

February 2023

Jesus Changes Everything 2

Readings, Reflections, Prayers from Luke

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Rembrandt, "Head of Christ"

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Monday, January 30: Luke 6:12-19

It's good to have time alone with God. Notice how Luke 6:12 begins. What is Jesus doing up on the mountain? Praying. Alone. Take time, alone, with God.

It's also good to celebrate and pray with other people. Jesus spends lots of time with His closest companions.

By choosing 12 disciples, Jesus is replacing the 12 tribes of Israel. The old days are over. Jesus is establishing a new kingdom, a new reality, more comprehensive, more perfect, and more permanent than the old Israel. This new Kingdom of God is good news of great joy for ALL people from ALL nations for ALL time.

We don't know why Jesus chooses these people to be His associates. They are a diverse bunch, frequently confused, ornery, and impulsive. One, Judas Iscariot, seems to be a faithful follower of Jesus at this point. Does Jesus know Judas will eventually betray Him? We don't know. Judas' presence reminds us even the most (apparently) faithful people can go astray. Jesus chooses to work with these "interesting" characters anyway.

Jesus could have travelled faster and done more on His own. Alone, He wouldn't have to deal with these difficult people every day. Sometimes I grumble, *"It's easier, faster, and better if I just do it myself. I know it will be done right."* Jesus likely felt like that most of the time. But Jesus chooses to invest in people. He teaches them. He mentors them. He lives life with them. His Presence transforms their lives. His Presence also forms leaders. He builds into people who will then build His church after His resurrection.

Take time alone with Jesus. Also take time with people. Who can you invest in? Who needs mentoring? You may not think you have the time or it's worth it. How can you encourage someone else, today?

*Awake in the morning, and the first thing you do ...
Thank God for it, even if you don't feel particularly happy about the day which is to come.
Come to God again with two convictions:
The one is: you are God's own,
and the other is: this day is also God's own;
it is absolutely new, absolutely fresh.
This day is blessed by God, it is God's own,
and now let us go into it with faith.
I walk in this day as God's own messenger.
Whoever I meet, I meet in God's own way.
Whoever I love, I love in God's name.
May I shine your Light, Lord Jesus, into your world today.
Amen*

Anthony Bloom (1914-2003)

Tuesday, January 31: Luke 6:20-26

If you want to inspire people, no speaking coach would recommend beginning with, *"God blesses you who are poor ..."* It might be better to begin, *"God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."* But Jesus doesn't say that in Luke 6. In fact, Jesus never says that anywhere. Neither does Paul. Or Peter. Or John.

Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" (6:17-49) is a summary of what His new Kingdom is all about (like the better known "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7). As relatively affluent westerners, we often spiritualize these principles: Jesus must be talking about the poor *in spirit*, the *spiritually* hungry, *spiritually* sad, etc. That kind of poverty and hunger we can imagine. We can deal with it.

Consider, however an African perspective on this passage. Paul John Isaak is Namibian, Head of the Department of Theology at the University of Namibia, Africa. In an African context, he writes:

"In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus issues a major policy statement of the Kingdom of God. This address explains more about the 'good news to the poor' which He announced in Nazareth and which he had demonstrated in messianic acts throughout Galilee. Now he speaks, and the message is revolutionary – a series of bombshells. The Beatitudes take our standard notions of what is acceptable and turn them upside down. The people who Jesus calls 'blessed' the world would call 'wretched'; the people for whom Jesus prophesies 'woe' are those whom the world professes to admire. He completely overturns the world's values.

"These words must have been addressed to the hungry, powerless, and socially dispossessed people around Jesus. His announcement of the reign of God, with its concrete promise of a better future, must have stirred up long latent hopes for a time when justice would prevail and their present hardships would be past. They saw their present life and condition as a scandal in the eyes of God. But they looked to the future to change this. The preaching of Jesus revitalized the messianic hope. It was this hope that those around Jesus took to heart and understood themselves as the 'little flock' who were heirs of the coming reign of God (12:32).

"The Beatitudes, in Luke's telling, are blunt: 'Blessed are you who are poor.' Throughout his Gospel and in Acts, Luke relentlessly shows Jesus' focus on the poor and reveals early Christian groups having the same concern. This image both haunts and inspires us today as we consider what it means to be a Christian community in a world plagued by poverty.

"When Jesus says the poor are blessed, he is stating a principle. We are responsible for formulating concrete ethics, principles and policies that ensure blessedness for the poor today. Theologically speaking, with God's blessing and under the command of God who co-exists with us, we are invited to take up the task of eradicating poverty while addressing and finding solutions to the challenges facing Africa and the world at large. The church has a critical role to play in ensuring that the voices of the poor reverberate in the halls of public policy. The location of many churches in the midst of poverty creates strategic opportunity for the faith community to work to eradicate poverty." (Africa Bible Commentary, p. 1216)

Isaak's insight, from one of the poorest countries of the world, challenges us. Yes, Jesus does address our spiritual poverty and hunger. Jesus is also passionately concerned about physical poverty and hunger, too. "Integral mission" – Word and deed – spirit and body – is what Jesus' good news is about.

- How can we care for the poor/hungry in our community? Soup Kitchen? Food banks? Can we also pray about and dream of ways to deal with some of the **root causes** of poverty? How can we prevent people from becoming poor or homeless and requiring those services? There are good things happening in our community. How can we support those initiatives?
- How about globally? Of course, we cannot end global poverty/hunger instantly. But "Gifts for Change" from CBM – a goat/well/education etc. – can be transformative, with potential ripple effects we cannot imagine. Why not use these gifts for birthdays/anniversaries? <https://www.cbmin.org/hopefulgifts/>

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
Help me live one day at a time.
Help me enjoy one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.
Help me take as this sinful world as it is, as Jesus did,
If I surrender to Your will,
I trust that You will make all things right.
May I be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.*

Boethius (480-524 martyred for his faith)

NOTE: This prayer is usually attribute to theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). Niebuhr always denied writing it and credited it to Friedrich Oetinger (1702-1782). Scholars now trace it's roots back to Boethius, a Christian executed by the Goth king, Theodoric, in 524 AD.

Wednesday, February 1: Luke 6:27-36

The Kingdom of God is upside down from what we expect. Instead of emphasizing power, possessions, and pride, Jesus values humility, love, and compassion. *"Do to others as you would like them to do to you"* (6:31) sums up Jesus' ethic. If everyone did that, imagine what a different place the world would be?

Most major religions/philosophical schools share variations of this principle,

- *"Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you."* (Isocrates, 436-338 BC)
- *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."* (Hillel the elder, Judaism)
- *"One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self."* (Hinduism)
- *"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."* (Buddhism)
- *"Try not to do things to others that you would not like them to do to you."* (Scientology)

However, these are NEGATIVE expressions of the Golden Rule: **DON'T** do what you **DON'T** want done to you. Jesus – and only Jesus – words it positively: **DO** good things. **DO** the best for the other person. What difference does wording this command positively make in how we choose to live?

- Do I ever pause before I do something and ask myself if this how I would like to be treated?
- Do I pause before I say something and ask if I would like to hear those words spoken to me?
- Do I take God's command to *"DO love my neighbour as myself"* and practice it?

What if we followed Mom's advice: *"If you can't say something good, to say anything at all"*? What if we broadened this to include: *"If you can't do something nice, don't do anything at all"*? We should probably add, *"If you can't text/tweet/Facebook/email/Pinterest/Instagram something good, don't text/tweet/Facebook/email/Pinterest/Instagram anything at all."*

What if we worded it positively: *"DO something good for someone – anything at all, just do it."*?

Jesus challenges us to live differently. In His Kingdom, we don't choose anger, judgement, or revenge. We choose love. Is it possible to love our enemies (6:27)? Can we actually, *"Do good to those who hate us"*? Those who choose to love and forgive can change the world.

Abraham Lincoln commented, *"Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"* Of a political opponent, he said, *"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."* Great counsel. One act of mercy and forgiveness can change a person's life. One kind deed can become a snowball of grace.

This sort of behaviour isn't possible in our own strength. This is where we really need Jesus' help. As we spend more time with Jesus, it's possible to develop these qualities of character that don't come naturally to us.

*As I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me
even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns
and be open to what God is asking of me.
I choose to allow my loving Creator to guide me and form me.
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.
Is there someone I need to pray for? Then I bring them to Jesus.
Is there a situation that needs His healing touch? Then I invite Him in.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.*

Thursday, February 2: Luke 6:37-42

Liz Pacey writes, *"My mother was a great believer in giving people the benefit of the doubt. I would sometimes visit her full of some injustice I thought I'd suffered. And did I get sympathy? No, absolutely not. She was much more likely to wonder aloud whether the other person might be having a bad day and how that might affect their judgement."*

Jesus wants us to give the benefit of the doubt, too. Rather than judging people we show generosity in forgiving and giving, even when we think they deserve judgment. Can we do that?

When the Bible lists gifts of the Holy Spirit, "finding fault" is **NOT** one of them (Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, etc). Spiritual gifts **do NOT** include "criticism," "cynicism," or "fault finding." Spiritual gifts **DO** include blessings like "serving," "teaching," "encouragement," "giving," "leadership," "mercy," and "help."

Have you ever found yourself judging another person ... only to realize your own issues are as many or more? Have you found yourself judging another person, and NOT realizing your own problems? It is SO easy to spot the speck of sawdust in the other person's eye and so hard to see the 2x4 in our own. We can be aware of little faults in others, while we ignore our own big problems. Jesus calls us out.

The ability to recognize our own personal shortcomings is something we need to pray about. What issues are there in your life that you're not dealing with? Ask God. Once you recognize them, deal with them.

I love the description of giving in verse 38: this isn't a case of grabbing a last-minute present, it's a matter of thinking about and finding a gift that's absolutely perfect. Forgiveness is similar. We can glibly say, "I forgive you," and not mean it. The actual work of forgiving from the heart and choosing to love again is hard work. We need God's help to truly forgive.

Mahatma Gandhi said, *"I look only to the good qualities in people. Not being faultless myself, I won't presume to probe into the faults of others."* In our relationships with other people, let's be gracious. May we DO for them what we would like done for us (6:31).

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

Friday, February 3: Luke 6:43-49

Be careful if you buy a house on the edge of the coulee in Lethbridge. The view may be great. But Lethbridge is built on loosely consolidated sediment, not solid rock. If you live on the coulee and you overwater your lawns or we have heavy rains, the ground along the coulee edge can liquify and flow downhill (the geographic term is solifluction).

Jesus understands this. He concludes His message by comparing a house built on a solid rock foundation with

a house NOT built on a solid foundation (in a parallel story, in [Matthew 7:24-27](#), He describes the second house as built on sand). The two houses may look the same above ground, but when the rains come, you discover one house is built on solid rock. The other is not.

Of course, Jesus is not teaching civil engineering. He is talking about our lives. In life, we all experience sudden storms: illness, death, loss of a job, family crisis. What then? Is God our solid foundation? Or not?

Other times, houses can suffer insidious damage caused by water seeping under the surface, slowly undermining, rotting, and destroying the structure. The same subtle, long-term damage can happen in our lives, too. Problems in life can happen slowly. A tiny lie, for example, can lead to bigger and bigger untruths that make things worse. A wrong remembered and unforgiven can fester into a bitter, broken relationship. A bad habit can become an addiction that harms us and those we love. Loneliness, depression, bitterness, and resentment can create major problems. Is God our solid foundation? Or not?

Jesus warns us that whatever our lives are built upon will come out. What is in our heart will be revealed. The effects of not having a solid foundation built on God will be evident.

The solution is to *"dig deep and lay the foundation (of your life) on solid rock."* What is the solid rock? Jesus (of course). The bigger issue is, how do we dig deep and lay that foundation ...

- Paul John Isaak, in Namibia, writes: *"The essence of Christianity is not merely a belief and a confession ('you call me "Lord, Lord"') that can be separated from the way we walk in the world ('and not do what I say'). When the whole self responds totally to one Lord, the result is an indissoluble union between confession and walk or between faith and good works."* Walk the talk.
- Tom Wright adds, *"The question is: are we today so keen on looking for specks in other people's eyes that we can't see the planks in our own? Do our plans and schemes look good on the outside but leave the heart untouched? As we building with a foundation? As we ask those questions about ourselves, and watch out in case we are lured into those traps by others, we must maintain, as our basic rule of life, the generous, free-spirited approach of the previous parts of the sermon. Jesus' radical offer of new and abundant life is so all-embracing, and hence all-demanding, that people try to find alternative ways. These must be resisted, or the house will come down with a crash."*
- *"A biblical text or exhortation from Jesus is not really understood until it is applied. The disciple who responds to Jesus and does what He calls for can stand up to the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. The disciple who learns to see and act in the world as Jesus calls the disciple to do is able to face the floods, that is, the disappointments and injuries that life often brings. In contrast, to ignore His teaching is to be set up to suffer a tragic loss. As sad as it is to lose one's home in a flood, it is sadder still for one's life to be swept away because the call and advice of God was ignored."* (Darrel Bock)

What is Jesus saying to you in this passage? How can you make this part of your life?

*Jesus, you came as one bringing peace,
and told us to greet people with a word of peace,
not hostility, or judgment.
May your blessing flow through me,
so that when I leave people, they may feel approved of,
contented and tranquil in the love of Jesus,
shown through me.
Who can tell what a day may bring forth?
Cause me, therefore, gracious God,
to live every day as if it were to be my last,
for I know not but that it may be such.
Cause me to live now as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Saturday, February 4: Luke 7:1-10

Jesus is “amazed” only twice in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). One time, He’s amazed at people’s unbelief in His hometown, Nazareth ([Mark 6:6](#)). This time, He’s amazed by this person’s faith (7:9). This amazing man is not Jewish. He’s a Roman, in Jewish eyes, a “Gentile Dog.” He represents the political and military oppression of Rome. And yet this foreigner models “amazing” faith in Jesus. The centurion’s conviction that Jesus can heal – even at a distance – goes way beyond the faith of Jesus’ countrymen.

Centurions are the Sergeant-Majors of the Roman army. They are battle-hardened, no-nonsense veterans. They are the first into battle and the last out. They can be rough, tough, and hard. But this centurion has a good relationship with the Jews. He is generous. He understands authority without being authoritarian. He recognizes the signs of God’s power, words, and presence in Jesus. He believes in Jesus. His faith in Jesus really is amazing.

This veteran soldier cares about **a servant**. The sick person is not a wife, son, daughter, or even a fellow Roman. In the 1st Century, servants were locals. And they were nobodies. They had no rights. They were commodities, labour-saving devices, bought and sold at auction. This centurion sees beyond status to see a person created by God. He values this slave as a fellow human being. His love for a “non-person” is radical. It certainly exceeds the lack of compassion for slaves among the Jewish leadership.

This soldier is a military officer: as a member of the occupying army, he has every right to order Jesus to obey him. Instead, he “earnestly begs” Jesus to come. He is a Gentile: according to Jewish Law, a Jew, like Jesus, must not enter the centurion’s home. But Jesus is going. His good news is for ALL people.

The centurion never does meet Jesus. But he has amazing faith.

We never “see” God either, but we can still believe in Him. Do I have faith? What do I believe God can do?

*Thank you, Lord, for all your blessings.
Praise you, Lord, for your grace and mercy.
When we pray and praise, the powers of Satan are destroyed.
Help me to pray unceasingly for other people.
Though your grace and power, the person that falls can rise again.
May all people come to know the way to God and follow it.
May all people come to know you as Saviour and King.
May all people have opportunity to know your love and become your disciples.
Lord, help me to meet angry outbursts with gentleness,
boastfulness with humility,
reviling with prayers,
error with constancy in the faith,
harshness with meekness.
May I never return tit for tat.
May I not just have Jesus Christ on my lips, but also in my heart.
Help me not just call myself a “Christian,” but to be one.
Amen*

Ignatius of Antioch (35-108)

Sunday, February 5: Luke 7:11-17

Imagine we are walking with Jesus, His disciples, and a large crowd toward the gates of a village (7:11). Another large crowd, a funeral procession, is coming out of town (7:12). One crowd is rejoicing. The other crowd is mourning. The two crowds meet.

The funeral is for a widow’s son. Her only son. This lady is now destitute. Her husband is already dead. Now her only son is gone. In a world where men are the providers and women have few (if any) prospects to earn an income other than by begging or prostitution, she is without hope. Her life is over. This is a crisis.

The two crowds should go their separate ways. After all, when you're grieving, the last thing you want are joyful revelers. And when you're having a party, the last thing you want to deal with is tragedy. Jesus crosses over from the celebration to the funeral. He changes crowds. He is filled with compassion for the widow. Something profound is happening here.

Back then, for a man to speak to a strange woman is as unthinkable as a Roman centurion asking a favour of a Jewish rabbi or a master caring for the well-being of a slave (7:1-10). To us these rules seem silly. In Jesus' culture they are impenetrable barriers. Jesus loves to break cultural rules: *"In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith ... there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:27-28). That was radical then. It's still radical now.

Do we think some people are more special or less special than others? Jesus doesn't.

Remember how Jesus described the "good news" of the Kingdom? *"The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor ..."* (4:18-19). We see a slave cured of illness (7:1-10). Now a dead man is sitting up and talking. God, the King, has come. He is sovereign over everything, even sickness and death. This is great news.

- **Jesus is in control** – the Kingdom of God is real and relevant, even if the world seems chaotic. I may not understand what Jesus is (or is not) doing right now, but I know He is King. I can be at peace.
- **The Kingdom of God is a place of joy and celebration.** Jesus cares for all, especially those the suffering, hurting, grieving, and poor. In Jesus's presence there is joy, peace, love, and hope. Whether I am struggling with illness, grief, loneliness or economic hardship, Jesus meets me where I am, walks with me, and invites me to find joy in His presence.
- **We have good news to *experience*.** In the hard times, I can count on Jesus. He may not heal me physically or raise a loved one from the dead, but His Spirit is with me every moment. I am not alone. And I can look forward to a time when, *"God will wipe every tear from their eyes; there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain"* (Revelation 21:4).
- **We have good news to *share*:** *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith ..."* We have an invitation to ALL people to *"taste and see that the Lord is good."* We can share God's forgiveness and eternal life. But our good news is much bigger. It is about the power and presence of God, moment-by-moment, day-by-day, today and every day, from now into eternity.
- **We have good news to *live out*.** God forgives/saves/fills us. Now we can share His love with others. We are the love of God as we work, study, love our neighbours, visit those in hospital, call a friend – whatever, wherever. Who are those who are lonely, in pain, in need of compassion? How can I reach out with His love?

Today, how can I be like Jesus?

*O God, be all my love,
all my hope,
all my striving ...
Let my thoughts and words flow from you,
My daily life be in you,
And every breath I take be for you.
May your Kingdom come in me.
May your Kingdom come through me.
Amen.*

John Cassian, 360-435

Monday, February 6: Luke 7:18-35

If God were a human being, what would He look like? A bearded old man? A stern judge? An awe-inspiring warrior? If God were a human being, would He really look like Jesus? This is exactly what John is wondering.

John the Baptist is a towering figure – fearless, outspoken, quick to notice others' needs, but indifferent to his

own. He is a prophet, if ever there was one. Yet his greatest moment is pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God: *"This is how my own happiness is made complete. He must increase and I must decrease"* (John 3:30). He watches his followers move to Jesus. He is content to spend His life pointing away from himself to Jesus. He rejects the cult of his own importance. Jesus is the One who matters.

Jesus' compassion, mercy, and love are signs He is the promised Messiah. For John, in prison, this affirms that his work is done. He has prepared the way. His job is done. He has done well.

What can we learn from John?

- John has doubts and questions. It's OK to doubt and ask questions. That's how we grow.
- We don't like playing second fiddle; we love to be important. We love to be loved. John's life challenges us: are we willing to let others have the limelight? Can we do what's right, even if it means not getting the attention we'd like?
- God's Spirit is at work. Look at the world around you, at your life, at the lives of those you love: God is at work. Now. God is doing amazing things. Now. The Kingdom of God has come. Now.

What can we learn from Jesus?

- God's Kingdom is love and grace. Jesus redefines Jewish expectations for the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. The Jews want a warrior-king and an earthly kingdom. Jesus' declaration about Himself (7:22-23) comes directly from Scripture ([Isaiah 61:1-2/Luke 4:18-19](#)). Jesus simply says: *"Look at Scripture then look at what's happening. Ask the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor – they get it."* Jesus' compassion, mercy, and love are evidence He IS the promised Messiah, the One in and through whom God saves his people. Jesus models a world where God reestablishes peace and justice, as promised in the prophets, by love and grace, not military might and power (see [Isaiah 11:1-9](#)).
- The Kingdom of God is a party. Some folks felt John's ascetic life was more godly than Jesus' "fun" life. After all, religious people are austere, dour people, right? Does it challenge your image of Jesus that *"the Son of Man feasts and drinks"* and people say, *"He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners"* (7:34)? Can we love Jesus and enjoy life? Can we have (good, clean) fun? If our goal is to be like Jesus, yes. This is part of being like Him.

The Kingdom of God has come. It's a party. The Spirit is at work. Celebrate. Enjoy the new life you have in Jesus today. He has given us the freedom to be joyful people (and invite others to the party).

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

Tuesday, February 7: Luke 7:36-50

Jesus is glad to spend time with a religious Pharisee. We're often hard on Pharisees. But Pharisees are good, religious people who live exemplary moral and religious lives. They take God and Scripture seriously. They are the good "church-goers" of their day. Those are good things. The Pharisees' mistake is they equate spirituality with **doing** religious things. Being "good" people who **do** all the right things, they feel justified judging people who don't live up to their standards. They often come across as self-righteous, judgmental, unloving, and arrogant. Hopefully we don't come across that way.

Jesus is also willing to meet with “outsiders,” people who are not religious or “good.” Jesus spends time with people with physical diseases (Luke 5:17-26), tax collectors (Matthew 9:9-13), and people with “sin issues,” like this lady. We don’t know exactly what her past was, but the words “*a sinful life*” suggest prostitution. God loves not-so-good people, too. He welcomes them. Then He changes them.

The lady has met Jesus before. Jesus comments her many sins ***have already been forgiven***. He tells her, “Your faith ***has saved*** you” (both past tense). At some point, He has dealt with her past. Imagine what their first meeting might have been like. In her world, she would know the Kingdom of God is only for “good” people. She was definitely not “good.” She came to Jesus in desperation. He saw her faith, deep under the layers of sin. He forgave her. He gave her a new start. This is good news: no one is beyond God’s love.

Now, this lady comes to anoint Jesus’ feet. She wants to express her deep thanks. In this culture, the standard welcome would be the **host** would greet his guest with a kiss and anoint his **head** with oil. A **slave** would wash and anoint the guest’s **feet**. This lady, overwhelmed by God’s forgiveness, is doing for Jesus what both a host and a slave would do, and more. Before she can get her jar of expensive oil open, however, she bursts into tears. Then, trying to make things better, she makes them worse. She lets down her hair. This is something only a prostitute would do in public. She kisses and wipes Jesus’ feet. How does Jesus respond? Embarrassed? Offended? No. He accepts her love and devotion, gently and patiently.

Simon, a religious Pharisee, is watching. He is horrified Jesus allows this woman draw near. If Jesus were a genuine prophet, He would know what kind of woman she is and turn her away. Jesus even lets her touch Him. Unthinkable. Now, by Simon’s religious rules, Jesus is “unclean.” Jesus welcomes everyone.

Jesus is much more than a prophet: He sees through Simon: “*Simon, I have something to tell you. Two people owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him \$5,000 and the other \$500. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?*” How would you answer? Like Simon? What is Jesus saying in this parable?

The “degree” of debt is one of Jesus’ points. Jesus also points out ***BOTH*** people owe a debt they cannot pay. In the eyes of the law, ***both*** are guilty. The amount of debt doesn’t matter; they are both in debt. Simon might be a “better” person than this lady, but he is guilty, too. We all are. Simon misses Jesus’ point. Do we?

The woman is guilty of sins of ***CO***mmission. She did bad things. Simon is guilty of sins of ***O***mission. He doesn’t do the right thing. He hasn’t welcomed Jesus as he ought. His religion is about legalism, not love.

Jesus is gracious to all who come to Him, love Him, and desire to follow Him. He welcomes us all. He forgives us all. How do we respond? The result of faith ought to be love and worship. Worship is allowing the truth of God’s love and grace to fill our whole being. As a result, our lives are transformed. We become more loving people. Archbishop William Temple writes, “*To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; and to devote the will to the purpose of God.*”

“Good” worship is not about what happens Sunday morning. “Good” worship is about our hearts – Monday, Tuesday ... through Sunday. Worship is living, thankfully and prayerfully, in Jesus’ presence, in all ways, at all times. Worship is living in the Spirit, through the ups and downs, every day. We offer every part of our lives as living sacrifices to God: our thoughts, our activities, our plans, our words, our hopes, our steps, our fears, and our bodies (Romans 12:1). How will you worship God this week?

*O Lord, teach me to seek you,
and reveal yourself to me when I seek you.
For I cannot seek you unless you first teach me,
nor find you unless you first reveal yourself to me.
Let me seek you in longing, and long for you in seeking.
Let me find you in love, and love you in finding.
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397)

Wednesday, February 8: Luke 8:1-15

In C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, one of the four main characters is a girl named Susan. In the early books, Susan is a follower of Aslan (the Jesus' figure). She knows Aslan/Jesus personally and serves Him bravely and faithfully.

If you have read the *Narnia* books you know how enjoyable, wonderful, and exciting walking with Aslan/Jesus can be. There are hard times, but Jesus (in Narnia, Aslan) is always there. In the Kingdom of God, as we walk with God through all the circumstances of life, we can discover the wonder, joy, peace, hope, and love that come from living with Him.

But in the final book, *The Last Battle*, Susan is conspicuously absent. Her brother, Peter, says she is *"no longer a friend of Narnia"* (i.e. Jesus and the Kingdom of God). A friend comments, *"Oh Susan. She's interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations."* Another adds, *"She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can."* Susan, herself, when asked about Aslan/Jesus and Narnia/the Kingdom of God, comments, *"What wonderful memories you have. Fancy you still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children."* Susan has let life – the hard path, weeds, birds, nylons, lipstick, and invitations – distract her from her true calling as a child of God. She is lost in a frivolous, empty world. Some of us, like Susan, lose our way, too.

C.S. Lewis, in response to a question from one of his readers, wrote about Susan, *"The books don't tell us what happens to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there's plenty of time for her to mend and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country (heaven) in the end ... in her own way."*

Jesus' parable speaks of God's hope that everyone will hear the Word of God, welcome it, and hold it fast. Like Susan at her best, we walk with Jesus as our King and Companion always. We keep faith. The result is we bear fruit (What fruit? *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* [Galatians 5:22-23]).

- What are the hard places in my life – places where I don't let the Word of God soak in? What parts of my life do I refuse to allow Him to enter? Why?
- What are the rocks that cause my faith to wilt? What tough times cause me to wander away?
- What thorns/weeds choke out my love for God? What distractions, activities, worries, concerns, pastimes, and priorities take time and energy away from God?

Where are we in Jesus' parable? I may not be silly or conceited, like Susan (or maybe I am?), but what are my issues? What do I need to deal with? The good news is that there is always time for us to mend. What do you need to talk with Jesus about today?

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

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Thursday, February 9: Luke 8:16-21

Believing in Jesus is counter cultural. As Jesus models a Spirit-filled, godly life, He shows us life is not about gaining power, accumulating wealth, being famous, or "getting ahead." It is about love, compassion, grace, forgiveness, justice, and mercy. In a dark world, Jesus' life shines as a beacon of hope. People who, filled with a genuine love for Jesus, live those values, shine like lights today, as well.

Following on from the parable of the sower, Jesus makes the point that hearing the Word leads to bearing fruit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) and shining as light. If we genuinely love Jesus, it will show in who we are and how we live. Of course, we will never be perfect.

C.S. Lewis once told a story about a "*nice young man*" and a "*cantankerous old maid*" (his words, not mine). Lewis asks, "*Who's the Christian?*" He says, "*There is no way to tell: maybe the nice young man is NOT a Christian – who knows how much nicer he would be if he were a Christian? Maybe the cantankerous old maid IS a Christian – who knows how much more cantankerous she would be if she were not a Christian?*" Some of us are nicer than others. God, through His Spirit, can make us even nicer. Some of us are a bit more cantankerous than others. But God, through His Spirit, can de-cantankerize us. The point is not so much where we are now, but what direction are we moving in. Are we becoming more and more like Jesus? Becoming nicer? Are we not changing at all? Are we moving further away from Jesus? Becoming less nice?

In Matthew 12:48-49, when Jesus' mother and brothers want to speak to Him, He asks a question: "*Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?*" Then he points to his disciples and said, "*Look, these are my mother and brothers. **Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven** is my brother and sister and mother.*"

When we love Jesus, He sees us as His own brothers, sisters, and mothers. We are His family – His **immediate** family (not some distant cousin-in-law, twenty times removed). You are His brother. You are His sister. How does that make you feel? How might that effect the way you live?

*O Lord, I don't know what you will bring into my journey today.
But I am willing to see and listen to your Spirit's leading.
I bring before you the distress and dangers of peoples and nations,
the pleas of the imprisoned and the captive,
the need of the refugee,
the weariness of the despondent,
the suffering of the oppressed,
and the diminishment of the aging.
O Lord, stay close to them all.
Help me to find the opportunities to encourage those in my path, today.
O Lord, help me be Jesus to those I meet.
At very least encourage me to pray for those who cross my mind.
Spirit of the living God, be merciful to those who suffer.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Friday, February 10: Luke 8:22-25

Katshushika Hokusai's 19th-century woodblock print, [The Great Wave off Kanagawa](#), shows a giant wave dwarfing a distant snow-capped Mount Fuji, Japan. In two small fishing boats, miniscule sailors flinch for one final second, before being totally destroyed (it brings up eerie memories of the tsunami in 2011).

A century later, Monika Liu Ho-Peh, painted a storm at sea in her painting, [Stilling of the Tempest](#). In a similar storm, Christ is her focal point. He is standing on the prow of a small fishing boat, tunic billowing in the squall, face serene, arms cruciform, hands flexed in rebuke. He shelters His 12 disciples who grip gunwales, oars, the mast, a rope, and one another in terror. Jesus is clearly in control. The sailors are not.

Luke and Mark ([Mark 4:35-41](#)) both tell this story. Mark focusses on Jesus. Luke tells the story from the disciples' viewpoint. They feel like the terrified fishermen in Hokusai's woodcut. They can identify with the terror of the 12 in Liu Ho-Peh's painting. They're certain they're about to die. Then Jesus speaks. All is calm.

He asks His disciples, *"Where is your faith?"* The disciples, terrified and amazed, ask each other, *"Who is this man? When he gives a command, even the wind and waves obey him."*

There are times in our lives when we feel like the storm-tossed sailors. The waves of life are crashing over us. We cling to whatever gunwales, oars, masts, ropes, or people we can find. We're desperate. Maybe, we cry out to Jesus. Maybe we pray: *"Master, Master, we're all going to die."* Sometimes it feels like Jesus is sleeping through our tempests.

Notice ...

1. **Hurricanes happen.** Jesus doesn't prevent the storm. Storms in life happen, even to those close to Jesus. Bad (and good) things happen to the godly and the not-so-godly. That's life.
2. **We may be afraid.** Fear is human. Fear, if it draws us closer to Jesus, is OK. Fear, if it leads to panic, destroys us. Nelson Mandela said, *"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."*
3. **We can conquer the fear.** How? By recognizing Jesus is in the boat with us. If we could see the reality of the spiritual world as clearly as we see physical reality, we would see Jesus is in front of us, sheltering us, caring for us, providing for us a way through the storm. He is in control. Always. Like the Saviour in Liu Ho-Peh's painting, we can cling to Him.
4. **Jesus can give us peace.** In the midst of the chaos, He can actually give us "calm." His peace.

Pioneer missionary to China, Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), said, *"God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him."* Faith often looks more like taking small steps forward, following Jesus, holding on to Jesus, and trusting Jesus in the storms. Faith is rarely a dramatic, death-defying leap. It's following Jesus one step at a time. What small step of faith might you need to take this week?

*Lord, sometimes when I read, I see the words,
but I do not feel or think them.
Sometimes when I read I feel the words,
but do not think them.
Sometimes when I read I think the words,
but do not feel them.
An act of the will cannot make me feel, nor keep my mind from wandering.
An act of the will can only make me read.
So I shall read the words, Lord,
And invite Your Holy Spirit to do the rest:
Guide my mind and my heart as You will.
Amen.*

Saturday, February 11: Luke 8:26-39

God's good news is for ALL people of ALL nations. That was the blessing Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, were supposed to pass on ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)). Jesus is finally fulfilling the mission at which they failed. He is enlarging His disciples' understanding of the kingdom of God: God's good news is not just for Israel, it's for ALL the world. God's love and grace are for ALL people. As a person without Jewish DNA, I'm so thankful.

The region of the Gerasenes (known as Decapolis or the Ten Cities) is non-Jewish territory (they're raising pigs, something no Jewish community would do). Today we might call this Palestinian territory. According to religious people like the Pharisees, a Jewish rabbi like Jesus should not be here.

So far, many Jews see Jesus as a great teacher. But they don't recognize Him as the Messiah. The only beings who "get it" are angels and demons (Luke [4:34](#), [4:41](#)). This demon-possessed Palestinian "gets it." He

declares Jesus is "*the Son of the Most High God.*" God's good news is for everyone.

During the storm at sea, Jesus' Jewish disciples were surprised by Jesus' authority (8:21-25). This evil spirit (more accurately, this regiment of evil spirits) has no problem recognizing Jesus' power and authority. It/they know He can instantly banish them to "the bottomless pit." They know who Jesus is and what He can do.

I've noticed some Christians believe in God, but don't expect God will do much. Meanwhile some non-Christians really believe God can do amazing and miraculous things. They're flabbergasted by our lack of faith.

Theologian, Craig Gay, writes, "*Thathu, a theological student I teach, recently cast out a demon from a farm worker in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands (South Africa). Just days afterwards, Thathu received the farm owner's blessing to pastor a church in a disused outbuilding there, for many spiritually hungry labourers who had come to believe in Jesus along with the cleansed man. Animist worldviews enable most of the world's peoples to identify the realities of demon possession, but affluent postmodern minorities are unaware of demonic elements ensnaring them through addictive Internet use and cyber-living, frenetic busyness, excessive eating, or compulsive shopping. The Gerasene's new-found discipline of solitude, and Jesus' requirement of homeliness after years of spiritual vagrancy (v 39), are qualities foreign to many in an increasingly spaced-out, globalised and technology-driven culture, with its gravitational pull of hype, extreme mobility and individual isolation.*"

Gay has some provocative and interesting thoughts on "demon possession" in our culture: "*addictive Internet use and cyber-living, frenetic busyness, excessive eating, compulsive shopping ...*" What else could we add? What things pull us away from God? What else do we put our faith in, other than God?

This man wanted to spend time with Jesus. That's a good thing, isn't it? Yes, it is ... but our faith is something to be lived and shared. While we do need to spend time with Jesus in study, solitude, and prayer, *the purpose of that is so we can share what we know about God's amazing love with those we love.* Spiritual disciplines like prayer, solitude, and study are not intended as ends in themselves. Disciplines are tools to help us know Jesus, so we can share our faith and lives. An old Jewish proverb says, "*Whatever you have learned, you have the responsibility to teach.*"

This story is a microcosm of Jesus' ministry. He delivers us from the evil crippling us (think about some of those "forces" in Gay's quote). He restores our true dignity, humanity, self-worth, and social standing. He makes us whole. He recreates to be who He created us to be, made in the image of God. And Jesus gives us a commission and a purpose, "*Go back to your home, and tell them what God has done for you*" (8:39).

We don't need a Ph.D. in theology to share what God is doing in our lives (I know several people with Ph.D's in theology: one or two have spent lots of time studying **about** Jesus, but not much time living **with** Jesus). Jesus challenges us simply to tell people what He has done for us. Live your faith. Share your story.

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

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Sunday, February 12: Luke 8:40-56

Does Jesus love some people more than others? So far, He has shown His grace and mercy to Jewish, Roman, and Palestinian people. He has shown grace to healthy people, ill people, "sinful" people, demon-possessed people, and even dead people. Jesus wants us ALL to know He is the Messiah for ALL people – Jewish, Palestinian, Roman, healthy, ill, good, "sinful" – whoever.

Jesus is returning to Jewish Galilee. After a whirlwind adventure of tempests, culture shock, and casting out of demons, His disciples need rest. They need to debrief. But they are swamped by more people, all wanting Jesus. Luke packs his narrative with people from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of issues and emotions, all coming to Jesus. Jesus welcomes them all.

For instance, Jesus is met by a grief-stricken father who is watching his 12-year-old daughter die. If that isn't enough, at the same moment a desperate woman reaches out to touch Jesus. This lady has seen her own health deteriorating for the same 12 years.

In Jairus' timeline, Jesus doesn't have time for both problems: his little girl is dying. His little girl matter most. Jairus knows Jesus does NOT have time for this bothersome lady.

What happens? Jesus has time for each one. Jesus can handle both, just fine. Jesus is not under any deadlines, even if we are. He always has time for each of us.

"Don't be afraid; just believe ..." (8:50). That's Jesus' message to Jairus, and to us (the phrase, *"Don't be afraid"* occurs over and over in the Bible). When life is falling apart, it's a challenge to not be afraid. The good news is we never face these crises alone. God is always with us. Eleanor Roosevelt wisely said, *"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'"*

We believe/trust/have faith all the time. We put our lives in the hands of doctors, drivers, and airplane pilots without reservation. These are fallible, human people. If we trust these strangers, why would we not trust God, the Creator of the universe, the One who loves us, the wonderful Lord who is with us? It's an interesting question to think about, isn't it?

"Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations," says theologian, Elton Trueblood. Pioneer missionary, Hudson Taylor, comments, *"God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him ..."* Face your fears. Give them to Jesus. Trust Him. Follow Him.

"Take the first step in faith," says Martin Luther King Jr., *"You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."* Take a step forward ... and another step ... and another step. As we do that, we discover Jesus is more than faithful ... and powerful.

*The mountains I face are dark and foreboding.
The valleys I face are deep and dangerous.
But I will hold to that refrain in your Word, heard over and over again:
"Do not be afraid."*

*"Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me." (Psalm 23:4)*

*"If God is for us, who can be against us?
I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love.
Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God
that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)*

*Lord, grant me the strength to walk with you, in faith.
Give me the courage to serve you, in faith.
Amen*

Monday, February 13: Luke 9:1-9

In 1542, Ignatius Loyola asked his best friend, Francis Xavier, to go as a missionary to India. The catch? The boat sailed the next day. Francis replied, *"Fine, Inigo. That just gives me time to put a patch in my trousers. Then I am ready for the boat."* How would you respond if someone were to ask you to go overseas as a missionary for the rest of your life – tomorrow. You could take nothing except what you can pack – tonight?

Very few of us are called to a lifetime in some other part of the world, on such short notice. In fact, the way in which Jesus sends out his disciples in this passage – in complete poverty, relying on help along the way – is unique. It is not the pattern established in the early church. But the details about HOW they go are not what's most important in this story. What's most important is ***the fact THAT they actually went.***

Back when Jesus first met Peter, He said, *"Peter, don't be afraid. From now on you will fish for people"* (Luke 5:10). There's that wonderful phrase, *"Don't be afraid,"* again. Now, in Luke 9, Peter is being told, *"Go fish ..."* It's time to put words into action. It's time to put out the nets and see what you catch.

Their message? To *"proclaim the kingdom of God."* It's more than just *"Believe in Jesus and when you die you go to heaven"* (although this is very true, they don't know it yet). Their message is that the King, God, Jesus, the Messiah, has come. He brings hope, healing, life, forgiveness, power, purpose, and so much more into life right now. True life, life with Jesus, new life with God, begins this moment. Nothing is the same again.

We may not be called to leave tomorrow for India. We may not be called to wander around Taber with *"no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, and no extra shirt"* (that could get pretty smelly, pretty quickly). We can share what God has done in our lives in our homes. We can talk about how we see the reality of the Kingdom of God, of how God is at work, within our own family and friends.

- Healing people (modern research, medicine and health care are wonderful gifts from God; sometimes God works way beyond what any doctor might dream possible, too).
- Bringing comfort, hope, joy, love, and peace (within our hearts and souls, and through the loving care of other people, inspired by the Spirit).
- Providing for our daily needs (not necessarily our daily "wants").
- Forgiving us and helping us to forgive others (an incredible miracle, and an incredible blessing).
- Giving us practical wisdom for life, relationships, direction, ethics, decisions.
- How else do you see God at work?

Some people will hear, see, and believe. Others won't. That's not our problem. Our task is simply to be faithful to share what we have seen, heard, and experienced. God does the rest.

*This day, as I rise and prepare for the morning,
I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart,
and in the hearts of all I meet today.
I pray that your Word might speak to my soul,
kindle the spark of love in my breast,
and help me live faithfully for your glory.
I pray that neither indifference nor apathy,
neither contempt nor pride,
will pour water on the fire of my faith.
I pray that neither envy nor ill-will,
neither hatred nor fear, may smother your Word's light in my life.
May your light shine through me as sunshine streaming through a window,
showing you're the way of your grace,
and the warmth of your love to all around me.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Tuesday, February 14: Luke 9:10-17

I received an email from one of our overseas mission partners about a young lady recovering from what was supposed to be a terminal illness: *"One of the hospital staff told her family that she is their Christmas miracle. None of us can doubt that this is true."* Jesus is still doing amazing things in our world. Do I believe it?

People often find this story in Luke 9 incredible. One popular interpretation is many people actually had food with them but didn't want to share it. When Jesus' disciples led the way by sharing their five loaves and two fish, everyone else brings out the food they already have with them and share as well. The miracle is this: Jesus turns selfish, suspicious people into generous, sharing people. That's one explanation (there are others) that tries to explain away this miracle. But if everyone has food anyway, what's the problem?

The fact of the situation is there really is no food except a handful loaves of bread and a couple of fish. People really are hungry. And desperate.

Jesus is challenging His disciples (and us) to recognize something amazing is happening here. In the Kingdom of God, things aren't always as they seem or as we expect. As strange as it is to go on a mission trip with no walking stick, bag, food, money, or even a change of clothes (9:3), it is also strange to trust God to provide in other practical ways. Yes, it is a miracle if Jesus can change self-centered, suspicious people into people who share with and care for one another. But He can do even greater things than that. This passage is about Jesus' power to change everything, not just people's selfishness.

"Christians who intend to make the gospel story their own are living an adventure of faith from first to last," writes Tom Wright. It is an adventure. On some occasions, like this, Jesus does allow God's creative power to flow through Him in special, powerful ways. But Jesus doesn't feed every hungry person. He doesn't heal every sick person. He doesn't free every slave. In 2023, Jesus does do miracles as amazing as this one in Scripture. Sometimes. Not always. We don't know not every person is healed. Why every slave isn't freed.

There is a tremendous mystery in our relationship with God. The Book of Job is the story of a man who loved God. But Job lost everything precious to him. There was no miracle. Job's response: *"The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord."* (Job 1:21). That's a difficult attitude to have. God never leaves Job. Ultimately Job, through his suffering, finds God more deeply and profoundly.

We live in the certain hope that life here-and-now is not all there is. We look forward to a perfect life with Jesus. In the meantime, Jesus is here with us today, February 14, 2023. He will get us through whatever circumstances we face. Possibly we'll experience a miracle. Possibly not.

The adventure of faith is walking through the valleys and the shadows, the dark places, and the hard times AND finding God walking with us, moment by moment, day by day. The miracle may be discovering God's strength, guidance, and presence, more deeply and profoundly, along the hard journey.

*Lord, teach me your way of treating others –
sinners, children, Pharisees, Pilates and Herods, and John the Baptists.
Teach me your way of eating and drinking,
how to act when I'm tired from work and need rest.
Teach me compassion for the suffering, the poor, the blind, and the lame.
You who shed tears, show me how to live my deepest emotions.
Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may truly live and love.
Amen.*

Wednesday, February 15: Luke 9:18-27

When did you first know what your vocation would "be" (if you have)? If you have been in love, when did you first know that you were in love? If you believe in Jesus, when did you first know that?

Some of us can identify specific times and places for some of those big moments. There was a specific point-in-

time decision. Others of us grew into those realizations. For instance, we may not be able to name the exact time we came to believe in Jesus, but we KNOW we do really, deeply, and profoundly believe in Jesus NOW.

As this passage begins, Jesus is praying alone, again (9:18). Next, He is with His disciples, asking them a soul-searching question, a question we all have to wrestle with: "*Who do you say I am?*" (9:20). How do His friends answer? How do you answer? How does that answer shape how you live?

Next, Jesus speaks to a crowd (9:23). His words are jarring. Culturally, we may have a picture of Jesus meek and mild, a nice guy, eager to please everyone, offering kind and gentle advice about how you might possibly, perhaps, maybe want to live your life ...

As we read Luke's gospel, however, we discover a Messiah who is turning the world upside down:

- The poor – in spirit, but also those who are poor economically and politically – find good news.
- Captives – spiritually, but also those trapped by injustice, violence, racism, and hatred – find release.
- The blind – spiritually, and those unable to see hope for the future – see light.
- The oppressed – in spirit, but also in physical, social, economic, political ways – find freedom.

ALL people are truly equal, valued, and free as invaluable treasures, created in the image of God.

Jesus challenges our economic systems, our social structures, our way of life ...

- He challenges us to think about poverty in other parts of the world – and how our wealth is related to that. What will we do about it?
- He challenges us to think about how we treat our environment – and the consequences for God's natural creation and people. What will we change?
- He challenges us to think about what we really need, and don't need. So what?
- He challenges us to think about racism, poverty, homelessness, crime, and injustice in Lethbridge

Jesus challenges us to recognise that He is God. He is the One with the creative power to heal, to provide, to change the world. He is also challenging us to recognize that we are His body in the world today; we are called to live as He lived. We are called to love as He loved. How, then, should I live?

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

This is the love of God:

for God's love for the world is such that he gave up his Son.

The love of God is a power and an example for human love,

and it is an active help to sustain human love.

Can human love really last without love for God?

People – married and single – whose love for God is alive,

find a motivation and a strength from Him to love others.

Love isn't born just of itself;

it is like a child of God, alive in each of us.

Love is what makes each of us most a person,

just as in the Trinity, love is the person we call Jesus, Son and Word of God.

Lord Jesus Christ, while on earth you had close and devoted friends

such as John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary.

You showed in this way that friendship is one of life's great blessings.

Thank you for the friends that you have given me to love me,

in spite of my failures and weaknesses,

and to enrich my life after your example.

Let me ever behave toward them as you behaved toward your friends.

Bind us close together in you and enable us to help one another on our earthly journey.

Amen

Thursday, February 16: Luke 9:28-36

I was talking with a couple about their wedding. They had been planning it for over a year. It was going to be a beautiful service. They'd have a fantastic reception. They'd enjoy a wonderful honeymoon. It would be a mountaintop experience. In their minds, marriage was then going to be eternal bliss.

Eventually, however, the "high" of the wedding will be over. The real work – hard work – exciting work – challenging work of building a lifelong marriage will begin. They will always remember their incredible wedding. But marriage is learning to live real life together, today, every day, forever. It can be hard.

Have you had a time when you have felt on top of the world emotionally, relationally, or (I hope) spiritually? Camp? A concert? A retreat? A vacation? Wasn't it wonderful? Wouldn't it be great if it went on and on? But life is living today, every day, forever. Life can be hard. But lived with Jesus, we can face everything, together.

Peter is on a rollercoaster of emotion. In response to Jesus' question, *"Who do you say I am?"* Peter gets it: *"You are the Messiah sent from God."* It is a mountaintop experience (Luke 9:18-20).

Then Jesus says hard words to His friends (including Peter): *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels."*

Eight days later, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up for another mountaintop experience, literally and figuratively. As they are praying, amazing things happen. What do think this does for their faith?

Mountaintop experiences are great times for us to refocus, to recharge, to be re-inspired, to be re-invigorated, to make new resolutions, to choose new paths, and to make essential changes. But you can't live on mountaintops. They are times that equip us to go back down to the valley where real life happens.

Today is February 16. It's a real-life, gritty, living-in-the-trenches winter day. Look back to those mountaintop times, be thankful for them, and draw encouragement and inspiration from them. Remember the commitments and decisions you made. Be thankful. Count your blessings. But don't live in the past.

Jesus is with you today just as much as He was then. He will be with you today and tomorrow and the next day. Seize this day with God. Live it to the fullest. Relish it. Enjoy it. Know God in in the midst of it.

"Faith is not a life of mounting up with wings, but a life of walking and not fainting ... Faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading" (Oswald Chambers).

*My soul's desire is to know God,
and to rest in His presence.
My soul's desire is to study God's Word,
and to learn His ways.
My soul's desire is to be freed from fear,
and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my King,
and to sing His praises always.
My soul's desire is to serve my Saviour,
and to bless others with His love.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,
and to gaze upon His glory forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires,
and you alone can satisfy those desires.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Friday, February 17: Luke 9:37-45

My office looks onto the lane behind the church. Students from the high schools across the street often hang out in the lane. Sometimes they're just talking, sometimes smoking, and sometimes fighting. As I am writing this at 10:24 a.m. on a cold winter morning, it's easy to look at the students, who should be in class, and think to myself, *"These are the ones who will never amount to anything."*

I think about the "interesting" people Jesus gathered around Himself – fishermen, tax-collectors, hot-tempered, self-centered, ornery, rather dull-witted folks, who no-one would expect to amount to anything. Yet Jesus chooses this rag tag group of people to build His Kingdom.

If Jesus were in my office, what could He do in the lives of those students? If God can change a person like Peter, James, or John, and build His Kingdom through them, He can certainly do amazing things in the lives of each of these people in the lane. I need to pray for them.

This passage happens right after two dramatic revelations of Jesus as the Son of God: He feeds five thousand people (Luke 9:10-17) and He is gloriously transformed and revealed in glory (Luke 9:28-36). God is great. Jesus is God's Son, in whom and through whom the greatness of God shines and flows.

In verses 37-43, the greatness of God in Jesus is shown again (9:43). But this time, He is very much in the real world of real life, real pain, and real struggle. He is in the back lanes of life, dealing with back lane people. His greatness comes as He has compassion for ordinary, hurting people. *"The Messiah sent from God"* (9:20) meets us on mountaintops, but also in the nitty gritty and the back lanes of real life.

What is particularly shocking to people in the First Century is that Jesus cares about children. Children had no legal status in that day. They were nobodies. But Jesus doesn't see them that way. He sees each one as a precious child of God. He has compassion on each one, even the most troubled of them.

Who have I given up on? Who do I know who needs Jesus? Pray for them. (If you can't think of anyone else to pray for, pray for the kids from the high schools outside Bruce's window. They need it.)

*Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
that working or resting I may always think of You.
Lord of my heart, give me light to guide me,
that home or aboard, at work or at play, I may always walk in Your ways.
Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
that thinking or acting, I may always discern right from wrong.
Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me,
that among friends or enemies, I may always proclaim your justice.
Lord of my heart, give me faith to console me,
that hungry or well-fed, I may always rely on Your mercy.
Lord of my heart, save me from great wealth or great poverty,
that I neither trust in my riches nor be tempted to steal.
Lord of my heart, save me from empty knowledge,
that I may always find true wisdom in Your Word.
Lord of my heart, save me from pride,
that I may always and only boast of You.
Lord of my heart, whatever befall me,
rule over my thoughts and feelings, my words, and my actions.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Saturday, February 18: Luke 9:46-50

If we're honest, we can recognize all we are – our talents, abilities, skills, gifts – and all we have – our education, health, opportunities, resources, families, friends – are gifts from God. We are blessed. We're

thankful and count our blessings.

We could argue **we** have worked hard and made good choices. **We** are self-made people. However, the mere facts that we were born in this country (or had the opportunity to immigrate here), have had decent health, had the opportunity for an education, and had jobs to work hard at, means we have been blessed by God. A girl born in a rural village in Rwanda, whose parents died of AIDS, enduring civil unrest, with no chance of education or employment, simply does not have the same opportunities we have, do they? They can work harder than I and make better choices than I, and never enjoy the opportunities I do.

Despite three overwhelming evidences of Jesus' greatness (feeding 5000, the transfiguration, healing a demon-possessed boy), Jesus' disciples are arguing about which of **them** is greatest (Luke 9:46-48). They may be decent, capable people, but none of them can compare with Jesus.

Do we ever act in similar ways? **We** are so wonderful? **We** have all the answers? If only they would listen to **me**? If only they would live as **I** lived? Can you identify with these characters at all?

Jesus uses a child (perhaps the one he just healed?) as a metaphor for what a follower of Jesus should look like. In *The Message* translation, Jesus says, "Whoever accepts this child as if the child were me, accepts me. And whoever accepts me, accepts the One who sent me. You become great by accepting, not asserting. Your spirit, not your size, makes the difference." How does that make you think?

In true humility, we can rejoice in and be thankful for all God has given us. We need to be thankful.

And, in true worship with thanksgiving, we can ask Jesus how we can use our blessings to help His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Ask Jesus to help you know how you can make a difference. God's good news is for ALL people. How can you be more like the child in this story?

*Can I abandon, O King of Creation, all the comforts I depend on?
Can I put myself wholly at the mercy of God –
willing to let go of silver, horse, fame and honour?
Can I throw myself wholly on the King of Kings,
without sword or shield, food or drink, without a bed to lie on?
Can I truly trust my Saviour with my life?
O King of Glorious Heaven, I trust myself to you.
O Jesus, my Saviour and Lord, I put my trust in You.
O Spirit, full of mercy, I walk in trust with You.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Sunday, February 19: Luke 9:51-62

My family gets tired of me telling the same old stories again and again. In fairness, I only have a few GOOD stories worth telling in my life, so I have to repeat them. Who wants to hear about the dull 99.999% of my life?

When we read the gospels, we focus on the BIG stories, too – feeding the 5000, mountaintop experiences, dramatic healings. We forget the gospels give us the highlights. But there is still 99.999% of Jesus' life and ministry we know nothing about. He was not performing miracles 24/7/365.

These little vignettes are glimpses of some of the "other" stories.

1. When a Samaritan town doesn't welcome Jesus and His disciples, James and John want to destroy it (9:54). How should we respond to people who do not accept Jesus? Note Jesus and His disciples are Jews on their way to Jerusalem (9:53). This is a Samaritan village, not Jewish (9:51). In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), we read "*Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans*" (John 4:9) and vice versa. Both groups claim to be the "true" people of God. They hate one another (not unlike some ethnic groups in the world today). This is why Jesus' story of the "Good

Samaritan" is so galling to His Jewish listeners. It is wrong for a despised Samaritan to be the hero of Jesus' parable. It also explains why John and James really want these people to suffer. Bitter animosity ran deep between Jews and Samaritans. How does Jesus respond?

2. Another person wants to follow Jesus, as long as he can sleep in a 5-star hotel every night. How does Jesus respond?
3. Jesus invites another man to "*Follow me.*" The fellow wants to bury his father first. Actually, his father probably isn't even dead yet. The implication of his answer is that he is putting off following Jesus indefinitely. Until it's more convenient. How does Jesus respond?
4. Another man just wants to say goodbye to his parents. How does Jesus respond?

This all seems rather harsh. In fact, Jesus is using exaggeration to emphasize His points. There is nothing wrong with having a house or a bed, taking care of your parents, or showing love and respect for your family. In fact, these are all good things.

Jesus' point is that following Him doesn't guarantee comfort, ease, and financial security. "*What Jesus is teaching is that if these things (home, family, etc.) mean TOO MUCH to a person, then that person will find discipleship too demanding and too costly ... commitment to Jesus and to the kingdom of God must be a matter of first priority for anyone to be his disciple*" (Craig Evans). Good things can replace the BEST thing – Jesus.

How do we feel that following Jesus may require sacrifice? Am I willing to give up ANYTHING to follow Jesus? Time? Money? Comfort? Energy? I can come up with all sorts of excuses why I can't tithe, can't serve, can't volunteer, can't sacrifice, even why I can't make it to church on February 19 ... How might Jesus respond?

*Lord, preserve the fire of your Spirit within us,
as Christ preserves us.
May the warmth of your Spirit remain in our midst,
as Christ is always among us.
May I warm those who are lonely,
whose hearts are cold and lifeless,
so they, too, may know the comfort of God's love.
May your Spirit brightly in us and through us
that we might be the very Light and Presence of Jesus
in our world today.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Monday, February 20: Luke 10:1-20

What's a turning point in your life? A time when you made a decision that changed everything?

Back in Luke 9:51, we read, "*As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely/steadfastly/determinedly set out for Jerusalem.*" It's a phrase you may not have noticed. But it marks a dramatic shift in Jesus' life. Until now, He had been teaching/healing/inviting people to the Kingdom of God by going village to village (mostly in the backwater province of Galilee, also in Palestinian and Samaritan territories).

This is THE defining moment in Jesus' life so far. Now, He resolutely/steadfastly/determinedly turns from Galilee to Jerusalem. From now on, He deliberately heads towards a confrontation with the powers-that-be. Rather than doing circuits of random rural villages, Jesus is now intentionally and purposefully moving toward the fulfilment of His mission – His death and resurrection – in the capital city, Jerusalem.

As Jesus single-mindedly moves forward, He calls His people to follow resolutely/steadfastly/determinedly as well: "*Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God*" (9:62).

Jesus now chooses and mentors disciples to partner with him in his mission (see also [Luke 9:1-6](#)) and carry on for him later. Notice a few points:

- The task can be dangerous (10:3). It may result in rejection (10:10).
- The task is urgent, requiring single-minded dedication (10:4).
- In faith, we may need to learn dependence on and contentment with God's provision (10:4, 7-8).
- We are to proclaim peace, not declaring war upon those who oppose us (10:5-6).
- We proclaim God's kingdom in word and deed (10:9).
- We are to be honest about the reality of judgement (10:10-11).
- Our mission field is everyone – "seventy-two" (10:1) represents all the nations of the world.
- People's response to the message of the Kingdom is not about us. If people listen, it is really Jesus they are listening to; we can't take the credit. If people reject Jesus, it is Jesus who is being rejected; we are not somehow at fault (10:16). We are simply asked to be faithful.

Jim Wallis, speaking about Easter, writes, *"What is the good news? When all that sin had done, or could ever do, was laid on Jesus, it did not overcome him. Death could not swallow him. The grave was denied its victory. The witness of history and of his followers is that 'He is risen.' He is alive. He has triumphed over all. He is the victor over every sin, hate, fear, violence, and death. Nothing is stronger than his victory – nothing past, nothing present, and nothing future.*

"On Easter morning, and each day of our lives, we celebrate the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which triumphs over every other reality. In the face of the world and its systems, we proclaim the resurrection, saying, 'We have seen the Lord.' We see him in the lives of our brothers and sisters. We discover him in the faces of the poor, in the faces of all the victims, and in the faces of our children. We see him in the lives of Christians who have suffered and died because they believed. And we see the Lord in the bread and the wine. He shows us, as he did his disciples, the evidence of his suffering. He invites us to reach out, take, eat, and drink; he wants us to remember him, to see him, and to know his victory.

"His way is life. The world's way is death. We can now stand before the world's false realities and securities, free to deny them, denounce them, and remove ourselves from them. We stand before the reality of the resurrection and confess with the first disciples that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

"We stand before the world as fools. We are foolish enough to believe that Jesus' way is stronger and truer than the way of the world. We rest secure in the knowledge that he has, and will, overcome. We are called to be fools for Christ, a people saved by his cross and converted, finally, by his resurrection. May God convert us to such foolishness." May God truly convert us to such foolishness.

*Anyone who hears and does not heed God's voice
Is like a leaking ship on a stormy sea ...
an eagle caught in a trap ...
an apple tree that never blossoms.
Anyone who hears and obeys God's voice
Is like the golden rays of the summer sun ...
a silver chalice overflowing ...
a handsome groom (or beautiful bride) ready for the wedding.
Lord, help me hear and obey.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Tuesday, February 21: Luke 10:17-24

Years ago, Marianne and I bought tickets for our family to all go to Britain for a vacation. As parents, we bought the tickets. We didn't ask the kids to earn them, pay for them, or do good things to get them. They were a gift from us to them, so the kids could be where we would be, and we could have a great time together. We really wanted them to accept the gift and come. We would have been devastated if they said, "No, I'd

rather stay home" or "You know, we're really not good enough ..." We would have found it weird if they tried to earn them somehow.

Our loving, heavenly Father gives us salvation and new life through Jesus' death and resurrection. Everything is paid for. God's love and mercy are His gracious gift to us, so we might be with Him now, and enjoy His presence forever. He invites us just to accept the gift and be with Him, today and eternally. Our names are on the "ticket." He doesn't ask us to earn His love, pay for our salvation, or do good deeds to merit His grace. He would be devastated if we said, "No, I'd rather not come," or "I'm not good enough ..." It would be weird if we tried to earn our way to God. As if we could do that, anyway.

You have new life, today, with Jesus. Your name is registered in heaven (10:20). That's His gift to you. How do you know it's true? You trust your loving Father. It's a matter of simple, childlike faith (10:21).

We don't EARN our way to heaven. We don't THINK our way to heaven by being wise or clever. We don't get Jesus by doing all sorts of spiritual activities. We have life simply by trusting in God's love, grace, and mercy. Our salvation is His gift to us. All we do is accept it. Thank Him. Praise Him.

Take a moment. Think about the ways in which you see (and have seen) God at work. Be thankful. Count your blessings. Worship and praise God for His goodness and mercy.

"Blessed are the eyes that see what you have seen," says Jesus. "I tell you, many prophets and kings longed to see what you see, but they didn't see it. And they longed to hear what you hear, but they didn't hear it." We take for granted the experiences we have with Jesus – times we sense His nearness, His wisdom and guidance, His care and comfort, His answers to our prayers, the healing and hope He provides, the miracles we have seen and experienced. Do we thank God for His blessings? Do we celebrate and praise Him for answered prayers?

Our Father invites us to accept His gift of life as a gift. Thank Him for it. Because God has given you so much, how then should you live? How can you show your gratitude by letting His grace shine through you?

*God help my thoughts.
They stray from me, setting off on the wildest journeys.
When I am in church,
they run off like naughty children, quarrelling, making trouble.
When I read the Bible,
they fly to a distant city, filled with distractions.
My thoughts can cross an ocean with a single leap;
they can fly from earth to heaven, and back again, in a second.
They slip from my grasp like tails of eels;
they swoop hither and thither like swallows in flight.
Dear Jesus, who can see into every heart and read every mind,
please take hold of my thoughts.
Bring my thoughts back to You,
and hold me close to Your heart.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Wednesday, February 22: Luke 10:25-37
(Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent is six weeks of preparation for Easter)

Yesterday we read how we come to know God through simple, childlike faith. We simply trust Jesus. We accept the gift of love and life He offers us through Jesus. We don't earn God's love. We are not saved by being good enough. It's not about being clever or wise. God, in Jesus, freely blesses us with new life.

This grace is difficult to accept. We want to make it complicated. We want to make it about merit. Every religion (EXCEPT Christianity) requires you to be as perfect as possible if you want a spiritual reward, whether that means a better reincarnation, getting to Paradise, entering the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, etc.

"Good" people (like us) are saved; bad people (like others) aren't. Jesus, however, awkwardly points out that none of us is good enough for a perfect God. That's why He freely saves us, by His amazing grace.

An expert in religious law, struggling to accept this teaching about grace, tests Jesus. He asks a question: *"Teacher, what should I **DO** to inherit eternal life?"* Like most people, he equates God's blessing with **doing** the right things (and not doing the wrong things). How does Jesus respond in 10:26-28?

The good news is not about DOING or EARNING salvation. It's about an attitude of loving trust in God. Then, with our salvation done, finished, and completed by faith in Jesus, we live out our love in relationship with God and one another. The expert in the law is sure he must **DO** stuff to be saved. Perhaps, too, he wants to look wise and clever. He persists, *"But who is my neighbour?"*

How does Jesus respond in 10:30-37? Remember, Samaritans are despised by the Jews (see February 19). Josephus, a First Century Jewish historian records, *"Hatred arose between the Samaritans and the Jews for the following reason: it was the custom of the Galileans (Jews) to pass through the Samaritan territory on the way to the Holy City (Jerusalem) at the time of the festival (Passover). On one occasion, while they were passing through, certain Samaritan inhabitants of a village attacked the Galileans and slew a great number."* Perhaps this incident helps explain James' and John's venom in 9:54). Imagine how a good Jewish lawyer would respond to Jesus' story, in which a Samaritan is the hero?

- What is Jesus' lesson? How does this complement what He has already said in 10:26-28?
- What is Jesus' final challenge to the lawyer?

I appreciate these insights from C.S. Lewis:

- *"Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not."*
- *"Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him."*
- *"To love at all is to be vulnerable."*
- *"Love is unselfishly choosing for another's highest good."*
- *"Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained."*

Today, how can you ...

- love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind?
- Love your neighbor as yourself?

*Dear Jesus,
help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your Spirit and life.
Fill and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me,
and be in me so much, that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence shining through me.
Let me look up and see Jesus.
May others look at me and see only Jesus.
In true humility, help me to live for you, Jesus.
Amen*

Thursday, February 23: Luke 10:38-42

Jesus says, *"My dear ____ (fill in **your own name**), you are worried and upset over so many things. There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."*

Fresh from Jesus' encounter with a lawyer trying to justify himself and figure out what he has to DO to impress God, Jesus comes to Mary's and Martha's home. Martha invites Him in. Then she frantically goes to work to make sure everything is perfect – the meal, the table, the dusting, the vacuuming, and the hors d'oeuvres (you know what I mean). She is worried and upset over so many things.

Mary sits at Jesus' feet, talking with Him. Martha is annoyed: *"Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."* How does Jesus answer?

What is the *"one thing worth being concerned about"*? Spending time with Jesus. Learning from Jesus.

Over the past several days we've noticed several times that we DON'T earn Jesus' love. We don't WORK for our salvation. What Jesus really wants is for us to spend time with Him, to love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind. He wants us to talk with Him. But I know I'm more like Martha than Mary. I'm always doing things. Always on the move. I am worried and upset over so many things. I rarely make the time to simply "be" with Jesus. I rarely experience His peace.

C.S. Lewis wrote: *"Christ offers something for nothing: He offers everything for nothing. In a sense, the whole Christian life consists in accepting that very remarkable offer ... all we have done and can do is nothing."*

Lewis continues: *"To trust Him means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus, if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you."*

Jesus says to you: *"You are worried and upset over so many things ... do not be afraid. Sit at My feet, trust in Me, accept My gift of life, and discover life as it is meant to be ..."* Am I listening?

*Teach me your way of looking at people:
the way you glanced at Peter after his denial,
the way you touched the heart of the rich young man
and the hearts of your disciples.
I would like to meet you as you really are,
since you change those who really know you.
If only I could hear you speak as when you spoke in the synagogue of Capernaum
or on the Mount of Beatitudes.
Yet you do speak to me, if I take time to listen ...
You do meet me, if I take time to notice ...
Give me ears to hear and eyes to see.
Teach me to listen.
Give me grace to live my life, within and without,
the way you lived your life, O Lord.
Amen*

Pedro Arrupe

Friday, February 24: Luke 11:1-13

One of the principles of good teaching is to repeat and reinforce important points. Jesus undoubtedly taught key principles on many different occasions. This is a parallel version to the more familiar "Lord's Prayer" recorded in [Matthew 6:9-13](#). What are KEY things Jesus is saying we should pray for?

- A spirit of reverence and worship, recognizing God is *God* ("Father, may your name be kept holy")
- God's Kingdom rule would come more and more completely ("May your Kingdom come soon")
- God would provide our basic needs – not necessarily our wants. ("Give us each day the food we need")
- God would forgive us and restore our relationship with Himself ("and forgive us our sins")

- We would forgive other people and restore our relationship with one another (*"as we forgive those who sin against us"*)
- We would live wisely and well, faithful to God (*"And don't let us yield to temptation"*).

Those are great things to pray about, today.

Jesus continues teaching about prayer in 11:5-13. Like any parable, there are details that don't totally work (God doesn't live in a house or need sleep). Those things don't matter. Jesus' point is **persistence**. *"He is encouraging a kind of holy boldness, a sharp knocking on the door, an insistent asking, a search that refuses to give up. That's what our prayer should be like. This isn't just a routine or formal praying, going through the motions as a daily or weekly task. There is a battle on, a fight with the powers of darkness, and those who have glimpsed the light are called to struggle in prayer – for peace, for reconciliation, for wisdom, for a thousand things for the world and the church, perhaps a hundred or two for one's own family, friends, and neighbours, and perhaps a dozen or two for oneself"* (Tom Wright).

Does it seem overwhelming? Go back to the Lord's Prayer – it's a perfect framework or outline to help us as we pray. Use it as a guide for your prayer today. **Get passionate in your praying.** Have a really good conversation with God about the things that matter – God's glory, His Kingdom coming, our basic needs, a good relationship with Him, a good relationship with people close to us, victory in our battles with the evil one ...

*"Father, may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
Give us each day the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation."*

*Change requires honesty:
Honesty with myself to acknowledge my sins.
Honesty with God to confess my sins.
I know that the most common sin in my life is lying --
Lying to myself, ignoring my sins.
Lying to others, denying my sins.
Lying to God, not acknowledging my sins.
If I am lying to myself – if I need to see things in my life that need changing ...
God open my heart so I may see myself as you see me.
Help me repent.
Help me change.
Help me grow.
Amen.*

Saturday, February 25: Luke 11:14-28

We struggle to contextualize demon possession in contemporary Canadian society. But in many societies globally, demon possession is very much a reality. Think about what demon possession means:

- There is an alien, evil presence in your life which influences your thinking, choices, and behaviour.
- You are not totally in control of what you say or do.
- You do and say things you regret later. You might say, *"I wasn't myself just then."*
- You feel trapped and powerless. You have no hope.

We all share those experiences, to some degree. We're tempted by things we know are wrong. We sense an evil whisper: *"Go for it. It'll be Ok. Who'll know?"* And whether it's as trivial as cheating on your diet, or more serious like internet pornography, or fudging our income tax return, we may cross a line. The degree of evil may be different, but giving in to an impish voice once in a while is common to all of us. Demon possession in the Bible, and in many parts of the world today, takes this many, many steps further.

Jesus comes as the One who defeats the powers of evil once and for all. He can wallop demons. If we ask Him for help, if we determine to remain strong, and if we work with His Spirit in our lives, He can give us the resolve and strength we need to resist temptation and remain holy. That's great news.

Jesus can only have this power to defeat evil **IF** one of two things is true:

- **EITHER** Jesus is the devil-incarnate, "Beelzebul," commanding his minions, ("Beelzebul" is a nickname for Satan, rather like "He-who-must-not-be-named").
- **OR** Jesus is almighty God, the King of Kings. As God, He has authority over everything, even Satan.

Jesus' enemies want people to believe He is Satan. But Jesus responds, "*Don't be ridiculous.*" No evil empire gives up its power willingly. It wouldn't survive. Hitler didn't voluntarily withdraw from Poland. Vladimir Putin isn't voluntarily retreating from Ukraine. Satan would never cast out demons to give a person back their freedom. **IF** the power of Satan is being destroyed, **THEN** the only option is Jesus must be God Himself. Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, the One who really can help us overcome our deepest struggles.

There is a somber warning here, as well. Even though our house may be in order now, we need to stay close to Jesus. We can get sucked into sin so easily. Giving into temptation/compromise is like a cancer that can subtly infiltrate and eat away at our lives. We must be aware of temptation and remain vigilant.

Our challenge is continually to ask Jesus to help us identify parts of our lives that need cleansing. Then we deal with them, right away. "*Blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice,*" Jesus says (11:28). Lord, help us to not just be hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word as well.

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

Sunday, February 26: Luke 11:29-36

Tom Wright comments, "*When the light comes, it scatters the darkness. But what if you were rather enjoying the darkness, able to get on unseen with whatever evil purposes you had? Light brings hope and new possibility, but it also brings judgment. Light symbolizes new life in the face of the darkness of death, but it also shows up that darkness for what it is. These sayings, then, though full of hope, are also filled with warnings of judgment. Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem, is constantly saying in one way or another that God's light will shine out and expose the darkness that had taken hold of the hearts and minds of his contemporaries.*"

Jesus talks about Jonah, the prophet who preached to the horribly evil people of Nineveh, Assyria. The Assyrians were brutal, cruel people – raping and slaughtering their enemies, flaying prisoners, skinning them alive, ripping them apart with horses driven in opposite directions. They were not nice folks. What happened? The murderous, cruel, amoral Assyrians repented. It's one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament.

Jesus challenges the Jews of His day: God's Messiah is preaching to them now. How will they respond? With faith, like the Ninevites? Or with no faith, as the Jews in the days of the prophets? The sad truth will be most Jews will be less noble than the Ninevites, choosing to ignore God's Messiah. They won't put their faith in Him.

Jesus points out that the Queen of Sheba (the Queen of the South, modern-day Yemen, NOT Israel, NOT Jewish) and the Ninevites will "rise up/stand up" (literally "be resurrected"). But the stubborn Israelites won't.

How do you think the Jewish leaders would have responded to Jesus' words?

Jesus emphasizes our relationship with God is not based on ethnic heritage, family background, or DNA. It is all about how we respond to His message of love and grace, and to His call for repentance. It's about a personal choice to put our faith in Jesus. Or not.

God says of the Messiah, Jesus, *"My servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted. But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man. And he will startle many nations. Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not been told; they will understand what they had not heard about"* (Isaiah 52:13-15). Jesus has come. Do we recognize Him any more than the Jewish leaders back then did?

This is the good news: *"God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants"* (John 3:16-21).

The Light of the World has come among us. Will I allow Him into every corner of my life?

*May all I do today begin with you, O Lord.
Plant dreams and hopes within my soul.
Revive my tired spirit: be with me today.
May all I do today continue with your help, O Lord.
Be at my side and walk with me: be my support today.
May all I do today reach far and wide, O Lord.
My thoughts, my work, my life –
make them blessings for your kingdom forever and ever.
Let them go beyond today, O God.
Today is new, unlike any other day, for God makes each day different.
Today God's everyday grace falls on my soul like abundant seed, though I may hardly see it.
Today is one of those days Jesus promised to be with me, a companion on my journey,
And my life today, if I trust him, has potential unseen.
My life has purpose.
Jesus, be my Light today.
Amen*

Monday, February 27: Luke 11:33-54 (rereading a few verses from yesterday)

When people try to legislate other people's behaviour. What may begin as a noble enterprise (in the leaders' minds) often devolves into evil. Think of the Pharisees' efforts to make Israel ultra-Jewish in Jesus day. Or John Calvin's attempt to create a Christian Geneva in the 16th century. Or plans to create the perfect atheistic nation in the former Soviet Union or China. Or attempts to form ideal Islamic states today. They all turn evil.

The problem is this: you cannot legislate people's hearts. You can create and enforce laws – even good laws – but if people's hearts are evil, all the legislation in the world amounts to nothing. For a nation to thrive, people must *want* to make their nation work *in their heart of hearts*. If enough people have a burning vision and passion for a just, equitable, godly society – if they really want to make it a reality – and if they genuinely choose to live by those principles – it will happen. Passing more and more and more laws won't change anything. It starts with a change in my heart. And change in your heart.

Jesus talks about how His Word is like a floodlight, exposing the good, and the not-so-good, in our lives. In His

conversation with this Pharisee, Jesus applies that concept in graphic terms. The Spirit is more concerned about the state of our hearts than the details of our actions. Our hearts, not how perfectly we obey the law, is critical. Jesus is NOT saying how we live is NOT important or we are free to do whatever we want. **We should all live holy lives.** He is talking about our hearts. The **motivation** for holy living comes from a deep love for God. A grim obedience to the law or a fetish for superficial compliance is not enough.

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees (and us) to get excited and passionate about a vision of the Kingdom of God. **Because we have experienced God's love,** we live holy lives.

In response to our own experiences of God's amazing love and grace:

- We **love for God.**
- We passionately **love our neighbours**, including the poor and suffering.
- We **welcome all people** as God's treasured, equal, created in the image of God, creations.

The love we have experienced from God, motivates us to live as an alternative culture, embody God's Kingdom values in our personal lives, in the community of our church, and in society. We show the world around us a new way of living. Of course, we will never be perfect. But we continue to aspire to live out Jesus' prayer that His Kingdom come and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This is not something we can create by legislation. You can't create laws to force people to love God and love their neighbour as themselves. Love is a choice – a heart choice.

We can model what a transformation Jesus can make, however, and invite people to try it for themselves.

Spend some time reflecting on God's amazing love. In response, ask God to help you have a vision for how you/we can be Kingdom of God people today. Get passionate about living His love, yourself.

*Keep us, O God, from pettiness.
Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed.
Let us be done with faultfinding and leave off self-seeking.
May we put away all pretenses and meet each other, face to face,
without self-pity and without prejudice.
May we never be hasty in judgment and always generous.
Let us take time for all things.
Help us be calm, serene, and gentle.
Teach us to put in action our better impulses, straightforward and unafraid.
Help us realize we can disagree on the little things in life.
Help us to be united on the big things of life.
O Lord, let us be kind.
Let us love one another as you have loved us.
Amen.*

Tuesday, February 28: Luke 12:1-12

God loves us so much (12:6-7). That's glorious news. It's amazing for us to think about what it means in our lives. And it's incredible to think about the astounding good news of great joy we have to share with others.

Jesus has just challenged the Pharisees, reminding them what is in our hearts matters, not outward religiosity. He refers to the yeast of the Pharisees. In bread dough, yeast is unseen but causes amazing transformation. The legalism, ritualism, bitterness, judgmentalism, narrowness, lack of love (and much more) of the Pharisees was unseen on the surface, but it permeates their lives so much they have been transformed into people who are bitter and judgmental. Their lives and religion had risen to be hard and love-less. They miss the message of God's love, for themselves and for others.

Jesus continues to use the metaphor of light: light brings hope and joy. It also reveals evil and darkness.

Do we ever miss God's foundational message of love and grace? Do we feel angry? Bitter? Judgmental? Why? What "yeast" is there in our lives that causes us to miss God's hope, joy, peace, and love?

"Anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (12:10) is a difficult verse. What does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? Have I done that???

In Mark and Mathew, Jesus says these words when He is accused of casting out demons by the prince of demons. In those gospels, the implication is that if you start calling the work of God the work of the devil (and vice versa), your moral bearings off base. You are in real trouble.

Luke records this saying here, suggesting a broader application. If you meet Jesus, see Him at work, hear His message, experience the reality of His Holy Spirit, and struggle to get it ... that's OK. But if you firmly, finally, and unequivocally reject Jesus, then you are in real trouble. This is about those who absolutely, ultimately, irrevocably reject what the Holy Spirit is trying to get through to them. They totally, forever reject God's love. If you are worried about having committed this sin, it means you are getting to know, thinking seriously about, or already believe in Jesus. Therefore, you are NOT committing this sin. That's good news of great joy.

Today's reading is all about **good** news:

- The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. He really does want everyone to come to faith in Jesus. That's great news. Pray for friends and family who need to respond to Him.
- For those of us who allow the Spirit into our lives, He will also help us know the right words to say and the right things to do in tight situations. That's wonderful.
- The Holy Spirit can and does do so much more in our lives. Where do you need His touch today?

*Glorious God, give me grace to amend my life.
Give me, good Lord, a humble, lowly,
quiet, peaceable,
patient, charitable,
kind, tender,
loving, and pity-full mind.
In all my works and all my words and all my thoughts,
May I be led by your holy, blessed Spirit.
Give me, good Lord, a full faith, a firm hope, a fervent charity,
and a love of you incomparably above the love of myself.
Give me, good Lord, a longing to be with you.
Give me, good Lord, your love and favor,
which my love of you, however great it might be,
could not deserve were it not for your great mercy.
These things, good Lord, that I pray for,
give me your grace to labour for.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Wednesday, March 1: Luke 12:13-34

What is your treasure? What do you value most of all?

In the movie, *Leap Year*, a young Boston socialite, Anna, deliberately pulls the fire alarm in her new ultra-high-end condo to see what her ultra-wealthy fiancé treasures most. What will he save first? Her? Their photo albums? Their special momentos? His first concern is **his** electronic gizmos: **his** smartphone, **his** tablet, **his** laptop, etc. The clear message? What is most important to him is **his stuff** – not her or their relationship.

- If there were a fire, what would you try to save first? Why?
- But think bigger: if your life were on the line, what is really most important to you? Why?

In *Leap Year*, Anna meets a penniless Irish pub owner, who helps her sort through her priorities. In the end (spoiler alert), she says to him, *"When my 60 seconds came around, I realized I had everything I ever wanted, but nothing I really needed."* When the fire bell rang, she discovered her life was superficial and empty. The "perfect" address, "perfect" condo, and even "perfect" fiancé (he was a successful heart surgeon) didn't really matter. What mattered was a significant relationship. And meaning. And purpose.

"Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be" (12:34). This is the heart of Jesus' message in this section. It is really a continuation of what He has been saying all along: life is not about outward appearances. It's about our heart. Do we really love Jesus? Or do we love other things?

Talking with Declan (the obscure pub owner) in a backwater Irish village, Anna, the big-city American socialite, says, *"I think what I need is here. And I came all this way to see if you maybe think so too. If you do, well ... I don't really have plans past that, which is new for me. So, Declan O'Callaghan – and I should probably learn your middle name – here is my proposal: I propose we not make plans. I propose we give this thing a chance and let it work out how it works out. So what do you say, do you wanna not make plans with me?"*

Declan, the pub owner, replies, *"I don't want **not** to make plans with you. I **want** to make plans with you."*

Maybe we need to think about what we treasure most. And think about what we really need.

- Do I need to confess that I have many of the things I want, but I'm missing what I really need?
- Do I need to come to Jesus with the attitude that, *"I think what I need is here with You ..."*?
- Do I need to say to the Holy Spirit, *"I don't really have plans past today, which is new for me ..."*?

I might want to come to God saying, *"God, here is my proposal: I propose we not make plans. I propose we give this thing a chance and let it work out how it works out. So what do you say, do you wanna not make plans with me?"* But it's not up to us to determine the "terms of engagement." This is God, the Creator of the universe and King of Kings, we're dealing with.

His response will likely be, ***"I don't want not to make plans with you. I want to make plans with you."*** Do I have the faith to believe God's plans for me are good? Am I open to talking with God, listening to His counsel, valuing His priorities, and daring to live His way? Will I allow God to make plans – and then follow?

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
Keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray.
Let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
Help me to sacrifice myself just for today.
And if today my tide of life should ebb away,
Give me Your love divine, sweet Lord today.
So for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray,
But keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, March 2: Luke 12:35-48

Think about the servants in a great English country house a hundred years ago (think *Downton Abbey*). Or think about Bruce Wayne's butler, Alfred Pennyworth, in the *Batman* movies. Or Sam Gamgee, Frodo's faithful sidekick in the *Lord of the Rings*. Some servants have a passionate devotion to their master/family. They are really part of the family. They will do anything for their family/friend. If their master suffers, they suffer with him. If their master rejoices, they celebrate with him.

But some servants just serve as a job. If push comes to shove, they will abandon their posts and their families in a heartbeat.

Jesus invites us to think about our relationship to Himself. What kind of servant am I? When push comes to shove, do I love God so much that I will stand with Him in bad times and in good? Or am I just a servant in name, but not in action? When push comes to shove, will I turn away?

Elsewhere, Jesus teaches us that we are far more than His servants.

- *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I **no longer call you slaves**, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. **Now you are my friends**, since I have told you everything the Father told me"* (John 15:13-15).
- *"He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him (reminiscent of the Pharisees Jesus has just been talking to). But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become **children of God**. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God" – we are His brothers and sisters – His immediate family.*

We are Jesus' close friends. His immediate family. We are more than servants.

In the best of worlds, what does a good friendship look like? A good brotherly/sisterly relationship? How can I relate to Jesus like that?

Jesus is inviting us to have a personal – heart-to-heart – relationship with God. If our hearts are right with God, we don't need to fear Jesus' return. In fact, it is something we welcome. Our dearest friend is coming back to be with us. Fantastic. Jesus uses the image of a wedding feast as a metaphor for His return: that's good news (12:35-36). To quote the title of a Tony Campolo book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. Perhaps we need to recover that sense of anticipation and celebration in our lives and in the church.

The following verses are more somber. And perhaps surprising. It is helpful to keep this in the context of what Jesus said just before (skim back over 12:13-34). Jesus has been talking about our priorities, our treasures, and what matters most in life. As He teaches about these servants, He is going back to that same idea: what is our real priority? Our real treasure? What is important to us?

How can I spend time making plans with Jesus? Listening to Him? Speaking with Him? Learning from Him?

*Grant us, O God, your protection;
and in your protection, strength;
and in strength, understanding;
and in understanding, knowledge;
and in knowledge, hearts of justice;
and in hearts of justice, love of mercy;
and in love of mercy, the grace of God,
and in the grace of God, all thankfulness,
and in thankfulness, genuine love of others.
Amen*

Friday, March 3: Luke 12:49-59

For us, living in the twilight of the Christian era in the West, these words seem harsh and strange to us. But think about Jesus, in His time. He is ticking off the Pharisees. He is annoying the establishment. He knows what His personal future will hold. He knows His future includes abuse, torture, and execution.

Jesus understands that, for His followers in the First Century, there will be a high price pay to follow Him. This was not a nominally Christian culture, like ours. It was not a world of democratic values. It was not a world with freedom of speech or freedom of religion. It was totalitarian regime which did not tolerate dissent or any challenge to the status quo. The punishment for disobedience was gruesome execution.

While we may struggle to apply these verses to our context, think about Christians in other parts of the world today: the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia ... As I am writing this, headlines for this week from www.persecution.org (the best website on the persecuted church) report:

- [Catholic Priest Murdered in Burkina Faso](#)
- [Christian Persecution in Nigeria Intensifies, Report Finds](#)
- [Iraqi Displaced Find Alternative Refugee Camp](#)
- [Christians Warned Against Participating in Iranian Uprisings](#)
- [Anti-Christian Riots in India Surge Across 20 Villages](#)
- [Kidnapped Algerian Refugee Given Prison Sentence](#)
- [Christian Genocide Warning Signs in Artsakh](#)
- [Yemen's Children are Dying in Large Numbers Daily](#)
- [ISIS Activity Spikes in Iraq](#)

Pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are struggling in very difficult situations.

Thank God for our freedoms. And pray that we would be faithful in our witness in our own community.

*Father, make us more like Jesus.
Help us to bear difficulty, pain, disappointment and sorrows,
knowing that in your perfect working and design
you can use such bitter experiences to shape our characters
and make us more like our Lord.
We look with hope for that day when we shall be wholly like Christ,
because we shall see him as he is.
In the meantime, help us to so live with Jesus,
that we live for Jesus,
and people see Jesus in us.
Amen.*

Ignatius (martyred in 107)

Saturday, March 4: Luke 13:1-9

Imagine you were off on a trip with a group of other Canadians to the (fictitious) resort of Angelishu. You just got news that the President of Angelishu had his army slaughter a group of Canadian tourists in cold blood – men, women, and children. Would you still go? I think I'd be cancelling my reservation quickly.

This is the exact situation Jesus and his band of Galileans find themselves in. On the orders of King Herod, a group of Galilean pilgrims had just been butchered in Jerusalem. Herod was a nasty piece of work: among his notorious actions was the beheading of John the Baptist and the murder of several of his own family. Jesus, however, keeps heading resolutely toward the city. He will not be distracted from His single-minded purpose.

In Jesus' commentary on the slaughter and subsequent parable of the fig tree, He reiterates His message of accepting Him, as the Messiah, in our hearts. The consequences of rejecting Him are serious.

Commentators interpret the fig tree story in two different ways, but the meaning is similar in both.

- One interpretation is that Jesus is the vineyard owner, coming to the Lord's garden, looking for the fruit of repentance and genuine faith. Through His ministry, except for His few faithful followers, Jesus has found precious little repentance and authentic faith. As Jesus heads toward Jerusalem, He will give the priests, scribes, and powers-that-be one more chance to come to faith ...
- Another understanding is that God, Himself, is the owner. He has come again and again (through His prophets). Jesus is the gardener, trying to cultivate some fruit, before the garden's doom is sealed.

Either way, if there is no repentance, the garden's (Israel's) doom is sealed.

Repentance is a BIG theme in Jesus' teaching, especially in Luke. Literally it means "turning back." It is commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to a **personal** turning away from sin and turning back toward God. It also can refer to Israel's need, as **a nation**, to turn from idolatry and sin, and turn back to God.

God's offer of salvation is free to all. A genuine acceptance of this gift of grace ought to be a turning toward God – a genuine desire to honour Him, live humbly for Him, seek justice, love mercy, care for His creation, and so forth. These are the fruit of repentance. An authentic decision of faith inevitably results in fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

May the Holy Spirit help us genuinely to repent, to return to God. And may our lives show forth the fruit of His Spirit's work within and among us ...

*O Lord, grant me to greet this day in peace.
Help me in all things to rely on Your Holy Spirit.
In every hour of this day, reveal Your will to me.
Bless my dealings with all who surround me.
Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul,
and with the firm conviction that Your will governs all.
In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings.
In unforeseen events, let me not forget that You are always with me.
Give me strength to bear the fatigue of this coming day with all that it shall bring.
May Your Spirit fill every corner of my being and life.
May Your Spirit direct my will.
May Your Spirit teach me to pray.
May Your Spirit help me be obedient in all things.
O Lord, grant me to live this day in peace.
Amen.*

Patriarch Philaret (1553-1633)

Sunday, March 5: Luke 13:10-21

A kingdom is the territory over which a king rules.

Jesus has come announcing the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15). We are commanded to pray, "*Your Kingdom come ...*" What is the Kingdom of God like? The Kingdom of God refers to the territory God rules.

In practice, what does that mean?

- Jesus teaches about the Kingdom. ***Our hearts are the territory in which God rules.*** On some occasions Jesus directly talks about our need to repent – to return to God, recognizing that He is the King, and we are His servants (Luke 12). He also teaches us about the freedom we have to enjoy God's rest, recreation, and worship, through new life with Him (Luke 13:15-16). When my heart is open and obedient to God, it is God's Kingdom. How can I live His Kingdom in my life?
- Jesus models the Kingdom. ***When we make choices to live as Jesus would live and do what Jesus would do, His Kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as in heaven.*** The poor receive good news, captives are released, the blind see, and the oppressed are set free (Luke 4:18). As Jesus heals the crippled lady here, He is demonstrating what the Kingdom is like – healing, wholeness, and hope (Luke 13:10-13). What Jesus is doing for this one woman is what He wants to do for all of Israel – for all people everywhere – uncripple us, give us hope, and a future. In the Kingdom of God, all people are welcome. How can His Kingdom come through me?
- Jesus uses metaphors to try to help us understand the Kingdom:
 - *God's Kingdom is like a mustard seed.* A mustard seed is a tiny seed that grows into a huge tree that provides refuge, security, and a home for all kinds of creatures. The Kingdom is starting

small, but it will become huge, and all nations will find a home as His Kingdom comes into being in us, and through us.

- *God's Kingdom is like yeast.* You don't see yeast in dough, but it changes everything. You don't "see" the Kingdom of God: there is no fanfare, flags, or palaces. But through the Spirit, God is changing everything. All around us small acts of grace – visits, phone calls, emails, caring actions – are changing the world to be God's Kingdom.

Just when we think we understand Jesus, He surprises us. He challenges our preconceived notions. And He reminds us that small things – like reaching out to one crippled lady, like one tiny seed, like a little bit of yeast – like you or me – can change the world.

In Matthew 25:34-46, Jesus tells a parable about sheep and goats. Of the sheep, He says, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.*" Then these righteous ones ask, when did we do all this? And the King says, "*I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to **me**!*" When we know and reflect Jesus' love, when we live as Jesus would have us live, His kingdom does come and His will is done.

Jesus adds, "*When you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help **me***" (Matthew 25:45). When I turn my back on a person in need, I am turning my back on Jesus. When I cause grief to another person, I am causing grief to Jesus. When I look the other way on a person's need, I am looking away from Jesus. What might Jesus be saying to me? What will I do about it?

Loving heavenly Father, I give my soul to your care.

Protect me from the temptations of sin.

Protect my mind and my will so that all my thoughts and desires will be pleasing to You.

Protect my desire to serve You and be holy in my soul.

Jesus, Son of the living God, I give my heart to your care.

Let me love you with all my heart.

Let me always try to love my neighbour.

Help me be strong around friends who might lead me away from You,

May I, instead, be a light of Your life in a darkened world.

Holy Spirit, I give my body to your care.

Let me always remember that my body is Your home.

You dwell within me.

Let me never sin against you by any impure actions alone or with others.

Loving Lord, Three-in-One, I give my whole self to you.

And if I do fall and fail, help me to quickly confess and repent

That I may know the freedom of Your forgiveness.

Amen