My high school in Vancouver was amazingly diverse. Among my circle of friends were kids from Hong Kong, mainland China, Thailand, South Asia, Israel, and a hodgepodge of Europeans from all sorts of backgrounds. I loved the richness of the various cultures ... and the food. I’m sure some people were upset by the changing demographics of the city, but I loved the multiethnic, multi-religious, multi-everything pot pourri.

A church like ours is a community – a community of God’s people. The blessing and challenge of being a community of people is that we are a rich, diverse cultural mix, too. We also are becoming more multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-denominational, multi-everything, too. We all have different gifts, skills, experiences, and abilities (more about this later). Part of our “growing up” in Jesus is to celebrate our not-all-the-same-ness – we are a family from every tribe and nation, every background, every skillset, and every ability. This is what the Kingdom of God is like. Can I enjoy that?

Another challenge of our diversity is to allow people to use their gifts, skills, experiences, and abilities. We’re good about that – most times. But Paul is discovering people don’t always appreciate *his* gifts of teaching and leadership. He is challenging them to grow up and be the people of God. He wants them to be the community of the Kingdom that God yearns for them to be. They are pushing back. They don’t like change. They like the “good old days.” They haven’t done it that way before.

In our church we have leaders – pastors, teachers, Council members, etc. Our philosophy is one of “servant leadership.” As leaders, we serve the church by helping us all be the community God has called us to be. It’s not about power. It is all about servanthood. It’s about being like Jesus. It’s about love.

How can we help our leaders use their gifts? How can we help them be the people God created them to be? How can we encourage them? How can we all work together to build His kingdom?

Today, thank God for our pastors, Church Council, teachers, small group leaders, youth leaders, and other church leaders. Pray for them. They need it. Pray that God would:

- Give them wisdom.
- Encourage them.
- Guide and inspire them.
- Help them be servants of Jesus and servants of us all.
- Teach them.
- Help them stay close to God, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and follow Jesus.

- Give them rest.
- What else ...???

Pray that God would help all of us be the people He created us to be.

*Jesus, You are the ever-living one.
 Jesus, You are without beginning,
 like the Father, and co-eternal with the Spirit.
 Jesus, You are He who made all things out of nothing.
 Jesus, You are the Prince of the angels.
 Jesus, You are He at whom the depths tremble.
 Jesus, You are He who is covered with light as with the garment.
 Jesus, You are He who made us, and fashioned us at birth.
 Jesus, You are He who formed things invisible.
 Lord Jesus, help me see You and know You
 as my King, my Saviour, my God.
 Amen.*

Hippolytus of Rome (165-235)

Sunday, February 6: Psalm 65

What are you thankful for? Take time today to count your blessings ...

As we gather for communion today, we can be thankful for the mercy, forgiveness, and new life we have through Jesus. As David writes, in Psalm 65:3, "*Though we are overwhelmed by our sins, you forgive them all.*" We are not slaves to the Old Testament law. We are not condemned by the Old Testament law. We are saved from sin by Jesus. Thank God for the new beginning, new hope, and new life we have with Jesus.

Psalm 65 also reminds us that all of creation is in God's hands. We tend to think in terms of a very human-centred gospel – God loves people and only people. God's Good News is only for human beings. The rest of His creation is not really important. However, throughout Scripture especially the Psalms, it is clear that the Creator loves and cares for ALL His creation (see Romans 8).

From Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21, the consistent message of God's Word is that God created His universe and our world intentionally, purposefully, beautifully, and meaningfully. The wonders of creation are His glorious art gallery. Together, all of His creation worships Him in a myriad of unique, amazing, glorious ways (Psalms 19, 103 and 148). If this incredible world is God's world, perfectly created and cared for by Him, how, therefore, should we treat it? What are the ethical implications of this?

One of the themes that runs through Scripture as well is that we are God's stewards – His representatives, caretakers, deputies – caring for His creation on His behalf (Genesis 2:15). What does this mean for how we live in His world? How can we be wise, godly stewards of His creation?

Reflect on the words of this classic hymn today:

*This is my Father's world,
 And to my listening ears,
 All nature sings, and round me rings,
 The music of the spheres.*

*This is my Father's world,
 The birds their carols raise,
 The morning light, the lily white,
 Declare their maker's praise.*

*This is my Father's world,
I rest me in the thought,
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
His hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world,
Oh, let me never forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.*

*This is my Father's world,
Why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is king, let the heavens ring,
God reigns, let the earth be glad.*

*This is my father's world,
He shines in all that's fair,
In the rustling grass, I hear him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.*

Give thanks to our glorious God today.

Pray for wisdom as we seek to live for Him today, in practical ways.

Praise Him.

*O my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You,
where and how to find You.
You are my God and You are my all and I have never seen You.
You have made me and remade me.
You have bestowed on me all the good things I possess,
Still I do not know You as much as I long to.
I have not yet done that for which I was made.
Teach me to seek You.
I cannot seek You unless You teach me.
I cannot find You unless You show Yourself to me.
Let me seek You in my desire.
Let me desire You in my seeking.
Let me find You by loving You.
Let me love You when I find You.
Amen*

Anselm (died 1109)