

A person is shown in silhouette, kneeling in a prayerful posture on the right side of the frame. They are facing a body of water, likely a lake or river, which is shrouded in a thick mist or fog. The sun is rising low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that fills the sky and reflects off the water's surface. Tall, thin trees are visible in the background, their forms softened by the mist. In the foreground, some reeds and grasses are visible on the left side. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

July 2023

Prayer: Talking with God 3

Readings, Reflections, Prayers

Dr. Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue S
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
403-327-2082
bruce@firstb.net
www.firstb.net

If you would prefer daily emails of these studies, visit www.firstb.net or email info@firstb.net

Monday, July 10: Matthew 6:7-15 (again)

We're going back to Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6, today. Theologian and astrophysicist, David Wilkinson comments, *"The term 'Father' is now so well known in Christian spirituality that we no longer notice just how unusual a statement it is. It is not an obvious thing that the creator of billions of galaxies can be called 'Father' by people like us. And this is not a term for a kind of universal fatherhood, where we call God 'Father' because we are all part of the family of human beings. This is an intimate, personal term. This is to address God directly as Father, just as Jesus himself does. He tells us we can do it too."*

God invites us into that kind of an approachable, intimate, personal, trusting, loving relationship both personally and corporately as the church (*"**Our** Father"*). Isn't that fantastic? At the same time, we hold in tension the fact that God is infinitely beyond us and is all-powerful (*"Our Father **in** heaven"*). God's intimate closeness (immanence) and infinite greatness (transcendence) exist in creative tension.

Jesus' prayer aligns us with a different set of values than those in the society around us. While the greed for money, power, and fame dominates mainstream culture, we are challenged to live by a countercultural set of virtues emphasizing the Kingdom of God, thankfulness, forgiveness, justice, love, and self-control.

Jesus chooses to elaborate on one particular phrase in the prayer (6:12: *"forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"*). In 6:14-15, Jesus expands His meaning: *"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* He knows we'll struggle with this. He is fully aware of **our** need for forgiveness; He also knows how hard it can be for us to practice gifting forgiveness to one another.

Jesus sees forgiveness as a two-step process: (1) **He forgives us**, and then, (2) out of that experience of grace, **we gift that same forgiveness** to those around us. We aren't expected to conjure up forgiveness; we are simply passing on the blessing we have already received. We imitate Jesus' model of love, grace, and mercy by treating others with the same love, grace, compassion, and mercy He gives to us.

Have you experienced God's forgiveness? If not, pray about it. He will forgive you. If you have known His forgiveness, forgive with the same grace you have received. Pass on His blessing of grace and peace.

Can I do that? Try it. When we hold on to grudges, we are the ones who suffer: we lose sleep, we grind our teeth, we get ulcers, we become bitter, unpleasant people. Often the other person doesn't even know we're mad at them; they get on with their lives as normal. Give yourself peace. Let it go.

Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for the many gifts you have given me.

*I am giving You the worship of my whole life,
I am giving You glory with my whole power.
I am giving You praise with my whole being.
I'm giving You honor with my whole life.
I'm giving You reverence with my whole understanding.
I'm giving You offering with my whole thought.
I'm giving You praise with my whole emotion.
I am giving You humility in the blood of the Lamb.
I'm giving You love with my whole devotion.
I am giving You service with my whole desire.
I'm giving You glory with my whole heart.
I'm giving You adoration with my whole sense.
I am giving you my very existence
with my whole mind and heart, body and soul,
O God of glory. Amen*

Gaelic prayer

Tuesday, July 11: Matthew 18:15-35

How do we deal with it when someone from within the church hurts us? Jesus gives us step-by-step advice in 18:15-20: *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense ... For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."* Sounds great.

Peter has issues with this. The disciples do not always get along. They have some "colourful" discussions. They compete. They argue. Peter, himself, is impulsive. He has a temper.

Peter asks a great, practical question: *"That's great, but ... Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"* (18:21). Peter is pretty generous offering to forgive a person seven times.

How does Jesus answer? As He responds, Jesus is not literally saying we forgive someone 490 times (seventy times seven), then we stop forgiving them on the 491st offence. He is saying forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and keep on forgiving ... forever and ever. I don't like that. Then He goes tells a parable about forgiveness.

Jesus is NOT saying we should just bite our tongues, be a doormat, simply "forgive and forget" again and again, and never confront issues. As He says in 18:15-17, when someone sins, you do deal with it. You do talk about it – individually, with a friend, and (if necessary) with the community. You do deal with problems between people. The key principle is that we never, ever give up making forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration our goals. We handle problems in constructive, redemptive, and community-building ways.

Just as God never gives up on us – His goal is always forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration with us – we don't give up trying to restore relationships with one another. God, of course, is never content to leave us as we are; He will always deal with the sin in our life. In the same way we are encouraged to help other people deal with the sin in their lives and be restored to wholeness. We want to restore relationships or keep relationships, and help people work through the issues in their lives. We want God's will to be done.

The final verse (18:35) seems harsh. How can this be? Throughout the Sermon on the Mount and His later teaching, Jesus emphasizes what is in our heart is critical (*"The words you speak come from the heart – that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you"* (Matthew 15:18-20)). If we cannot forgive other people, what is going on in our hearts? If we cannot forgive other people, are we really experiencing God's forgiveness? Jesus endured the cross for us. What will we endure for others? What cross will we bear?

I find that if I am enjoying God's forgiveness – if I am honest with Him about my issues, confess my sins, and know He is leading me forward – I experience God's joy and peace in profound ways. And, when I know God is forgiving me, I find it relatively easy to be a forgiving person with other people. However, if I am not dealing with my problems with God – if I won't confess my sin and won't deal with my attitudes – I am generally miserable and unhappy. And I am much less gracious and forgiving toward others.

If I find myself not willing to forgive other people, I'm probably not in a good relationship with God. I have things I need to deal with in my relationship with God. I need to take action – now.

The crazy thing is that when I don't forgive others (because I want to "punish" them for what they did to me) the other person rarely suffers at all, but I am miserable, lose sleep, get ulcers, fume, stew ... However, when I am a forgiving person toward others, I generally feel joy and peace as well.

Being a forgiving person provides a double-blessing: the person you forgive has the blessing of being forgiven in a restored relationship AND you have the blessing of being at peace within yourself as well. You will sleep better. You will grind your teeth less. You will grumble and complain less. You won't get ulcers.

When I experience God's grace, mercy and forgiveness, I have a greater capacity to forgive others. And I discover God's joy, peace, and presence in amazing ways.

*I give you thanks, O God, that I have risen today,
to rise and serve You this new day.
May this be a day to Your glory, O God of every gift,
that Your glory might be known far and wide.
O great God, help my soul;
by Your own mercy and grace, forgive my sins.
Help me to avoid every sin,
and to run from every source of temptation.
As the mist scatters when the sun rises on the hills,
scatter the haze in my soul so I may see You clearly.
As Your sunshine warms me from the outside in,
may Your Son warm me from inside out.
May Your glory shine through me today:
through my thoughts, deeds, words, desires, senses, and all my ways.
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Wednesday, July 12: Mark 11:12-26

This fig-tree incident brackets Jesus upsetting the (moneychangers') carts in the Temple. Jesus doesn't have an issue with this particular tree. He uses it as a metaphor for the spiritual life of the Jewish nation, symbolized by the Temple. On the outside, from a distance, the tree looks great: but on closer inspection it has no figs, no fruit. Jesus does not "curse" the tree. He simply affirms what is already true: it isn't doing anyone any good. It is a sad, withered tree that feeds no one.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, the Temple glistens in the evening light like a gorgeous star shining on the mountaintop. From a distance, the religion of the 1st Century Jews looked wonderful, too. But on closer inspection, it was dead. The ritualized, commandment-obsessed religion of Pharisees was lifeless, just like the fig tree. All the rule-keeping and Temple rituals weren't doing anyone any good. It was a dead religion feeding no one. There was no fruit.

All the rule-keeping and religious ritual in the world is no substitute for the life-giving nourishment of a genuine relationship with God, a relationship that comes from inside out, from the heart.

But there is good news. With faith in God anything is possible. Mountains can move. Barren fig trees can bear fruit. We can be renewed by God's Spirit. Stodgy, judgmental, religion-y people can come alive. We can come alive. Our lives can bear fruit if we allow Jesus and His Spirit to transform us.

Are you feeling empty? Withered? Dead? Pray. Pray for our church. Pray that we would have a passion for outreach and mission in our community – and around the world. Pray that we may be inspired to find ways to bless our neighbours, to share with them the bread of life – Jesus. Pray for life, genuine life in Jesus. "*More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,*" wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Jesus emphasizes that an essential key to a good relationship with God is forgiveness: "*But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too*" (11:25). We put hands and feet to our prayers by reaching out in love and compassion to the people closest to us ... It's hard. But it's how God's Kingdom comes and His will is done.

*Help us Lord -
To live in Your light.
To act in Your might.
To think in Your wisdom.
To walk in Your kingdom.
To abide in Your love.
Your presence to prove. Amen.*

Welsh prayer

Thursday, July 13: Matthew 9:1-8

What hope is there? How do I pray, and move forward?

Think about the suffering and horrible quality of life of a paralyzed man in the first century. Centuries before social assistance, his only hope is begging. How does Jesus respond (9:2)?

Is his issue really sin? Jesus routinely dismisses any causal link between illness and sin (John 9).

This story is similar to one in which a man's buddies excavate a whole in the roof of a house to get their friend to Jesus: *"Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, 'Young man, your sins are forgiven.' But the Pharisees and teachers of religious law said to themselves, 'Who does he think he is? That's blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins.' Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he asked them, 'Why do you question this in your hearts? Is it easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up and walk'? So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins.' Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, 'Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home.'"* (Luke 5:17-26).

These stories are part of a bigger narrative of who Jesus is, the Messiah. Jesus is not just a "great physician" who can heal a specific disease in a particular person (although He can). He is God. He is the One who has authority over everything because He is the Creator and Sustainer of all of creation. And, while Jesus can heal illnesses, He is about bigger and better things.

The bigger issue Jesus deals with, running as an undercurrent from Genesis 3 right through Revelation 22, is "sin." We tend to think of "sin" in terms of occasional mistakes. Once in a while, we miss the mark. We all have little "oops-es" on occasion.

In the Bible "sin" is a deeper problem (those specific slip-ups are symptoms of a deeper disease). The bigger issue is that, although we were created to worship and know God, to a greater or lesser extent we all rebel. Sin is ultimately allowing something, anything, other than God to shape, guide, and control our lives. The deep issue is that we subconsciously worship created things, from money to popularity, pleasure to pride, power to prestige. We become slaves to our bank accounts, employers, hobbies, homes, friends, reputations, passions ... We allow things other than God to shape and control our lives.

What we all need – even this paralyzed man – is to re-centre our lives on God. Yes, good physical health is great. But a healthy body, still enslaved by other forces within creation, is still not healthy. To be really, wholly healthy, we need to worship God and God alone. It sounds easy. It's not.

Jesus says, *"Blessed are the pure in heart ..."* Our challenge is to keep focused on Jesus and His Kingdom. We struggle not to allow other things than God to control our decisions and lives. Jesus can deal with that. He can forgive us, heal us, and give us a new start. He does invite us to follow Him and to change.

We'll never be perfect. But we keep on getting up and trying, again and again, to be centred on Him and follow Him. When we fall, we confess it and go on. We keep on keeping on ...

*God, guide me with Your wisdom,
God chastise me with your justice,
God help me with your mercy,
God protect me with Your strength.
God fill me with Your fullness,
God shield me with Your shade,
God fill me with your grace,
for the sake of Your Anointed Son.
Amen*

Gaelic prayer

Friday, July 14: Matthew 12:15-37

After Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand, *"The Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus."* (12:14). In fact, when the Jewish leaders see what Jesus is doing, they accuse Him of being in league with the devil. Does that make sense? Jesus easily dismisses this accusation: why would the devil undo his own nasty handiwork like causing pain and suffering? Their logic is flawed.

What Jesus is doing is exactly what the Messiah ought to be doing (12:18-21). People recognize that. They ask, *"Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?"* (12:23). *"A tree is identified by its fruit,"* Jesus goes on to say. *"If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad ... A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart"* (12:33-35).

As Jesus teaches, He makes the cryptic comment, *"So I tell you, every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven – except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come"* (12:31-32). This sounds serious. Are there limits to God's forgiveness and mercy? How do I know if I have accidentally blasphemed against the Spirit?

Jesus is not talking about an occasional little slip up. He is talking about a stubborn, adamant, dogged, day-in-day-out, refusal to acknowledge God and put one's faith in Him. At the end of the day, those who defiantly resist the Spirit's call to know God's love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness through Jesus get what they really want, an eternal existence without God.

If a person really, really, really does not want to know God and have any kind of relationship with Him, Jesus will not force Himself on anyone. Love allows people freedom to choose, including freedom to refuse love.

C.S. Lewis muses, *"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell, choose it ... (Those in hell) are successful, rebels to the end; the doors of hell are locked on the inside ... A man can't be **taken** to hell, or **sent** to hell: you can only get there on your own steam ..."*

If, however, we come, in faith, to Jesus, we are welcomed into His Kingdom and family with celebration. We will still make mistakes. But we are safe in His hands. Forever. Some teachers give the impression God is looking for excuses to condemn us. In fact, the opposite is true. God is looking for that tiniest mustard seed of belief to nurture, the tiniest flickering flame of faith to fan into a fire. God yearns to save us. But He will not force us.

Pray for those who struggle with faith in God. Pray that the Spirit would be at work in their lives. And pray that our hearts, minds, and lives would be transformed by His Spirit so that our lives might *"produce good things from the treasury of a good heart ..."*

*A rainbow, skillfully painted
from the spectrum of colors contained in Your glorious palette:
warm colors encircling us,
embracing Your earth with a promise,
a reminder of your covenant with all Your creation.
Such love, eternal and everlasting.
Thank You, creator God, for the beauty of the rainbow,
and the beauty of Your love,
for all that You have made,
and for all You are going to make.
Make you make my life a temple for Your Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Saturday, July 15: John 14:1-14

Frank Doyle comments, "John quotes a curious remark of Philip to Jesus: 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.' It reminds me of what I have often heard on the lips of exasperated parents to their children: 'You're never satisfied.' Am I ever? Augustine said our hearts are restless till they rest in God. When I see Jesus, I see a human vision of the Infinite God who is beyond my imagination."

We all have difficulty understanding God. Our finite minds struggle to make sense of a spiritual being who created and sustains the universe. We cannot comprehend anyone who is not "physical" flesh and blood like us. Jesus invites us to know God, not by theological speculation or religious activity, but by observing His life of loving, healing, rebuking, challenging, forgiving, washing feet, encouraging, exemplary holiness, stilling storms, challenging evil, and raising the dead. This is who God is. Reading the stories of Jesus and listening to the teaching of Jesus we discover who God – Father, Son, and Spirit – really is.

How can we know God? How can flesh and blood beings, like us, relate to a Spirit, like God? How can sinful people have a relationship with a holy God? It seems impossible. Many people give up: "God," if He exists, is unknowable. Or we resort to religious rituals to appease Him. Or we have strange ideas of an angry God who needs to be placated by offerings. Or if we do enough good things, God will like us.

None of this is necessary. Jesus, coming among us as God in human form, relates to us as God in flesh and blood. When we read, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me," we can be offended by the exclusivity of Jesus' words. But think of it positively: through Jesus there actually **IS** a way to know our loving Father God. Through Jesus there really **IS** a rich and meaningful life in fellowship with God's Spirit. Through Jesus there actually **IS** objective truth about who we are. Without Jesus there are none of these.

Other than Jesus, there simply is no way to authentic relationship with the living God. Other than Jesus, there is no source of absolute truth about life, the universe, and everything. Other than Jesus, there is no way to a full and complete life, here and hereafter.

In the long term, we know our lives are secure in His hands. But this moment, this day, we are invited to know God, trusting our lives to Jesus. There may be tough times. We may encounter struggles throughout our earthly lives. But we know our lives are safe and complete in Him. We know we can make a difference to the world around us as we live in His grace and mercy.

"God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:21-25).

Lord, help me to live the life you have called me to, in and through Jesus ... in and through your Spirit ... in and through the Father.

*Let me bless almighty God,
whose power extends over sea and land,
whose angels watch over all.
Let me study sacred books to calm my soul:
I pray for peace, kneeling at heaven's gates.
Let me do my daily work, gathering seaweed, catching fish (earning a living? shopping?),
giving food to the poor.
Let me say my daily prayers, sometimes singing, sometimes quiet,
always thanking God.
Delightful it is to live a peaceful life, in a quiet way,
serving the King of kings.
Amen.*

Columba (521-597)

Sunday, July 16: John 14:15-31

Bilbo Baggins, one of the main characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, is a Hobbit. Hobbits are gentle, peace-loving, simple folk. Much to the consternation of Bilbo's quiet, peaceful, home-loving, non-adventurous neighbours, Bilbo travels far beyond the borders of the Shire and has some wild adventures with trolls, goblins, and dragons. Bilbo tells his young nephew, Frodo, *"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."*

We live in a crazy world where, if we don't keep our wits about us, there's no knowing where we might be swept off to, too. Jesus promises us His Holy Spirit – His personal presence in our lives – to help us keep our heads, hearts, and souls, and bodies in fellowship with God on the unpredictable journey of life.

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you ... When the Father sends the Advocate as my representative – that is, the Holy Spirit – he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid" (John 14:16-17, 26-27).

Jesus doesn't prepare His disciples to live in a holy huddle in a Christian fortress. He prepares them to live in the real knock-about world of work, family, school, friendships, health, sickness, stress, strife, success, defeat, non-belief, and "other" beliefs. When we step out the front door every morning we are in a rough and tumble world where we need Jesus' wisdom, guidance, and strength. His Spirit provides that.

Gandalf, a wise wizard, says of Bilbo: *"There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself."* When we are put in stressful situations, we find there is a lot more strength and resilience within ourselves than we imagine, too. Especially as people who love Jesus, we find when we have to rely on God and God alone, our faith can grow in amazing ways. When we are stretched beyond what we can handle in our own human strength, we discover He can get us through.

But *"God won't give me more than I am able to bear,"* right? Stop. That is NOT a verse in the Bible. Look it up. The closest is 1 Corinthians 10:13: *"The **temptations** in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the **temptation** to be more than you can stand. When you are **tempted**, he will show you a way out so that you can endure."* Notice this is specifically about **temptation**, not difficulties, hard times, or obstacles.

In fact, God may well allow us to face more than we can handle on our own and in our own strength. Because when we face more than **we** can bear we turn to **God**. Faith – genuine faith – happens when we do deal with more than we can bear. When we trust in God.

One of the frequent themes in Scripture is suffering is not unusual. It's common among God's people.

Peter writes, *"Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name. ... So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you"* (1 Peter 4:12-19).

God's Spirit is in you. When life is difficult, turn to God. There is a lot more in you than you guess – God is there. There is much more to you than you can imagine: His Spirit is in you. How can you live bravely, boldly, and missionally this week?

*God the Father, all-powerful –
 Jesus, all-loving –
 Holy Spirit, all-filling –
 Three-in-one, ever-living, ever-mighty, ever-lasting,
 who brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea,
 who brought Jonah to land from the belly of the great creature of the deep,
 who brought Paul and his companions in the ship from the torment of the sea,
 from the fury of the waves,
 from the gale that was great,
 from the storm that was heavy,
 save us and shield us and sanctify us.
 King of all creation and the elements,
 be seated at the helm of our lives.
 Lead us in peace to the end of our journey.
 When the winds blow wild and swirl and whirl,
 keep us safe and free of harm.
 You are the God who saves us.
 In the end bring us to a safe harbor in heaven,
 where the winds are soft and the eddies calm.
 Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Monday, July 17: John 15:1-8

John 14 ends with Jesus saying, *"I don't have much more time to talk to you, because the ruler of this world approaches ..."* (14:30). It's an ominous sentence. On the one hand, it is quite literally true – Imperial Roman soldiers, guided by Judas, are on their way to arrest Him. On the other hand, He is also referring to the dark spiritual forces at work, driving Judas, motivating Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders, influencing Pontius Pilate. All the powers of evil are aligning to destroy Him ...

Jesus has just shared His final meal with His disciples (the "last supper"), symbolically washed their feet, begun to talk about His death and resurrection, and promised His Holy Spirit. He concludes, *"Come, let's be going"* (14:31). They are leaving the upper room where they shared their last supper together and are heading toward the Garden of Gethsemane, through the streets of Jerusalem. It's dark, literally as it is now night, but also dark, spiritually, as the forces of evil move through the streets, searching to destroy Jesus.

As they make their way into the garden, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, they walk through vineyards. Jesus, master teacher that He is, uses the vines growing around them as an object lesson. Vines are not like trees with a large trunk out of which branches grow, one branching off the other, branches on branches on branches. Vines have **one** central stem out of which **each** branch grows. **Each** branch is connected directly to the stem. **Each** branch draws nourishment directly from the central vine.

As we walk through the dark streets and shadowy places of our world, Jesus teaches us we are directly connected to Him. We have a personal relationship with Him. We don't base our faith on a pastor, author, blogger, relative, YouTube personality, musician, or friend. We know **Jesus**, personally, directly.

Any good relationship takes time and work. We need to prune away the busy-ness of our lives and spend time – quality time – with those who matter most, including God. It's not easy to do. But just as a gardener is always cultivating the vine to ensure it is healthy and thriving, just as we need to make sure we spend high quality time with our close friends and family, we need to keep ensuring we are working on our relationship with Jesus. Personal prayer, Bible study, corporate worship, small group time, and good friends are a few ways we keep connected with the vine, Jesus. What can I do to keep connected to Him?

When we do stay connected with Him, we bear fruit. He does not specify what the fruit is, but the context suggests it is what glorifies God in our character, attitudes, actions, and speech. Paul is more explicit: *"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).

I wonder if a vine likes to be pruned? In plant terms, it must hurt. But pruning is a process that directs the plant's energy so the fruit is more plentiful. Jesus does not say what "pruning" looks like for us. The results are that which is dead is removed and our lives/fruit are enriched. We may not like the idea of being "pruned," but we can trust God wants to remove "dead" parts of our lives. As a result, we will be more fruit-full: more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. That's all good.

What is "dead" in my life? What might Jesus need to prune from my life? Will I let Him?

*God of harvest, Gardener supreme,
you place us in your good garden.
Feed us, equip us and provide for us our daily bread.
More than this, help us look to a different harvest:
a fruitfulness of lives
in service to you and others.
God of harvest,
feed us,
prune us,
harvest us,
that our lives might bring glory to you.
Amen*

John Birch

Tuesday, July 18: John 15:9-17

When I was an undergraduate at university (working on my bachelor's degree) we called our professors Dr. Ley, Dr. Pratt, Dr. Barnes. When I began working on my graduate degrees (master's and doctorate), it was a first name basis: David, Andrew, and Jim. In the transition from undergrad to grad school, we moved from a professor-student to a friend-friend relationship. Of course, David, Andrew, and Jim were much, much wiser and more knowledgeable than I. I was still their student and they my mentors. But we also spent time "hanging out" and doing things together. I got to know them as people – their joys and sorrows, successes, struggles, and families. I still have a great relationship with the two of them still living.

Jesus is describing a transition in His relationship with His disciples. They are going from knowing Him as a Rabbi and Teacher, to knowing Him as a friend. He is sharing with them His knowledge and wisdom, but also His joy and His sorrow, His success, and His struggle. Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine: He struggles through these final days/hours with the overwhelming burden He carries. He needs friends.

Of course, Jesus is still much, much more knowledgeable and wise than His disciples then and us today. He still teaches them (and us). But the tone of His teaching is more intimate and personal: *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends ... 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."*

Friendship is characterized by love – sacrificial, unconditional, unwavering love:

- *"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love."*
- *"When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love."*
- *"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."*
- *"This is my command: Love each other."*

Friendship is also characterized by obedience – obedience, informed and formed by honour and respect for a wise mentor. Knowing your wise mentor knows best, you choose to listen, to learn, and to follow:

- "When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love."
- "This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you."
- "This is my command: Love each other."

How do you feel, knowing Jesus calls **you** His friend? How do friends relate? What do they do together? How can that describe your relationship with Jesus? How can knowing Jesus is your friend change how you pray/talk/relate to Him? Ask Him to help you get to know Him more and more ...

"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow."

*Jesus, You are the light of the world:
a light no darkness can quench.
Upon Your church,
wrestling with the darkness of evil, battling against doubt –
let Your light shine.
Upon world governments,
facing gloom and despair, battling against disaster –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who live in the shadows,
caught up in sorrow and strife, struggling against pain –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who are poor,
hungry and homeless, feeling hopeless and unloved –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who feel helpless,
unsure where to turn or who to turn to, confused and convicted –
let Your light shine.
Come, my Lord, my light, my way ...
Come, my lantern, night and day –
let Your light shine.
Come, my healer, make me whole ...
Come, my Saviour, protect my soul –
let Your light shine.
Come, my King, enter my heart ...
Come, Prince of peace, and never depart –
let Your light shine.
Amen*

David Adam

Wednesday, July 19: John 15:18-27

Living for Jesus is not always easy. Not only do we stumble and fail now and then, but people don't always like us. Why not? After all, we are people who share God's love and try to live by maxims like, "*Love your neighbour as yourself*"? Aren't we loveable people?

Jesus reminds us He came teaching those same truths. His own people killed Him for it. The reality is that in our world, "love," in the biblical sense of unconditional grace and mercy, is not a popular theme.

Certain aspects of "love" are very popular – sex, for instance.

But self-giving love that seeks justice, peace, forgiveness, mercy, and equality is not well-received. Why not? Because some people have a lot to lose if they were act in a selfless and self-giving way. Frankly many of us do better (financially, power, prestige) in a world that builds walls not bridges, sows hate not love, creates suspicion not compassion, and nurtures lies rather than truth. What happens to a person's wealth, advancement, power, and clout if they care for others first?

The kingdom of God introduces a radical reordering of society where we choose to live counter-culturally. We choose to live Jesus-like values of unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, grace, truth, patience, honesty, and self-control.

What if it costs us (money, time) to help provide services for those who are homeless, have disabilities, are immigrants, or are poor?

Historically Christians, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, have been in the frontlines to end slavery, provide public education and healthcare, fight for minority rights, care for the poor, champion gender equality, sponsor refugees, care for the environment, and much more – all of which are/were unpopular with many people. And all of which cost us time, money, effort, and popularity. As we care for the poor (soup kitchen, food banks, homeless shelter), seek justice, care for God's creation, sponsor refugees, and try to be peace-makers, we can be out of sync with people around us. But we still do it. It's the right thing to do. We are called to love and give as generously as Jesus: He gave His life for us.

The good news is that "*the Spirit of truth will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me*" – Jesus will be with us through His Holy Spirit. Praise God.

We are called to "*love our neighbor*" in our community. How can we do that courageously?

*Where there is fear I can allay,
where there is pain I can heal,
where there are wounds I can bind,
and hunger I can fill:
Lord, grant me courage,
Lord, grant me strength,
grant me compassion
that I may be your heart today.
Where there is hate I can confront,
where there are yokes I can release,
where there are captives I can free
and anger I can appease:
Lord, grant me courage,
Lord, grant me strength,
grant me compassion
that I may be your heart today.
Lord, give me hope,
That I may be your heart today.
Amen*

Manoling Francisco

Thursday, July 20: John 16:1-15

Can hard times happen the life of someone who loves Jesus? Read John 16:1-2. Following Jesus in the real world can be tough. God may allow us to face more than we can handle, BUT His Spirit is with us always.

What will the Holy Spirit do in our world? He will ...

- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in relation to **sin**.* The world THINKS it knows what's right: financial wealth is ultimately most important; survival of the fittest is the way to go; if other people are in your way, run them over; we can exploit the earth's resources; morality is a matter of personal choice, the poor have only themselves to blame; etc. Of course we may not SAY things this way, but this is how we act. BUT, the Holy Spirit helps us see these values are wrong. They are sinful. The real guiding principle should be: "*Love each other as I have loved you*" (John 15:12). God's way calls us to love others first. Unconditionally. Sacrificially.

- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in terms of **righteousness**.* Our culture tells us we can choose our own moral standards. No one should tell us how to live our lives. Personal "success" (whatever that might look like) is the highest value. Money and power are everything. Jesus warns pursuing those ends ultimately leads to self-destruction. God's way calls us to holiness. Jesus shows us how to live wisely and rightly – a life characterized by obedience to God's laws. Self-giving, unconditional love. The proof He was right is His resurrection. Jesus proves love wins.
- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in terms of **judgment** or condemnation.* The world has judged Jesus and His teachings (and us) as wrong about the fundamentals of life. His teachings about love, compassion, justice, mercy, and servanthood are misguided. We need to shape the political and cultural agenda around a booming economy and personal freedom. We need bigger walls and more weapons, not bridges, hospitals, or schools. In the end, God's judgment will vindicate Jesus and His people, who model compassion, care, and mercy. God calls us to faithfulness.

We may live at odds with our culture. In fact, we should expect that. That's OK. The Spirit will help us along the way. God will honour our perseverance and commitment.

"With eyes wide open to the mercies of God," Paul writes, "I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity" (Romans 12:1-2). May the Spirit inspire us to live faithfully ...

*God of Goodness, I come into your presence
so aware of my human frailty
and yet overwhelmed by your love for me.
I thank you that there is no human experience that I might walk through
where your love cannot reach me.
If I climb the highest mountain, you are there
and yet if I find myself in the darkest valley of my life, you are there.
Teach me today to love you more.
Help me to rest in that love.
I ask nothing more than the simple trusting heart of a child.
Amen.*

Friday, July 21: John 16:16-33

It would have been nice to meet the Queen. I did see the Queen and Prince Philip once, in Vancouver, many years ago. But I never got even remotely close to meeting them. If I could have made it through the throngs of other "ordinary" people like myself on the sidewalk, security was so tight I would never have gotten near them. Let's face it. I was just not important enough.

Whether it's royalty or the CEO of Air Canada, there are some people that we cannot make personal contact with. They have echelons of public relations people, reception people, administrators, and security to keep us at a distance. We regular people just don't have the pull to see the head person.

The incredible truth Jesus is teaching His disciples is that, in prayer, all of us are welcome into the personal presence of the King of Kings, the Creator of the Universe, God Himself, the Father. We won't be passed on to some answering service or junior angel. When we pray to our Father, we are in His presence. Just as every branch of the vine connects with the main stalk, each of us prays directly with God. We can share our joys and fears, celebrations and concerns, hopes and heartaches with complete honesty and trust, knowing He hears us, love us, and has compassion on us.

How is this possible? Because the Father Himself loves **us**. Tom Wright comments, *"Time to throw out of the junk-room of our minds all those medieval images of a distant, remote, uncaring 'father' who has to be*

pleaded with and, as it were, bribed with the blood of his own son before he can be made even to think of doing something good for us. Time to throw out, too, any idea that Jesus is a bit remote, so that we have to come to him through a succession of others – saints, martyrs, any of them."

When Jesus says, in the safety and wonder of this kind of intimate relationship, *"I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name ... Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy"* (16:23-24), He is not playing into the hands of the prosperity-gospel teachers and healers who read this as carte blanche for getting filthy rich or ensuring perfect health. Jesus' point is we have direct access to God, our loving Father.

The more we get to know God, the more we pray wisely in accordance with His character and His will. As we pray, *"Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ..."* of course God will answer that prayer. This is not about praying, *"Lord, give me a nicer house, a fancier car, a warmer vacation, a new set of lungs, and help me lose a few pounds, too."*

As you pray, continue to ask God how you can know Him more completely, pray more wisely, and serve Him more intentionally ...

*May the blessing of God's light be on you –
light without and light within.
May God's blessed sunlight shine on you like a great peat fire,
so that stranger and friend may come and warm himself at it.
And may God's light shine out of the two eyes of you,
like a candle set in the window of a house,
bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm.

And may the blessing of God's rain be on you,
may it beat upon your spirit and wash it fair and clean,
and leave there a shining pool where the blue of heaven shines,
and sometimes a star.

And may the blessing of God's earth be on you,
soft under your feet as you pass along the roads,
soft under you as you lie out on it, tired at the end of day,
and may it rest easy over you when,
at last, you lie out under it.

May it rest so lightly over you that your soul may be out from under it quickly,
up and off and on its way to Him.
And now may the Lord bless you, and bless you kindly.
Amen.*

Scottish Blessing

Saturday, July 22: Luke 20:45-21:1-4

Have a look at the deliberate contrast between the teachers of the law (20:46-47, 21:1) and the poor widow (20:47, 21:2-4). What do you see?

These sayings follow Jesus' teaching about the fact that knowing God is a matter of truly loving Him, following Him, and not just empty rituals.

"We need to stop giving people excuses not to believe in God," writes Francis Chan. "You've probably heard the expression 'I believe in God, just not organized religion'. I don't think people would say that if the church truly lived like we are called to live ..."

Prayer, genuine prayer, calls us into an authentic relationship with Jesus, characterized by the faith of a poor widow who put in two very small copper coins (the equivalent of two pennies – back when we had pennies).

Pray to God, today, simply yearning to know Him and speak with Him ... No pretenses ... Just honest, open, conversation about what is on your heart and mind ...

*Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for the many gifts you have given me:
each day and each night,
each lake and each land,
each weather fair, each calm, each wild.*

*I am giving You the worship of my whole life,
I am giving You glory with my whole power.
I am giving You praise with my whole being.
I'm giving You honor with my whole life.
I'm giving You reverence with my whole understanding.
I'm giving You offering with my whole thought.
I'm giving You praise with my whole emotion.
I am giving You humility in the blood of the Lamb.
I'm giving You love with my whole devotion.
I am giving You service with my whole desire.
I'm giving You glory with my whole heart.
I'm giving You adoration with my whole sense.
I am giving you my very existence
with my whole mind and heart, body and soul,
O God of glory.
Amen*

Gaelic prayer

Sunday, July 23: Luke 19:28-46 and Luke 23:35-49 (especially 23:46)

The Sunday before Easter is Palm Sunday, a day when we read one of the stories of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We celebrate with palm branches, and "Hosannas," and generally have a great party. We're celebrating Palm Sunday in July this year! It's too good a party to limit to only once a year.

We rarely link Palm Sunday with Good Friday, only five days later. It's a tragic comment on human nature that, within a couple of days, a rousing chorus of "*Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord!*" can turn to vile shouts of "*Crucify Him!*" The same people who throw a party for Jesus throw Him to the wolves (the Jewish/Roman authorities) five days on.

People are willing to welcome Jesus at a superficial level, but when he threatens to overturn their entrepreneurial money-changing ways, they are quick to get rid of Him.

Jesus is a fantastic judge of human character. As He approaches the city, He comments, "*How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace ...*" (Luke 19:42). What is the way to peace? Peace comes when we genuinely welcome Jesus deeply, not just superficially. That may mean a change of priorities. It may mean a shift in values. It may mean living differently. Following Jesus in the real world may lead to living counter culturally to the world around us. It can lead us into tough places.

Hard places are not as uncommon as we might like to think they are.

Before His crucifixion, Jesus prays, "*Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine*" (Luke 22:42). Jesus walked a hard, hard road after that.

C.S. Lewis comments, "*There are, no doubt, passages in the New Testament which may seem at first sight to promise an invariable granting of our prayers. But in the very heart of the story we meet a glaring instance to the contrary. In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible*

gimmick may be dismissed." There is a hard mystery to prayer that we cannot reduce to a simple formula. Some things God always grants ... other things are much more mysterious. We live in that tension.

One prayer that is always answered is Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:46: "*Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands.*" When we place our lives in God's hands, His promise is that He never leaves us and never forsakes us. That is a promise that runs throughout Scripture. God may not protect us from walking through some dark valleys, but He does assure us that we are in His hands, even in those tough, tough places.

What parts of my life do I doggedly hold on to? If Jesus were to overturn some of the "tables" in my life that I don't want Him to touch, what things might He want to deal with? How will I handle that? Can I genuinely entrust my life into His hands? Will I do that?

*I will kindle my fire this morning,
in the presence of God, the Creator of heaven and earth;
I will kindle my fire this morning,
in the presence of Jesus, my Saviour and King;
I will kindle my fire this morning,
in the presence of the Spirit who cleanses and guides me.
Without anger, without jealousy, without enmity, without fear,
without ill will toward anyone under the sun,
with the holy Son of God to shield me.

God, kindle within my heart a flame of love
for my neighbor, for my enemy,
for my friend, for my family,
for the brave, for the knave,
for the leader, and for the servant of all.
Kindle within my heart a flame of devotion to follow You
and the ways You would have me go:
ways of service, ways of giving,
ways of prayer, ways of fasting,
ways of study, and ways of love.
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Monday, July 24: Matthew 24:1-28

Some of us get excited about passages like Matthew 24. We are 110% positively certain it's all about us, in Canada, in 2023, right? Jesus is just about to return almost immediately, right? Maybe. Maybe not.

In every generation, some people have been positive these signs will come to pass in their lifetimes. And so far, every generation has been wrong. To keep perspective, we need to remember:

- Jesus spoke these words to specific people (His disciples) at a certain point in time (just before His arrest and crucifixion) in a particular place (on a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem and Temple). Jesus' words were intended for these people. We're eavesdropping on Jesus' specific words to a specific people at a specific time in a specific place. Many of His disciples would experience all these horrors in their lifetimes: wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution, false prophets, even the "abomination of desolation" when the Romans destroyed the Temple and desecrated it by making offerings to their pagan gods on the holy altar (70 AD).

Jesus is preparing His people for challenging days ahead, within their own lifetimes – trials unlike any we have experienced in ours. These words are a stark reminder that following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. They also remind us God will get His people through crazy, dangerous, and evil times. And, one day, someday, Jesus will return. Until then we are called to remain faithful.

- We still do live in difficult times, just as Christians have through the centuries. Following Jesus is still

not an “easy” thing. It can be very challenging. We can face ridicule for our faith. We could even face brutal persecution (believers in some parts of the world, today, do). But in this challenging world, God gets us through. We remain faithful.

- Our challenge – like Christians in all generations – is to live as if we will live forever: we keep learning, keep trying to change the world, keep investing in the lives of people around us, keep caring for those in need, keep praying that God’s Kingdom come and His will be done on earth. And we also live as if this is the last of the last days: we make every moment of every day count for the Lord. It sounds like a paradox. But when we do that, we make our lives count both for the long- and the short-term. And the Kingdom of God does come a little bit more here as it is in heaven.
- Don’t get taken in by people who claim to have figured out the exact date, time, or place of Jesus’ return. If Jesus Himself says, *“No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows”* (24:36), we would be arrogant to think we know better than the angels or Jesus, Himself. If someone tells you they’ve got it all figured out, they likely fall into the “false prophet” category.

How do we pray in such tumultuous times? The earliest Christians, for whom Matthew was writing His gospel, prayed all the time (in Book of Acts, the story of the early church, the followers of Jesus are recorded as praying 34 times).

For instance, after Peter and John are arrested, then released, *“all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: ‘O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying, “Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.”’*

“In fact, this has happened here in this very city. For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (Acts 4:24-30).

Do they pray for personal protection? For a comfortable life? For safety? No. They pray for boldness in sharing their faith. They pray for the power to show people God’s power through the name of Jesus. They pray, *“Your Kingdom and your will be done”* – in and through us. Can I pray that prayer?

Luke adds, *“After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness”* (Acts 4:31). Lord, fill us with your Spirit. Give us courage. Give us boldness. Give us faith. Shake us up. Shake up the world through your Spirit in us ...

*Lord Jesus,
I give you my hands to do your work.
I give you my feet to go your way.
I give you my eyes to see as you do.
I give you my tongue to speak your words.
I give you my mind that you may think in me.
I give you my spirit that you may pray in me.
Above all, I give you my heart.
May I love you, your Father, your Spirit, and all mankind.
I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,
so that it is you, Lord Jesus,
who live, and work, and pray in me.
Amen.*

Tuesday, July 25: Matthew 24:26-44

C.S. Lewis comments, *"We must never speak to simple, excitable people about 'the Day' (of Jesus' return) without emphasizing again and again the utter impossibility of prediction. We must try to show them that that impossibility is an essential part of the doctrine. If you do not believe our Lord's words (that no one knows the time), why do you believe in his return at all? And if you do believe them must you not put away from you, utterly and forever, any hope of dating that return?"*

"His teaching on the subject quite clearly consisted of three presuppositions.

- (1) That he will certainly return.*
- (2) That we cannot possibly find out when.*
- (3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him ...*

"Precisely because we cannot predict the moment, we must be ready at all moments."

If we do look at how the first followers of Jesus lived in this reality, we notice they prayed – a lot. But it wasn't prayer to be released from the world, to go to heaven, or even to be protected from physical harm.

Instead, they prayed for courage, for boldness, for their teachers, for those called to serve widows and others in need, for new believers, for God's mercy and power to be poured out, for those suffering and in prison for their faith, for those sharing God's Word in other places, for people to come to faith in Jesus, and for the name of Jesus to be glorified. (Skim the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul, Peter, and John)

Then the first believers got on with it. They put boots to their prayers. They shared their faith with boldness, despite the risks. They cared for those in need, despite the cost. They sent out (and went out as) "missionaries" who planted churches everywhere. They lived their faith moment by moment, day by day consistently and compassionately. The church grew as "ordinary" people simply lived and shared their faith.

They were "ready" at all moments for Jesus' return, but they also lived as if He wouldn't return for centuries so they set about building His church that would – and has – lasted for thousands of years.

We can pray for courage and boldness, for those who serve God in more formal ways, for those suffering for their faith, and for people to come to faith. Then we can just get on with it, too. How can God's Kingdom come and His will be done in and through me?

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, you heav'nly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.*

Wednesday, July 26: Matthew 26:17-46

Jesus knows what's coming:

- *"The Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged with a whip, and crucified"* (Matthew 20:19).
- *"The Passover begins in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified"* (26:2).

Crucifixion was what happened to murderers, revolutionaries, assassins, and thugs. It was a publicly humiliating, physically excruciating, long-drawn-out way to die. You faced ridicule and abuse from the mob for hours. You endured inconceivable pain. We cannot conceive the physical or emotional suffering.

No wonder Jesus says, *"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death"* (26:38). No wonder He prays, *"My Father. If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me"* (Matthew 26:39). Ultimately,

of course, Jesus prays, *"Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."*

Before that heart-wrenching prayer in the garden, Jesus shared the Passover meal with His disciples. Passover celebrated how God miraculously delivered the Israelites from Egypt. It was a meal each of them had celebrated every year of their lives. The same preparations were made year after year. The same food was eaten, year after year. The same words were said, year after year. Until this year. Jesus took the familiar words and personalized them: *"This is **my** body ... This is **my** blood ..."* This is not the same.

"Tonight, all of you will desert me," Jesus says. But Peter pipes up: *"Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you."*

Jesus looks at him and says, *"I tell you the truth, Peter – this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me."*

"No." Peter insists. *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you."* All the others say the same.

Earlier, Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me"* (26:21). Judas is there at the time (26:20, 25). Jesus knows what will happen. But the other eleven don't. What is going on in Peter's mind? Thomas' soul? John's heart? They don't know it is going to be Judas: would it be me?

From our vantage point – centuries later – we know how the story turns out. We know that, although there will be brutal pain, there is a happy – a fantastic – ending. The disciples don't know that, yet.

There are times in our lives when we sit as the disciples do. Things seems bleak. Confusing. We may be aware of Jesus' presence with us, but there doesn't seem to be much good news. The future looks grim. Dark. Hopeless. And, like the disciples, we don't know what the next hour, day, or week will hold. As Jesus warned in Matthew 24 (the past two days), following Jesus can be difficult, even intensely painful.

The words the disciples probably missed among all the talk of betrayal, desertion, and crowing roosters is Jesus' promise: *"After I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there"* (26:32). *"After I have been **raised from the dead** ..."* Something new, radical, and unheard of is about to happen. Jesus will rise from the dead. He will meet us there.

Is this a promise that when we die we will be with Jesus? Yes, absolutely. But the disciples are not dead yet. And they won't be dead when they meet Jesus in Galilee either.

God is the God of the living, not just the dead. Jesus – the One who has been raised from the dead – is here, right now, with you. He always meets you – here. Jesus – the risen King – is walking with you every step of the way. Here. Now. Unlike the disciples, we are not about to lose our Friend (even for a few days). He is with us, always. Everywhere. Through everything.

"Go ahead and sleep," Jesus says, *"Have your rest"* (26:45). You are safe in His care. You are safe in His love. That's good news.

*Lord, may you support us all the day long,
'till the shades lengthen,
and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over
and our work is done.
Then in your mercy, please give us a safe lodging
and a holy rest and peace at the last.
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-90)

Thursday, July 27: Matthew 27:11-66

"Good Friday" was not good. The name comes either

- from a corruption of Old English for "God's Friday": the day on which we tried to kill God ... or
- from the truth that the accomplishments of these dreadful events ***IS good***. Our sins are paid for. We have forgiveness. Our relationship with God is restored. The Kingdom of God has come.

Tom Wright reflects on this latter aspect of the "goodness" about this day: *"'Finished.' 'Accomplished.' 'Completed.' Jesus' last word, which sums it all up. Part of its meaning is that everything that had gone before has now come together. This is where it was all going; this is what it was all about.*

"Part of its meaning is that in Jesus' world that word 'finished' was what you wrote on a bill when it had been settled: 'Paid in full.' But underneath these is the meaning John intends, most deeply. When God the Creator made his wonderful world, at the end of the sixth day he finished it. He completed his work. Now, on the Friday, the sixth day of the week, Jesus has completed the work of redeeming the world.

"With his shameful, chaotic, horrible death he has gone to the very bottom, to the darkest and deepest place of the ruin, and has planted there the sign that says 'Rescued.' It is the sign of love, the love of the creator for his ruined creation, the love of the Saviour for his ruined people. Yes, of course, it all has to be worked out. The victory has to be implemented. But it's done; it's completed; it's finished ...

"Now here in this community, and in this church, there are plenty of Marys and Johns, plenty of people for whom life isn't going to be the same again. Our job is to stand and wait at the foot of the cross, and to see what fresh word may come to us concerning the way forward, the way of becoming a community again ...

"Good Friday is the point at which God comes into our chaos, to be there with us in the middle of it and to bring us his new creation. Let us pause and give thanks, and listen for his words of love and healing."

During the drama of the crucifixion – during the drama of our lives – let's stop. Let's spend a bit of time. At the foot of the cross. Give thanks. Listen. Listen especially for His words of love. Listen especially for His words of healing. Listen for His word.

On the one hand, His love for you is finished. Accomplished. Completed. You are completely loved, completely forgiven, completely welcomed into His presence – now – and forever. Pray that we ALL might know His finished, accomplished, completed supremely powerful work of love on the cross.

On the other hand, His love for you is never finished. His love and healing are with you today and every day. He is with you always. Pray that we ALL might know His love every moment of every day, now and forever ... Nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of Jesus (Romans 8:28-39).

*Lord Jesus, as I start this day.
I gaze at your face, your pierced side and your wounded heart
showing God's love for us.
Take, Lord, and receive my heart:
The words of faith that I speak,
the works of justice I would do,
my joys and sufferings.
May these be united with your own offering for the life of the whole world.
Amen*

Friday, July 28: Matthew 27:32-54 (especially 27:45-46)

Many years ago, I was in a Christian bookstore. They seemed to stock less books, but they had lots of "art" – plaques, posters, and other knick-knacks with encouraging poems, peaceful pictures, positive verses, and inspiring quotes. None of them include Jesus' last words before his death: *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* which means *'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'* (The opening words of Psalm 22).

Tom Wright says, *"When Jesus cried out, in the opening words of Psalm 22, asking why God had abandoned*

him, Matthew does not intend us to think, in a comforting sort of way, 'Oh, that was all right; you see, it only felt like that. Actually God was carrying him through.' Part of the whole point of the cross is that there the weight of the world's evil really did converge upon Jesus, blotting out the sunlight of God's love as surely as the light of day was blotted out for three hours. Jesus is 'giving his life as a ransom for many' (20:28), and the sin of the 'many', which he is bearing, has for the first and only time in his experience caused a cloud to come between him and the Father he loved and obeyed, the one who had been delighted in him."

Something profound is happening here. Something that has never happened before. Something that has never happened since. Something that will never happen again.

Throughout Scripture, the "something" that is happening here is that, God – out of His amazing love – is willing to suffer on our behalf to win the decisive victory over the power of evil. He is setting us free from the shackles of sin. Sin (as we discussed earlier) is not so much those individual "oops-es" along the course of life. Sin is when we substitute something else, anything else, for God as the motivating centre and foundation of our lives. Those "powers," be they money, power, pleasure, greed, sex, or something else, enslave us. We become servants of things in God's creation rather than servants of the Creator Himself.

Jesus' prayer captures the fundamental misery of those who are separated from God. Thankfully, God never separates Himself from us. But we can choose to separate ourselves from Him when we allow other powers to control us. And if, in our heart of hearts, we really do not want God, He will not force Himself upon us.

The good news is that through Jesus' suffering, He won the ultimate victory over the powers of evil. As the people of God we may suffer as well, but this is the upside-down way in which God establishes the Kingdom of God and changes the world.

In Romans 8:18-28, Paul says, "*Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later ... And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*"

Pray to God, in confidence that the Spirit helps us in our weakness ...

*O loving Christ, who died upon the cross,
each day and each night I remember Your love.
In my lying down in my rising up,
in life and in death,
You are my health and my peace.*

*Each day and each night I remember Your forgiveness,
bestowed on me so gently and generously.
Each day and each night I affirm my love to You.
May there be life in my speech, truth in what I say.
I place myself with those who struggle today,
and I pray for them.*

*O Christ, You are a bright flame before me.
You are a guiding star above me.
You are the light and love I see in other's eyes.
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is tender.
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is true.
Keep me, O Christ, in a love that is strong.
Tonight, tomorrow, had always.
Amen.*

Philip Newell

Saturday, July 29: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

Peter. I love Peter. Peter is so human. He is all boastful and blusterful about his determination to stick with Jesus through thin or thick. But when the time comes for him to stand up for Jesus, what does he do? It's good to spend time with Peter. He behaves just like I might in the circumstances. How about you?

Henri Nouwen writes: *"The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered what the Lord had said to him" (Luke 22:61). Like Peter, we need to be reminded of our self-confident promises, our failure to keep them, our lack of faithfulness and our powerlessness when we are on our own. But like Peter, we are also reminded of a love that does not leave us, a compassion that has no limits and a forgiveness which is always offered to us again.*

"When Peter felt the eyes of Jesus penetrating his innermost being and saw at once his own weakness and Jesus' love, 'he went outside and wept bitterly.' (Luke 22:62). We can understand Peter's tears. We feel them in ourselves. They are tears of both repentance and gratitude for so much love.

"Jesus' eyes," muses Nouwen, "are neither sentimental nor judgmental, neither pious nor harsh, neither sweet nor severe. They are the eyes of God, who sees us in our most hidden places and loves us with divine mercy ...

"The eyes of Christ which see the splendour of God's light are the same eyes which have seen the lowliness of God's people. The same eyes that penetrate God's eternal mystery have also seen into the innermost being of men and women, who were created in God's image. They saw Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, Philip, Nathaniel and Levi and called them to discipleship. They saw Mary of Magdala, the widow of Naim, the lame, the lepers and the hungry crowd and offered them healing and new life. They saw the sadness of the rich young ruler, the fear of the disciples on the lake, the loneliness of his own mother under the cross, and the sorrow of the women at the tomb. They saw the fruitless fig tree, the desecrated temple and the faithless city of Jerusalem.

"They also saw faith: the faith of the men who lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof, the faith of the Canaanite woman who asked for the scraps that fell from the master's table, the faith of the centurion whose servant was paralyzed and in great pain, the faith of the blind Bartimaeus shouting for pity, and the faith of the woman with a hemorrhage who touched the fringe of his cloak.

"The one who sees unceasingly the limitless goodness of God, came to world, saw it broken to pieces by human sin and was moved to compassion. The same eyes which see into the heart of God saw the suffering hearts of God's people and wept (John 11:36). These eyes, which burn like flames of fire penetrating God's own interiority, also hold oceans of tears for the human sorrow of all times and all places ..."

The Lord looks at us. But not with judgement. He looks at you and I with love and compassion and forgiveness. He looks at us with mercy. He looks at us with grace. Spend some time with Jesus today ...

*O God our Father,
help us all through this day to live so that we may bring help to others,
and joy to those that love us, and to you.
Help us to be cheerful when things go wrong;
persevering when things are difficult;
serene when things are irritating.
Enable us to be helpful to those in difficulties;
kind to those in need;
sympathetic to those whose hearts are sore and sad.
Grant that nothing may make us lose our tempers;
nothing may take away our joy;
nothing may ruffle our peace;
nothing may make us bitter towards anyone.
Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Sunday, July 30: Matthew 28:1-10

The weather forecast for Digby, Nova Scotia, August 20, 1988 (our wedding day) was fog and rainy. Every other day in Nova Scotia that summer had been dull, dreary, foggy, and rainy. So, when the day dawned with bright blue skies and brilliant sunshine, it was a wonderful surprise. We were unexpectedly blessed.

At an even more profound level, these women are expecting a horrible, dark day. They expect to find a sealed tomb. They expect to find Roman guards. If they are not arrested, if they are even allowed to go near the tomb, if by some miracle if they could even move the stone, and if they are allowed to go in, (all BIG "ifs") they expect to find Jesus' brutally beaten, spear-pierced dead body. They hope to anoint his brutalized corpse. They hope to say one final, tearful farewell to the dearest of loved ones. At best, they hope for a shred of quiet and closure on the darkest day they could possibly imagine ...

When Sunday dawns, they do not expect an earthquake. They do not expect an angel of the Lord. They do not expect battle-hardened Roman legionaries to be shaking in terror. They do not expect to hear an angel speak (what would that sound like, I wonder??). They do not expect the stone to be moved. They do not expect to hear Jesus has risen from the dead. They do not expect to *meet* Jesus, risen and alive. This is not at all what they expect. It is so far beyond their wildest hopes. They don't know how to react.

The story of the resurrection may be the greatest surprise of all time. We have heard the story so many times we glibly take it for granted. But allow yourself, today, to imagine you are there on that first Easter Sunday morning, when the day dawns – with an earthquake, an angel, a rolling boulder, quavering legionaries, and the risen Jesus. And be in awe. And wonder. And worship. This is something no one has ever experienced before. This is something to get excited about.

God is the master of surprises. He still meets us – no, not in a physical way like he met Mary and Mary. But He does meet us, in Spirit. He walks with each one of us, personally, if we choose to notice. And when life is dull and dreary, God can bring some new opportunity, challenge, or joy into our lives. When things seem hopeless and dark, God can bring bright sunbeams of hope and light into our lives. When there seem to be few options or possibilities, God can open brand new doors we never knew existed.

The wonder of Easter is that the old order of things has changed forever. God is alive and well and at work in our world – and still full of surprises. His Kingdom has come. His will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. The challenge this poses for us, of course, is that God may not do what we want Him to do.

He may, in fact, do things completely opposite to what we want to – to what we think should – be done. But the risen Lord is with us. He never leaves us. He comforts us. He says to us, "*Do not be afraid ...*"

Fears and struggles will always come at us. But when we live in the light of the resurrection, these powers and challenges have no final power over us. Jesus says unambiguously: "*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Do not be afraid ...

*My soul glorifies the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour!
For he has blessed me lavishly and makes me ready to respond.
He shatters my little world and lets me be open before him.
He takes from me all my plans
and gives me more than I can hope for or ask.
He gives me opportunities and the ability to become free
and to burst through my boundaries.
He gives the strength to be doing, to build on him alone,
for he shows himself as the ever greater One in my life.
It is in my being a servant that it becomes possible
for God's kingdom to break through. here and now.
Amen*

Monday, July 31: John 21

I'm a morning person. I was up before 6. I've done some exercise. I've gone to work. It's 8:17 a.m. but I haven't had breakfast yet ... I'm meeting a colleague at 8:45 for a breakfast meeting. I'm getting hungry.

Peter and his buddies have been up fishing all night. They have caught nothing. They are tired, grumpy, and very, very hungry. The last thing they want to do is cast their nets again. But they do. And now their nets are bursting.

When they get ashore, what do they find? *"When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them – fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread"* (21:9). Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Jesus says, *"Bring some of the fish you've just caught."* Of course, their nets were empty. Jesus doesn't need them, anyway. Somehow, some way Jesus already has fish. Breakfast is ready and waiting for them.

Once before Jesus fed people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with loaves of bread and fish (John 6). Jesus is reminding them of what happened before. After that miraculous meal, these tough fishermen were caught in a storm: *"A gale swept down upon them, and the sea grew very rough. They had rowed three or four miles when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, but he called out to them, 'Don't be afraid. I am here.' Then they were eager to let him in the boat, and immediately they arrived at their destination."* (John 6:18-21). All those memories would be rushing back into their minds as Jesus serves them bread and fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Simon Peter, John, James and the others had gone back to their old home and their old livelihood. But Jesus is not content to let them drift back to their old lives. He had called them to follow Him. He had changed Simon's name from "Simon" to "Peter" – literally meaning "the Rock" ("petros" is Greek for "rock") in Matthew 16:13-19. Peter is no longer a fisherman (he can't catch anything on his own anyway). Jesus had given him a new vocation – to be "the rock," the foundation stone on which His church would be built. Peter needs to step up and be who Jesus called him to be.

In Jewish theology, the Temple was where God was actually present on earth. But since Jesus has given us His Spirit – God's real and personal presence – God is present in each one of us, not in one stone building. Peter will go on to write, *"... Christ is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And **you** are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple"* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Together with Peter, the Rock, we are ALL God's Temple, we are ALL God's presence on earth. God is no longer in one small place in one small city in one small country. Wherever God's people are – you and I are – God is there. God is present in us, here, now. We are His Temple.

If you believe in Jesus, God's Holy Spirit is in you. Whether you "feel" Him or not, that is objective truth. As you encourage other people, as you care for someone in need, as you give to help those suffering, as you smile at a checkout clerk, as you talk about your faith with your neighbour, as you call a friend, as you volunteer, and so much more, you are sharing God's love. You are building His Kingdom. And if you come across challenges that seem overwhelming, remember God's Spirit – His presence and power – is within you and will get you through. *"Don't be afraid. I am here."* You are His Temple. He is within you.

Thanks to the resurrection of Jesus and blessing of His Holy Spirit, we not only experience a God-for-us and a God-with-us, but also a God-within-us. The time of confusion, misunderstanding, unbelief, and fear is over. Yes, we face challenges every day, but the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, lives within us, giving us new hope, new courage, and new confidence.

You are not a "mere mortal" simply going through the motions of life. You are God's child, you are His unique creation, you are His chosen one, you are the one in whom He chooses to live.

You are a living stone. Live confidently. Live boldly. Live for Jesus ... *"for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). How then do we live?

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;

*Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

*Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father and I, Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.*

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart;
O King of glory, my treasure Thou art.*

*O King of glory, my victory won;
Rule and reign in me 'til Thy will be done;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall;
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

Amen

8th Century Gaelic Poem

Tuesday, August 1: Acts 1:1-11

If you had some final words to say to your closest friends and family, what would you say?

What does Jesus say?

1. He promises the Holy Spirit, God's personal presence, Jesus' personal presence within them. Although He will not physically be with them, He will be with them always.
2. He doesn't answer all their questions about times, dates, or any of those details. Although Jesus is speaking particularly of the coming of the Holy Spirit on this occasion, He says similar things about His return. That's OK. They have a purpose and a mission in the meantime ...
3. When the Spirit does come, His people will be His witnesses. At first locally (Jerusalem, where they were). Then the surrounding region (Judea). Then further afield, across cultural and political lines (Samaria). Then everywhere.

Jesus does say these words to His friends, in person. However, as we pray and speak with Jesus, today, He might well say the same things to us:

1. The Holy Spirit, God's personal presence, Jesus' personal presence is with you, always. He never leaves you. He is ever present in your life.
2. He may not answer all our questions. That's OK. We have a purpose and a mission in the meantime ...
3. We are His witnesses. Locally (where they are). Regionally as we travel, support Camp, etc. Further afield, across cultural and political lines. Everywhere (through our support of global missions).

There were a few "fulltime" evangelists in the early church: Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. But most sharing of the good news was done by ordinary people who simply talked about Jesus. Christianity mostly spread by ordinary people with ordinary jobs and ordinary families simply sharing what Jesus meant to them.

Michael Green, writing about the early church, comments, "*Here were men and women of every rank and station in life, of every country in the known world, so convinced that they had discovered the riddle of the*

universe, so sure of the one true God whom they had come to know, that nothing must stand in the way of their passing on this good news to others ...” Wouldn’t it be great if this were true of us??? “What was the secret of such zeal?” Green asks. His answer: “They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ ...”

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

When reflect on the love of God we have experienced in Jesus, the forgiveness we have been blessed with through Jesus, the presence of God we know through the Holy Spirit, and the call to live for Jesus, we naturally share the life we know in Jesus. It’s not a “system” or set of beliefs we want people to agree with intellectually. It’s a new, Spirit-empowered life we want people to experience for themselves.

Pray for the opportunity to share something of the love, hope, peace, and joy of Jesus, today.

*By faith, I gaze up to the heavens
and know within its vastness
that this is your creation,
planned and effected within eternity.*

*By faith, I pluck an ear of corn,
and know within its symmetry
lies the chemistry of life,
the potential of creation within my hand.*

*By faith, I listen for your voice,
and know the whisper that I hear
breathed a world into existence,
yet listens to the prayer within my soul.*

*By faith, I strive to do your will,
and know the door that I approach
may lead me to shadows,
where my role is to become your light*

*By faith, I cling to your word,
and know the strength that I receive
has it’s source within the love
that is at the centre of all things.*

Amen

faithandworship.com

Wednesday, August 2: Acts 1:12-26

How do we make godly decisions?

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

But look closer ...

First, twenty or more people *“all met together and were constantly united in prayer”*(1:14). It’s good to pray, not just as a nice beginning or ending to a time together, but as the focus of our time. At our church staff meetings we always **begin** with prayer. The prayer time can take up more than half our meeting. When you are facing a major decision, pray – really pray. Ask some trusted people to pray with you ...

Second, Peter goes to Scripture for counsel. Of course, Scripture doesn't necessarily speak directly to every situation we face. We have to be cautious of pulling texts out of context to apply to our circumstances. But often there are general principles we can draw from Scripture that speak to our situation.

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

Once the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 2), the early church seems to move to a more direct dependence on the Spirit for wisdom (Acts 13:2, 15:1-28, 16:7).

But the principles are good for all of us in our decision making:

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

*May God give you...
For every storm, a rainbow,
For every tear, a smile,
For every care, a promise,
And a blessing in each trial.

For every day, a purpose,
For every moment, a call,
For every task, a helping hand
And care for creatures small.

For every problem life sends,
A faithful friend to share,
For every sigh, a sweet song,
And an answer for each prayer.
Amen*

Irish Blessing

Thursday, August 3: Acts 2:1-13

Waiting. Jesus has promised His disciples the Spirit. He hasn't come yet. What are they doing about it? They're praying. And praying. And praying.

Jerusalem is bustling with people. God-fearing Jews from all over are gathering for the annual celebration to give thanks for the harvest and to celebrate the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (2:5). Here, in the middle of Jerusalem, bursting with people who have come to seek God, that God shows up this time. No secret stable in obscure Bethlehem this time around.

God, creator of the universe, is present by his Holy Spirit.

We take this for granted. It is so much a part of our experience. But imagine a time **before** you could know Jesus personally in your life? Imagine a time when you could only know ABOUT God, but not really know God? This is a radical change ...

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

This coming of the Holy Spirit is the story of the tower of Babel in reverse. At Babel, people were separated by their sin and their different languages. Now they are brought together by the good news of Jesus, by His love for all people, and by hearing the good news in all languages. It's a miracle: everyone comes together to hear about God's new Kingdom and new life in Jesus.

For some, the meaning of the event was lost. It was an interesting experience but nothing more.

For others, life is changed forever. God meets them where **they** are. He comes into **their** lives in power. God comes to them in **their** language. Nothing will ever be the same again. How about you ...?

*Dear God,
I so much want to be in control.
I want to be the master of my own destiny.
Still I know that you are saying:
"Let me take you by the hand and lead you.
Accept my love
and trust that where I will bring you,
the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled."
Lord, open my hands to receive your gift of love.
Amen.*

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996)

Friday, August 4: Acts 2:40-47

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

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

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

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

1. Constant, lifelong **learning** is critical. We remain true to the teachings, values, and principles of Jesus so we can speak relevantly in and to our culture, and not just absorb the latest cultural craze.
2. **Fellowship** defines who we are. We care deeply for one another (modeled in the early church in very practical, financial ways). We live God's Kingdom values of mercy and compassion. Even in Covid times we can find ways to connect and care for one another in tangible, meaningful ways.
3. **Worship** shapes us. Symbolized by the ordinance of Communion, we give thanks, celebrate, praise, and stand in awe of our Creator, Saviour, and the Spirit who is with us.

4. Through **mission**, we care for people outside and inside the community. We want everyone to know Jesus. We want to alleviate pain and suffering, seek justice, and see God's Kingdom come and will be done.
5. In **prayer**, we listen to God speaking to us and we bring our **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanks-giving, and **S**upplication (needs) to God (note the helpful acronym **ACTS**, to help us have balanced prayers). In prayer we open ourselves up to God's will for us, and we bring our issues to Him.

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

How can we live our faith in such a way that people see our faith and are drawn to Jesus? *"They'll know we are Christians by our love ..."* How can we model that love? How does this challenge us?

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

*Deep peace of God to you – three in one and one in three.
 Deep peace of the running waves to you.
 Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
 Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
 Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
 Deep peace of the Father of Mercy to you
 Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.
 Deep peace of the Spirit of Grace to you.
 Deep peace of God to you – three in one and one in three.
 This His blessing: His deep peace to you.
 Amen*

Irish Blessing

Saturday, August 5: Acts 4:23-31 and Psalm 2

Some Christians face life-threatening persecution (No, Covid protocols were NOT persecution; we could still talk about Jesus and worship, we just had to be creative).

- If we were really persecuted, how would we pray?
- How do we pray when people talk down our faith?
- How do we pray when Christians embarrass us with hateful comments or irresponsible actions?

In the first half of Acts 4, Peter and John are thrown into jail and dragged before the Jewish authorities for talking about Jesus. Eventually they are released.

How do Peter, John, and the other disciples respond? They pray. They turn to the Bible. They seek the Spirit's leading. As they gather to pray, they cite Psalm 2:1-2. When the first Christians quoted single verses, they were not "proof-texting" (trying to find a verse, any verse, that met their circumstances, which they then yanked out of context). As people with a Jewish background, they assumed those hearing one verse knew the larger context. They assumed people knew the whole psalm. Quoting one or two verses was shorthand for referencing the entire psalm.

Look at Psalm 2. The psalm begins by questioning the state of affairs: why are things the way they are? Notice how the psalm continues. God ultimately is very much in control. In the end, His anointed King, His Son, the Messiah, Jesus, is sovereign Lord over all of creation, including every nation, and every ruler.

As the disciples pray through Psalm 2, they are reminding themselves that the Messiah, Jesus, is far more powerful than the Herods and Pilates of the world. He will set things right.

The "Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them" is with us. Who can be against us? He is more than able to "Stretch out His hand with healing power." He is more than capable of doing "miraculous signs and wonders through the name of His holy servant Jesus."

Though the world seems out of **our** control (it is), it is not out of **God's** control. We cannot begin to appreciate how God is working, why He allows what He allows, or how He will set things right. But He will.

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

*Dear Lord, today I thought of the words of Vincent van Gogh:
"It is true there is an ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea."*

You are the sea.

*Although I experience many ups and downs in my emotions
and often feel great shifts and changes in my inner life,
you remain the same.*

Your sameness is not the sameness of a rock, but the sameness of a faithful friend.

*Out of your love I came to life, by your love I am sustained,
and to your love I am always called back.*

*There are days of sadness and days of joy;
there are feelings of guilt and feelings of gratitude;
there are moments of failure and moments of success;
but all of them are embraced by your unwavering love. . . .*

*O Lord, sea of love and goodness,
let me not fear too much the storms and winds of my daily life,
and let me know there is ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea.
You, my God, are my God, today and all days,
Amen*

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996)

Sunday, August 6: Acts 12:1-19

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

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

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

Peter's friends are praying **earnestly** for Peter. A good thing to do. We don't of course know exactly what they are praying for. What do they expect? After all, James had been arrested. Surely, they prayed for James, too. He was executed.

Would Peter be any different? Sometimes we are told we need to pray boldly and specifically for what we want, believing it will happen. We're promised that, if we have enough faith, we can claim those things as true. They **MUST** happen. I'm sure the early Christians prayed that way for James. But he was killed.

Both in Scripture and in our day, God does miracles, sometimes (like with Peter). And not other times (like with James). It's a mystery. God clearly answers some prayers positively first time. Others after much

persistence. Others never (what we interpret as a “no”). There are no neat explanations.

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

Some people might say such an “unfocussed” set of prayers reflects a lack of faith. I disagree. I think that “if-it-be-your-will” prayers allow God to be God. In humility, I know God is the One who really does know best. After all, Jesus Himself, in Gethsemane, prayed twice, *“My Father! I want your will to be done, not mine”* (Matthew 26:39, 42).

More and more, I find I simply *“Pray to God for ____.”* I don’t worry so much about the specifics of what I want God to do for the person. The possibilities I can imagine are so limited. I find myself, as I simply *“Pray to God for ____,”* often saying, *“God surprise me.”*

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

God does answer our prayers.

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

Our encouragement from this passage is simply *“to pray to God for Peter”* ... whoever the Peter might be in our lives. Maybe it’s a relative who’s ill. Maybe it’s friend who’s going through a family meltdown. Maybe it’s one of the folks from our church community. Maybe it’s our church. Maybe it’s yourself.

“Pray to God for Peter ...” Don’t know what to pray? That’s fine. Neither did Peter’s friends. Just pray for Peter and let God be God in the situation. He knows what He’s doing.

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

*O Lord, we 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,
and the diminishment of the aging.
O Lord, stay close to them all.
O Lord, stay close to me.
Lord, hear my prayer.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Monday, August 7 (Heritage Day): Acts 16:1-10

Back in my university days in Vancouver, I needed to take a year off and do a one-year Bible College programme. I had two options: a Capernwray school in Germany or the Baptist Leadership Training School (BLTS) in Calgary. I was young. Adventurous. Both would cost about the same ... Germany (very cool) or Calgary (not so cool – just COLD)? Which would you choose?

As I prayed about it, talked with godly friends about it, and reflected on the different programmes, I KNEW God was leading me to BLTS in Calgary. I was annoyed. I wanted to go to Germany. But, in my heart, I knew my preference for Germany was not from God; I just thought it would be more fun. The programme in Calgary was better suited to me. I would be going for the right reasons: to learn and grow. In hindsight, the programme and the friends I made in Calgary were hugely influential in my spiritual growth.

Paul is seeking God's leading. Paul, Timothy, Silas, and Luke ("we" in 16:10) are wandering through the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey), seeking God's leading. Traveling by foot, the journey to the places listed in 16:6-8 would have taken weeks. Doors seem to be closing right, left, and centre. Paul and his companions want to serve God, but there seem to be no opportunities. Finally, Paul has a dream in which a man begs them to come to Greece. The good news about Jesus will go to Europe for the first time.

How does God lead us? Of course, one of the first guidelines we need to follow is Scripture. If something is contrary to the Bible, God is NOT leading us in that direction.

Not all our decisions is clearly guided by biblical principles (like which Bible school to attend or with whom to share the good news). Several options could be good. We can pray. We can speak with godly friends. We can think through the options in logical ways (making lists of pros and cons. God gave us brains).

Sometimes God does give us a strong sense of just KNOWING the best option. Sometimes God does clearly open and close doors. Some things just don't work out and other things do.

We may be afraid of making the WRONG decision. We can be paralyzed, making no decision at all. We have to make **A** decision. Ultimately, had I gone to Germany instead of Calgary, the world would not have ended. God could still have worked in my life. If Paul had gone to Bithynia, God still could have done amazing things there, too. The key is to keep moving forward, making the best decisions we can.

A wise mentor once told me, *"After much prayer, just make the best decision you can. Then go forward. Don't look back and second guess yourself."* Just make that decision. And go for it.

*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

Tuesday, August 8: Acts 16:11-15

We know we ought to share our faith. But practically what does that mean? How do we share our faith?

Look what happens outside Philippi. Paul and his companions join a group of people. Someone asks who they are and where they have come from. So, Paul begins to talk. He tells his story. He was a leader in the Jewish community. He persecuted Jesus but now he believes in and follows Him. God led them to Macedonia. Now they expect the Spirit will do things in Greece. His enthusiasm and sincere faith come through. He shares his life and his experience, long before he shares his theology.

One woman, Lydia, listens intently. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* She hears Paul talking about what God is doing in his life. The **Holy Spirit** impresses upon her heart that this same Jesus wants to be her Saviour. She believes. She and others who believe are baptized.

All of us have experiences with God. We can share how we came to believe and how God has protected, guided, and cared for us. We can talk about what God means to us today. Like Paul, our natural response

to God's grace ought to be to share God's grace in natural, ordinary ways, too.

We may know Jesus and have experiences with God, but we're hesitant to share. Why? What are your reasons? Pray about this. Perhaps we don't know when it's appropriate to share our faith – pray. We don't know who to share our faith with – pray. We don't know what to say – pray. We feel afraid – pray. Is this the right time? – pray. It sounds trite, but prayer really does help.

C.S. Lewis says, *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God – it changes me."*

After you have prayed, do it. We can always find reasons not to speak to someone else. But when you find yourself starting to think of excuses ... DON'T. Talking about our faith in Jesus can be difficult at first, but it becomes more natural with time. As you share your experience of God with someone, your words become part of that person's life. They may believe right away, but probably not. You're sowing seeds. Growth may take a long time. That's God's responsibility.

Your words may make all the difference in the world to one person. And then they tell two people. Who each tell two people. Who each tell two people ... you get the picture. Pray that God would give each of us the wisdom, courage, and opportunity to share His love and grace ...

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him,
forever, in the next.
Amen.*

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Wednesday, August 9: Acts 16:16-40

We want our friends, family members, neighbours, and colleagues to know Jesus. And we try to make a difference, by the way we live, our gracious words, and our prayers. But what is it we're trying to communicate? What is the "good news"? What is the "gospel"? What do people need to believe?

Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century (and author of many THICK academic tomes), was visiting the University of Chicago. The eminent scholar was asked, *"Dr. Barth, what is the most profound truth you have learned in your studies?"* Without hesitation, he replied, *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* This is the good news: *"Jesus loves you."*

During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what, if any, belief was unique to Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions have versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believe in life after death. The story goes that C.S. Lewis wandered in, *"What's the rumpus about?"* When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, *"Oh, that's easy. It's grace."* Grace is simply love, free of charge, no strings attached – Jesus loves you, just as you are. That's what's unique about Christianity. That's what Paul shares (Acts 16:31).

Notice what Paul and Silas are doing at midnight. They're praying and singing.

In response to their prayers, God does amazing things. Jailers in those days were **not** known for being

“good” or “nice” people. They were rough, tough, bouncers. But Paul has credibility. He knows, firsthand, about God’s grace. Paul was one of those responsible for the murder of Stephen. Paul was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, and worse. God’s grace had come to Paul, with all his violent, cruel, and merciless past. Paul could share his experiences of amazing grace with the jailer.

Paul’s message to the jailer in Philippi (and our message to the world around us) is that God, in His grace, loves each one of us, no matter our past. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There is also nothing we can do to make God love us more. This may be difficult for some of us to accept.

We can turn the good news into bad news by adding all sorts of rules and regulations to it: people have to believe specific doctrines or do particular things to be saved. AFTER we are saved, the Spirit does challenge us to deal with lots of issues in our lives. These are changes we make in obedience to God’s Spirit, AFTER we put our trust in Jesus. The good news is simply this – “*Jesus loves you.*”

Paul writes: “*I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was. He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life*” (1 Timothy 1:13-17). God loves you.

God loves _____ (you fill in the blank with someone (or several people) you know). Pray for them.

*Lord, let nothing disturb me.
Let nothing frighten me.
All things are passing.
You alone are changeless, O God.
If I have patience, I want for nothing.
If I have faith, I lack nothing.
If I have Jesus, I am rich beyond measure.
If I have You, O God, I have all things.
You alone suffice.
Amen*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Thursday, August 10: Ephesians 1:1-14

In the light of God’s love and grace, C.S. Lewis writes, “*A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word ‘darkness’ on the walls of his cell.*”

For the next few days, we’ll read Paul’s letter to the believers in Ephesus. While Ephesians is not specifically about prayer, it contains Paul’s reflections on God’s glory and what it means to know Jesus and to be known by Jesus (the essence of prayer). He prays some astounding prayers for followers of Jesus – people like us.

Paul wants us to know and truly believe that:

- We are saved by faith in Jesus. We are saved for a relationship of openness and love with God.
- We are saved by faith in Jesus to make a difference in the world. We are love our neighbours.
- We are saved by faith in Jesus to make a difference in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. God gives us the wisdom, inspiration, and power we need as His Spirit is in us.

In this letter, Paul emphasizes how blessed we are as people whom God loves, for whom Jesus died and rose again, and in whom Spirit lives. Paul begins with a prayer of praise to God. Sometimes it is good just to praise and thank Him. Read this passage personally, thinking about what God’s grace means to you:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because you are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved you and chose you in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt you into his own family by bringing you to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

So praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on you – you belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased your freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave your sins. He has showered his kindness on you, along with all wisdom and understanding ...

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give you the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased you to be his own child. He did this so you would praise and glorify him ...

It is good to read this passage in personal terms. But the actual Scripture is written to "us." In our modern world, we tend to (subconsciously) personalize "my" faith and "my" relationship with Jesus. But community is critical. We do have a personal relationship with Jesus, but it's lived out in the context of the church.

Read what Paul ACTUALLY prays, reflecting on what it means for our lives, together ...

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed **US** with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because **we** are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved **US** and chose **US** in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt **US** into his own family by bringing **US** to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*

*So praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on **US** – **WE** belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased **OUR** freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave **OUR** sins. He has showered his kindness on **US**, along with all wisdom and understanding ...*

*And when **you (plural)** believed in Christ, he identified **you (plural)** as his own by giving **you (plural)** the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee he will give **US** the inheritance he promised and he has purchased **US** to be his own people. He did this so **WE** would praise and glorify him ...*

Praise God for the amazing hope, life, love, forgiveness, mercy, calling, joy, peace, and so much more we have in and through Jesus. And praise God for the community of friends, encouragers, helpers, family, accountability-people, and so much more we have in and through His church ...

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me,
and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let me look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus.
Amen*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Friday, August 11: Ephesians 1:15-23

In English, the word "you" is "you." "You" can mean you-singular (just you as an individual person), or you-plural (all of us together, including you as an individual). In most languages, like Greek (the language of the New Testament) and Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), there is a different word for you-singular and you-plural (French does the same: "tu" (singular) and "vous" (plural)). Thus, when we read passages like this in English, we typically singular-ize it: Paul is praying this for **ME**. This can contribute to a hyper-individualized Christian faith: it is **MY** personal relationship with Jesus that matters.

All this prayer is **plural-you**, however. This is Paul's prayer for **all of us together**. Yes, you as an individual are part of this prayer. But this is a prayer for all of us as a community, too.

- Think about this prayer in your own personal terms: pray God would help you know Jesus this way.
- AND, pray through it on behalf of our entire church community: pray that God would help US ALL know Jesus in this way.
- AND pray this prayer for someone you know, who needs to know the presence of Jesus.

God, I thank you for my life/our church/some person. I pray for _____ constantly, asking you, God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give _____ spiritual wisdom and insight so that they might grow in their knowledge of God. I pray that _____'s heart will be flooded with light so that they can understand the confident hope You give to those You call – Your holy people who are Your rich and glorious inheritance.

I also pray that _____ will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for them, as they believe in You. I pray _____ may know this the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at Your right hand in the heavenly realms. I pray that _____ might know You, the One who is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but also in the world to come.

I pray that _____ will know You, the One who has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And I pray that _____ will know You in the context of the church, Christ's body, made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself. Amen.

F.B. Meyer comments, *"The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer."*

- Pray that you may know God's presence, peace, and power in your life.
- Pray that our church community might know and experience Jesus and His power in new ways.
- Pray for the people closest to you, that they may know His transforming reality.

*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*

Frank James Unger

Saturday, August 12: Ephesians 2:1-10

For what purpose did God create us? How would you answer that?

We might paraphrase it like this, *"What would life look like if I were self-fulfilled, happy, and content?"* How would you answer that? According to commercials on TV, a full life would be lying in a hammock on a tropical beach, with a drink or two (or more), a beautiful/handsome companion, the right body wash, the right burger and fries, and nothing to do but watch the latest superhero movie ...

Is that really what life is about? I don't know about you, but a couple of days of carefree Tropicana would be nice, but then I'd want to **do** something. Something meaningful. Something that made a difference for people around me. Something that mattered to the Lord. Something that made live worth living. I'd want to actually be a living person, not a "dead" person baking in the sun ...

In Genesis 2:15 we read, *"The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it."*

From the very beginning, people were created to tend and care for God's creation, the natural world, and other people. Care for God's creation (including people) is inextricably woven into who we are as people created "*in the image of God*" (Genesis 1:27).

We are only fulfilled, content, and joyful when we are sharing in God's purpose: making a difference in the lives of other people, the created world around us, and the Kingdom of God. Those of us who have volunteered with children, in a hospital, with youth, or in cleaning up a park know the sense of peace, joy, and satisfaction that comes from being part of the Lord's work.

Even in retirement, the God encourages us to keep busy (in fact there is no retirement plan in the Bible). There are always meaningful things we can do to care for others, for creation, and God's Kingdom.

In Ephesians 2, Paul emphasizes that: "*God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it*" (2:8-9). That is great news. The teachers in Ephesus and in Peter's world wanted people to believe that you earn your salvation by following rules or impressing God with what a "good person" you are. Paul is blunt: forget it. You will never be good enough. But thank God – He chose to save us in spite of ourselves. We are saved by His gift of gracious forgiveness, mercy, and love.

Paul goes on: "*For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago*" (notice this is all plural – us-together). We are saved to do good works. We – individually and as a community – are saved for a purpose: to serve God by blessing other people and His creation. We – individually and as a community – have a job to do: to encourage, bless, care for, build up, empower, help, mentor, and love God's world and God's people. Isn't that wonderful?

There is a bigger purpose to life. We can be part of answering the prayer, "*Your Kingdom come, your will be done*" as we live in His grace.

*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;
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 consequences unseen.*

*My life has a purpose.
I have a mission. God has not created me for naught.
I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.
Therefore, I will trust him.
Whatever, wherever I am,
I can never be thrown away.
God does nothing in vain.
He knows what he is about.*

Amen

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Sunday, August 13: Ephesians 2:8-22

Paul wants EVERYONE to know they are part of this new Kingdom/Temple God is building. It is not a Jewish-only enterprise anymore. Jews/non-Jews (Gentiles), men/women, wealthy/poor, slave/free, able/challenged, young/old – everyone is welcome in God's new order of things. Actually, this is nothing new; it is something very, very old. It's the way God intended things to be from the very beginning.

Paul wants everyone to know they are saved by FAITH, a gift of God. They are not saved by following the Old Testament law, by trying to do all sorts of good things for God, by virtue of their genetics (being born "Jewish"). God saves us just because HE loves us.

Paul also wants us to know we are saved, by faith, for a PURPOSE: *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago"* (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We (non-Jews) are *"citizens along with all of God's holy people."* We are *"members of God's family"* (2:19). And we are invited to be part of the building process, of building the church, God's Temple, the Kingdom of God. Every stone – every one of us – is vital. We are all important to God and His church. And each of us has unique gifts, talents, abilities, experiences, skills that we can bring to the task.

What is your passion? What do you really enjoy doing? What do you want to be when you grow up? God may well have planted that desire within you ... (Sometimes we have this odd theology that God will call us to do what we LEAST want to do: maybe God created you in such a way that He is calling you to do what you MOST want to do?). How can you move forward, keeping step with God's Spirit?

Pray that God would help each one of us know we have talents, abilities, experiences, wisdom, education, resources, gifts, time, energy, creativity, and ideas that can bless others and build His kingdom.

*May the road rise to meet you
May the wind always be at your back,
May the warm rays of sun fall upon your home,
And may the hand of a friend always be near.
May green be the grass you walk on,
May blue be the sky above you,
May pure be the joys that surround you,
May true be the hearts that love you.*

*May God be with you and bless you,
May you see your children's children.
May you be poor in misfortune,
Rich in blessings,
May you know nothing but God's grace from this day forward.*

*May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm on your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again, May God hold you in the palm of His hand.
Amen*

Irish Blessing