Perfect Grace for an Imperfect World

Greg Hildenbrand

ContemplatingGrace.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the communion of saints around us – the relatives and teachers of the past whose influence has carried us to this point in time. It is further dedicated to the saints of the future, those born and yet-to-be-born to whom everything we do today is ultimately directed. May the words herein not betray the sacred trust and heritage of either.

Other Works by Greg Hildenbrand

Books

Finding Grace in an Imperfect World (2014)
Finding Grace in Lent (2015)
Uncovering God in Christmas (2015)
Paul Wrote the Book of Love (2016)
How Did I Miss That? (2017)
The Faces of God (2018)
What Jesus Said (2018)
A Contemplative Life (2019)
Praying With One Eye Open (2019)

Music CDs

Finding Grace in an Imperfect World (2014)
Songs of Lent (2015)
Songs of Christmas (2015)
Questions of Being (2018)

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Introduction

Perfect Grace for an Imperfect World is the product of over seven years of writing. Each of these reflections was first published as a weekly *Life Note* on my website, www.ContemplatingGrace.com, between the years of 2012 and 2018. They were later published in books, including *Finding Grace in an Imperfect World, Finding Grace in Lent, Uncovering God in Christmas, Paul Wrote the Book of Love, How Did I Miss That?, The Faces of God,* and *What Jesus Said.*

Because this book is a compilation of numerous works written over an extended period of time, the reader may notice differences in writing style. They will certainly notice differences in the length of each reflection, as I have become wordier with age. The reader may also notice some repeated themes, although I attempted to come at the themes from enough different angles to give the reader new fodder for consideration with each repetition.

Perfect Grace for an Imperfect World offers the reader a unique reflection for each day of the year, including specifically targeted readings for the seasons of Lent, Advent, and Christmas. Each reflection ends with a question or thought for journaling to encourage readers to explore their own thoughts and experiences further. Particularly for the beginnings of Lent, Thanksgiving, and Advent, all of which have start dates that change each year, the book encourages the reader to jump ahead or back in order to coordinate the start of relevant passages with the specific timing of the season in any given year.

It is my hope and prayer that *Perfect Grace for an Imperfect World* will give you, the reader, new perspectives and inspire new insights regarding the nature of God, your relationship with God, and this wonderful and mysterious life that is what is. Regular, contemplative attention to matters of the spirit and faith, as they manifest in the physical world, is one of the keys to the kingdom of heaven, which was a primary focus of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Each of our days on earth is a gift, some more pleasant than others. Taken as a whole, however, life is grace, and life is perfect – even and especially in an imperfect world. I wish you joy in your search for life's many and magical graces.

Greg Hildenbrand
November 2019

This Second Edition contains grammatical, formatting, and other minor corrections. It does not alter the themes or reflections of the book.

January 1
Beginning Again

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Revelation 21:1, 5a

As an employer, I made certain my employees received at least one performance evaluation each year. The process rewarded a person for things done well, provided coaching in areas needing improvement, and encouraged goal setting for the coming year. It was a time for reflection, as well as an opportunity to begin again.

It is common to mark New Year's Day with resolutions for change. Some people want to lose weight; others decide to exercise more frequently, save more money, spend more time in prayer, mend broken relationships – you name the issue and someone wants to resolve it. For numerous reasons, few New Year's resolutions actually succeed. First, resolutions are often made with little thought or research into what is required for success. Second, our sights are often set too high too quickly. Finally, having too many resolutions is a sure recipe for failure. Here are a few suggestions:

Research the desired change. Goal setting is a worthwhile endeavor, but goals need to be broken down into pieces that can be accomplished and measured in weekly, even daily or hourly units. For example, if I desire to lose 25 pounds in the coming year, I need to research the types and quantities of foods I will and will not primarily eat, the types and frequency of exercise that will be needed, and a reasonable expectation for how much weight I can successfully lose each week. Losing 25 pounds is a lofty goal. Losing 1 pound per week over 6-months sounds much more attainable. Prayerful research and planning is required for serious goals.

Set realistic goals and timelines. Everyone wants positive change, and everyone wants it *now.* Unfortunately, strategic changes that last seldom occur quickly. Rather, new habits must be consciously practiced over lengthy periods to become ingrained. There is no magic that happens on New Year's Day that allows change to occur more quickly than any other day of the year. What is important is our resolve to make a change.

Focus. If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. There are only so many hours in a day and success in creating positive change

requires focused attention over time. The more we dilute our attention among numerous change projects, the less likely we will be to accomplish any of them. One project at a time is a good rule of thumb.

The writer of Revelation, referring to a new heaven and a new earth, writes, "See, I am making all things new." I believe God will help us remake ourselves anew; we can be born again and grow into better versions of ourselves. That sort of change, however, requires strategic planning and thoughtful participation on our part. It is easy to forget that God is our all-powerful partner in the change we desire. If we align our desired changes with God's will and draw on that unfailing source of power, we will succeed.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life that could use a new beginning? How would I begin to make the change?

January 2
Baby Steps

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."
Ecclesiastes 3:1

Advent is over and the Christ-child has been born. So what do we do now? Perhaps we begin with a reassessment of the meaning of Advent. Of course, it is a time to prepare our hearts and minds to recognize, celebrate, and honor the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. We prepare to receive, again, the birth of Christ into our world and acknowledge the impact of that simple birth on our lives today. If that is all Advent is about, then Advent ends with the birth, right?

No, there is more to Advent than the birth of Jesus. It involves preparation for an event; but for an event that has yet to happen: the return of the Christ. It is referred to as the Second Coming. Some believe the Second Coming will be a corporate, future event where Christ comes back to earth to collect his faithful. Others believe the Second Coming occurs at our physical death when Christ welcomes us on the other side. Still others believe the Second Coming occurs when we receive and perceive the Holy Spirit as a living presence within us.

If Jesus Christ came to our church this Sunday, how would we react? If he asked to join us for dinner, how would we prepare? Somehow, I

do not think picking up the clutter, vacuuming the carpets, and dusting the pictures would suffice. I suspect Jesus would be more interested in how focused we are on feeding his sheep. Are we taking care of our physical and spiritual health in order to be useful instruments for his purposes? Are we being good stewards over that which has been entrusted to us? Are we hoarding our abundance, or sharing with others who have needs?

Honestly, I look at what I need to do to prepare to meet Christ and I see an enormous task. All mountains, however, are scaled one step at a time. When Jesus walked the earth he met people where and how they were, and focused their hearts and minds on *whose* they were and *what* they were to become. We are not called to reach the summit today; rather, to progress on the journey. Like a newborn, we can take baby steps. I do not know what that means for others. Perhaps it is committing to regular prayer time. Maybe serving at a homeless shelter or mending a broken relationship. Maybe it is joining a Bible study, covenant group, or Sunday school class. There are many starting points. The child has been born and the Savior is coming, although we do not know when. Certainly, everyone knows a few baby steps they can take to begin preparing. Once we take those steps, others will appear.

Just when we thought Advent was over...a new life begins.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I prepare for the coming of Christ into my life today?

January 3
Visions of Angels

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream…" Matthew 1:18-20a

Scripture does not tell us much about Joseph. We know he was a carpenter who lived in Nazareth. According to Matthew, he was a descendent of King David and "a righteous man." We are told he was visited by an angel at least twice. The first time was to announce that Mary's pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit and would result in the long-anticipated Messiah. The second came as a warning to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt, for Herod was seeking to kill this newborn *King*. We know Joseph took Mary as his wife, despite her unconventional pregnancy. We know Joseph

was part of Jesus' life, at least until Jesus was twelve and found in the Temple, after wandering away from his parents. Otherwise, Joseph is absent from the Gospel stories.

Although Joseph seems to be more of a bit-player in the life of Jesus, I imagine him to be a strong, quiet man, content to remain in the background of the strange saga his life had become. It seems to me, based on the lack of evidence to the contrary, that he faithfully accepted his calling and simply fulfilled his role as best he was able. Perhaps being visited by an angel is such an awe-inspiring event that Joseph dared not challenge the angel's direction. Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife, accept the son he had no role in producing, and raise him as his own. By all accounts, that is what he does. Certainly, his fellow townsfolk may have gossiped mercilessly behind his back. Pregnancy outside of marriage was a crime punishable by death from stoning. He must have had to reconcile his faithfulness to God with the perception and derision of his neighbors.

Yet, most of us are called to be Josephs. Not Mary, not John the Baptist, not Jesus. We function mostly behind the scenes, doing what we are called to do, offering our seemingly insignificant gifts wherever they seem to fit. Somehow, God takes our combined contributions, however small they may appear, and weaves them into the fabric of this world. Nearly hidden in that complex tapestry is a vital thread, without which the fabric would unravel; and that thread is ours.

Journaling focus: What is one important behind-the-scenes task I am gifted to accept?

January 4
Unseen Movement

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters. Genesis 1:1-2

John 1:18a tells us, "No one has ever seen God." If that is true, how can I presume to write anything worthwhile about the "faces" of God? My usage of *faces* here refers to God's *persona* – God's *mask*, if you will – or the different ways God appears to us on earth. In the way a versatile actor portrays many characters, so God manifests in our lives under many different *faces*.

The first manifestation from God recorded in the Bible is that of *wind*. "A wind from God swept over the waters" (Genesis 1:1). Meteorologists

tell us that winds are movements of air from areas of high atmospheric pressure to areas of low pressure. It is an informative description of *unseen movement* from point to point. Jesus tells Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish elite, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). One way God manifests is as unseen movement. We do not know where it comes from or where it goes, but we can perceive its motion around and through us when we pay attention.

A common illustration of unseen movement is found in the water cycle. Water flows from higher areas down into lakes, streams, and oceans until evaporation carries it back up into the atmosphere, only to fall back to earth as rain. It is a constantly reoccurring sequence, emptying and refilling, happening outside of our conscious awareness, and it pervades every corner of the earth. Nothing is ever lost; it only changes form and location. Blood flow in the body is another example, where the heart pushes blood out to the organs and extremities, and then draws it back in. In respiration, we breathe in, and we breathe out. These movements of air, wind, water, and blood support all of life, and they are animated by and completely dependent upon the unseen movement of God.

Of course, the Bible does not say that God *is* the wind. In the creation account in Genesis, a wind *from* God sweeps over the waters. It is this unseen movement from God that initiates creation, and everything else follows. God expresses in the constant, dynamic, and ever-flowing relationship between all parts of creation, connecting all that is, holding everything and everyone together by invisible bonds.

God is on the move as an invisible, vibrant presence, sweeping over the depths of our lives, encouraging us to love and care for others as we learn to love and care for ourselves. Like water seeking the lowest places, God moves to where the pain is. If we are sufficiently attuned to God's presence, we are carried along to the suffering, marginalized, and unfortunate persons along our journey for a reason – to relieve suffering and transform it for good. We (hopefully) experience this presence in return as family and friends surround us in our times of trouble, like angels appearing from God. In those caring, healing expressions, we see the face of a loving, creating, and always present God. God's movement is a continuous giving and receiving, emptying and refilling, breathing in and breathing out, undergirding everything we know in creation.

Journaling focus: In what ways is God moving in my life today?

January 5
Circling Around Again

Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. Colossians 2:18-19

A common misperception about life is that it is linear. In other words, our lives begin at our birth and continue along a mostly straight line until our death. While the linearity of life is a nice theory, it is not always accurate. From a certain perspective, life unfolds in a spiral. I notice similar experiences and annoyances repeating at intervals throughout my life. The exact nature of the experience changes, but the internal impact is essentially the same. For example, there are particular types of people I do not enjoy being around. They have characteristics that may be appreciated by some, but not by me. I do not particularly like associating with people who are loud and boisterous. I tend to interpret those behaviors as attention-seeking and insecure, and I am more likely to avoid or ignore them than to acknowledge them. Understand, I have my own attention-seeking and insecure behaviors, but I express them in different ways.

If our lives travel in a spiral motion, so that we return to similar experiences throughout our lives, then we will continue reliving pleasant and unpleasant encounters, even though the details of the encounters will differ. The loud and boisterous person is someone I encounter on a cyclical basis. Granted, it is seldom the same person, but different people can have similar traits. I now believe that our annoyances recur so we can learn to love and accept everyone and everything as an integral part of the greater life in which we live. Once we face that which is difficult for us, acknowledging it as an equal and worthy aspect of God's creation, we may find it no longer annoys us.

When we can do away with our annoyances – changing our perception, not the other person or circumstance – the next time we circle back, we experience them at a higher level. Experiencing something at a higher level means we are no longer circling through life like a hamster on an exercise wheel, but moving up in a spiral to a higher level of being and understanding. Life still goes around and around, but each time we come back to a similar point, we see and experience it differently, from a higher vantage point. If we are growing, we are accepting and acknowledging our unity, our interdependence with everything that is. This, I believe, is the path to God. It spirals up and up through common, everyday experiences that are seen and experienced closer and closer to the way God sees and

experiences them. We learn to see and experience through the eyes of love.

As we experience rebirth, it can be helpful to reflect on that which annoys us. When we find a lens through which to view our annoyances that makes them less threatening, we find we have taken a step up into a spiral, instead of spinning around in a never-ending circle.

Journaling focus: What annoying aspect of or person in my life might I learn to see and experience differently today?

January 6
An Epic Epiphany

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Ephesians 3:5-6

According to the Christian calendar, Epiphany occurs on January 6. It is a barely-noticeable speed bump lying just west of the mountain-of-our-own-making known as Christmas. Particularly in the United States, January 6 holds little more relevance than any other non-holiday. In other Christian cultures, however, Epiphany is the day Christmas is celebrated, complete with presents, food, friends, and family. All Christians recognize December 25 as the day of Jesus' birth, but January 6 – the 12th Day of Christmas – is the day Jesus is revealed to us as the manifestation of God. It signifies the coming of the Wise Men from foreign lands to pay homage to this baby King. The Epiphany also celebrates that Jesus came not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles – the non-Jews, meaning us. The joy of Epiphany, then, is not that the baby was *born*, but that the baby was *revealed* as God-with-us, Emmanuel.

The dictionary definition of epiphany is a *manifestation*. We often use the term in the context of a sudden realization or understanding. For example, I recently told a friend that I had had an epiphany about fasting – that fasting was not just about giving something up, but about giving something up that would regularly remind me about something else of importance. This was an intellectual clarification of what had formerly been less clear to me. The birth of Jesus, however, was *real*, meaning he came in the flesh to be seen, heard, and touched. God took on a human body and walked the earth as one of us.

The Christian season of Epiphany runs from January 6 through

Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent. Epiphany provides an opportunity for us to ponder the meaning of God's manifestation among us. If we were to invite Jesus to dinner, or to ride with us to work, or to live in our spare bedroom, what would change in our lives? If Jesus were to manifest himself into every moment of our every day, how would we be different? Even though Jesus is no longer on the earth *physically,* the Christ still present in the form of the Holy Spirit, which is always with us. Therefore, this season invites us not only to ponder God-with-us, but also to *acknowledge* that God is, indeed, with us and to live accordingly. God coming to earth in the person of Jesus was an epiphany of epic proportion. If we only celebrate the birth without allowing the manifestation to change us, we pack Jesus away into storage with the rest of our Christmas decorations. Jesus becomes an ornament that we take out once a year and say, "Oh, what a beautiful baby!" Certainly, the baby is beautiful; but the baby wants to grow up – within us.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life that needs to be taken from concept to reality? How might my life change from that manifestation?

January 7
What Now?

"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." John 1:12-13

My life path was uncertain when my first child was born. Of course, my wife and I had planned for it, at least as much as one can plan for a new life being born into an already existing life. I knew I would have to give some things up – sacrifice, if you will – in order to be the father I wanted to be for our daughter. Some activities and areas of focus in my previous life were not going to be compatible with this new life. Three years later our second child was born, bringing more changes, more sacrifices. Carrie and I integrated these children into our lives and willingly rearranged our lives to accommodate them. Today, they are both wonderful adults, and I cannot think of anything I *sacrificed* to accommodate my children. In fact, at every stage and at every age I wanted to freeze their development and our lives at that point. Whatever I gave up was not worth holding on to anyway. I gained, and continue to gain, more adventure and wonderful experiences than I ever dreamed possible. Certainly, there have been times

we chose one path where a childless couple may have chosen another. Children are expensive, but we have not given anything that feels sacrificial, at least not compared to the daily blessings these lives-with-our-lives have wrought.

So, what will we do with this Christ-child, born again to us this Christmas past? What will we sacrifice to allow this new-life-within to be nurtured and thrive? Like any relationship dependent on us, we must take the first step by making room in our lives for a new life. Once we begin, additional steps will appear. As the relationship grows, parts of our old life will fall away because we have found something more fulfilling, a new and better life that makes the previous one seem old, stale, and boring. Remember, it is to YOU the Christ-child is born!

Journaling focus: What one thing can I sacrifice in my life to make room for the Christ to grow within? What impact might that have?

January 8
Soul Food

He humbled you by letting you hunger … in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
Deuteronomy 8:3

A number of years ago I attended the funeral for the mother of a longtime friend. The minister recalled how this caring woman had specialized in feeding both the body and soul of those in her presence. Warm cookies and good conversation color my own memories of being in her home. The minister spoke of her life in poetic terms and quoted Carl Sandburg, saying, "Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits."[1] He followed with a story inspired by a quotation from the Prophet Muhammad: "If I had but two loaves of bread, I would sell one and buy hyacinths, for they would feed my soul."[2] The point is that we do not live by food alone — both body and soul require nourishment for a rich and full life.

If we were only physical creatures, we would be content with shelter and a full stomach. That is not the case. Our reality consists of more than our physical existence. Abraham Maslow, an influential psychiatrist of the past century, postulated a "hierarchy of needs" in which our physical needs are primary. For example, when we are cold and hungry, all of our attention focuses on attaining warmth and food. However, after our

physical needs have been met, we hunger for higher and fuller states of being, including building stronger relationships with others and developing improved versions of ourselves.

We can feed our spirits in many ways, and most of us practice a number of them. Experiencing music, poetry, Scripture, prayer, worship, gardening, and meditation are among the ways we feed our spirits. Exercise, though a physical activity, can free the mind to focus on spiritual matters. Serving the needs of others is a nourishing habit, both for the served and the server. We seek to stretch our being beyond the obvious, familiar, and physical. The world of the spirit is present wherever we are, but it extends beyond what we see. It requires a different type of sight to perceive. Through our seeking, however, we perceive deeper levels of blessing in the most mundane parts of our days. A hyacinth is a beautiful flower with a beautiful fragrance. The combination of its beauty and its fragrance takes us to a level of experience that neither accomplishes separately. It is food for the eyes and a balm for the soul. It is soul food. *Mmm, good!*

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better feed my soul?

January 9
Entering the Mystery

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." Exodus 3:13-14a

A friend of mine gave a sermon with the theme, "God is not a question to be answered." It was a powerful message for me, capturing a fundamental truth: Try as we might, we will never figure out God. Let me explain. The purpose of Scripture, prayer, church, or spiritual growth is not to figure out God. We *figure out* math problems. The purpose of spiritual practice is to build a connection with God. The Israelites of the Old Testament were squeamish about naming God, and for good reason. When we give something a name, we limit its nature. Naming establishes boundaries for what a thing is and is not. When we say, "This is a maple tree," we establish that it is not an oak. It is not a house, a car, or a person. We name because it is useful and efficient to categorize and describe what we encounter. However, God is distinctly different. God cannot be limited by a name, because God is limitless. Further, God's nature transcends the language we use to name. Language is a valuable tool for communication,

but just because we name a thing a "maple tree" does not mean we have captured its essence. That is especially true with God. We use the name "God," but that name does not capture the essence of God.

In Exodus 3:1-15, Moses encounters God as a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. God promises to deliver the Israelites from their enslavement to the Egyptians. Moses asks whom he should identify as the giver of this promise, and the reply is, "I am who I am." The original word given in answer to Moses has been interpreted in different ways, all of which are vague and unsatisfactory to our need to define and categorize. A common interpretation of this "name" is the doxology: "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen." The doxology is a translation of the name God gave Moses to share with his people. When Moses asked for God's name, God refused to become a question for us to answer. Thus, God is not a being to be named.

I am leery of those who act as though they have God figured out. The Bible confirms that God is beyond our ability to fully understand or name. What is helpful, necessary, and possible is a *relationship* with God. Even so, we should not get too comfortable in our familiarity with God. We do best to keep our minds and hearts open to possibilities, trusting in God's love for us. It is a love we may never fully understand, but it is a love that will never fail us.

Journaling focus: What is a mystery about God that I have difficulty accepting?

January 10
A Street Prophet

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?
James 2:5

The main campus of my church is in the heart of downtown Lawrence, Kansas. There are a number of programs for homeless and/or struggling persons in the vicinity, so we often have a diverse mix of people in worship. Several years ago, a man wandered into the sanctuary, stood in front of me as I led music, and insisted that we sing "Amazing Grace." The man's clothes were dirty, his hair unkempt, and he had blood oozing from an untreated wound on his arm. By his odor and mannerisms, he had been drinking. I asked him to take a seat while I finished the song set. He waited until I was able to take him to a room outside the sanctuary, where he and I

sang "Amazing Grace." He wept, singing through his tears, and I wondered what hell he had stumbled through to get to this point. I wondered how strongly he felt the cleansing presence of the Holy Spirit as we sang. When we finished, it was time for me to return to the service. His unfettered and determined worship blessed me. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

Another attendee of our church is a man who reminds me of the person I just described. His clothes are filthy and torn, he does not smell very good, and his hair and beard have grown wild. He is friendly, however, and always eager to talk, even though a speech impediment makes it difficult to understand his words. One thing is clear, however – he quotes scripture. There is no small talk with this man. He walks up to a person, quotes scripture, and then explains what it means. I call him the *Street Prophet*, but not in a derogatory way. He simply looks like he is from the street, and he talks as I imagine prophets of old spoke – completely focused on the Word of God.

Last week, this man quoted one of the love passages from Scripture and explained that love is not an emotion, but that true love expresses in action. The concept of love as a verb, as opposed to a feeling, is one that is near and dear to my heart. To hear the concept articulated by a street prophet gave me pause. Yet, the author of the Epistle of James tells us that God chose the poor to be rich in faith. The fact that many of us try to avoid those who are different from us does not change their status with God. If Jesus returned today, would he come as a middle-class, white, heterosexual American like me, or as a street prophet? I strongly and humbly suspect the latter.

Journaling focus: What is one way I can express love as action today?

January 11
A Finger Pointing at the Moon

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Several old wisdom tales from various traditions refer to a finger pointing at the moon. The message goes like this: "I have experienced the moon and you wish to have that experience. I point to the moon. My finger is not the moon. The words I use to describe it are also not the moon. To

experience the moon, you must find it for yourself. I can only point."

For centuries, people have sought their Creator. They have believed in and experienced a life that transcends what can be seen, heard, tasted, and touched on earth. They have experienced events that cannot be explained by science. We call these events "miracles," and seekers tend to want to find their source. We long for assurance that this life is not all there is. When we breathe our last breath, we want to know our essence lives on. Our hearts break for the chronically ill, the downtrodden, the social misfits, the impoverished, the hungry. We want to believe there is hope for a better life for them — if not here and now, then somewhere and sometime.

In our Christian tradition, Scripture is like a finger pointing to God. Human beings who received inspiration from God wrote it. Their written words help point us to an experience of God. God is not the Scripture. Scripture helps us contemplate our life experiences in light of the words of the biblical authors. It provides context for the difficulties in our lives. It helps distinguish that which has permanence from that which is transitory. It tells the stories of others' experiences of God over hundreds of generations. It points us toward God.

In the United Methodist tradition, the message of Scripture finds context by use of reason, experience and tradition. Each serves as a finger pointing to God. In that way, Scripture informs, invites, and draws us to God. God is not the finger, nor is God the Scripture. When we consider where those guide us, however, we may begin to experience God in more tangible ways. Through prayerful contemplation, we build a relationship with the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

Finally, when we contemplate Scripture, we must consider the limitations of the written word. The image of a finger pointing at the moon is helpful because it does not attempt to *describe* a reality. Rather, it points to reality in a way that is unrestricted by words. As we reflect on God, we need both written descriptions and finger pointing. Most of us can read and understand the written word. Our challenge, then, is to follow to the experience where the finger points.

Journaling reflection: What is one passage of scripture I find helpful as a finger pointing to God? Why?

January 12
Rise Up!

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."
Luke 24:5b

The church I grew up in served communion every Sunday. There was a small sip of grape juice in the communion cups held secure in silver serving trays. *The blood of Christ spilled for me*. On silver serving plates was the bread. *The body of Christ broken for my sins*. What passed for bread in that church was unlike anything I had ever called bread. It was a grouping of flat, rectangular objects that resembled medicine more than bread. I remember thinking if that was the body of Christ, he was not very healthy. Years later, I learned those pasty, life-less morsels were unleavened bread—bread with nothing to make it rise.

Leaven, in a literal sense, is a means of lifting or something that raises something else. Yeast is added to bread to make it rise so it will be fluffy, soft, and delicious. Yeast is actually alive—a conglomeration of microorganisms that cause fermentation in the bread dough. The use of unleavened bread finds its significance many times throughout the bible, but one time was when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt. They had to leave so quickly there was no time to allow the bread to rise. The unleavened bread reminds us of our Jewish ancestors' flight to freedom.

It is fascinating to me that the addition of a living substance, leaven, to an otherwise bland substance like bread dough, causes a transformation to occur that makes the bread much more desirable—full of life and beauty and taste. The same thing can happen in us. When we add a living substance to our lives—the Holy Spirit—we are reborn as new creatures, full of life and beauty and taste! We rise up from our drab former selves and live richer, fuller lives.

And that's not all that is rising. Did you know when we are asked to "Rise" in church, it not only is an instruction to physically stand, but also an invitation to lift our spirits up? We stand to symbolize being raised up, spiritually. With Christ, our risen and living Savior, we rise to richer, fuller lives in service to God, and to our brothers and sisters on earth. Christ has risen, and we can, too!

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life that could use some leaven? How might I help make that happen?

January 13
Wrestling with God

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" … and there he blessed him. Genesis 32:24, 26, 29b

I wrestled in junior high school — and it was hard work! Of all the sports I participated in, wrestling was the most exhausting. I came home from practice with every part of my body and mind aching. Wrestling is an interesting sport (at least the nonprofessional variety). Success requires more than strength and athletic ability. It necessitates learning how to utilize and counteract leverage. The mental aspect of wrestling is often overlooked. Desire plays a big part. A smaller and weaker wrestler can defeat a larger and stronger opponent by wrestling smarter.

Jacob wrestles with God in the form of a man in the Genesis story. Jacob and his brother, Esau, are the sons of Abraham. Abraham is the father and common ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the story, Jacob and God wrestle all night. As day is breaking, God tells Jacob to let him go, but Jacob refuses to quit until he receives a blessing. Finally, Jacob obtains his blessing and God departs. Even so, the blessing did not come cheaply to Jacob. His hip was knocked out of joint during the encounter. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life, the mark of having wrestled with God.

The story is instructive, because those wishing to receive a blessing from God must often work for it. We must wrestle with God. Just like the sport of wrestling, our success requires determination, practice, and persistence. Biblical knowledge is helpful, but it alone is not sufficient. Wrestling with the Bible involves taking a passage or concept and working it over in our minds. We may choose to discuss it with others or study related passages. Wrestling with God requires focused reflection — and not just the one-minute prayer before falling asleep at night. Wrestling becomes a continuous prayer that may go on for days or weeks. Our communion with God is never completely broken, even as we go about our days. It is the kind of prayer that consecrates each daily task to God. It is a haunting, obsessive need to know and serve, as well as an insistent demand to be blessed. We demand to be blessed with knowledge, understanding, and comfort. We conduct an unrelenting search for evidence of God's presence with us. We need to know we are not alone in our wondering, our wandering, or our suffering. It can be exhausting — and it may leave a mark.

Journaling focus: In what ways has my wrestling with God left its mark on me?

January 14
Beautiful and Abundant

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." 2 Corinthians 9:6, 8

My friend, Bryan Welch, wrote a fascinating book titled *Beautiful and Abundant*. It is a thought-provoking, optimistic, and visionary treatise on how we can build the kind of world we want for ourselves and for future generations. Bryan asks us to consider our current and future actions in light of four queries: (1) Is it beautiful? (2) Does it create abundance? (3) Is it fair? (4) Is it sustainable? By considering our lives in light of these questions we begin to take a more introspective and longer-term view of life as it is today, as well as the impact our actions may have on the lives of our children and our children's children.

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul discusses "sowing bountifully" in order to "reap bountifully," and how God provides us with "every blessing in abundance" so that as we realize we have enough of everything, we will "share abundantly in every good work." Paul's point is that what we receive from life is directly related to what we give. A farmer cannot sow a half-acre of seed and reap a hundred acres of grain. Bryan's point is similar.

What we give depends on our attitude about how much of what we already have is enough. The home my wife and I bought when our children were young may look excessively large as we become empty nesters. As we reflect on what we have compared to how much we need compared to how our excess could enrich others who lack, our resources look different. And our stewardship of those resources takes a new focus. We can be blessed by utilizing what we need for ourselves; we can be blessed by utilizing less so there is more for others; and we can be blessed by sharing extravagantly with others. It is our choice, and blessing is the result.

Beauty and abundance is provided by God to those who sow abundantly and thoughtfully distribute the blessings received.

Journaling focus: What is one way I can sow and share more abundantly today?

January 15
Letter vs. Spirit

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." Luke 13:13-14

My wife once asked one of our children to move the clothes from the washing machine to the dryer. Sometime later, she checked the dryer and noticed it full of still-wet clothes. The child had followed the *letter* of her request by putting the clothes in the dryer, but the child had missed the *spirit* of the request by failing to start the dryer. The request intended for the clothes to be dried — not just moved to a different location.

In the passage above, a religious leader criticizes Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Such an act was a violation of the *letter* of the law. The Jewish law of the Old Testament mandated the Sabbath be a day of rest, and therefore no work was to be done. A few passages later, Jesus calls the religious leaders "hypocrites," noting everyone does work-related tasks on the Sabbath. For example, everyone would untie their animals and lead them to water. Some work must always be done, regardless of the day. Jesus promoted the use of common sense in interpreting the law.

The literal interpretation of scripture is a divisive issue among Christians. We readily accept some Scripture passages literally. We wrestle with others, dissecting and otherwise pondering their possible application. One issue is working on the Sabbath. Although the literal Sabbath is Saturday, Sunday is the day most Christians have chosen for worship and rest. When I was a child, no stores were open on Sunday, and nearly everyone was off work. Today, Sundays are difficult to distinguish from any other day of the week. Other discussion-provoking spiritual topics include women in leadership roles in the church, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, and gay marriage. Scripture, though written thousands of years ago, has a lot to say about topics relevant today. Times have changed, but divisive issues linger. Jesus modeled following the *spirit* of the law, even when it violated the *letter* of the law. We are challenged in similar ways. The critical point for today's Christian is not *whether* to follow scripture literally. It is *how* we wrestle with the teachings and apply them in our daily lives. Serious contemplation of scripture is vital in order for us to reach an understanding about how best to apply what we read. God responds to our wrestling with a relationship. It is through that relationship that we gain insight into the applications of scripture.

Journaling focus: In what ways may I be following the letter of scripture and missing its spirit?

January 16
Beyond Words

Be still, and know that I am God! Psalm 46:1a

I am a man of too many words. I think in words, I speak in words, and, too often, I experience life through the filter of words. I attempt to capture beauty in words and in doing so I invariably lose much of the wonder I try to describe. There is a saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. We only detract from the splendor by trying to describe a beautiful sunset. Even the picture does not capture the experience, however. A picture is a two-dimensional recreation of a single moment. A sunset occurs in four dimensions, the fourth being the 30 or so minutes it requires to manifest fully.

I enjoy using words to share the insights and wisdom I occasionally stumble across. A part of me knows, however, that the more words I use, the farther I stray from the essence of what I attempt to share. Consider a finger pointing at the moon, where the moon is truth and the finger is its description. The purpose of the finger is to point, to lead others to experience the moon for themselves. Unfortunately, we too readily focus on the words – the finger – instead of the truth – the moon – to which they point. I fall into this trap regularly. I tell myself if I can only find the right combination of words, I will capture an experience for eternity. Certainly, the written word can be beautiful, inspiring, and artful. But words cannot capture the totality of a beautiful experience.

Words are symbols we create to represent something else. The word *rock* describes a part of creation. Adjectives can make it more precise: a *small, smooth, round, brown* rock. Even so, the rock and the description of the rock are not the same. We simply cannot capture reality in words. Reality is experiential, and words are just marks on paper. Like a sunset, reality happens in space over a span of time. If we want a description of an experience, words are great. If we want the experience, however, we must be *present*. Words can lead us to believe we have experienced something about which we have only read.

Saint Francis of Assisi, a 13th Century monk, wrote, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." In general, we talk too much, and our words can actually inhibit understanding. The Psalmist tells us to "Be still" if we wish to know God. We cannot find God in a dictionary.

Neither does God live in books, including the Bible, even though that text is our primary resource for learning *about* God. We experience God by seeking and listening, not to the words of the voice in our head, but by responding to the pull on our heart. To find God, we must eventually move beyond words.

Be still and know.

Journaling focus: Where is one area of my life that could use fewer words and more presence?

January 17
Intellect and Faith

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.
I Corinthians 3:18-19a

When my godson was confirmed into the United Methodist church, I had the honor of serving as his mentor through the process. Confirmation occurs at about age 13. It involves several months of study about the church, its history, and its practices. It concludes with induction into full membership in the church. As his mentor, I spoke at his confirmation service.

My godson has a highly developed intellect for his age and is very analytical. He is well beyond his years in activities such as chess and mathematics. In my comments at his confirmation service, I read the Scripture above and told him his intellect would serve him well, but I cautioned that earthly intelligence would only carry him so far. In fact, it can become downright foolishness. Earthly intelligence focuses on what can be physically observed. It leaves the unknown and unknowable largely unaccounted for.

Fully developing our intellect requires faith. Faith opens our eyes to realities beyond physical observation. Intellect without faith is shallow, and faith without intellect is weak. We need both to begin to reach our potential. My godson is naturally drawn to intellectual pursuits. He, like many of us, will need to work to develop his faith in a similar manner. Our two eyes, working together, perceive depth in our field of vision that one eye alone cannot perceive. In like manner, our intellect and faith, working together, inform our life experience in both earthly and spiritual ways. Intellect and faith find their highest expressions in each other.

I sought a visual reminder of what I most wanted my godson to

remember about his confirmation. I wanted a common artifact that would aid his recall. I chose the cross. The cross consists of two elements: a horizontal crossbeam and a vertical post. The horizontal beam represents our intellect. It spans east and west and symbolizes our knowledge of this world. The vertical beam represents our faith, a connection between earth and heaven, the known and the unknown. Where the vertical and horizontal meet — where intellect intersects with faith — is where wisdom begins. That is where I pray my godson will reside. It is where I pray we all reside. It is where we meet Jesus on the cross.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life where faith and intellect are out of balance?

January 18
Committed Love

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:12-13

There is a popular fable about a chicken and a pig. It goes like this: *A chicken wants to open a restaurant with a pig. The pig asks what they would serve, and the chicken says, "Ham and eggs, of course." The pig replies, "No thanks. You might be involved, but I would be committed."*

The story is a light-hearted illustration of the difference between involvement and commitment. The chicken's involvement requires giving up the eggs it lays. The pig's commitment requires giving its life to provide the ham.

Some employers classify their employees as those who are *compliant* and those who are *committed.* Compliant people are those who do what is expected or asked of them, but little more. They seldom take work home, nor will they willingly work extra hours or stray outside of their job descriptions. They are dependable, but not particularly loyal to or passionate about their work. Committed employees, on the other hand, are on fire for their profession and organization. They constantly think of new ways to excel at what they do in order to further the mission of the company. They work extra hours, often without being asked, and readily fill in wherever needed. They are loyal and zealous.

The difference between involvement and commitment is of sacrificial proportion. Both are important and require a measure of sacrifice, but differ in the degree of sacrifice offered. The first sentence in today's passage from John reminds me of the chicken. To love another requires a

sacrifice – giving up something of value to us to serve someone else. A loving sacrifice could be donating one's time to serve at a soup kitchen. The second sentence from John makes me think of the pig – giving up one's *life* in service to another. Of course, giving up one's life could mean *dying* for a cause, as a soldier might do for his or her country. It can also mean *dedicating* one's life to a cause, as in the case of Mother Teresa and the poor of India. Either way, committed persons give up significant rights to the course of their own lives in order to serve a higher purpose. It is easy for me to list a number of areas where I am involved. It is much more difficult, however, to show where I am truly committed. In the fable of the chicken and the pig, both animals provide necessary resources for ham and eggs. What the chicken provides, however, is available in a sustainable way that does not require the chicken's life. The pig, on the other hand, can only provide its contribution to breakfast one time. John's passage tells us there is need for both involved and committed Christians in the service of Christ.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life to which I should become more committed? In what ways?

January 19
Thoughts Matter

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matthew 5:28

For most of us, our parents taught us right from wrong by rewarding the good things we said and did and punishing the not so good. Society does the same by creating laws governing our actions and punishing those who break the law. The focus is on our actions and, occasionally, on the things we say because our words and actions have a direct impact on those around us. In today's Bible reading, Jesus reminds us that thoughts matter, too.

In his 1903 book *As A Man Thinketh*,[15] James Allen writes, "A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts." Thought (sometimes, very little thought) precedes our words and actions. In fact, our thoughts *shape* our words and actions. Every act of creation, from paintings, songs, poems and other literary works, structures, and relationships, begins in thought. Poorly thought out projects inevitably have poor results. In our criminal justice system, a premeditated murder – one consciously planned before the act – is treated more seriously than the

accidental killing of another or a murder committed in the heat of the moment.

Jesus' example of a man lusting after a woman in his heart is an amazingly insightful reference, and the main point, in my opinion, goes well beyond lustful thoughts. When a man looks at a woman with lust, when he not only notices the woman as an attractive being, but also allows his thoughts to explore how he might derive pleasure from that physical body, he has effectively reduced the woman into an object. There is no recognition of or appreciation for the unique expression of God that occupies that body, for the life she lives, or for the ways she impacts others by being who God created her to be. In Jesus' words, he "has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Focusing for too long and hard on the objectification of another can result in creating ways for one's thoughts to manifest physically, often with unfortunate and lasting results.

Controlling our thoughts is hard. Our minds were created to wander from thought to thought and, without being consciously aware of it, we can entertain some pretty nasty imagery in our heads about a variety of things we would be appalled to see actually happen. The society around us may not be able to detect our thoughts in the same way it assesses our words and actions, but our inner musings are known to us and to God. Psalm 139:1,2b says, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me…You discern *my thoughts* from far away." While I believe God understands our all-too-human tendency to allow our thoughts to run where they will, and to dwell where they perhaps should not, I also believe it is an expected discipline for us to gain a measure of control over our thoughts, every bit as much as we do our words and actions. Our thoughts should be our tools, not our master. We cannot stop unhealthy thoughts from popping into our heads, but we can certainly control how much we dwell on them. Contemplative types of prayer can help.

Because our thoughts are such powerful creative forces, we should always be conscious of them. For example, when we are overly critical of our own shortcomings, we almost certainly increase our likelihood that we will underachieve in many areas. If we berate ourselves for not being good at one thing, we may extrapolate that we are not good at anything. Positive thinking may have its limits, but negative thinking is almost boundless in its destructive power. While we need to guard against unhealthy self-talk, we also need to guard against negative thoughts about others. If another person does something that annoys us, it is easy to write off the entire person as annoying. When that happens, our own thoughts may blind us to what should bless us in others.

Our thinking mind is a gift that allows us to co-create with God in awesome and infinite ways. From the way we treat others to the ways we decorate our homes to the legacy we leave for our children, our thoughts

birth what manifests in our lives – both beautiful and less than beautiful. In all things, our thoughts matter.

Journaling focus: How can I gain better control over which thoughts linger in my head?

January 20
The Kingdom of Heaven is Near

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." Mark 1:14-15

I do not know how I missed it, but somewhere in my childhood, and reinforced throughout my life, was the concept that heaven and hell were faraway places where we would go after we die. Heaven was somewhere above, and hell was somewhere below. Heaven was a paradise where we would be reunited with long-lost relatives, and hell was a place of eternal punishment where we would go if we did not live a life on earth worthy of heaven.

I believe the church I grew up in perpetuated these images and many churches today do the same. In spite of insisting we are saved by grace, as the apostle Paul proclaimed, there is still an element of the need to *earn* our salvation running through too many religious discussions. The threat of hell is ever near for those who do not give enough money to the right causes, live an acceptable lifestyle, vote for certain candidates, recite the correct words, or regularly attend the right kind of church. Thankfully, many churches recognize an inclusive God. If God is the God of any of us, God is the God of all and is not bound by our imperfect, individual judgements regarding who is and who is not worthy of eternal life with God.

The first recorded words of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and repeated throughout the Gospels, are that the kingdom of God – heaven – is near. We consistently overlook that reality. For all the speculation about possible states of being after we die, we completely ignore that heaven and hell are present realities in our world right now, today, this moment, and in this place! Speculation about the future comes at the expense of the blessings of the now. Eternity stretches out in all directions from wherever we are at a point in time, and from that point we can experience heaven, or we can experience hell. The choice is ours because we are co-creators with God of the world we experience.

Finding heaven on earth is challenging because there are so many attractive distractions that entice us to look in other directions, like possessions, positions, and power. The earth is a beautiful place with many lovely entertainments. But none of them are eternal. Finding hell on earth, however, is much easier. There are many opportunities to succumb to illness, financial straits, disabilities, loneliness, and broken hearts. When we focus on our suffering – and everyone suffers – we lose another moment in which we could experience heaven. Jesus invites us to repent (turn around) and live the good news.

Journaling focus: If I were to search for heaven on earth today, where would I begin?

January 21
A Reverse Mission

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Matthew 5:7

In his book *Here and Now*,[3] Henri Nouwen writes, "I have become aware that wherever God's Spirit is present there is a reverse mission." He refers to the common realization that those whom we believe need our help – our mission field – often have more to offer us than we have for them. Nouwen continues, "The poor have a mission to the rich, the blacks have a mission to the whites, the handicapped have a mission to the 'normal,' the gay people have a mission to the straight, the dying have a mission to the living. Those whom the world has made into victims, God has chosen to be bearers of good news."

I first learned about reverse missions on a mission trip to Honduras. While my church sends mission teams to Central America every year, I was surprised to learn that Central American churches send missionary teams to the United States, too. This was an easier idea to process once I spent time with some of the people of Honduras. Were they poor? Certainly. Did they lack some fundamental needs like clean water? Yes, they did. Did I return home feeling I had done God's work in Honduras? No, I did not. I came home feeling like God's work had been done to me in Honduras.

When we feed the hungry or house the homeless, we perform acts of *mercy* – meeting a need that another cannot meet on his or her own. Jesus says those who are merciful – those who *give* mercy – will *receive* mercy. This is exactly what Nouwen writes. And it fits perfectly with what I experienced in Honduras. What I gave, what I accomplished on behalf of those I went

to serve paled in comparison to what I received. My first hint of a reverse mission occurred at the church services I attended the day after I arrived. There was energy and joy beyond anything I had experienced in church before. Congregants praised God with abandon, and reached out in loving fellowship to others, including our mission team, as if we were long-lost members of their own family. I was perplexed that people lacking in so many basic necessities could be filled with such joy.

I went to Honduras on a mission – to give some of what I have in the United States to the people of Honduras. I left Honduras with the knowledge that much of what we value in the United States is of little or no lasting value in other parts of the world, and much more valued here than it should be. We are distracted from our true blessings of love, relationship, and fellowship, by the sheer abundance of our dominating distractions, like perpetual internet access and cell reception. Our relationships become shallow and impersonal. Deep, loving, and healing connections happen face-to-face, not text-to-text.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I remain more focused on my true blessings today?

January 22
24 Hours

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at the time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

I am not one to pay a lot of attention to dreams. For one thing, I seldom remember them. Years ago, however, I had a vivid dream that stuck with me. I was working at the nursery that employed me during college. My boss came up to me, clearly angry, and said, "Greg, you need to *be here* more! You've got 24 hours." The message was that I would be fired if I did not change my priorities quickly. It was puzzling, as I had never had that sort of encounter with my boss in my waking life.

Three things stuck with me about the dream. First was the urgency of the message. Clearly, something had to change, and it had to change *now*. Next was my boss's exhortation to *be here*. Finally, the 24-hour deadline made no sense in the context of my job, but it was obviously important. As I considered the dream, I concluded that it was a reminder that in the next 24 hours my life *might* change dramatically or – gulp – end. I recalled my

mother losing her ability to communicate, my father's death, and a friend's paralyzing injury – all happening in an instant. The message, then, was *if* this were my last day on earth as I knew it, *what* would I do differently?

Clearly, the urgent message to *be here* is the key. When we are fully present to the moments in our lives, we are less likely to miss opportunities we might regret later. We make sure that those we love know that we love them. We do not allow a beautiful sunset to pass unnoticed. We appreciate and acknowledge the blessings around us. We fix broken relationships and forgive past hurts. We develop and use our gifts and talents for good. When we live our lives intentionally, we do not relinquish a moment of our limited time without receiving something of value in return. Time is a constrained gift, not an entitlement. Certainly, being present does not mean that we let needed tasks go undone. It does mean, however, that whatever we do and however unpleasant the task may be, we take charge of our attitude and experience the available blessings. Being present also means we reevaluate the necessity of certain activities that may have no significant value.

The fact that this *might be* my last 24 hours on earth, which is a true statement for all of us, should change me. As the writer of Ecclesiastes writes, "no one can anticipate the time of disaster." The challenge, in the absence of a known and imminent calamity, is to live as if the time is near. That knowledge should change us for the better.

Journaling focus: What will I do differently today knowing that it might be my last?

January 23
Seeing Inside Out

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day … because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16, 18

When it comes to spiritual matters, I am no fan of the obvious. Our earthly existence is animated by forces we cannot see. Our physical existence springs from deep spiritual roots that trail into the unseen recesses of space and time. What we experience today is the product of a complex set of past actions and choices. We simply cannot trace all the threads of cause that have woven the tapestry of today's experience.

Can I prove it? Can I see the oak tree in the acorn or the adult human in the embryo? Of course, I cannot. Life on earth is full of unseen potential, waiting and wanting to express in all the glory God created the

various life forms to manifest. In our time-limited existence, we only catch glimpses of a much larger reality. We experience moments of partial insight but remain blind to the whole. In missing the whole, we miss the intimate interconnections that bind all things.

Our inability to see beyond our own existence is what makes many religious teachings confusing. Perhaps Jesus should have just told us in plain language what we needed to know. Unfortunately, the nature of the truth that animates the universe cannot be adequately captured in words. Because biblical writers could not put that type of truth into words, they often talked around it. Jesus used parables and cryptic sayings that we can ponder many times and interpret in new ways each time. These teachings challenge us to see with new eyes — eyes that perceive beyond what is visible.

We will never understand the fullness of the life and teachings of Christ until we look beyond the obvious. Our earthly eyes perceive only differences — differences in light and shadow. Our vision perceives separateness, not likeness. We incorrectly interpret our visible differences as differences in essence. However, because we were all created in the image of God, are we not all the same in essence? We categorize and discriminate by gender, color, age, ethnic background, and sexual orientation. In the words of Paul to the Corinthians, "What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be unseen is eternal." The truth lies in the realm of the unseen.

Journaling focus: What person in my life has potential I am not seeing? How can I better see it?

January 24
Enigmatic Faith

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.
Matthew 5:11-12a

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*,[4] Parker Palmer writes, "The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring." He follows this by saying, "If we refuse to hold them in hopes of living without doubt, despair and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love." Palmer makes it sound as if we are damned if we do, and damned if we don't.

I have witnessed the truth of Palmer's words in my life. The person with the strongest faith I have known was my Grandma Hildenbrand. Her mother died young, leaving my grandmother to raise her four younger siblings. Two of her own children died as young adults. She lived through two world wars and the Great Depression, and worked sun up to sundown as a farm girl, and then a farm wife. Grandma had a harder life than anyone I know, and she had the strongest faith. I never knew her to waiver in her faith, including as her health steadily deteriorated in her final months on earth. She remained optimistic, cheerful, and feeling blessed to the end. When I was a child, there were times when Grandma's faith seemed to get in the way. We could watch whatever was on television – any of the 3 available channels – unless Billy Graham was preaching, in which case we would be watching Billy Graham. Church attendance on Sunday mornings was mandatory, as were prayers of thanksgiving before every meal. Grandma believed God's plan was perfect and that all things would work together for good – no matter how bad things got.

In his Sermon on the Mount, a part of which is today's scripture, Jesus proclaims a number of enigmas. Endurance through pain and perseverance through difficulty will be rewarded, if not in this life then in the next. In the context of our live-for-the-moment world, maxims of the faith often seem foolish. Wise sages like Jesus, Parker Palmer, and Grandma Hildenbrand talk about this life as if there is much that we cannot see or understand, as well as more beyond what we recognize as *this* life. Their faith is not rooted in what can be seen — indeed, that does not require faith at all. Palmer's point is that just because we risk experiencing pain when we love deeply is no reason not to love deeply – or to believe strongly, or to hope defiantly. Like Grandma Hildenbrand, when life knocks us down we are to get back up, dust ourselves off, and keep moving forward with confident certainty that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Journaling focus: When was a time that I loved deeply and suffered because of the depth of my love? Was it worth it?

January 25
Down the Rabbit Hole

But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living. Job 28:12-13

As a teenager, my daughter had a black-and-white bunny named Oreo.

Oreo had a cage in our garage with her food bowl, her water bottle, a heat lamp, and a blanket. She could go outside through a little doorway into a small, fenced area. Her yard had a wooden sun deck and plenty of dirt in which to dig. Over time, she constructed an elaborate series of deep tunnels in her patch. Those tunnels were where she preferred to spend large chunks of her time. One day we noticed Oreo was very ill. She had been lethargic for several days, and then one day she failed to come running at mealtime. In fact, she did not exit her rabbit hole all day. Because she would not come out, I went in after her. I stuck my arm down as far as I could reach, but felt no bunny. I had to begin digging into the rabbit hole. I dug through many tree roots (and telephone and cable lines) until I finally found her three or four feet below the surface. She was still alive, and we made an emergency visit to the vet.

Today's proverb from Job ponders where we will find wisdom. It concludes that wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living. That implies that wisdom must be sought in unique ways and places. As in finding Oreo, wisdom will not often be obvious or easily attained. There are no guarantees that venturing into the unknown — going down a rabbit hole — will yield wisdom. When I put my arm into Oreo's tunnel, I did so reluctantly. I was aware of a large rat snake that shared the underworld with Oreo at times. The lesson for Job, as for us, is that to find wisdom, we must seek it in places beyond the familiar. Fortunately, in my trip down the rabbit hole, I found a live bunny and not an angry snake. After a few days with the vet, Oreo enjoyed several more years of life on earth.

What wisdom did I gain from the rabbit hole? Well, I learned that telephone and cable lines look similar to tree roots. I learned that telephone lines cut by a shovel shock bare skin. I learned that having utility companies repair lines that have been cut — even for a noble cause — is expensive. I learned that our health insurance does not cover emergency veterinary services for a sick bunny. Finally, I learned that a healthy bunny, like wisdom, is worth the cost of the occasional dive down the rabbit hole.

Journaling focus: What is one issue in my life deserving of going down a rabbit hole?

January 26
Unclean Spirits

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and

come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. Mark 1:23-26

I was a mostly good, agreeable child. I seldom argued with my parents or siblings. I kept my room in order. I helped with work around the house. I stayed out of trouble at school. I feel safe making these claims because neither of my parents can refute them any longer. However, there were times I did do something to spark the ire of one or both of my parents, and I would hear, *"GREGORY LYNN HILDENBRAND! You come here this instant!"* I could gage their anger by their use of my otherwise-ignored full name. I would then submissively appear before the accusing parent to receive my shaming. It was as if my parents had identified an unclean spirit in me, and this was their way of casting it out.

In the Scripture, Jesus rebukes an unclean spirit in a man in the synagogue and orders it out. While the unclean spirit complains, it does obey the authority of Jesus and exits. Who are the voices of authority in our lives? My wife, children, friends, and co-workers all catch me showing symptoms of an unclean spirit and call me out. Sometimes they even use my full name. I may become convicted by a Scripture passage or sermon. Heartfelt prayers help set my heart right. Sometimes I see the suffering of another and realize I have no reason to complain about my life, thus casting out the demon myself. Receiving a different perspective is an enlightening and humbling, if not always pleasant, experience.

What are the unclean spirits in our lives? I picture the man in the temple behaving in an unruly, disruptive, over-the-top manner. Perhaps he was being argumentative, talking over others, complaining incessantly, cursing, or being selfish, demanding, or rude. I frequently fall prey to many of these unclean spirits, and I need them called out. Sometimes the perspective of others regarding our behavior is enough to cast out our demons. At other times, we need the authority of Jesus to rid us of the more stubborn unclean spirits.

Journaling focus: What unclean spirits manifest in my life from time to time? How can they be cast out?

January 27
Creation Revisited, Part 1

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. Genesis 2:23-24

There are two accounts of the creation of human beings in Genesis. In the first chapter, the creation goes like this: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). The second creation account begins like this: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). It continues in verse 21, "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs … and the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman."

In his book *How Good Do We Have to Be?*,[5] Rabbi Harold Kushner makes interesting observations about those two creation stories.[1] His comments center on the Hebrew word *tsela*, translated as *rib* in the second creation account. The same word is translated as *side* in other parts of the Bible. Rabbi Kushner makes the point that the second creation story could just as logically read, "Then he took one of his sides … and the side that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman."

This alternate wording is significant. I learned that God first created a man, Adam. Noting it was not good for Adam to be alone, God put Adam to sleep, removed one of his ribs, and made a woman, Eve, out of that rib. In this alternate reading of the story, substituting *side* for *rib*, we read the two creation stories as sequential events in a single creation. *Humanity* was created first in Adam, with both male and female contained in the same being. The second part of creation split humanity into its male and female *sides*.

Rabbi Kushner suggests the initial creation of humankind produced a single being that was both male and female. If God truly created humankind in God's own image, it is reasonable to assume that the first human held both male and female characteristics since God's nature must encompass the characteristics of both genders. The dilemma from the initial creation was that there was no other being for equal companionship. God thus put the human to sleep and separated the male and female halves, resulting in two beings from the one: a man and a woman.

Journaling focus: How do I feel about the possibility that male and female genders came from a single being?

January 28
Creation Revisited, Part 2

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

Yesterday, I explored the implications of taking the Hebrew word translated as *rib* in the second creation story of Genesis and instead translating it as *side*. Because the same word is translated as *side* elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is a reasonable substitution. That change allows us to imagine God's first creation of humankind as both male and female instead of beginning with the male expression only. In the creation story of the second chapter of Genesis, instead of God removing a *rib* from the man, God removes a *side* of the first human, resulting in two halves — one man and one woman.

As we explore this alternate translation, the implications are significant. They help make sense of much that is confusing in the traditional interpretations of the creation story. For example, some argue that because the man was created first, and because the woman was formed from one small piece of the man, that man is superior to woman. Some say God created woman from the side of man so she would walk beside him — she was not created from his foot so he would tower above her, and not from his head so she would be above him. While this allows for more equity between genders, it still says that woman was created from the man. The alternate translation leads to a more logical and equitable interpretation.

God separated the first human into two equal but distinct parts. Neither is complete in and of itself, but by joining the two, a degree of wholeness is restored. There is no confusion about whether male or female is superior. Both are equally accurate images of one aspect of God's nature. When joined together, they more closely mirror the divine image from which they came.

During our premarital counseling, my wife and I took personality tests. I was fascinated to find we were mirror opposites on every trait. For example, my wife was extroverted and I was introverted. It was even more astounding that she was extroverted to nearly the same degree that I was introverted. We have all heard that opposites attract. I think a more accurate statement, however, is that we are attracted to what we lack. We seek others who best help us achieve wholeness — like pieces in a puzzle, and like seeking the *wholeness* we knew in the original creation of humankind. By uniting with another who is strong where we are weak, we more closely approach the divine whole from which we originated.

Journaling focus: Where in my life might I be seeking wholeness from another?

January 29
Creation Revisited, Part 3

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. Genesis 2:24

We desire to be in relationship with others. Even my introverted friends crave relationships, romantic and otherwise. I believe the alternate reading of the creation story reveals that our desire for relationship springs from more than our being social creatures. It suggests we may, at a subconscious level, seek to reunite that which was separated at creation. Our human bodies are the product of the union of a sperm and an egg, each only half genetically human. It is possible we are drawn to relationships because the product of two people in an intimate relationship together more closely mirrors the image of God from which we were created. Perhaps we seek that wholeness both spiritually and physically. Arguably, the most intense, mysterious, and binding of physical interactions is the sexual act, when two become one flesh. Significantly, this is also the act by which human life is perpetuated on earth.

Does this imply that those who live life as single persons are out of the intended order of creation? No, it does not. Everyone still seeks relationship. Romance is not a requirement for relationship, although intimacy is required. Intimacy, however, does not have to be sexual. Important associations need not even be with people. We can be in relationship with a job, a pet, a hobby, a television show, or a Savior. Relationship is about attending to someone or something outside of oneself.

In my early adulthood, I desired a hermit-like existence. I wanted to be close to nature and find wholeness, mostly uninterrupted by human distraction. Upon attaining my goal, I was miserable. When face to face with my own incompleteness, what I found was far from the image of God I sought. My mistake was in the belief that I could find fulfillment alone. There may be people who do enjoy fulfilled lives apart from others, but most of us do not.

The point is that we have an irrepressible need to be in close relationship with one or more others. I believe that need traces back to the creation of humankind. Certainly some amount of time alone is also important, but our time away from others is more productive and enjoyable if we know we have a solid relationship to which to return. Our relationships animate and provide context for everything we do in life.

Journaling focus: What is one relationship in my life that helps me feel more whole? What void does that relationship fill?

January 30
Creation Revisited, Part 4

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Genesis 2:16-17

In preceding days I have suggested we are drawn to relationship because we desire the wholeness of our original state. Being in relationship allows us to mirror more closely the image of God from which we were created. Prior to God splitting the human into male and female halves, there are two trees named in the creation story. The first is the tree of life. The second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God tells Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because doing so will cause them to die. This command is confusing to me, because so much of our earthly quest is a search for knowledge. This tree is at the heart of what many refer to as *original sin*. Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of this tree, in defiance of God's instruction. In Genesis 3:4-5, the serpent tells Eve, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Adam and Eve did not die physically, but they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. They were also separated from God.

The knowledge Adam and Eve gain from eating of the fruit of the tree is of their own nakedness. God says, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). How are the awareness of nakedness and the knowledge of good and evil related? The answer is in the separation theme of being expelled from the Garden of Eden. This separation may refer to humanity being split into male and female beings. It may also refer to the separation of humanity from God. When their eyes were "opened," Adam and Eve saw differences – differences from each other and differences from God – and they were ashamed. They were "naked" in their exposed uniqueness. When we understand sin as "that which separates us from God," we understand why this incident was the original sin. It led to humanity's original separation from God, not because God willed it but because we desired it.

We value individuality, but it is a misleading value. We glorify our individual expression of the divine. At the same time, we undervalue the unique expression of others. The knowledge gained from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not *knowledge* as we define it today. Rather, it was an *awareness* of a condition incompatible with life in the Garden of Eden where everything was valued and co-existed in harmony. In the Garden, everyone was in direct communion and companionship with God and each other. They were one. However, oneness is incompatible with

separation, which manifests as *you-and-me* to the exclusion of *us*, leaving us naked, alone, and exposed. We identify with our differences rather than rejoicing in our oneness. Separation breeds fear and doubt, which is the exact nature of sin.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I feel naked and exposed around others?

January 31
Creation Revisited, Part 5

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.
Genesis 3:23-24

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That act of sin led to the physical separation of humanity from God, symbolized in Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden. The story provides important clues to our earthly existence; specifically, that we are not whole. We were created in the image of God and then separated into male and female halves. There are similar, opposing realities manifesting throughout our world. Electricity flows between positive and negative poles. Conception occurs by uniting male and female. What we speak of as opposites are defined in relation to each other. Dark is the absence of light. Ignorance is the absence of knowledge. Evil is the absence of good. Perhaps the knowledge imparted by the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is actually found in our experiences of opposites.

In reality, these *opposites* are not opposite at all, but the relative absence or presence of a single trait. Light and dark are not opposites; dark is simply the absence of light. Life on earth manifests in various quantities and combinations of light, good, and love. Part of our earthly experience is to know creation in its separated state. We eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by leaving the Garden and becoming human. Our experience is one of separation.

Almost everything in our human experience tells us we are separate, independent beings. The truth is we are an integral part of the *whole* from which we were created. This is the origin of all sin, that we do not recognize ourselves as intimately connected to everyone and everything else. We cannot know peace when others are at war. We cannot be well

while others suffer. We cannot experience wholeness while others lack basic needs. Our fates are intimately tied together. The original sin is about the illusion of separation. Jesus seeks to reunite us with each other and with God. In the words of Paul, "There is no longer male and female; for you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28b). When we leave earth, we will be reunified into the whole from which we came.

This creation story series began with a look at how male and female humans spring forth from a single source. That led to consideration of the *opposites* of creation. I have noted that we are attracted to others who help make us whole. Male and female are not opposite, but, rather, complementary traits. Male traits are not exhibited exclusively by men nor female traits only by women. Male and female, bound together, manifest a single trait. That trait is godliness. God created us, male and female, in God's image. As part of that creation, we cannot experience wholeness without reunifying the parts.

Journaling focus: What emotional reaction do I experience from feeling separated from others?

February 1
Not As the World Gives

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." John 14:27

We live in a competitive society. We are capable of finding countless ways to separate ourselves from others. We are male or female; black or brown or red or white; Democrat or Republican; rich or poor; old or young; or…well, you get the idea. I played in rock bands as a teenager, and we used to scrutinize other bands and seek out things they did poorly. I once worked for a company that compared itself to other companies and measured its worth, at least in part, by how much better we were than others. It is true in our schools, our families, our circle of friends – even our churches. In order to build ourselves up, sometimes it seems we must tear someone else down. That is simply the way of this world, at least according to some.

Jesus distinguished between realities, but not in a competitive way. In the passage above he says, "I do not give to you as the world gives." Jesus distinguishes between his world and ours. It is confusing because both worlds appear to be the same. The same sun rises and sets on both worlds. The rain falls and the flowers bloom in both worlds. People are

born and people die in both worlds. The difference is not found in the physical characteristics of the worlds, but in our recognition of the Spirit's presence in the physical realities. In the verse prior to the one above, Jesus says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit…will teach you everything…" The difference between the worlds is our conscious awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the applied knowledge the Spirit brings. As we learn to turn to the Spirit for wisdom, guidance, and perspective our world changes. But not physically, as some expect. Rather, our perception of our experience changes. It still rains when we wish it wouldn't. People still get sick. Loved ones die. But as the knowledge of the Spirit is applied to the world, negative experiences are seen as less-than-pleasant phases in an amazingly beautiful journey. Traveling to Colorado can be a beautiful setting for a vacation, but certain necessary aspects of the journey, particularly when coming from the east, can seem less than thrilling.

We all desire to be a part of something greater than ourselves, so we seek groups with which to identify with and belong. But it doesn't have to always be at the exclusion of others. We are one in the Spirit. Jesus invites us into his world, joining with our Christian brothers and sisters in a love "our world" cannot comprehend.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I notice the Spirit manifesting in my life?

February 2
Utilizing Talents

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."
Matthew 25: 29

Today's scripture passage is the conclusion of the parable of the talents. I remember wondering, as a younger person, what this parable said about justice. The story is about a man going on a journey, entrusting his property to others in his absence. To one he gives five talents, to another two, and to another he gives one. Upon his return the person entrusted with the five talents had used them to earn an additional five talents. The person given two talents had also doubled his original allotment. But the person given only one talent had done nothing with it and only had the original talent to show for his stewardship. The master praises the first two for using their talents wisely and increasing them, but criticizes the last for wasting his, calling him a 'wicked and lazy slave' and takes his one talent

away and gives it to the one with the greatest abundance.

Can anyone else relate to the person with only one talent? I have watched people throughout my life with so much more than I have – more money, more athletic ability, better looks, greater intelligence – and I wonder what I could accomplish had I only been blessed like these others. Had I been given five talents at birth, just imagine how I could have multiplied those by now!

Which, of course, misses the point entirely. Even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, it is not our grass – not the grass we were given, not our grass to tend, not the grass we will be held to account for. While we cannot know why some people are blessed with much and others little, we are responsible for identifying the gifts and talents we have and putting them to the best use we can in as many areas of need we can. A careful reading of today's verse shows that to all who *have*, more will be given. We all have been given *something*. How we use that which we have will determine our abundance. Our gifts are not meant to be trophies for display, but tools to be used for good. The parable of the talents, ultimately, is about stewardship and accountability.

Journaling focus: Which of my gifts could I put to better use today? In what way?

February 3
My Ebenezer

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." 1 Samuel 7:12

Years ago I attended the memorial service for a cousin of my father's. It was at the Ebenezer United Methodist Church, located in a rural area of north-central Kansas. A group of German Methodists immigrated to the area in the 1870s and established the church, barely a decade after the Civil War. My great-grandfather, a child at the time, was among them. The remote location of the church is memorable, as miles and miles of farmland surround it. It is on the slightest of rises in an otherwise flat expanse of pasture, wheat, and soybeans.

Ebenezer UMC is a familiar church to me because of the many family reunions, funerals, and other gatherings I have attended there since I was a child. It is a plain, no-frills, wooden structure. There are no stained glass windows, no fancy stone or woodwork, and no vaulted ceilings. This church was built for function, not form, consistent with the folks it was

built for – practical, down-to-earth, and humble. I always found Ebenezer UMC disquieting, due in part to its name. Perhaps it reminded me of Ebenezer Scrooge – *bah humbug!* Perhaps it was the puzzling line from an old hymn: "Here I raise my Ebenezer." Something about the name made me think of ancient and haunted things. The church stands proud, however, on this unforgiving, horizontal vastness, tempting the unrelenting Kansas winds to blow it off its foundation. At least in my lifetime, no storm has phased it.

The biblical references to Ebenezer are in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. I assume the stone that Samuel placed was large enough to be seen for miles. That stone, which he named Ebenezer, stood as a symbol of God's constant and helpful presence throughout their struggles. Before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they gave up everything they knew for the promise of a new life. A group of Methodist immigrants gave up everything familiar and crossed the Atlantic Ocean for a similar promise of a new life a century and a half ago. They landed in a vast country where they could eke out a reasonable living with the sweat of their brow. In the midst of this fertile soil, they erected a visible reminder that God is good; a place to call the faithful to worship and, in their time, to call the saints home. An Ebenezer – a symbol of hope, a reminder of God's presence – is a good thing to have as we weather the storms of life. God is always near, but sometimes we forget. When we enter new life territory, when we feel lost and alone, when we need to remember, may there always be an Ebenezer in sight.

Journaling focus: What serves as my Ebenezer?

February 4
The Unredeemed Reaping of an Imperfect World

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? Jeremiah 8:20-9:1

This is Jeremiah's Old Testament lament: "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt."

A number of years ago, a co-worker of mine lost her 5-year-old daughter to meningitis. Death came quickly to this previously healthy, fun-loving little girl. Amanda's fever spiked, she went to the hospital, and she

died a short time later. She had loved singing songs with her father. Her parents asked me to sing a few of her favorite songs at her memorial service. My own daughter, only a year younger than Amanda, also loved to sing. After the service, I went to my car and wept. That evening, I held my daughter a little tighter and a little longer than normal. I wondered how such indescribable sorrow could fall upon such good people. "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt."

My formerly health- and fitness-conscious mother became bed-ridden following a stroke that left her unable to express even the most basic of thoughts. "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt."

Cancer. September 11th. Hurricanes. Divorce. Ethnic cleansing. Traffic accidents. The Holocaust. Heart-rending, life-changing events are never far from our daily existence. "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt."

Where is God in tragedy? We hurt. Friends and family hurt. Our world hurts. Where is God in the midst of this suffering? Jeremiah wrestled with this question centuries ago; we wrestle with it still today. The minister who conducted Amanda's memorial service said, "I believe the moment Amanda breathed her final breath, the first heart to break was God's." God does not create horrors; they are the unredeemed reaping of an imperfect world.

Where is God in our hurting? Where God has always been: in the hearts and hands of God's people. God moves, heals, and is present through them. God is present when we sing for the father who cannot, and when we share what we have with those who lack. When we pray for those who cannot pray for themselves, God is there, too. God lives in and expresses through the faithful who act when they see a need.

Journaling focus: Who is hurting in my circle of friends and family that I can reach out to today?

February 5
A New Body

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. Luke 24:36-39

After Jesus rose from the grave on the morning we celebrate as

Easter, he appeared to his disciples a number of times. All four Gospel accounts of the post-resurrection days record appearances of the risen Christ. Based on those accounts, however, the body of the risen Jesus is clearly different than his pre-resurrection body. Often, his closest followers did not recognize Jesus until he spoke to them. He entered rooms through locked doors. He appeared, and then disappeared from gatherings of his disciples. He reprised his walk upon the sea. Jesus rose from the dead, but he did not return in an identical body. His new body resembled the old, however, and it still bore the holes and scars from his crucifixion. He ate and conversed with his followers, as he did in his previous life, but it was not the same Jesus. He was now the *risen Christ.*

In his final hours on earth, Jesus suffered a litany of the worst types of torture imaginable. One of his closest friends betrayed him to the religious authorities, who promptly convicted him of blasphemy in a sham trial. He was beaten, scourged, humiliated, and mocked. He suffered inconceivable physical and emotional abuse. Finally, nailed to a cross for hours in the hot sun, he died. And when it was finished, he rose from the dead and returned to earth. Jesus returned to earth changed, however, and with a new body.

There are many profound lessons from the death and resurrection of Jesus, one of which is that there is new life on the other side of suffering. While we may not return to an earthly life, there is *always* life on the other side. And we are always changed as a result of our struggles. We may look similar, but our bodies and spirits bear the marks of our experiences. Often, we rearrange our priorities, and what was important before, fades into obscurity. That type of rebirth is one purpose of death – when something needs to change or grow, something else must die first. Like a chick, persistently and exhaustingly pecking its way out of the egg; like a mother giving birth; like Jacob wrestling with God; like a caterpillar struggling from its cocoon to emerge as a butterfly. New life comes at a cost; our souls reach for a higher experience, and a new life emerges from the old. Jesus showed us – on the cross and out of the tomb – that there is always life on the other side, and always in a changed body.

Journaling focus: What is one deep experience that changed my body? In what ways?

February 6
Healing the Sick

So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:24

Each of the four Gospels document instances of Jesus healing the sick. It was a primary manifestation of his ministry and drew crowds wherever he went. We read of the healing of paralysis, leprosy, hemorrhaging, physical disabilities, and fevers. Jesus eradicated demons – what we would likely consider mental illnesses today. He even raised people from the dead. From what we read, there was no illness or condition on earth Jesus could not cure. Knowing his time on earth was limited, Jesus gave power to his disciples to heal the sick. In fact, he commanded them to do so. When they had difficulty healing certain conditions, he criticized their lack of faith.

Jesus considered these healings to be faith events, saying, "Your faith has made you well." If healing was a primary manifestation of Jesus' ministry, faith was the conduit through which the healing occurred. Clearly, a person's faith and the healing power of Jesus were connected. In today's passage from Mark, Jesus refers to the limitless power of prayer: "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

I wonder whether our faith today has lost its power by being diluted and divided in unhealthy and unnatural ways. Our currency says, "In God We Trust," but do we? Most of us have faith in health professionals, and they perform amazing works for the sick through modern medicine. Even so, their ability to heal has limitations. My question is this: *When we reach the healing limits of our medical system, do we have sufficient faith in Christ to heal?* Some religions completely shun the medical system, relying instead on faith healing. Many of us look upon such religious conviction with suspicion. Should we? Faith is a dynamic manifestation of our relationship with God through Christ. We cannot treat faith as if it has an on-off switch. Many of us turn to heartfelt prayer whenever we or others are sick, but is our *faith* in God or in medicine? Does believing in one reduce our belief in or the power of the other? These are among the difficult questions we wrestle with as Christians. One constant remains, however: Our world needs healing.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life in need of healing? What would that healing look like?

February 7
Wrestling With Doubt

"(But Thomas) said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."
John 20:25b

My daughter, Grace, was suspicious of Santa Claus almost from the beginning. The whole "old fat man coming down the chimney" routine was a stretch for her to unconditionally believe. Reflecting back, it is a little creepy, plus our house did not have a chimney. She would try to stay awake on Christmas Eve to settle the mystery, but her little body always gave in to sleep before the presents arrived. My son, Reid, was more utilitarian. Whether Santa was real or not wasn't the point. The point was to play along with the myth and get presents. Why sweat the "small" stuff?

In the days following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to many of his disciples: conversed with them, ate with them, helped them understand what was happening. They had proof positive he had risen from the grave and was their promised Messiah. But doubting Thomas had not been present for these appearances, and he refused to believe until he could actually feel the holes in Jesus' hands.

And this is the crux of our faith dilemma today. Because Jesus' kingdom is not of the earth, because he is not physically present, and because we are quick to seek and accept logical explanations for most miracles, it can be saner not to believe in miracles. Science teaches us to seek proof before believing. But science is of the world we see and hear and touch, and there is another world beyond our senses. Both worlds co-exist within us. To further complicate matters, the rules are different in the two worlds. In one we are told to live today as if there's no tomorrow; in the other we are told our tomorrow is shaped by our choices today. One world seemingly ends at death, when awareness of the other begins.

Some people believe in God with ease. For others, belief is an on-going struggle. I fall in with the latter group. I had little to do with Christianity as a young adult. My search for Truth led me to abandon what I was taught in Sunday school as too much to accept at face value. But it was that same search that eventually led me to see my everyday life in ways that were unexplainable, except by the very lessons taught in Sunday school. I am still a skeptical, doubtful person. But persisting in the search for Truth, wrestling over issues of faith, can lead us to the same place as those with unwavering faith – just as if we, like Thomas, were allowed to put our fingers in the holes in Jesus' hands.

Journaling focus: What about Jesus is difficult for me to accept without further proof?

February 8
Don't Worry; Be Happy

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" Matthew 6:31

My life has been filled with calamities, some of which actually happened.
— Mark Twain[6]

I was convinced this was the end. I was going to die on a pre-dawn flight to Chicago. The dark sky had a subtle hint of a sunrise I was unlikely to witness. From that subtle streak of pink, it was clear our jet was headed down. Not straight down, but we were losing altitude at an alarming rate. A frightened flight attendant buckled herself into a seat across from my co-worker and me, biting her lip. The kisses I had given to my sleeping wife and children before I left home that morning would likely be my last. Was my relationship with God sufficient? Would my children remember me as they grew up? Would my wife find another man to help raise our family and with whom to share the rest of her life?

Clearly, I was choosing to spend my last moments on earth, like so many of my other moments on earth, worrying. Eventually, the airplane leveled off and began to climb. A cabin pressure gauge had failed, and the pilot had made the dive to prevent the oxygen masks from deploying. Had that happened, it would have caused a two-hour delay in Chicago, resulting in flight delays for the rest of his shift. He chose not to make an announcement over the intercom, assuming all of us passengers were asleep.

In his book *Conscious Capitalism*,[7] John Mackey writes, "The most important insight about fear is that it seldom exists in the present moment. It is almost always about the future, something we are afraid is going to happen. When we direct our attention fully into the present moment, fear greatly lessens or disappears." Mackey cites a University of Cincinnati study on worry that found that 85 percent of what we worry about never happens.[8] Further, 79 percent of us handle the 15 percent of our worries that do manifest much better than we imagined we would.

So why do we worry? Unfortunately, we worry about almost everything, even when little of what we worry about actually happens. We are obsessed with looking forward into the unknown of the future. Once there, we project the worst. Simply living in the present moment and enjoying its blessings is difficult. Certainly some moments contain challenges we must address, but worry does nothing to help us find solutions. When we stay in the moment, where we belong, we find our blessings, and worry naturally dissipates.

Journaling focus: What one area of chronic worry in my life should I let go of? How can I do that?

February 9
Swallowing Camels

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe … (but) have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" Matthew 23:23-24

Too often, I lose sight of what really matters. Usually, it is easier to get lost in the details of an issue than to focus on the bigger picture. The minutia in our life is clear-cut, but the whole-life-view is blurry. We have sayings that capture the sentiment: "He cannot see the forest for the trees," or "She majors in minors," or "Perfect is the enemy of good." Jesus said it even better: "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." We immerse ourselves in the small stuff while neglecting the reason for doing the small stuff.

Jesus reserved his harshest name-calling for two groups of people: the scribes and the Pharisees. These two groups were devout and pious about their religion. In their attempt to do everything right, they did little that was righteous. In fact, because they did not understand religion's larger purpose, they led others astray. They made following the religious laws the focus of seeking God, and ignored God's issues of justice, mercy, and faith. Jesus called these obsessive zealots "hypocrites" and "blind guides." That was strong language for such "holy" beings. It is little wonder they had Jesus crucified.

How does one eat a camel? Just like one eats an elephant – one bite at a time. We consume our days in endless details, leaving no time or energy for the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith and *Gulp!* We just swallowed a big bite of camel. As time passes, we get used to the taste. Not having to deal with the squishy, impossible-to-solve issues of faithful followership can make the lingering aftertaste of camel fur almost pleasant by comparison. Straining out gnats is so much easier, and at the end of the day, we feel like we accomplished something. Unfortunately, straining gnats does not bring us into relationship with Christ, nor does it move God's will forward on earth.

Clearly, we cannot accomplish anything worthwhile without paying attention to certain details. We also cannot mistake the details for the end goal, however. If, at the end of the day, everything on our *to-do* list has been checked off, we should be a step closer to something else of larger importance. Small tasks are like fruit flies – kill one and a hundred more appear. Eventually, we may have to allow a few gnats into our soup in order to focus on our purpose on earth. We are created in the image of God, and we, in partnership with our spiritual brothers and sisters, were created for

great things!

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life where I may be overlooking the big picture?

Lenten Study Section

The following sections are intended to be read during the season of Lent, which runs from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Because the dates for the Lenten season change each year, I suggest you begin this section on the date of Ash Wednesday of whatever year you are reading this.

Here are the dates of Ash Wednesday for the years 2021 through 2030:

2021 February 17
2022 March 2
2023 February 22
2024 February 14
2025 March 5
2026 February 18
2027 February 10
2028 March 1
2029 February 14
2030 March 6

Assuming that Ash Wednesday does not fall on February 10 for the year you are reading this, skip ahead to the reading beginning on March 29 (page 107) and go from their until Ash Wednesday for the current year. Then you can return to this point in the book. After Easter, the dates in this book and your calendar dates should match once again.

February 10
Ash Wednesday

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Genesis 3:19

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, a day of prayer and fasting. It is a day to remember that each of us – the greatest and the least, the richest and the poorest, young and old, male and female, every race, every ethnic group, and every social class – is made from the stuff of the earth. And to the stuff of the earth we will return. In that foundational sense at least, we are equal, and that realization is cause for humility – before God and before humankind.

The traditional Ash Wednesday worship service closes with the imposition of ashes on the foreheads of attendees. The ashes come from the burned remains of the palms used in worship during the previous year's Palm Sunday parade. They remind us that our joys and sorrows are joined with each other – two sides of the same coin, if you will. Where ashes normally represent death and sorrow, these ashes are the remains of a Palm Sunday celebration. Contained within each of us is life and death.

The elements from which our bodies and all living things on earth are made come from stars formed billions of years ago. These elements are not made new with each new life, but are continuously recycled, building the bodies for new lives. Those elements are the original building blocks of God's creation, and we *borrow* them for a time. When our time on earth is over, those elements return to the earth to be reformed into a new life. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

Journaling focus: As I enter the season of Lent, what can I learn from my own mortality?

February 11
Been There, Done That

"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." John 17:1b-3

On the day of the Last Supper and the betrayal by Judas. Jesus and his disciples gather in a room for the Passover meal. Jesus washes their feet and gives them a new commandment – to love one another. He also establishes a new covenant, one indemnified by his body and blood. Christians know the rest of the gruesome story – the sham trials, beatings, flogging, crown of thorns, carrying his cross, and the crucifixion. There are many lessons of importance here, including these two: (1) Jesus came so we could know God through him; and (2) Jesus suffered so we would know that God understands our pain.

A common illustration of the generation gap occurs when a parent tells a suffering child, "I know what you are going through." Children do not believe it. They believe the world has changed dramatically since their parents were kids, so parents cannot possibly understand contemporary challenges. Our children do not grasp that although time may put new clothes on life's challenges, the essence of the experience does not change.

Similarly, some may assume God cannot understand our pain because Jesus' trials were 2000 years ago. Suffering is suffering, however, regardless of age, socio-economic status, geographic location, or any other variable. Pain is an equal opportunity experience. Jesus suffered horribly near the end, both physically and emotionally. No matter what we go through, we have assurance that God has experienced it, because God was there in Jesus. And God is with us today. In order to finish his "work" on earth, God-in-Jesus experienced the worst. Jesus went through death's door and came back to show that death is not the end. Our suffering will end, but our existence continues. Hope springs eternal.

Jesus drew all people to himself – the outcasts, the poor, the sick, the foreigners, and the unpopular. He knew what we only pretend to know, that higher levels of life and truth *must* contain and embrace all lower levels. We cannot overcome evil by ostracizing it, nor can we overcome suffering by ignoring its existence. We overcome less-than-desirable parts of our lives by loving them, by living a better way, and by accepting all into our circle of awareness and blessing. Jesus invites us to bring our earthly trials and lay them at the foot of his cross, where he will bear them with us. We are not alone. He has been there and done that. At the Last Supper, Jesus told us to *remember* – remember he has been there; remember this life is not all there is; remember we are loved beyond comprehension. There is light on the other side of the cross.

Journaling focus: What is one less-than-desirable part of my life that I should love more? How would I do that?

February 12
Resurrection

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."
Revelation 21:5

Lately, I have been contemplating resurrection. Among the images conjured up by the word are revival, rejuvenation, and rebirth. On the morning of August 3, 2015, I received a call from a police detective. He was at my brother's apartment and told me my brother was dead.

There was a time when Wade and I were best friends. We learned to snow ski together. We vacationed together. We played basketball, golf, and mud volleyball together. He was the best man at my wedding, and I at his. He had a quirky sense of humor and was always fun company. About 20 years prior to his death, however, something in Wade's brain chemistry

shifted, and he ended up in a mental institution for the first of many hospitalizations. At first, his illness was something we dealt with together. As the years passed, however, a wedge developed between us – a wedge due in part to his illness and in part to my anxiety. There was the day in court as his wife and I sought to have him involuntarily committed to a mental institution. There were several nerve-wracking drives, taking him to the hospital as his psychosis raged. A part of Wade became suspicious of me, as if I were looking for any reason to send him back to a mental ward. A part of me resented the need monitor Wade's mental state with every encounter. Was he in a *normal* realm of reality, or was he only pretending? When he was pretending, he could be unnerving. Perhaps my biggest fear was that his illness would incapacitate him, and I, as his oldest sibling, would need to become his legal guardian.

Today, as I reflect on my life with Wade, I realize the discomfort, the anxieties, and the challenges of those 20 years are gone. The wedge between us was removed as surely as the stone of Christ's tomb was rolled away. They, along with his body, now belong to the earth where they can sprout into new life. Wade's soul is once again free to be the truest and freest version of itself – funny, quirky, loving life and those with whom he shares it. In a fit of unexpected resurrection, I got my brother back by losing him.

And this is the essence of resurrection – making things new and better, restoring what is good, healing what is sick, removing that which stands between us and love. In the sadness of losing my brother as a physical presence, I have regained the unfettered memories of a brother I loved dearly. And I can immerse myself in those memories without worrying about when, where, and how the next manifestation of his illness will occur. Part of me always knew those episodes were the illness and not my brother, but sometimes it was difficult to separate the two. Not anymore. Wade's human frailties are committed to the earth where they are being transformed, and he is free. For that, and for the extraordinary experiences, I can rejoice.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I experienced resurrection in my life?

February 13
Confusing Terminology

"The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the

highest heaven!'" Matthew 21:9

As Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem on what was to be the final week of his life on earth, crowds welcomed him, waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" The term *hosanna* is translated as "save us." It was originally an appeal to God for deliverance and was also used as a term of praise or adoration. Old Testament scriptures wrote that a Savior would come to deliver God's people from bondage. This Savior, or Messiah, would be their King. The Jewish people had long expected the coming of their Messiah, and the celebrating was surely intense with his triumphant arrival into Jerusalem.

However, the coming of this long-awaited King was not greeted enthusiastically by all. For the Romans, a new "King" posed a serious threat to their governing authority. For the Jewish leaders, the coming of the Messiah was a threat to their spiritual authority. This Jesus-of-the-nothing-town-of-Nazareth had already been a thorn in their sides for three years. The Temple leadership and Roman government had an uneasy, but mutually agreeable truce and neither wanted the precarious peace disrupted.

The crowds expected their new King to overthrow the Romans and set them free from the oppression they had been subjected to for countless generations. That is why they were so excited to see Jesus entering town on a donkey, as had been prophesied in Scripture. That is also why they were so disappointed and quick to turn on Jesus when they realized he had no intention of overthrowing the Romans. The oppression he came to save them from had nothing to do with Roman rule, but with the oppression of personal sin.

What they experienced was a failure to communicate. The term *King,* as the crowds and Romans understood it, was a very different type of king than what Jesus had in mind. In spite of trying to draw the distinction throughout his ministry, his followers had difficulty distinguishing between the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven. We have that difficulty still today. We look to reap the rewards of our faithful followership of Christ in the kingdom of earth, when our true harvest will be in the kingdom of heaven. The terminology can be confusing.

Journaling focus: What is an example of a breakdown in communication in my life?

February 14
Love Is …

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

I do not mean to brag, but I consider myself to be quite a lover. I love my wife and children. I love our friends and extended family. I love my church, my co-workers, and my colleagues. I love my Savior. Do not get me wrong; I am not always patient or kind. I am often envious, boastful, arrogant, and rude. Do I insist on my own way? Often, yes, I do. I am a lover, but I am also human. The good news is that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Today's passage from 1 Corinthians is so familiar it almost seems cliché, and that is unfortunate. The words are beautiful, and the message is deceptively deep. According to Paul, love transcends this world. Unlike most treasures of the earth, *love never ends*. Paul points beyond our earthly experience and limited understanding of love to something eternal, pure, and holy. Of course, love may become soiled, like other things on earth. Even so, love has an eternal essence that cannot be soiled by our earthly failings.

We read of or experience how beautiful love can be and wonder about the times love goes badly. Where is love when a beloved companion dies too soon? What about those people whose love is not reciprocated? I suspect the love we know on earth is but a single chapter in a vast and steamy love story. If love never ends, as Paul writes, love outlives our earthly experience and continues into eternity. Who knows what love looks like on the other side of the grave? Without corruptible bodies or the temptations of the flesh, and without finances, distance, or busy schedules to get in our way, the possibilities for love are beyond imagination.

Do my selfish desires, which sometimes override my loving intentions, make me less of a lover? I hope not. My intentions for those I love are good and pure, even if my follow-through is sometimes lacking. As the Wizard of Oz tells the Tin Man, "A heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others." By that standard, I am a blessed lover indeed!

Journaling focus: In what three ways can I become a better lover today?

February 15
Imminent Death

Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. Luke 22:41-42, 44

If I could see into the future, and if I knew this would be my last evening on earth, how would I choose to spend it? I might decide to cram as much frolic and debauchery into the evening as possible. There would be no concern about the personal consequences of my actions, because I would be dead tomorrow, anyway. There are a host of sins I might decide to commit in my attempt to stuff as much *fun* into my final moments as possible. On the other hand, I might decide to spend my last evening on earth quietly, with those I have grown closest to. I might want to make certain they have the information only I can share. I might want to assure myself that those I leave behind will be okay.

While none of us knows exactly when our physical death will occur, all of us know death will come. Jesus, however, knew the when and the how of his death. He foresaw his betrayal into the hands of the Temple guards, his sham trials, and his being handed over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. He knew, in a few short hours, he would be beaten, scourged, spat upon, humiliated, and nailed to a cross for the most excruciating death imaginable. He also knew he would suffer and die on behalf of his own murders.

Jesus chose to spend his final hours as one with more tasks on his to-do list than hours remaining to accomplish them. He shared his final meal with his closest friends. There was a lot of instruction shared by Jesus during this closing evening, knowing that was his last opportunity to teach. The Gospel of John tells of a moving act of humility, when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-11). The other Gospels record Jesus instituting communion at his last supper, as in Luke 22:14-23. Shortly before his arrest, he went to a quiet garden to pray.

It would be difficult for me to decide how best to spend my last hours on earth. Jesus had a plan, however, that would lay the foundation for His followers. Jesus spent his last hours on earth accomplishing what only he could know would be required for his followers, today.

Journaling focus: What priorities in my life should be rearranged in light of my imminent death?

February 16
The Power of One

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:20-23

Today's passage comes from the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, shortly before he will be betrayed and murdered. He prays for himself to successfully complete his earthly work. He prays for his disciples, who will lead his followers. Finally, he prays for us — those who will believe through the Word passed to us by his disciples. There is a common theme in this intimate prayer: Oneness. Many times throughout his ministry Jesus declares that he and God are One. And here, in the Garden, he prays that we—two thousand years in the future—will be *completely one* with each other. He (Jesus) in us, and God in him, all together as One.

So, what does it mean to be One? In Genesis 2:24, referring to marriage, it is written, *"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."* Could that be the sort of Oneness Jesus refers to? I am married, but my wife and I are very different and unique individuals. Yet we are one, according to Genesis. Certainly, we have all seen how the lives of folks in committed relationships become intertwined by bonds that are painfully difficult to try to break.

There are bonds uniting us that are beyond our ability to perceive, not just in marriage, but in our human nature. I believe Jesus is referring to a Oneness that is an absolute reality, regardless of whether we are consciously aware of it. And that sort of Oneness helps bring perspective to some of the more difficult passages in the Bible. For example, we are told to care for the poor and less fortunate. If we are truly One, no one can truly prosper until all prosper because we are all interconnected. It is true in marriage that a couple suffers or prospers together, and it is equally true of humanity. Such shared fates may not manifest in obvious ways, but I believe they are there nonetheless. Jesus recognized the importance of affirming that connection, even if we cannot see it. We are all unique expressions of the One because Oneness does not mean uniformity. But we cannot separate ourselves from that source or our fellow beings; we can only ignore the connection — at our own peril.

Journaling focus: What are the implications of my oneness with those I find unpleasant?

February 17
Endings and Beginnings

He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:2-4

The season of Lent, the forty-day period leading to Easter, officially begins on Ash Wednesday. A typical Ash Wednesday service ends with the imposing of ashes in the shape of a cross on the forehead of participants. The ashes are the burnt remains of the palm leaves used in the previous year's Palm Sunday services, the Sunday which precedes Easter. The act bookends the church year: the green, leafy palms by which we celebrate Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem become the ashes reminding us of Christ's death on a cross at Golgotha.

The symbolism is visible and powerful. Palm leaves: represent new life and new beginnings. When Jesus entered Jerusalem many of his followers expected him to overthrow the Roman rulers of the day, believing his kingship would be like other earthly kings they had known. There was a fever-pitch excitement, hoping their years of oppression at the hands of tyrants would finally come to an end.

But the palm leaves turn brown and die. They are burned and become ash. Ashes symbolize death and endings. When Jesus was captured and bound and beaten by church and Roman authorities, and when he was crucified, the hopes and dreams of his people died with him on that cross. The ashes placed on our forehead remind us of that sad ending.

Lent is intended to be a time of study and reflection, a time to grasp more deeply the trial and crucifixion of Christ so we can better understand and more fully celebrate His resurrection on Easter. The forty days of Lent remind us of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted by the devil. This was a time at the beginning of his ministry where he was tested and prepared for the challenges to come. While Lent is a time for us to prepare ourselves for our trials in life, other times of the year work as well. In today's Bible message, the devil tries to focus Jesus' attention on his physical needs. Jesus responds with a spiritual focus. The implication for us is that every physical need has a spiritual component, and we need to attend to both. As new beginnings manifest in our lives around us, may we reflect on the new life within us, offered freely and perpetually through the grace of Christ.

Journaling focus: What part of my life could use a new beginning?

February 18
Remember

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 1 Corinthians 11:23b-24

I have heard the phrase "Do this in remembrance of me" for as long as I can remember. At every communion service I attend, that line or some variation of it is spoken. It always seemed odd to me. It made me wonder whether Jesus was an egomaniac. You see, if Jesus insisted we remember him every time we take communion, then he must have feared he would be forgotten. If he feared we would forget, he must have been very self-centered. I confess, I thought less of Jesus because of this apparent insecurity of his.

But what if our remembrance of Jesus is not for his posterity, but for *our* well-being? What if Jesus knew that by remembering him, *our* lives would go better? What if he understood how our daily lives would distract us? What if he knew how frequently we would forget that our less-than-Christian thoughts and actions have already been forgiven? What if he knew we would need frequent reminders that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginings? What if, in the upper room at his Last Supper with his disciples, he knew we would *need* to remember?

I believe he did know. He told us to remember — not for his sake, but for ours. Every time we eat the bread and drink the wine during communion, we are to remember the gift already given to us. Further, I believe Jesus asked us to remember not just at communion, but every time we eat and drink, as bread and wine were mealtime staples in his day. Jesus told us to associate his gift with something we see every day, several times a day — food and drink. *Whenever you do this, remember me.*

In our remembering, we reconnect with our Savior. When we remember Jesus, we are reminded we are not alone. We are *re-membered* — as in, put back together. The everyday act of eating, combined with remembrance, leads to *re-membering* with Christ.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better remember that I belong to Christ?

February 19
Lenten Musings

"Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they cried all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified." Mark 15: 14-15

The temple leadership, the Sanhedrin, held their mock trial in the middle of the night, convicting Jesus of blasphemy and deserving of death. He was handed over to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be put to death. Pilate had a custom of releasing one prisoner during the Passover festival and offered Jesus to the crowd. But the crowd cried out for the release of Barabbas, a murdering rebel, and for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Isn't this an odd occurrence? Surely at least part of the crowd was made up of people who had heard Jesus teach, been healed by him, been counted among his followers just hours before. Why would they now cry for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus? Was the crowd hoping Barabbas would rejoin the insurrection he had been a part of? Were they such devout Jews that when the Sanhedrin pronounced him deserving of death, they accepted that sentence without question? It just seems like a strange and rapid turn of events.

And yet, what if Jesus had been released and Barabbas crucified? What if Jesus didn't suffer and die on the cross? Surely the death of Barabbas could not have brought about our salvation. Instead of Black Friday, where Jesus is led to Golgotha, Jesus might have ridden quietly out of Jerusalem, back into the hills and continued his ministry to a ripe old age, dying of natural causes many years hence. Had Jesus walked away that day, there would be no resurrection, no Easter, no assurance that we, too, will one day die to this life, only to be reborn into another.

We tend to vilify Judas, Pilate and the crowd. Ditto for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, and I have always accepted that vilification to be justified. But what if one of them hadn't followed through on their evil deed? What if Judas kissed Simon instead of Jesus? While we despise the nasty way in which Jesus spent his final hours, we sometimes forget that very suffering was a necessary, if sometimes difficult-to-understand step in *our* salvation. And a number of people were required to bring that suffering about, right up to and including us.

Journaling focus: What might be my part to play today in the post-resurrection time of Christ?

February 20
Faith is a Good Start

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.
Matthew 25:34-36, 40

Religious circles emphasize the importance of faith. Faith is the belief in something beyond what we can see or fully understand. It provides a broader vision than our eyes can see and a more sensitive hearing than is possible from our ears alone. Faith acknowledges that for all we know and for all the information we have available to us, there is much that is and will always remain a mystery. Religious faith acknowledges a higher, benevolent power that will make all things work together for good. Christians name that power God.

I believe developing a faith in something larger than ourselves and in purposes larger than our circle of attention is important for our individual and collective development, regardless of whether that faith is a *religious* faith and regardless of whether we express that faith in a church. Developing faith is a practical way to live. Jesus, in Matthew 17, says that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. The implication is that a small amount of faith can increase whatever power is available in order to overcome tremendous challenges.

Faith is a multiplier. We can accomplish more with faith in something beyond ourselves than we can accomplish alone. I want to emphasize the word *accomplish*. One purpose for the gift of faith is to accomplish *something*. Not that faith, alone, is not worthwhile. The apostle Paul says we are *justified* by faith, or made right with God. That we establish a faith connection with a higher, benevolent power is one thing. We might even worship that power on Sunday mornings, but are we using the power of that faith to accomplish something for the greater good? God's power unites with ours, through faith, in order to co-create a better world. I believe faith should inspire us to work for justice, to feed the hungry, to welcome strangers, and to house the homeless. Jesus modeled a life-giving faith and dedicated himself to meeting the needs of a broken world. He valued his time with his Father, going away from the crowds frequently to pray, but he used that connection to renew his ability to serve. The faith of Jesus was an active, achieving faith, and that type of faith leaves a positive imprint.

The writer of James proclaims that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). The Bible is full of stories of ordinary people who responded in faith and accomplished extraordinary things. Why would we believe anything less is expected of us? Our faith is a wonderful thing, but our faith calls us to greater things. True faith inspires and empowers us to make good things happen in our world.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I use my faith as a multiplier for my actions today?

February 21
Truth is Paradoxical

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. John 11:25c-26a

A paradox is something that seems contradictory to popular opinion or common sense. The good news is that paradoxical reasoning does not trouble most of us very often. The bad news is that it probably should. The Bible is full of paradoxical bits of wisdom – nonsensical statements that seemingly contradict themselves. Jesus was a king of paradox. Here is a sampling:

> *But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.* (Mark 10:31)
> *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* (Matthew 10:39)
> *Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.* (Luke 17:33)

Jesus taught with stories, or parables, few of which gave clear answers and many defied common sense. What Jesus understood about truth is that it is inherently paradoxical, and that is a constant obstacle for many of us. Much of what we hold to be true is actually only partially true, or perhaps its truth depends on the situation. For example, we separate light and dark for our own understanding, but they are actually manifestations of the same reality. We cannot know darkness without first knowing light, and darkness is simply the relative absence of light. Other examples of single realities include bliss and sorrow, life and death, right and wrong, good and evil, happy and sad. Each is defined by the other, and neither can be known except in relation to the other. They are two ends of a single continuum, but we treat them as distinct realities. We try our best to be good and are disappointed when we act in not-so-good ways. What we thought to be right turns out to be wrong in another circumstance. What

we assumed to be virtuous turns out to be evil from another vantage point. When our sports team wins a game we are excited; but our thrill comes at the expense of fans of the other team who may be devastated. The game is a single reality experienced from two different points of view – one positive and one negative. In his book, *Yes, And,…,* Fr. Richard Rohr writes, "You and I are living paradoxes, which everybody can see except us."[9]

Our entire existence is held together by a *tension of opposites* that characterizes every aspect of our lives. It is nearly impossible for us to reconcile these opposites in a meaningful, understandable way. And therein lies the key to dealing with mysterious realities – we cannot reconcile the paradox. Our challenge is not to solve the mystery but to *transcend* the seeming enigma and *transform* our experience and understanding of it.

Chief among the paradoxes we must transcend is our understanding of life and death. Death is an inextricable part of life. Death does not mean the *end* of life but a new beginning. In his cryptic way, when Jesus tells us we must die in order to *live,* he is not referring only to our physical death. Jesus is speaking of a transformation of our life into one consistent with his. We are not asked to give up our life, physically, but to enter into a new version of that life which transforms our former priorities to new ones. We cannot understand Jesus' teachings about new life with our traditional understanding of life and death. It is a paradox – an irreconcilable enigma – when seen through our old eyes. Life is so much more than we can see, hear, feel, and touch with our earthly senses. As we learn to engage our spiritual senses, the formerly paradoxical becomes perfectly acceptable, if not always understandable.

Journaling focus: What is an irreconcilable paradox I struggle with?

February 22
Prayer as a Way of Life

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought." Romans 8:26

For most of my life, prayer occurred at a specified time or event, or else it was something I carved out a special time for from the rest of my day. That was how I was taught to pray. We prayed before meals, head

bowed and hands folded; at bedtime, kneeling at the edge of my bed; and during church. Most prayers were recited by rote, saying the same words each time. It seemed more like a redundant formality than an expression of sincere need or gratitude.

As I got older, my prayers became more conversational. Particularly in my bachelor days when I spent large swaths of time alone, I found myself in conversations with God. Most of the time it was a one-way conversation – I talked and assumed God was listening. There were times, however, I believe God answered. God's answers did not come as spoken responses, however, nor did they arrive according to my preferred timeline. Rather, they came at unpredictable times as an inspiration or an intuition that helped me see an issue in a new way. Answers came with expansions of my awareness, making me believe the reason I could not hear God earlier was because I prejudged the answer. In other words, if God did not seem to answer, the problem was not because God did not answer, but because God answered in a way that I was not ready for or capable of accepting. Like most stumbling blocks in my life, the problem within myself had to first be identified and resolved.

Paul's exhortation in his first letter to the Thessalonians, one of today's scripture passages, to "pray without ceasing" seemed ridiculous. How could anyone devote his or her entire life to praying? As long as prayer is an interruption to one's day, there can be no simultaneous living and praying, at least not on a regular, sustainable basis. A clue to the resolution of this dilemma is found in Paul's letter to the Romans, "…we do not know how to pray as we ought." The challenge is not that we must take more time out of our day to pray; rather, we must find ways to live our days in a more prayerful manner.

For most of my life, I used prayer judiciously. After all, I did not want to draw too much divine attention to some of what I did. When I was in trouble, when I was sad, when I was lost or broken, I would turn to God in prayer. God, however, does not want to *only* be our God in our times of difficulty. I believe God experiences creation *through* us, meaning God experiences creation *with* us. Assuming that is the case, why would God only want to experience the difficult times? If our good times consist of actions we feel God would not want to experience with us, we need to either rethink our actions or rethink our understanding of the interests of God.

Sin is that which separates us from God and others. If God wishes to experience life with and through us, our sin keeps that from happening. It is not that sin prevents God from experiencing with and through us, but our sin prevents *us* from experiencing God experiencing with and through us. In other words, we suffer twice from our sin – first from the separation caused by our sin, and second by not being consciously aware of our

communion with the accepting, encouraging presence of God. Emmanuel, God with us, is not something that happens only when we become holier. Emmanuel has been with us since before our birth. Prayer is communion and communication *with* God. In order to experience God in a conscious way, we must keep ourselves in the ever-flowing rhythm of the divine and, thus, aware of God's constant presence. In the process, our entire life becomes one unceasing prayer.

Journaling focus: How can I consciously invite God's presence into my day today?

February 23
Growth is not Chronological

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 2 Peter 3:8

Beginning at birth, our bodies go through a mostly predictable cycle of growth, maturation, decline, and death. We see it in others, and most of us witness it firsthand in ourselves. Through our school years, we steadily advance in our academic achievements as we graduate from grade to grade. As such, it is only natural to expect our growth as spiritual beings to follow a similar, regular pattern; but it does not. Our earthly experience of time is very different from that of God. In other words, time is not always as it seems. Our human evolution seemingly progresses in a predictable manner from past to present to future. God creates, and that creation – including our lives – manifests in ways that we can only experience gradually over time. That is not necessarily the spiritual reality, however.

Because our spiritual growth – our increasing awareness of *God with us* – occurs outside of earth-time, our spiritual development appears to occur in fits and starts. We go through long periods where it seems nothing is changing. In fact, we go through periods where it seems we are falling back and losing what we once believed we had attained. Then something happens and we hardly recognize the person we were a short time earlier. Our spiritual growth is commonly experienced as three steps forward and two steps back.

Often painfully, the times we leap forward in a spiritual way are the times that force us to reevaluate our understanding of the world. The single event that most contributed to my spiritual development was the sudden death of my father when I was a youth. Decades later, that experience

continues to realign my understandings and priorities. For others it may be a serious accident or illness, a divorce, or the severe misfortune of someone close to them that drives their former certainties into a state of utter inadequacy. A regular reevaluation of our beliefs and understandings is a useful tool that need not only occur because of a tragedy.

In physical development, athletic trainers tell us, "No pain, no gain." The same is often true in our spiritual growth. We grow too fond of the status quo when life is too comfortable. God created our world, including us, to evolve. When we are not changing, we are not growing. Sometimes, we need a nudge to move; other times, we need a swift kick in the back side.

We know our experience of chronological time is variable at best. When we are absorbed in a task we enjoy, time flies by. When we are burdened with a dreadful job, however, the clock hardly seems to move. In childhood, time moved at a crawl. As we age, the days in a month and months in a year seem fewer and fewer. Author Gretchen Rubin said, "The days are long, but the years are short."[10] Truly, even time is not a stable foundation.

Our growth as human and spiritual beings does not correspond to our calendar because spiritual and physical times do not always correspond. Why does this matter? It matters because we are often too hard on others and on ourselves based on appearances on any given day. God's creation, including us, is good. From our perspective, we are always a work in progress. From God's perspective, we are the image of God; and in God's present, we are *very good!* We simply do not have eyes to see it (yet). That knowledge can and will transform our world.

Journaling focus: In what ways is my spiritual nature progressing at this point in my life?

February 24
Tithing is not Enough

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. Luke 11:42

Of all the expectations placed on the churchgoers among us, few cause as much discomfort and difference of opinion as the obligation to financially support our houses of worship. *Tithes and offerings* are spoken of regularly in both Old and New Testaments, although the expectation to

tithe is more explicit in the Old. A *tithe* means a tenth; thus, the common understanding that we are to give a tenth of our income in support of our church. In previous generations, that may have been clear-cut, but not anymore. Are we to tithe on our *gross* or our *net* income? Do donations to other worthy causes count as part of our tithe? If we have an unusual expense one year, can the "tenth" be reduced? If we find $20.00 lying in the street, must we tithe on that, too?

Historically, the Levites, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, were designated as the keepers of the Temple. Because their livelihood was the business of the Temple, they could not make a living in other ways. The Levites were dependent on the tithes of the people of the other eleven tribes for their support. The concept remains in place today, with members of a church providing financial support to pay the salaries of the staff and expenses of the church.

Often overlooked is that the Biblical expectation for giving went well beyond the tithe. Separate *offerings* were also requested at various times, and those offerings could add another ten to twenty percent of income or wealth on top of the tithe. Today, the percent of income given by the average church member is about 2%. Five percent is considered generous, although a tithe is still held out as the standard.

Jesus, however, held a much different measure for giving. He did not request a simple tithe; he wanted followers who willingly and happily gave *everything*. A rich man (Mark 10:17-22) tells Jesus he has followed every commandment and asks what else he must do to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and give it to the poor. The man walks away, disappointed, for he was not willing to give up his many possessions. In a parable found in Matthew 13:44, Jesus tells of a field with treasure such that someone *desires* to sell everything he or she owns in return for that one field. In the next verse, he tells of a pearl of great value such that one *desires* to sell everything else in order to obtain. For Jesus, the important matter is not how much we have or give, but of where our heart is – what do we most desire? Do we prefer our "stuff" to the life Jesus offers? The treasure-filled field and the pearl of great value represent the kingdom he encourages us to seek. When our heart is in the right place, nothing else will matter.

Far be it from me to imply churches are the only organizations worthy of financial support. Actually, I think that line of reasoning misses the point. Where is our heart? Where is our desire? Tithing – supporting our houses of worship – is a good start, but it is not enough. The key is to find ways to make every act of every day an *offering* for God to use for good. Whether we are eating, exercising, playing, getting ready for bed, or working, we need to offer everything for God's purposes. Whatever we do, our actions and decisions impact others. Making our life an offering is

recognizing that God is with us all the time, in every circumstance, whether we want or sense God there or not. God will not be locked in a church but is an active presence in our lives, no matter how mundane or profane some of our moments may be. Jesus reminds us in today's scripture reading that we cannot neglect justice or love. Jesus tells us when we willingly dedicate our heart and life to following him, the rest will fall into place. It is not that where our money goes is unimportant, but it is more important to examine the desire of our heart. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Journaling focus: In what ways can my giving and the desires of my heart become better aligned?

February 25
The Language of God is Silence

Be still, and know that I am God! Psalm 46:10a

Words encapsulate and narrow our lives. If we are not talking to someone, our internal dialogue is running rampant. If we are not interrupting the speaker, we are planning how to respond, instead of listening with a mind open to learning something new. After we converse with another person, we often replay and analyze the dialogue. We may think of things we wish we had or had not said, or we may wonder what the other person meant by words they used or how they spoke them. The point is that immediately after an experience, we begin reshaping the experience with our words. The actual experience ends and is replaced by our less-than-accurate, ever-changing *description* of the experience.

Words are symbols for things, not the things themselves. We describe, label, and categorize, but words themselves have no substance. We might describe a picture in detail, but the image in the hearer's mind will still be very different from the actual picture. Such is the nature of a verbal description – it is not the reality. Our words always remove us a step or more from the experience. Thus, the biblical directive in today's scripture to "Be still."

The early Jewish people did not believe the name of God should be spoken. When Moses met God at the burning bush, he asked God for a name to give the people. God said, "*I am who I am"* (Exodus 3:14). Once we have named something, we narrow our belief about its nature. If we say, "This is a maple tree," we believe it is not a rock or a person. As soon as we begin describing God with words, we limit the possibilities of an otherwise

limitless God. Our tendency toward naming and describing makes it easier for us to understand and process our experiences, but as our words remove us from those experiences, we trade the words for the reality. Much beauty, depth, and meaning is lost in the process.

The Psalmist encourages us to still our minds. There are many ways to do this, all of which require focus and persistence. Yoga, meditation, centering or contemplative prayer are a few ways to silence our inner dialogue long enough to draw closer to God. God's language appears silent to us because God does not speak as we do. God's word is not a description of reality – God's word *is* reality. In the creation story, God *speaks* the world into being. "Then God *said*, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." (Genesis 1:3) God's voice itself provided the creative power. Similarly, in the first chapter of John, the *Word* of God became flesh in Jesus. God's creative language does not interface with our spoken language, and we cannot *experience* it as long as our internal dialogue interrupts and interprets. As the Psalmist says, we must "be still" to know God.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I still my internal dialogue today in order to know God more?

February 26
Prophesy is About the Present

For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, "Do not see"; and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."
Isaiah 30:9-12

My understanding of prophesy was always of something future-oriented, as in predicting the future. My scant readings of biblical prophecy did nothing to correct my ignorance. Then one day I heard a speaker explain that prophesy is *courageously telling the present*, and her insights opened my eyes to the vital purpose and tenuous place of prophets throughout history. In biblical times, and still today, prophets lived in a space sometimes described as *the edge of the inside*. They live as part of the current culture, but they remain on the fringes of society. From there, they observe and participate in the comings and goings of their society, while retaining a distance that allows for their unique and broader perspective.

The prophets of the Old Testament were often servants of rulers whose job it was to read the signs of the times. When their reading proved

incorrect or unpopular, they sometimes were put to death. Some of those prophesies were future-oriented, as in "If you continue on this path, this (bad thing) will happen." A prophesy, however, is a reading of the *present* situation, even when it points to a future calamity. Common to prophets then and now, however, is that prophets speak *truth to power*. Prophets almost exclusively speak to the advantaged of society on behalf of the disadvantaged.

Artists, poets, authors, and songwriters are often the prophets of the day, holding up a mirror to society, saying, "Look at what you have become." The message of the prophets throughout time has not always been welcomed or received kindly. Jesus, himself, testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country (John 4:44). The 1960's saw an explosion of contemporary prophets, including Bob Dylan:

> *Come gather 'round people wherever you roam, And admit that the waters around you have grown;*
> *Accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone, If your time to you is worth savin',*
> *Then you better start swimmin', or you'll sink like a stone, For the times, they are a-changin'.*[11]

And Paul Simon:

> *And the people bowed and prayed, to the neon god they made;*
> *And the sign flashed out its warning, in the words that it was forming,*
> *And the sign said, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls*
> *And tenement halls," And whispered in the sounds of silence.*[12]

Those railing against the status quo welcomed these and other artists in the 1960's, but they were threats to the established order. They gave a voice to those who felt they had none. Unsettled times bring prophets to the forefront where their perspective is needed, if not always applauded. Author Thomas Moore says prophesy is "an ethical motivation that leads to criticism of, or at least an alternative to, *a highly narcissistic and materialistic culture"* (emphasis added).[13] Prophets are those who make the invisible God audible and visible. There can be no more timely need than now for ethical prophesies of that sort. The questions are: "Who will speak truth to power today?" and, once heard, "Who will act upon it?"

It is important to beware of false prophets, however. Jesus issued his warning in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." In assessing would-be prophets, it is wise to ask, "What do they hunger for?" My sense is that today's political partisans, on both sides, are closer to the powerful, ravenous wolf than to the sheep. If a person or group hungers for power or for the degradation or destruction of others, it cannot be the all-inclusive God they are making audible.

Journaling focus: Who are the present-day prophets I follow?

February 27
Salvation is Communal

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. Romans 12:4

One thing I despised in college was a group assignment. The instructor would assign several students a task and, together, they had to complete and present the assignment as a team. Every member received the same grade, regardless of how much or little he or she contributed to the final product. Being fiercely independent, I wanted to succeed or fail alone and did *not* want my grade to be dependent on others.

My father was in the Army-Air Force during World War II, and although he was not a part of the D Day invasion of France, I reflect on that action as if he were. The Normandy invasion was needed in order to break the German stronghold along the English Channel so the Allies could liberate France and, eventually, the rest of Europe. The problem was the concrete, machine-gun bunkers that lined the Channel. The Allies knew it would take a concentration of sustained force to break open a line in the German defenses so troops could enter and eventually drive the Nazis out of France. They also knew many lives would be lost. Of the 24,000 men landing on Normandy that morning, nearly half were killed or wounded. No doubt, there were similar numbers of German casualties, too. It was a bloodbath on all sides. Many individual lives were required to join together to accomplish a single goal. Thousands of those individuals – sons, brothers, and fathers – willingly served as *bullet recipients* so those behind them could eventually destroy and advance beyond the machine-gun bunkers.

The Bible seldom speaks of individual salvation. Salvation – the freeing and advancing to higher levels of existence – is communal in that its attainment is for the benefit of a group. The Hebrew people were saved, collectively, from their oppression in Egypt. Noah's extended family was saved from the great flood. Organizations succeed when its members move together in the same direction. Marriages flourish when the union prospers both partners. Individual effort is required, but to accomplish great things requires many individuals working together toward a common goal.

Paul, in a number of his letters, describes believers as a single body,

with each member having a specific function. All members work together and are necessary for *the good of the body*. Jesus' comment that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for another (John 15:13) is an expression of the willing subjugation of individual interests for the sake of something greater. Appearances aside, we are all members of a single body.

I sometimes act as if I were self-made person, that whatever I have achieved has been by my effort alone. It is a self-deception of enormous proportion. When we fail to acknowledge others for what we accomplish together, when we believe our personal objectives outweigh those of the larger community, we may be prone to believe we can attain salvation alone. Could my right hand separate itself from my body and prosper? What sort of salvation do we think we will attain, a paradise of one? That sounds more like solitary confinement. No, life is a group project, a relational undertaking, one body with all its parts working in harmony. In spite of what we may choose to believe, we sink or swim, pass or fail, together. We will succeed when our personal goals, desires, and actions are in accord with those of the greater family to which we belong. Too often we ask, "What do *I* need to do to get to heaven?" instead of focusing on what is required to manifest heaven on earth – not just for me, but also for everyone; and not just for some distant future, but for today.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better support the families I am a part of?

February 28
Mercy Trumps Justice

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

If a starving person is offered a meal or a job, and they can only choose one, which will he or she accept? Would we judge them as lazy if they took the meal over the job? Would we judge them as less hungry than they claimed if they took the job? My guess is that a truly hungry person would *always* choose the meal – not because they are lazy and do not want a job, but because they are *hungry,* and satisfying their hunger is their most immediate need.

In this example, providing a meal is an act of mercy; providing a job is an act of justice. Mercy addresses an immediate physical, emotional, or spiritual need, where justice works toward a longer-term solution to the need. The cruelty of this example, and all too common in reality, is that a

person in need is forced to choose between two important blessings, *both* of which are needed. The challenge for us as individuals and as a society is how best to provide both. Time management professionals suggest separating our daily tasks into those that are important and those that are urgent. Urgent tasks must be done first because they are, well, urgent. Important tasks must be completed, but not necessarily today. Important tasks that are not addressed within a reasonable time, however, become urgent. It is easy for us to become so consumed with urgent tasks, including those that are not important, that we leave insufficient time for the important but non-urgent issues. In this time management context, mercy is urgent and justice is important.

In his bestselling and insightful book, *When Breath Becomes Air,* Paul Kalanithi writes, "There is a tension in the Bible between justice and mercy…The main message of Jesus, I believe, is that mercy trumps justice every time."[14] When there is an urgent need, mercy is required. For this reason, we quickly send needed resources to the sites of natural and man-made disasters. Although mercy may trump justice in the immediate future, justice cannot be ignored if one is to be freed from the on-going need for mercy. This is our dilemma in helping the needy. There are many immediate needs for mercy: food, clothing, and shelter; but there are equally important needs for justice: good jobs, quality healthcare, affordable housing, accessible childcare, and legal protection from discrimination. Of course, works of mercy and justice both require funding, and those funds are increasingly difficult to generate.

Jesus recognized that mercy comes first. A hungry crowd cannot hear even the most brilliant sermon, so he made sure his followers had something to eat in addition to something to learn. We can model Jesus' example. When a person is not receiving a blessing we are trying to impart, perhaps we should ask what is standing between him or her and the blessing. Are they hungry? Are they addicted to something that draws their attention away? Are they safe? Are they in physical or emotional distress? It is possible for our best, most sincere efforts at establishing justice to fail when we do not first recognize and attend to the more immediate needs for mercy. Likewise, it is possible for our lack of focus on justice to result in our resources being consumed by a never-ending cycle of need for mercy. There is a delicate balance to establish between the two. Our challenge is to find that balance, beginning with mercy.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I show mercy today?

March 1
Anger is a Secondary Emotion

Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger. Ephesians 4:26

There are too many times on too many days that I experience anger. Sometimes, it is my own anger; other times, I am the target of the anger of another. Anger crops up at work, at home, in traffic, in politics, and yes, even at church. Some people are quick to get angry, but then calm down in short order. I am the opposite. It usually takes quite a lot to arouse my anger and, once angry, I can stew for days or weeks.

Our anger, however, is not a primary emotion. Although anger commands a lot of attention, it always masks something else. We may consider someone an *angry person,* but he or she is more likely a person whose anger is stimulated easily, quickly, and often. If we want to get to the heart of anger – ours or that of another – we must look deeper. It starts with an event that we interpret as threatening. It is the threat, real or perceived, that generates the anger. Once we are angry, any number of consequences may ensue, many of them unpleasant. To effectively deal with anger, we must first identify the threat preceding it and understand why it triggers feelings of vulnerability. In identifying and examining the threat, we may realize we have exaggerated the risk, often to the point of absurdity. For example, when someone cuts us off in traffic, we may lay on our horn and yell, "What are you trying to do, kill me?" The triggering event is the car pulling in front of us, the threat is our perceived imminent death at the hands of a homicidal maniac, and the result is anger.

Anger, once aroused, can lead to acts of verbal, emotional, or physical violence, and that is the problem. Many everyday events threaten us. When we examine the event and our initial reaction to it we can recognize our fear, humiliation, indignation, annoyance, or any of many emotional responses, and we can begin to understand that none of these events *require* us to become angry. The anger, the secondary emotion, is a choice, albeit often an unconscious and unhelpful one. The challenge is to become consciously aware enough to allow ourselves to *decide* whether to react in anger. Too often, our anger bursts out uninvited, leaving a mess we immediately regret.

Relationships are fertile ground for anger because no strong relationship is possible without a willing and shared vulnerability. What would not be a triggering event in other circumstances can lead to an emotional explosion between people in close, regular proximity to each other. A dish not rinsed before going into the dishwasher, dirty clothes left on the floor, a car left nearly empty of fuel – all can leave us feeling unappreciated, belittled, or invisible. If we are not intentional and measured

in our response, anger may ensue.

The challenge for me, as with most of the choices I make, is to take the time to assess my reactions to the countless stimuli around me. Why do certain things threaten me so? What am I afraid of? Will this matter a year from now? How does this compare to the challenges faced by those in third-world countries, or to the parent whose child has cancer? I find perspective helpful when analyzing emotions, just as analyzing the triggering events and my initial responses are helpful in exploring my anger.

When I am the object of someone else's anger, it is sometimes helpful to ponder, "What have I done that this person perceives as threatening?" Writing him or her off as just an angry, unpleasant person is not helpful or instructive – something is hurting them. Questions like these help me accept responsibility for the anger around me, which is important because I cannot improve a situation until I accept at least some responsibility for its creation.

Journaling focus: What is the triggering event for a recent experience of anger? How might I have reacted in a more helpful manner?

March 2
We are to Become Christ-Like

Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. John 14:12

Author, teacher, and speaker Fr. Richard Rohr often reminds us that *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. Christ is a designation for one in whom spirit and body are perfectly integrated and manifested. Christ consciousness is a state of being that has existed as part of the Godhead since the beginning of creation. Jesus was 100% human and 100% God – a perfect expression of body and spirit, and he invites us to become the same. His oft-repeated mandate, "Follow me," does not mean to go where he went, but to become who he was – to do what he did, to love as he loved, and to heal as he healed.

I find ample evidence to justify that Jesus encouraged us to fully develop our spiritual natures, even as we develop our human nature. For example, beginning with John 17:20, "I ask not only on behalf of these (his disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us…" Those who have come to believe in Jesus

through the words of his disciples, i.e., the Gospels, are invited to become one with God, Jesus, and with each other. That proclamation of *oneness* with God is what got Jesus crucified. This invitation to oneness extends to us, as those who now believe as a result of the teaching of the disciples.

Whether by teaching or by imagination, I grew up assuming Jesus the Christ was a larger-than-life figure that I could never aspire to imitating. I, after all, am a lowly and unworthy sinner. It is evident to me now that Jesus believed differently. He not only loves us, but he envisions a divine destiny for and with every one of us. He clearly directed his disciples to continue his work, and we are the current day descendants of those disciples.

To imagine becoming one with Christ *while still on earth* is difficult to grasp. Yet, with God all things are possible. Clearly, we underestimate our capability and our possibilities. Science has shown that we only develop a fraction of our intellectual capacity. What portion of our spiritual capacity is ever realized? Likely, it is minuscule. What if we abandon what have become the driving forces in most lives – prestige, possessions, and power – and unwaveringly center our lives on service to others, as Jesus did? What if we became such pure and empty vessels that Christ could work through us without resistance? Dare we believe we could heal illnesses with a word or a touch? Dare we believe we could lift the weight of sin from another's shoulders? Dare we believe the limitless possibilities? I think Jesus urges us so to dare.

Journaling focus: What obstacles are standing between me and oneness with Christ?

March 3
Love is (Always) the Answer

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. John 15:12

The opposite of love is *not* hate. Hate is an emotion. The opposite of love is *apathy*, or not caring. Love is an action we choose to give or withhold. My walking partner, Stan, describes love as "caring enough to *do* something." Because love is a verb, when Jesus commands us to love one another, he is telling us to care about others enough to *take action* on their behalf. He says nothing about liking another, or enjoying their company, or feeling that they deserve our care – those are emotions. Jesus tells us to love others as he loved us – unconditionally, sacrificially, and eternally.

There are a number of reasons why loving someone can be

difficult. First, love makes us *vulnerable*. When we do something for another, they may not reciprocate or appreciate our generosity, and then we may feel stupid or cheated. We are to love anyway. Second, loving another can be *expensive* – financially, emotionally, or physically – and we may feel we cannot afford to love. We are to love anyway. Third, committing to love another takes time and attention away from other important activities. We are to love anyway. Our loving attention is life giving and is sorely needed everywhere.

When we are puzzled about what best to do in a given situation or with another person, the answer is *always* more love. Love, when properly understood and applied, will not lead us astray. Obviously, loving someone does not necessarily mean we do whatever the object of our love asks. The term *tough love* comes to mind, where the loving actions we choose may not be anything the other person interprets as love, at least not at the time. Our actions might even cause him or her pain. There were times, when my children were young, I refused them something they felt they simply *had* to have. Love is not meek, weak, or unaware. For love to be effective, it must be conscious and intentional.

Robert Greenleaf, in his essay *The Servant as Leader*,[16] writes that we are to accept "unlimited liability" for others. Even in the business context from which he wrote, Greenleaf believed that leaders should take responsibility for the lives and well-being of those impacted by his or her company, just as a faithful servant would do. A leader committed to serving others will make decisions that consider the impact on his or her employees, customers, shareholders, and community. Accepting unlimited liability means our responsibility for those affected by our actions never ends – love demands that we always care enough to act in what we sincerely believe to be the best interest of those we love.

Ultimately, however, there is a selfish reason to love. In order to love others fully, we must expand our awareness to include their reality. While we do not need to accept their reality as our own, we do need to respect and acknowledge it. In love, we open our minds to be more aware and, in the process, a larger community of others enriches us. We grow closer to the God who is the Divine Parent to everyone; the same God that loves and accepts unlimited liability for all. We grow closer to the One who is the source of love, the One who *is* love. As we become more loving, we become capable of receiving love, and our world becomes a better, healthier, and more pleasant place for everyone.

Journaling focus: What is one area of or one person in my life that I should love more fully? In what ways?

March 4
The Creative Voice

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Genesis 1:3

Many years ago, I saw an opera singer break a wine glass by holding a certain note. She sang a high, loud, sustained tone, and the glass shattered. Not an opera fan at the time, I thought maybe the glass opted to disintegrate on the spot rather than subject itself to that annoying sound. I have since realized that the *vibration* of the note was incompatible with the structure of the glass. Similarly, I remember reading that marching armies had to stop marching in time whenever crossing a bridge to prevent the bridge from swaying uncontrollably. The vibration and power of the march could force the bridge into a destructive rhythm. Everything on earth vibrates in a certain range, and when an incompatible vibration works upon it, either the intruding vibration or the object itself must change. Most vibrations around us are outside of our conscious, perceptual range. We tend to ignore their presence and power, at least until we experience or see the results of an otherwise invisible wave, such as the destruction left by an earthquake.

We do consciously experience vibration in music, however. A string player plucks or bows a string, causing it to vibrate at a certain pitch. That vibration transfers to the wood, creating an audible sound. We speak and sing by forcing air across our vocal chords, causing them to vibrate in an audible way. When multiple notes vibrate in harmonious ways, we hear *chords*. When one of the notes is dissonant in relation to the others, we sense musical chaos. Our experiences around other people are similar. With some folks, we vibrate in harmony, and we enjoy their company and get along well. With others, we feel as if our relational energies are largely incompatible.

It is interesting that the Bible describes God as *speaking* creation into being. "Then God *said,* let there be…" I picture an enormous wave of energy emanating from God, forming the shapeless earth into what has become the evolving world we know today. I suppose one could also accurately call it a *Big Bang*. To imagine a sound wave forming elements into something cohesive, we only need to watch the demonstrations of sound waves applied to sand. We see the malleable material form into designs consistent with the vibration applied, changing into shapes consistent with the creating tone. We experience this, to a degree, when a car pulls up beside us with a bass-thumping stereo. The vibration of the low frequencies penetrates our bodies such that we *feel* the sound pulsating through us as much or more than we hear it.

One of the faces of God is a creative voice vibrating through and

around us, ever forming, ever healing, ever destroying and rebuilding, ever dying and being reborn. We live and move and have our being in an on-going song of creation endlessly emanating from the being of God. All of creation dances to the rhythm, seldom conscious of its divine existence or nature. When we dance in tune with the celestial beat, we experience heaven on earth wherever we are. When we fall out of time, we descend into a hell of our own making, a world of sin and separation. Fortunately for us, the invitation to rejoin the dance is always near, only a slight vibrational adjustment away.

Journaling focus: Think of someone you usually vibrate out of harmony with. What is one thing you can try to better synchronize vibrational frequencies with this person?

March 5
A Plural God

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;"
Genesis 1:26a

The image of God as a stern, bearded, all-powerful, white man is primarily an invention of the West. Certainly, there are biblical references to this fearsome and narrow image of God, but when considering the references to God in their totality, it is not a very accurate picture. The name generally translated as *God* in the Bible is *Elohim;* the name translated as *Lord* in the Bible is *Adonai.* These are the two most common scriptural designations for God, and both are *plural* nouns in their original Hebrew. The significance of the plural nature of the names has been lost in time and multiple translations, as witnessed by our common assumption of God and Lord as singular beings. In addition, other references are feminine in their original Hebrew. The point is that God expresses who God is in a number of different ways and is not confined by any of them.

It should not be surprising that our One God manifests in a plurality of ways. This is true of much of creation, including us. I am a father, husband, co-worker, brother, and friend. In each of these roles, I express myself differently, even though each is a unique expression of one being. Intelligence is not a single aspect, but is a combination of intellectual, emotional, and instinctual intelligences, each expressing in unique ways and providing distinct perspectives to a single body of knowledge. There are numerous phases to each day: sunrise, morning, noon, evening, sunset, and night. All are discrete parts of a single day.

The first biblical hint that God is a plurality occurs in today's scripture, "Then God said, Let *us* make humankind in *our* image" (emphasis added). The writing is distinctly and unmistakably *plural*. The question, then, is if God is One, who are the others? This question is sometimes reconciled by the religious doctrine of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In short, the Trinity identifies three *persons*, personas, or faces of the One God. Whether we believe God expresses in one, three, or many different ways, it is clear to me that our One God has many faces.

The observation that God has many faces is encouraging. If our God is to be inclusive of all, and if we are all created in God's likeness, then the being of God must include the infinite variations among all of us: all colors, all cultures, all genders, all ages, and all beliefs. That is good news for those who feel excluded from, unworthy of, or otherwise unable to access the all-inclusive love of God. In the Genesis creation story, God looks over the whole of creation and sees that it is good. We, on the other hand, look over the whole of creation and label some parts good and some not-so-good, some righteous and some evil, some like us and some different from us. We cannot begin to know and experience the depth of God's love until we learn to see God's creation as God sees it: wonderful and beautiful in all its awesome and infinite diversity. We are an inseparable part of one world expressing in countless ways, just like the image and likeness of the One God from whom we and all of creation flow.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I seen God express in my life today?

March 6
A Lonely God

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" Genesis 3:8-9

Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden after eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the Garden, Adam, Eve, and God lived peaceably together with the rest of creation. After eating the forbidden fruit, they became self-conscious and felt exposed and naked. They hid from God, presumably because they were ashamed. God calls out, "Where are you?"

One question from this allegorical story is this: If God is all-knowing,

as it seems safe to assume, why could God not find Adam and Eve? I remember playing Hide & Seek when my children were young. They would hide while I counted to ten, and I *always* knew where they were hiding long before actually "finding" them. Here is where the story gets uncannily timely and personal. Perhaps the hiding done by Adam and Eve was not physical. Perhaps they were hiding their *attention* from God. Perhaps they were intentionally turning away from God. After all, our attention can only be given; it cannot be taken, not even by God.

Throughout the Bible, it is clear that God wants to be in relationship with us. An important part of any relationship is the willingness to give the other our attention. Attention is life-giving. We have all had experiences, however, when someone was physically present with us but their attention was elsewhere. In this age of smart phones and multitasking, it is common to attempt to converse with someone while they (or we) are texting someone who is not physically present. It is annoying and inconsiderate. Sometimes, I want to ask, "Where are you?" when someone is standing in front of me but looking at their phone. Unfortunately, I return the favor too often.

What motivates us to divert our attention away from those we are with in a given moment? Are we too busy? Are we not interested? Are we easily distracted? These are common maladies with so many seductive diversions readily available that invite us out of the present moment. Adam responds to God's question, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (3:10). Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake, and thus began the practice of blaming others for our missteps. Why were they suddenly afraid of God? Adam and Eve had changed. Instead of delighting in the beauty, abundance, and divine fellowship of the garden, they began seeing everything – including themselves – as good or evil, black or white, right or wrong, naked or clothed. Neither one was comfortable in God's presence any longer, and the extension of the story is that often we are still uncomfortable today. A similar discomfort led society to crucify Jesus. God calls and we turn away. While we cannot turn God's attention away from us, we can refuse to reciprocate by withholding our attention. In doing so, we miss the love, acceptance, and grace God willingly offers. When our nakedness is exposed, as it necessarily must be in God's presence, we forget about our divine kinship, and we feel ashamed. In truth, it is our innocent nakedness that God most desires to receive.

There is a modern-day fable of a person having a near-death experience. Her spirit journeys to a wonderful place where she finds herself in the presence of God. What she experiences is pure, unsullied *love*. She feels a call back to her body, however, and just before returning, she asks God if there is a message to bring back to her earthy companions. God

says, "Yes, tell them I miss them." Dare we believe that God is lonely for us?

Journaling focus: What is one part of my life I try to hide from others?

March 7
A Sorry God

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.
Genesis 6:5-6

Some people believe that the story of Noah's Ark is historically accurate, meaning that the events happened as described in Genesis. Others believe the story is mythical, meaning it may not be factually correct, but rather was written to teach the reader something about God and God's relationship to man. While I respect both views, I am most interested in the Noah's Ark account for what it teaches about God, more so than what it may teach about history.

As the story goes, God looks over his early creation and sees corruption and wickedness. Humankind is behaving in ways that make God sorry for creating them. God decides to destroy all living things, except for Noah and his family. From them, the human race will then be regenerated. Noah is to gather pairs of every living thing, build a huge ark to preserve this cross-section of creation, and prepare for a flood of epic proportion.

To consider that God might be sorry for something God created is inconsistent with the way I was taught to understand God. According to the story of Noah's Ark, the depravity displayed by human beings toward each other and toward the rest of creation seemed to catch God by surprise. While the Bible does not explicitly say that God made a mistake, the story certainly makes it sound like that is the way God saw the initial creation. For me, the fact that humanity's corruption and wickedness made God sorrowful is an indication of how intimately God is involved in and cares about this creation. If that were not the case, why would God be sorry?

God did not introduce corruption and violence into our world – we did. Yet, because God experiences creation through us, corruption and violence break God's heart along with ours. Wickedness is a creation of the *human* mind, not God's, and yet God is victimized by it every bit as much as we are. The pinnacle of human depravity in the Bible is the crucifixion of

Jesus, where humanity applies its cruelest techniques of torture to maim, humiliate, and kill the One who came to display and model divine love in human form for us.

I think there are at least three lessons we can take from the story of Noah's Ark. First, God suffers with us in our suffering, and God is involved with us in relieving that suffering. Second, just as God saw something worth saving in Noah's family, so God sees something of value in each of us, something worth salvaging, and something that can be used to further God's work on earth. No matter how far we have fallen, how corrupted we feel, or how badly we have messed up our lives or the lives of others, God can and will redeem us. Finally, perhaps God is not all-knowing in the way we usually assume. Perhaps even God cannot predict the depths to which our free will can sink us. What we do know about God, based on Romans 8:28, is that God can and will make all things work together for good for those who believe. God works through those of us with physical bodies, however, to build the Ark that will lead us out of whatever swamp we find ourselves in.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life I would like to "flood" and begin again?

March 8
A Demanding God

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt sacrifice on one of the mountains that I shall show you." Genesis 22:1-2

Abraham, the shared patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, had an encounter with God – a disturbing encounter, to say the least. Some years earlier, God had promised to make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars. Never mind that Abraham was 100 and his wife was 90 at the time. Sure enough, Sarah gave birth to Isaac after having been barren. Once Isaac had grown into a young man, Abraham heard God tell him to sacrifice Isaac. Forever the obedient servant, Abraham took Isaac to a mountain, laid him on a pile of wood, and prepared to stab him to death before burning his body. As Abraham raised the knife, an angel stopped him and offered a ram in Isaac's place.

Of the many faces of God in the Bible, the one demanding the sacrifice of one's own child is among the most disturbing. It is completely

inconsistent with the loving, nurturing God I experience. It makes no sense that after God promises Abraham countless descendants that Abraham would be directed to kill the one through whom those descendants would flow. The traditional moral of the story is that Abraham's faithfulness was being tested and, thus, he was proven worthy to father a great nation. While I agree that obedience and faithfulness are important, I find myself questioning whether sacrificing Isaac was actually a directive from God.

Interestingly, there are numerous passages in the Bible indicating that God does not want our sacrifices. For instance, Psalm 51:16, "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased." Likewise, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus twice quotes Hosea 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Even so, offering sacrifices to atone for sin and to show one's obedience to God was a routine practice in the Old Testament.

A common thread running through Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that of *original sin,* which is said to have occurred when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Some believe that original sin is etched into our human DNA, forever making us corrupt creatures and more deserving of God's punishment than God's love. When we believe we must earn God's blessing, we may feel the need to sacrifice something to justify the undeserved gift. Many believe they will pay a painful price for anything good that happens in their lives. Do not misunderstand me; I know it is human nature to sometimes act in ways that are inconsistent with decent behavior. Even so, why do we focus on the disobedience from a mythical story and ignore the amazing blessings God bestowed on every succeeding generation? Particularly for Christians, if we believe Jesus bridged the sin gap between humanity and God, why would we continue to feel we can or must earn the love God so freely gives? One would think that responses of gratitude and generosity would be more appropriate than self-denying guilt. The feelings of worthlessness – our poor self-esteem – lead us to feel the need to offer God sacrifices that God has no need or desire to receive. The sacrificial system may have derived more from our poor self-image than from God's demands.

Sometimes we simply cannot accept our good fortune. Perhaps this is what happened to Abraham. Ultimately, God had to intervene to keep Abraham from destroying the very blessing God had given to him. We know how that is, do we not? Sometimes our subconscious guilt causes us to sabotage, or at least diminish the good in our life. When we act out of a deeply rooted sense of guilt, the outcome will not bestow blessing. When we act of out of a sense of blessing, God's love flows through us to bless others. God's nature is to bless, not to punish. Our human frailties punish us sufficiently already. God is accommodating enough, however, to allow our free will to sink us to whatever depths we feel we deserve. Once we are

sufficiently low, God lovingly and patiently works to help lift us out of whatever hole we find ourselves in. God's demands are not contrary to God's blessings. Our understanding, however, may be.

Journaling focus: What blessings in my life might I be sabotaging because I do not feel worthy of them?

March 9
The Stations of the Cross

Embarking on a journey toward one's death is not easy, especially when one knows beforehand that the path will be excruciatingly painful. Ultimately, Lent is a journey to the resurrection. Unfortunately, we cannot jump to the resurrection of Easter without first going through the crucifixion. Jesus crosses the threshold from life to death to life and invites us to join him on this extraordinary voyage. During the remaining two-plus weeks before Easter, our reflections will focus on the *Stations of the Cross.*

The history of the *Stations of the Cross* begins with early attempts to recreate the holy places of Jesus' life in lands outside of Jerusalem. As Christianity spread throughout the world, it became increasingly difficult for many of the faithful to directly experience the important shrines in the Holy Land. The purpose of the Stations is to allow followers of Jesus to make a virtual, spiritual pilgrimage through the primary scenes of Christ's suffering and death. The traditional format for the Stations was formulated in the 17th century. Several of the 14 traditional stations, however, are not found in Scripture but in Catholic tradition. In an effort to better align the Stations with Scripture, Pope John Paul II introduced a revised set of Stations in 1991, all of which are found in Scripture. Pope Benedict XVI formalized this revised set of the Stations in 2007, although the traditional stations are still found in many Catholic churches. These revised Stations have the additional benefit of being more familiar to the non-Catholics among us. On the following pages, I will utilize this more recent, scriptural version of the Stations.

The *Stations of the Cross* hold a particular fascination and attraction for me, a non-Catholic. They provide the foundation for an intense experience of Lent. There may be little that resembles grace during Lent, but we all know from experience that suffering and death are inseparable parts of every life. The resurrection we celebrate at Easter, however, is such a powerful and joyful conclusion that the road leading up to it is ultimately worthwhile and enhanced by the difficulty.

Journaling focus: How might I prepare today to begin my journey through the Stations of the Cross tomorrow?

March 10
Station #1: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Luke 22:39-46

The first Station of the Cross is in the Garden of Gethsemane. This scene occurs after the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the sacrament of communion. After Jesus identified Judas as the one who would betray him, and after Judas ran out of the room to find the Temple authorities. Jesus took three of his disciples to a quiet place in the Garden, in the dead of a dark night. He wandered a few steps away from them and uttered his first prayer to those disciples, warning them to pray not to come into the time of trial.

Today, over two thousand years later, Jesus prays for us, that we may not come into the time of trial. Our trials test us. In our legal system, a trial is held to determine guilt or innocence and to separate truth from untruth. At the trial's end, the person on trial is judged.

Jesus goes off by himself to pray, a short distance from his disciples. He is in agony and is sweating profusely. He knows what is about to happen. He has foreseen the pain and the humiliation he is about to endure. He begins his prayer with a request for mercy, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." Even God incarnate did not wish to enter this trial unless it was absolutely necessary. He concludes his prayer with submission, "Yet, not my will but yours be done." Importantly, once he submits, an angel from heaven gives him strength.

Sometimes we put off doing that which we know must be done. Jesus came to earth to allow us to see God, and for God to experience through us the worst that humanity has to offer. Because Jesus suffered the way he

did in his final hours, we know God understands our pain and suffering. God has been there, through the suffering of Jesus.

The disciples are aware of Jesus' agitation. They are exhausted, however, and confused from the events at the Last Supper. In addition, they are weary from the lateness of the hour. Being emotionally drained and physically worn out, they fall asleep. Jesus wakes them up and tells them to pray not to come into the "time of trial."

Can we actually avoid this "time of trial?" I suspect we cannot. Rather, I believe Jesus is warning us to prepare for our times of trial and to pray we will have someone to stand with us during those times. As we walk with Jesus along this sorrowful road to Golgotha, we are reminded that we must sometimes travel through the valley of death in order to come into the new life on the other side.

Journaling focus: Consider a recent trial in your life. Was anyone there to share your burden?

March 11
Station #2: Jesus is betrayed by Judas and arrested

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man? Luke 22:47-48

The second Station of the Cross occurs while Jesus is still in the Garden of Gethsemane, after he came back to his disciples and found them asleep. A crowd of solders and curious on-lookers arrives, led by Judas. The Temple authorities needed in insider, like Judas, in order to capture Jesus. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, they needed someone who was aware of Jesus' movements so they could capture him when he was away from the crowds. Second, they needed someone who knew Jesus well enough to recognize him in the dark of the Garden.

The agreed upon signal, from Judas to the guards, was a kiss. Judas would go to Jesus, kiss him, and the guards would grab him and take him back to the High Priest. It is ironic that Judas choose a sign of affection to commit his act of deceit and betrayal.

The scene of the second Station ends with a question: *Judas, do you betray me with a kiss?* When we consider the entire evening – from the emotional Last Supper, to praying in such agony as to have sweat falling like drops of blood – we can imagine the incredulity Jesus experienced at being

approached by a betraying friend with a kiss.

But what about us? Do we speak and act as if we love and are devoted to Jesus in one moment, and then turn around and speak and act as if we do not know who Jesus is? Are we not doing the same thing as Judas – betraying our Savior with a kiss?

I think we can consider the method of Judas' betrayal as *passive-aggressive*. Passive-aggressive behavior expresses hostility in indirect ways, such as by sarcastic criticisms that are lightly covered to sound like a compliment. This type of behavior is particularly infuriating because it is doubly dishonest and, as such, doubly hurtful. When someone is angry with us, or when someone otherwise wishes to hurt us, it is one thing for them to act in direct and hurtful ways. When someone attempts to hurt us in *indirect* ways, however, such as betraying us with a kiss, we are left with confusion piled on top of the hurt.

That Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities is one thing – the first act in the series of events leading to the crucifixion. That Judas betrayed Jesus by approaching him as a loving brother would only compound the hurt.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I been hurt by the passive-aggressive words or actions of others?

March 12
Station #3: Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips." Luke 22:66-71

The third station of the cross occurs at daybreak on the Friday morning after the Last Supper. Jesus, having likely been awake all night, is taken to an assembly of the Sanhedrin, the leadership body of the Temple. This is to be his first trial, the one held by the religious authorities. They attempt to entice him to commit blasphemy, or to admit to being the Son of God. Unlike Judas, the Sanhedrin do not challenge Jesus indirectly. Rather, they immediately ask if he is the Messiah, the chosen one of God.

Jesus had spent the previous several years preaching and performing

miracles in public places for all to see. There was no doubt he possessed uncanny insights, the likes of which none in the Temple could match. Jesus was a threat to the Temple way of life, and this council was determined to find him guilty of some offense that would give them reason to have him crucified.

Because Jesus had been very public in his ministry, and because he had not tried to hide his oneness with God, he was defiant in his response to the Temple council questioning. When they asked if he was the Messiah, he told them they would not believe him even if he told them. This is the essence of our faith quandary, that even when the truth stands before us, as Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, we still do not believe.

Jesus had embarrassed Temple authorities in the past by answering their public questioning in ways that illustrated how much greater his knowledge of God was than theirs. He points out their hypocrisy by noting that they would not be willing to answer his questioning of them.

At first glance, Jesus' response does not seem to be the admission the Sanhedrin concludes it to be. They ask if he is the Son of God, and he responds, "*You* say that I am." The part of that phrase that likely set his accusers off was "I am," which is the name of God as given to Moses at the burning bush and recorded in the book of the Exodus.

Once Jesus' words provide the authorities the "proof" they sought – that he claims to be the Son of God – they send Jesus off to the Roman authorities, who govern the region. The Sanhedrin are allowed to provide religious services to the people, but are not allowed to put people to death.

Journaling focus: What is a mystery that is difficult for me to believe in spite of evidence to the contrary?

March 13
Station #4: Jesus is denied by Peter

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then

Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.
Luke 22:54-62

At the fourth Station of the Cross, Jesus is taken from the Garden of Gethsemane to the house of the high priest under cover of darkness. Peter, who was with him in the Garden, follows at a distance. A servant-girl, who was probably among the crowd who witnessed Judas' betrayal of Jesus, recognizes Peter and reveals that Peter had been with Jesus in the Garden. Peter denies knowing Jesus.

Peter's reaction, while not being what we might hope from ourselves, is understandable. He would have been tired and confused, and the events were getting *real* in a hurry. His leader had been captured and led away. The life he had given up everything for was beginning to crumble. Denying Jesus to protect himself in this situation should not surprise us, nor make us think less of Peter or his devotion to Jesus.

In Jesus' day, it took two witnesses to assign guilt to a person. In other words, if two people were willing to testify to someone doing wrong, that person was pronounced guilty. Another person, presumably also among the crowd in the Garden, recognizes Peter as having been with Jesus. And again, Peter denies any association with Jesus.

We are all prone to weakness, particularly in times of great stress. Certainly, Peter was under great stress on this night. His future was uncertain. Would he, too, be taken into custody and suffer the same fate as Jesus?

During their dinner at the Last Supper, before retiring to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, before the Temple guards came to take him away, Jesus provided an amazing insight about Peter. Jesus was describing to his disciples the events that were about to unfold and how many would fall away from and deny him. Peter insisted he would never deny Jesus. Then, Jesus says, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." (Luke 22:33b)

In the courtyard of the high priest, Peter is accused three times of being a follower of Jesus. And three times he denies it. And with the third denial, the cock crows, just as Jesus predicted.

Jesus knows our frailties and loves us deeply, in spite of them.

Journaling focus: What is a time in my life where I intended to act in a certain way, but in the heat of the moment, I acted differently?

March 14
Station #5: Jesus is judged by Pilate

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him." Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. Luke 23:13-25

The fifth Station of the Cross occurs in the courtyard of Pilate, the Roman governor. The Temple authorities have found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and sentenced him to die. They do not, however, have the legal authority to put anyone to death, so they appeal to their Roman authority, Pilot. Rome, however, will not put someone to death for blasphemy, so the Temple leaders accuse Jesus of insurrection against the Roman government, saying he claims to be *King* of the Jews. Pilot questions Jesus and finds him to be innocent, announcing he will have him flogged instead, and then release him.

In many ways, this situation is the third betrayal of Jesus in a matter of hours. First, Judas betrays Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Second, Peter betrays Jesus in the courtyard of the chief priest. Finally, Jesus is betrayed by the Temple leaders, who alter the charge against him.

The next scene in the fifth Station of the Cross is the crowd's reaction to Pilot pronouncing Jesus as not-guilty. Pilot had a tradition of releasing a prisoner of the people's choice in honor of Passover as a way to placate the people. The crowd not only shouts for the crucifixion of Jesus, but calls for the release of Barabbas, a convicted murderer and insurrectionist.

The humiliation of Jesus continues, for the crowd calling for his crucifixion likely consisted of many of the same people he taught and healed. His closest companions, the very people he dedicated his ministry to, are now calling for his death on a cross. Pilate, no friend to the Jews, again tries to release Jesus.

The crowd prevails, and Pilot condemns Jesus to death by crucifixion. The betrayal is complete, although Jesus' suffering has barely begun. Jesus

was tried and convicted by several human courts – the Sanhedrin, Pilot, and the crowds. He was the victim of what we, today, call *groupthink,* where a false idea is planted by a minority who keep hammering on the idea until more and more people come to believe in its truth. Its truth, however, is accepted by repetition as opposed to being established by fact.

And so, Jesus' fate is decided. He will die in the most excruciating way known to man at the time, by being nailed to a cross.

Journaling focus: When have I fallen victim to group-think?

March 15
Station #6: Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns

Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?" They kept heaping many other insults on him. Luke 22:63-65

And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. John 19:2-3

Pilate hands Jesus over to the Roman soldiers to be mocked, beaten, and scourged. This was all a part of the pre-crucifixion humiliation intended to show what happens to those who dare to challenge the authority of Rome. Jesus was blindfolded, and the guards began the flogging, which consisted of whipping Jesus, probably on the back, with cords containing small stones and bones intended to not only leave bloody stripes on one's back, but also to rip off pieces of flesh and tissue. Some traditions say Jesus was whipped 39 times, just short of a fatal beating which was believed to occur at 40 lashes.

Upon completion of the flogging, Jesus would be bloody, swollen, and beaten beyond recognition. His humiliation at the hands of the Romans was actually ratcheted up another notch by being dressed as a mock king. They placed a crown of thorns on his head. If Jesus was capable of feeling more physical pain at this point, he would have cringed at the thorns being pressed into his skull. They put a purple robe – the color of royalty – over his shredded skin and paraded him around for the people to gaze upon their "King."

"Some King!" the people likely thought, as they looked upon this barely-living mass of human flesh. If he were truly the Son of God, and if

he truly had the power to save others, why was he unable to save himself? Was he unable, or simply unwilling?

Supporters of Jesus in the crowd – certainly there were some present – were in a serious dilemma. Because Jesus was being crucified for insurrection, any overt displays of support for him could be interpreted as their support for his defiance of Roman authority. They could easily suffer the same fate. As the soldiers cried, "Hail, King of the Jews!" no one in the crowd dared to intervene. Even so, hearts who had loved him would be broken to see their Lord and friend in the shape he was now in.

Jesus was almost certainly dazed and completely incoherent at this point, falling from soldier to soldier as they tried to keep him upright for everyone to see. Weakened from the pain, blood loss, lack of sleep, and humiliation, Jesus was caught in a tidal wave of suffering, being pushed and shoved towards the cross.

Journaling focus: Imagine yourself in the crowd witnessing this scourging. What do you see, hear, and smell?

March 16
Station #7: Jesus takes up his cross

After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. Mark 15:20

Jesus now begins his final earthly journey. He is required to carry his cross to Golgotha – the Hill of the Skull – where he will be crucified. Tradition implies this may have been a lengthy walk, from the Governor's courtyard to a hill outside the city walls. I am told the road believed to be taken by Jesus is still there, marked as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering.

Scripture tells us that Jesus fell under the weight of his cross at least once. Tradition says he fell many times.

I have difficulty picturing whether Jesus continued on his way toward Golgotha because he really had no choice, or whether he was doing it consciously, knowing he had to finish the work he had begun. Jesus displayed an amazing degree of divine power during his ministry to help relive earthly suffering. Certainly, he could have mustered the power to put an end to his own horrendous suffering. One would believe he could have, with a word, turned the pain onto those who were so anxious to inflict it upon him. But he did not. He just kept walking, apparently in silence.

Once the business of humiliating this mock, Jewish King was finished, the more serious business of crucifixion commenced. Jesus was stripped of his purple cloak, the color of royalty, and was returned to his normal attire. He was now reduced to a common criminal and was paraded through the streets of the city with his cross for all to see. There was no physical strength on display here, only a broken, wisp of the man he once had been. Jesus apparently accepted his fate, gathering whatever strength remained for the journey through town and to Golgotha.

Journaling focus: Reflect upon the strength of will required for Jesus to walk the path to the cross.

March 17
Station #8: Jesus is helped by Simon to carry his cross

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.
Luke 23:26

Jesus is struggling with his cross, apparently going too slowly for the Roman soldiers. They grab a man from the crowd, Simon of Cyrene, and order him to carry Jesus' cross. We are not told if Simon of Cyrene even knew who Jesus was. He may have just been passing through town and joined the crowd to see what was going on.

Regardless, Simon is ordered to help Jesus with his burden. Whether he assisted willingly, or whether he assisted because he feared the repercussions from the soldiers is not known. In his hour of most desperate need, however, Jesus received assistance. He might have received assistance because of the impatience of the soldiers, or because the soldiers feared he would die of exhaustion before they could crucify him. Perhaps some people were crying out from the crowd and demanding that someone help him. Regardless of the reason, our long-suffering Jesus was given a hand.

We can argue that Jesus was only given the assistance to expedite his fatal journey to Golgotha, but I believe there may have been some comfort to have the burden of the cross lifted from his shoulders, even if only for a short time.

Imagine for a moment that Simon of Cyrene volunteered to help Jesus carry his cross. Perhaps he recognized the impossibility of the task for Jesus and saw an opportunity to help by carrying the cross for him. It is possible that Simon pleaded with the guards to allow him to do this service for Jesus

as an act of mercy.

Journaling focus: Describe an event in your life when you felt you could go no further without assistance.

March 18
Station #9: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me but weep for yourselves and for your children." "For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'" "For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Luke 23:27-31

After Simon of Cyrene had taken Jesus' cross, the journey along the Way of Suffering continued. Among them were women who were mourning for Jesus. He mustered the strength to turn to them to say they should not weep for him but for themselves and their children. He implies there will be suffering to come for all, and there will be time and reason for weeping at that time.

It is hard to imagine that Jesus pictured suffering for others that would be worse than what he was enduring at the time. He could have known, however, that suffering would come to everyone. Because he was leaving his earthly life, he would no longer be there to comfort them physically.

Jesus went on to say that in the time of trial it would be better for those who never bore children. Did he mean that the suffering we would witness of children would make us wish we never had children at all? I think that is at least a part of what he meant. Apparently, times will become so troubling we will ask for the mountain to fall and bury us. We can only speculate about the times to which Jesus refers.

Jesus concludes his words to the women of Jerusalem with a reference to green and dry wood. Wood that is green is alive. Wood that is dry is dead. Green wood is difficult to burn, while dry wood burns easily. What does Jesus mean by wondering what would happen when the wood was dry? This could be a reference to himself and his legacy. If they rejected and betrayed him when he was alive, how much more would they reject Jesus after his death?

Given the context of his words, Jesus may have been referring to the

impact of his crucifixion on his followers. If they were weeping and mourning and feeling lost before he had actually died, how much more mournful and lost would they be after he was gone? Would all his work go for naught?

Journaling focus: Describe a time when life seemed so hopeless that you wished for a mountain to fall on and bury you.

March 19
Station #10: Jesus is crucified

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Luke 12:33
When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." Luke 23:47

The hill known as Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, was also called The Skull. It was outside the walls of the city, and it was where executions are performed. Upon his arrival to this place, his feet and hands were nailed to the cross and he was raised up to die. Death by crucifixion comes from asphyxiation, because one must have the strength of raise their body against the binds of their hands and feet in order to breathe. Jesus, in an already desperately weakened state, may not have survived long on the cross. I am told that some crucified persons survived for days on a cross. I wonder if Jesus felt any relief to finally be on the cross where he could soon be done with this torture.

Guilt and innocence on earth are determined by human beings and may or may not have relevance in God's eyes. Jesus was judged to be guilty by the Temple authorities and by the crowds, but not by the Roman authorities. He made no attempt to proclaim his innocence. He made no attempt at a divine intervention to relieve himself of his suffering. He accepted his fate with a grace unknown to most of us.

At the foot of the cross was a Roman soldier, stationed to keep the peace until Jesus' passing. He witnessed Jesus as he died and recognized that Jesus, indeed, was innocent. Clearly, the Roman soldier was moved by the crucifixion of Jesus. He must have noticed something significantly different in Jesus' demeanor through the process. Surely, this guard had witnessed many crucifixions. Was Jesus more accepting of his fate? Did the difference lie in Jesus' comforting the criminal beside him? Perhaps the guard was used to hearing criminals curse and demean the soldiers and the

Roman government. Whatever the reason, the soldier recognized and named an injustice.

Journaling focus: Reflect on the significance of a Roman soldier recognizing the innocence of Jesus that religious authorities denied.

March 20
Station #11: Jesus promises his kingdom to the repentant thief

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.
Luke 23:33-34

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself, and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."
Luke 23:39-43

Golgotha, the Skull, was a barren hill where criminals were put to death. I picture it as a tree-less wasteland, where those condemned to die hang on a cross with no protection from the sun, wind, or elements. I suspect the place was chosen because it added its own special element of misery to an otherwise excruciating and humiliating end. This was where the journey down the Via Dolorosa led – a miserable path to a dismal destination.

And here at Golgotha is where we find Jesus – beaten raw, bleeding, exhausted, racked with pain and nailed to a cross between two criminals.

Even after the Roman guards had beaten him, dragged him along the path to Golgotha, and nailed him to a cross, Jesus looked down on them with compassion. They had no idea who they were crucifying – they were simply following orders. Through his pain, Jesus accepted this fact and sought forgiveness on their behalf.

It was an unbelievable act of compassion to be able to show mercy to his persecutors. And yet, this is exactly what the Gospels encourage us to do. Jesus modeled that type of mercy for us.

One of the criminals hanging beside Jesus mocks him, saying if he is the Messiah he should save himself. The other criminal rebukes his colleague in crime by confessing that they are getting the punishment they deserve for their crimes, affirming that Jesus had done nothing wrong. The second criminal then asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus assures him he would be remembered.

Journaling focus: Reflect on the significance of Jesus being crucified between two criminals.

March 21
Palm Sunday

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Luke 19:36-38

We now leave the Stations of the Cross for a day in order to celebrate Palm Sunday, a day that predates the first Station by several days. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the end for Jesus, who had intentionally avoided spending significant time in Jerusalem, knowing his appearance there would be seen as a serious threat to the religious authorities. Yet, he could not avoid going to Jerusalem because only there could his ministry be completed. Jerusalem was Jewish religious center and the spiritual heart of Israelites.

Jesus enters the city on a colt and to a parade-like celebration. This was in order to fulfil the prophecy in Isaiah about how the Messiah would enter the city. Jesus was coming into his kingdom in power and glory, but the people seriously misjudged the type of power he was bringing. They assumed he would overthrow the Roman government and set them free of its oppressive rule. Jesus, however, was bringing a different kind of kingdom and a different kind of freedom. Many in the crowd would not understand the difference and would soon feel deceived. No doubt, many of those welcoming him into the city turned on him a few days later when it became apparent that he was not going to stand up to the Romans.

Journaling focus: Recall a time you seriously misjudged the intentions of another. How did you feel?

March 22
Station #12: Jesus entrusts Mary and John to each other

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. John 19:25-27

At the 12th Station of the Cross, at the foot of his cross, are Jesus' mother, his aunt, and his friend – all named Mary. No doubt, they felt overwhelmed with sorrow and completely powerless. Particularly in Jesus' day, women had little social standing anyway, but on this particular day they must have felt entirely invisible. They had followed Jesus along the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha. They had likely witnessed the flogging, the mocking, and the tortured steps as he carried the cross.

Perhaps Jesus felt some relief knowing that not everyone who loved him had deserted him in his final hours. At least three women remained with him to the end.

The three women were not the only ones to remain with Jesus. The disciple whom he loved, presumably John, was there, too. As Jesus looked down upon them, he knew his mother would have no one to look after her. In that age, a women with no husband or son to care for her was essentially homeless. Jesus pledges his mother Mary into John's care, and John into the care of his mother.

Sorrow is a heavy burden to bear alone. Jesus made sure John and Mary would at least have each other to share the load.

Caring for and about others was central to the ministry of Jesus. Through his words and by his example, we are expected to do the same. This is the essence of love, in fact, that we care for one another. Too often, we confuse love, the action, with love, the emotion. Jesus, as one of his final acts on earth, shows love in action for his mother.

If Jesus was focused on caring for others in the condition he was in on the cross, surely we can do the same in our lives.

Journaling focus: Who is one person I can reach out to in love today?

March 23
Station #13: Jesus dies on the cross

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:44-46

The symbolism of the torn curtain in the Temple is significant. The heavy curtain separated the area containing the Holy of Holies, which was where God was believed to reside. That area was only accessed on one day each year, on the Day of Atonement, and then only by the High Priest. The curtain separated the human from the divine, so when the curtain was torn at Jesus' death it symbolized that access to God was now being granted to all.

Jesus came to earth to make God known to us. When Jesus died and the curtain was torn, he also removed all barriers between us and God.

The last words Jesus utters as a living being on earth are to God, placing his own spirit into God's hands. It is a fitting end to a journey none of us would embark upon willingly. In the same way he began his ministry, as an act of obedience to God, he ended his ministry by turning the only thing he had left – his spirit – back to God. There is no hint of ego or legacy or bitterness. Jesus' entire life belonged to God, and when his life ended, he returned it to God.

By earthly standards, these would not be "last words" worthy of praise. And yet, they have endured for thousands of years as an uncommon expression of humility and submission.

After commending his spirit to God, his father, Jesus dies on the cross. The long, painful march to his physical death is complete, probably 18 or so hours after it began. In a typical crucifixion, the legs of the criminals would be broken in the late afternoon to hasten death. This act brought death quickly because a person on a cross whose legs were broken could no longer push themselves up with their legs in order to breath. Jesus dies before leg-breaking becomes necessary, however, consistent with an Old Testament prophesy that none of his bones would be broken.

The Gospel of John records the soldiers puncturing the side of Jesus, presumably puncturing a lung. When blood and water pour out from the wound, they confirm his death.

Journaling focus: Reflecting on Jesus' final words, what would commending your spirit to God look like?

March 24
Station #14: Jesus is laid in the tomb

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. Luke 23:50-53

We cannot know how many members of the Sanhedrin opposed Jesus, but there were at least two who recognized something different about him that set him apart from other nut-cases claiming to be the Messiah – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Nicodemus comes to Jesus one night to question him alone (John 3:1-21). The author of Luke records that Joseph was "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God." The fact that he was even present at Jesus' death probably tells us that Joseph recognized that Jesus could well be the Messiah. The fact that he remained a member of the Temple leadership may affirm his uncertainty.

Joseph goes to Pilate for permission to bury the body of Jesus. The life-less body was removed from the cross, wrapped in cloth, and given to Joseph, who takes it in a newly-hewn tomb and leaves it there. A large stone is rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb to secure it.

Journaling focus: You have come to the end of the Stations of the Cross. Reflect on your experience of the Stations.

March 25
Holy Thursday

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. John 13:2b-5

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Luke 22:19-20

Although we have completed our journey through the Stations of the Cross, today the journey begins again. Jesus has a final supper with his closest friends, the twelve disciples. He performs a selfless act of service by washing the feet of the disciples. Because most people walked around barefooted or in sandals, feet were always filthy. Cleaning the feet was the undesirable job of a servant, if the owner of the house had servants. Jesus assumed the role of servant and told the disciples they, too, needed to become servants.

Also at this supper, Jesus initiates the sacrament of communion. He takes bread and wine from the table, blesses it, and shares it with his disciples, telling them to remember him every time they eat and drink. This plea for remembrance was not a narcissistic act. Jesus did not fear being forgotten for self-serving reasons. He feared being forgotten because he knew the disciples, and we today, would need to remember – to remember that Jesus is with us, Jesus is one with God, and through Jesus, we are also one with God. He used the common elements at every meal to symbolize his body and blood – bread and wine – so we would have daily reminders of his love for us.

Journaling focus: What is one way you can daily remember God's love for you through Jesus?

March 26 (Good Friday)
The Crucifixion

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.
John 19:28-30

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?" Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.
Mark 15:33-34, 37-38

Good Friday appears to be poorly named. What can possibly be "good" about a day that symbolizes the cruel last hours of Jesus' earthly life? Jesus was first arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane sometime around

or after midnight, and the day goes downhill for Jesus after that. Sleepless, beaten, mocked, flogged, bleeding, stumbling under the weight of a heavy cross, Jesus is finally nailed onto the cross and dies. Friends make haste in getting his body down from the cross and into a tomb before sundown so they do not violate the prohibition on performing work on the Sabbath.

Good Friday is traditionally a day of prayer and fasting. As we remember the events of the day, we remember the confusion the disciples must have felt. These people had given up everything to follow Jesus. They expected him to rise to power and bring the kingdom he spoke so often about. Now he was dead and buried. Could they possibly return to the lives they had known before Jesus? I suspect not.

It just does not sound like a *good* day for anyone.

Journaling focus: Recall a time in your life when all hope seemed lost.

March 27
The Quiet of the Tomb

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. Luke 23:56b

Easter is an interesting day of celebration for many reasons, one of which is how the actual day is determined. It is not a specific calendar day, like Christmas or New Year's. It is not a specific day of a specific week, like Thanksgiving. Easter is not determined by human calendars, but by the movements of the created universe. Easter occurs on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox. The equinox occurs when the sun is midway on its journey from its high point in the northern sky and its low point in the southern sky.

Scripture is silent on the happenings of the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection. It is the Sabbath – a day of rest. No doubt, for the followers of Jesus who remained faithful to the end, this day of rest was needed to begin recovering from the emotionally draining events of the previous day. Jesus' body lay silently in the dark quiet of the tomb. No doubt, the mood of his followers was equally dark.

The old saying, "The darkest hour is right before the dawn," is an apt description for the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. The darkness of Jesus' death hangs like a black cloth over the moods and lives of his followers.

Journaling focus: Recall a darkest-hour-before-the-dawn experience from your life. What were you feeling? How did it end?

March 28
Easter Sunday

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." Luke 24:1-5

Why look for the living among the dead? Mary Magdalene and others went to the tomb looking for Jesus, but he was no longer there. Tombs are for the dead, but Jesus had been resurrected and was alive. He appeared many times in the subsequent days to the disciples and others, providing final counsel prior to ascending into heaven.

In order to experience the renewal of resurrection, we must first go through crucifixion – a part of us must die. Sometimes those types of deaths are extremely painful. Once we have been through that death, however, we must allow the dead part of us to pass. We cannot begin a new and resurrected life until we let go of the old one.

Why do we look for the living among the dead? Whenever we attempt to hold onto the way things used to be, we seek the living among the dead. When our thoughts and feelings focus on things of the past, we cannot be fully present to the now. We must learn to let go of the past because the living are not there.

Journaling focus: What dead area of my past do I need to let go of?

March 29
The Fiery Face of God

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." Exodus 3:2

Fire is an amazing phenomenon, almost like something outside of the rest of creation. Its sustenance requires three things: fuel, oxygen, and heat. Combining these three elements is not sufficient for a fire to actually manifest, however. There must also be an ignition source – a spark to initiate or invite the fire to begin. Fire, like electricity, is neither good nor bad; rather, fire can produce either good or bad results. Fire can heat a home, cook a meal, and provide soothing light; fire can also reduce a home to ashes or burn a person beyond recognition.

God manifests as fire in numerous places in the Bible. In Exodus, God appears to Moses as a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. God leads the Israelites out of Egypt as a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:22). Psalm 29:7 proclaims, "The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire." The New Testament author of Hebrews writes, "…for indeed our God is a consuming fire" (12:29). You get the picture: one of the faces of God is *fire.*

The ancient science of *Alchemy* used fire to purify metals like gold and silver. The art of the practice was to apply the right amount of heat to a substance like gold or silver in order to burn away the impurities without consuming the precious metal. Considering alchemy in an allegorical sense, God is the divine alchemist applying fire to us in order to burn away that which is unhelpful in us. The difficult, challenging, and painful times of our lives can be seen as a divine torch, burning away our narcissism, humbling us, and sometimes driving us to our knees in a cry for mercy. While I do not believe God rains hard times down upon us – we do that to ourselves – I do believe God takes what remains and stands ready to remake us anew. In the sense that one of the faces of God is fire, that fire is a resurrecting fire. Unfortunately, some measure of destruction is necessary for resurrection to occur, so the initial phases of the rebirthing process often feel more like a punishing fire from hell.

A legendary bird, the *Phoenix,* was said to live until reaching a certain stage of decline when it would simply burst into flame, reducing itself to ashes, only to rise again as a new creation from those very ashes. It is a mythical example of the pervasive cycle of life: birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth. A more down to earth example occurs annually in the Flint Hills of Kansas, which are burned to black stubble every spring, only to be reborn to an iridescent green a short time later. The centuries-old practice of prairie burning purges the old growth, replenishes the nutrients in the

ground, and clears the way for the rebirth of the prairie.

The analogy of God manifesting as fire assures us that our God is not an emotionless bystander. Fire is symbolic of passion and action. God's love for us is fierce and tenacious. We do not consciously experience the fiery love of God because we are seldom in a state of sufficient awareness to recognize it. Regardless, God's love burns brightly for each of us. The creator in God recycles all the elements of the earth in a never-ending dance of recreation, molding new combinations and rebirthing the old. Nothing is wasted, ever – no experience, no element, no being. When necessary, God manifests as a consuming fire, forcing the old to release the elements of its construction in order to allow a new creation to arise.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time in your life when it felt as though God was burning something out of you.

March 30
A Beingless Being

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Exodus 3:13-14a

It may seem odd to discuss God as a *beingless being*. The following may sound more like a discussion of a *faceless* God. In fact, that is exactly what I intend. The reader will have to wade through the obscure language, as I know of no other way to communicate this foundational, undefinable persona of God.

A *being* implies someone who can be known, described, and even predicted, at least to an extent. Human beings can be known, at least to a degree that is usually comfortable. Even though human beings are created in the image of God, the opposite cannot be completely true. The only place where we know God is created in the image of human beings is in the minds of humans; and that God is but the limited image of a limitless being. God, as Spirit, enters and animates all living creatures, including us. Father Richard Rohr writes, "Spirit is forever captured in matter, and matter is the place where Spirit shows itself."[17] God has no visible, tangible, physical being except in and through God's creation. In the book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses through a burning bush on top of a mountain. The people below see only dark clouds and lightening and hear only thunder. When Moses asks for God's name to share with the Israelites, God says, "I am

who I am." The Israelites wanted to *know* God as a being like themselves, but God refused to be known in such a limited way.

All attempts to know or name God ultimately fall short, because once we have given something a name or description, we have limited its being. While we are more comfortable with that which we can describe, God resists confinement to any limited form. God may assume any of an infinite number of faces. None of these *faces* exposes the entirety of God, but all of them provide glimpses into God's unfathomable nature. Above all, God is mysterious. Thus, God is a beingless being – God cannot be known as we know another person, the trees of the forest, or the ingredients for our favorite casserole. In this sense, God remains distant from our conscious understanding. Yet, God lives and experiences through us, so God is also closer than our next breath. When we look at the infinite variety and diversity in nature, and when we understand that God expresses in every part of creation, we begin to imagine the incomprehensible vastness of God's beingless being.

God is a God of endless possibilities, not an unchangeable rock. Of course, even rocks change over time. Even mountains crumble. Rivers change course. Our limited experience of time makes some things of the earth appear eternal, but that is simply not true in the context of eternity. If there is a constant quality to God, it is that God is constantly changing, shifting, and forever creating new tapestries of being. God shepherds all of creation through the on-going process of birth, growth, death, and rebirth, ever transforming everything into something new. Being less, being more, simply being. God will be what God will be.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I limit my understanding of God?

March 31
The Hidden Face of God

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire. Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. Exodus 19:18,19b

There is a stark contrast between the God presented in the first three chapters of Genesis and the God described in the rest of the Old Testament. In the Garden of Eden, God was present with Adam, Eve, and the rest of creation. They walked and talked together as people in relationships do. Once Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, God

seemingly became distant and mysterious. Leading the Israelites out of Egypt, God manifested as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As God prepared to give Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the people below heard only thunder and saw only fire and smoke. Psalm 13:1 asks, "How long will you hide your face from me?" The question arises, "Did God abandon a direct relationship with creation, or did creation leave its direct relationship with God?" How one answers that question has a lot to do with how one views his or her connection to God. If we see God as a distant, aloof being, we are likely to believe God put the distance between us, presumably because of the *original sin* committed in the Garden. If we see God as a constant, involved presence in our lives, however, we are more likely to believe we separate ourselves from God. Personally, I believe the latter.

Humankind has developed a collective and tenacious inferiority complex. Perhaps we are taught from an early age that we are not worthy of God's presence, that God cannot possibly love us as we are. We believe we must first go to church more often, read our Bibles more frequently, or pray more regularly. While these may be worthy goals for some, I do not believe God monitors our religious activities like a cosmic scorekeeper. God is interested in the content of our heart; God knows our hearts and resides there, whether or not we acknowledge it. To the extent there is distance between us and God, the distance is maintained by us, and it is completely illusory. Because of our free will, we can choose to withdraw our conscious attention from whatever we wish, even when the object of our inattention is right beside us. We are most comfortable keeping some distance from God, thus making God seem distant and aloof. It is convenient, but wrong, to say God withdrew from us. It lets us off the hook for being so self-centered when we claim God is not involved in or aware of the details of our daily lives. Of course, our feelings of unworthiness make us fear that if we reach out to God, God will not reach back. Why would God care about a lowly sinner like me?

The hidden face of God is hidden by our own fear of consciously allowing God a prominent presence in our lives. Interestingly, the Bible says that God wanted *all* the Israelites to come up the mountain with Moses, but they were afraid – they felt unworthy. They remained below and saw only fire and heard only thunder. We should understand this, because we are guilty of the same thing. We keep our distance from conscious encounters with God by making our religion an intellectual exercise instead of an experiential communion. As such, we turn to God and see only fire and smoke. We hide behind words, creeds, tithes, and even prayers. It is as if we believe there is a threshold of religious activity that, once met, will make us worthy of God's love – but it is a threshold we can never attain. While there is nothing wrong with our religious practices, they cannot close the gap

between us and God. God will remain a mystery to us until we surrender our poor self-image and embrace the image in whom we were created. The hidden face of God longs to be unmasked.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I seek God through activities rather than through direct experience?

April 1
A Militant God

Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." The Lord listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns.
Numbers 21:2-3

There is a militant face of God that appears in the Old Testament where God seemingly participates in the destruction of an enemy. Sometimes God is described as the destroyer, where other times God is named as empowering the army of one nation so it can overthrow another. In today's passage from Numbers, God is asked to "give this people into our hands," which means to wipe them out. Because the Israelites defeated the Canaanites in this particular battle, God received credit for the carnage. Stories like these turn some people, particularly those with a pacifist bent, away from the Old Testament.

I, too, find the thought that God might actually take sides in a physical battle troubling. My concern centers around two issues. First, I believe all people are created in the image of God and are loved by God as such. Second, the image of a militant God is inconsistent with the uncompromisingly non-violent persona of God embodied as Jesus the Christ in the New Testament.

While I realize the Bible was written from the perspective of the Israelites, I find the idea that God's support or displeasure was revealed in the outcome of a war difficult to accept. Especially considering that in addition to the normal butchery of warfare, the women and children of the defeated group were often killed or enslaved. This is not to mention the plundering of everything of value. It seems that "winning" was not sufficient, but that total annihilation was somehow justified. When the Israelites were defeated in battle, the biblical authors attributed it to God's "punishment" for their insolence. What troubles me is the implication that God would somehow participate in the annihilation of a human life God

created and called good. I understand that our human sin separates us from God, but I believe God reaches out to us in our sin to pull us back, rather than brutally snuffing the life out of the sinner.

The Old Testament portrayals of God leading a nation into battle is, to me, contrary to the life of Jesus, God's embodiment in human form. Jesus' life was a model of non-violence. In his final human act on earth, he submitted to the violent and deadly actions of his captors. He allowed himself to be falsely accused, humiliated, beaten, and nailed to a cross. Surely, if there was a time for God to intervene in a violent way on behalf of innocent life, that would have been it. Instead of portraying a militant face of God, however, Jesus manifested a vulnerable, submissive face. He held up a mirror for humanity to view its own cruelty and inhumanity. Perhaps God was waiting for one of us to intervene…

Fortunately, I believe there are alternative ways to interpret the violence recorded in the Bible. We can read biblical stories literally and as historical documents, *and* we can also understand them allegorically. Perhaps the battles documented in the Bible represent the battles that go on inside of us. I know I am forever trying to "defeat" or "annihilate" something in myself that is detrimental to my life and the lives around me. I, like many of us, worship the idols of wealth, power, and possession, covet what belongs to my neighbor, and attempt to establish God in my own image instead of allowing God's image to shape me. It is a constant combat to overcome my human frailties, and it is in that type of battle I could see God taking sides. God does not seek destruction as much as the transformation of a curse into a blessing. That is a militant face of God we can rally behind.

Journaling focus: What battles do I experience within myself?

April 2
A Listening God

Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer…If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7:12a,b,14

There was a movie in the 1970's called, "Oh God!"[18] George Burns was God, in the person of a spry, elderly, outspoken gentleman. John

Denver was an inquisitive, young assistant manager in a supermarket with a lot of uncertainty about life, strife, and God's role in the world. John Denver's character, over the course of the movie, grew fond of God and gained new perspectives on life. As God walked away at the end of the movie, John Denver's character called out, "Wait a minute, what if I want to just talk to you sometime?" God answered, "You talk, I'll listen." And then God disappeared from view.

The "You talk, I'll listen" theme is one I suspect many of us experience when it comes to God. We can never be certain that God is listening, however, except by faith. We hope that is the case, although our prayers often seem to be answered in such haphazard ways, it is difficult to know if God actually listens. Sometimes, when God answers our prayer in a way different than we desire, we wonder if God's hearing is faulty. The Israelites experienced the same uncertainty. Through the many challenges during their time of bondage in Egypt, through the exile, and even after they finally arrived in the Promised Land, they complained that God was not listening to their cries for help.

In today's scripture reading, God sets out conditions for the Israelites under which God was willing to listen: humble themselves, pray, seek God, and turn from their wicked ways. Rather than making pious demands, I suspect God was giving instructions for how to become sufficiently spiritually attuned to experience God working in the world. If the people remained arrogant, trusting in their own powers, living only for themselves, they simply would not be in a personal state conducive to recognizing God's presence. It was not a matter of God withholding anything from them, but a matter of their ability to recognize what God was willingly offering them. Some things do not change over the centuries.

The "You talk, I'll listen," motif lays a solid foundation for many friendships, counseling sessions, and marriages. I must constantly remind myself that when someone shares something that is troubling him or her, that person seldom wants me to solve a problem for them. Many of us cannot gain clarity on what is bothering us until we talk it out. Once we have found words for the problem, we sometimes find there is either no solution needed or that there is no actual problem after all. Often, allowing a person to frame the issue verbally is *all* they need from us. Anything more is not only unhelpful, but it can be harmful to the relationship. The day my father died, my best friend came and sat with me as I wept. He did not say anything, because there was nothing worthwhile to be said. I did not need to hear that everything would be all right, that God must have needed my dad in heaven, that I would see him again in the afterlife, or that I would feel better in a few days or weeks. I needed to grieve. He listened as I talked and made sure I did not suffer alone.

Sometimes, what we most need is for someone to just listen without

judgement, without offering advice, and without trivializing what is on our minds. God always has a willing and ready listening ear.

Journaling focus: In what ways and with whom can I become a better listener as opposed to a problem solver?

April 3
A Gambling God

"You have blessed the work of (Job's) hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" Job 1:10b-12

In today's scripture reading, God and Satan have a discussion. God points to Job as a faithful servant. Satan argues that Job is only faithful because God has blessed him so richly, and if those riches were removed from him, Job would curse God to God's face. God takes the bet and grants Satin power over Job's possessions. Thus begins a series of misfortunes that would make the most fatalistic pessimist cringe.

First, there is the theft and destruction of all of his livestock, followed by the murder of his servants. Next, his sons and daughters are killed when a great wind strikes their house and causes it to collapse. Job responds, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Satan then causes great sores to cover Job's entire body. In his misery, Job says, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad" (2:10)? Next, three of Job's friends turn on him, arguing that it is because of his own sin, wickedness, and refusal to admit his wrongdoing that he is being punished. Job complains mightily to God about the unfairness of his situation, but does not break faith or curse God. In a divine showdown, an unrepentant God humbles Job by reminding him of God's unfathomable power and Job's vast ignorance. Finally, God restores Job's riches to a level twice what he had before, giving him ten more children, and allowing him to live to see his great-grandchildren.

The story of Job raises a number of ethical questions about God. Why would God associate with Satan? Are women, children, and servants no more than property that can be murdered and then replaced with other women, children, and servants? Would God intentionally allow Satan – or anyone else – to torure the life of a faithful person just to make a point?

The gambling God presented in Job seems arrogant, careless, and insensitive.

Job's story, whether we read it as factual or allegorical, raises the age-old question: *Why do bad things happen to good people?* Although not to the magnitude of Job, we all know good people who seem terribly unlucky. Many of us have experienced extended misfortune, too. We find ourselves asking, "Why?" One of Job's answers is that if everything comes to us from God, everything can be taken away – whether by God, fate, genetics, or random events. There is no amount of money, health, or other earthly resource sufficient to provide an impenetrable security against the endless variety of calamities that occur every day on earth. Tornados, floods, famine, stock market crashes, medical bills – all can wipe out our possessions quickly. While I do not believe God is the cause of our misfortune, the bottom line is that, like Job, any one of us can become destitute very quickly. Job, however, did not only lose his possessions; he also lost his relationships – his family was killed, and his friends turned against him. Of course, we lose people in our lives, too. People who are near and dear to us are here one day, then gone the next. Some die; others decide they no longer value a relationship with us. Life can be sad and unfair.

The grace in the story of Job, as in our lives, is that there is no hole so deep that God will not crawl down with us and help us find our way to sunlight, again. In his book, *A Spring Within Us,*[19] Richard Rohr writes, "Like water, grace seeks the lowest place and there it pools." Job felt unfairly abandoned, and in the hardest times of our lives, we do too. Grace, however, finds us in our darkness and eventually leads us back to the light.

Did a gambling God cause Job's misfortune? Does a gambling God cause our misery? I do not believe so, but I do know our loving God can restore meaning and treasure to any life that has lost both.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time when God seemed to be working against you.

April 4
The Good Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. Psalm 23:1-4

Some may believe the image of God as a shepherd is trite or out of date. I disagree. In fact, I believe God taking on the face and role of a shepherd is one of the most meaningful and insightful analogies about God's relationship to us. The first line of the 23rd Psalm says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." As we better understand God and God's workings with and through us, we realize that most of us seldom *lack* anything we actually need, certainly not for extended periods. We often *desire* more than we have, but that is another issue entirely. Obviously, there are parts of the world, including in the United States, where there are people who lack necessities like sufficient food and shelter. I believe God, the good shepherd, attempts to take care of those needs by encouraging the rest of us to share our abundance to help meet those needs. A shepherd does not feed the sheep; a shepherd leads the sheep to where food is available.

My mother raised sheep as a teenager, and I remember her telling me how dumb they were. Her experience was that if they were not watched constantly, they would invent trouble to fall into. It was as if the sheep simply trusted that a shepherd was watching over them at all times, protecting them from life's perils, regardless of what they did. (Perhaps sheep are not dumb, just faithful.) The third verse of the 23rd Psalm comes to mind, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me..." According to mom, her sheep would mindlessly wander into any dark valley available.

I tend to think of shepherds as necessary in open fields, where there is no fencing to keep the sheep contained within a certain area. Of course, it is still possible for sheep to find themselves in trouble in a confined area, but it limits the possibilities. The point is that the days of the shepherd being physically present with the sheep 24 hours a day, at least on modern farms, are probably over.

Even contained within a fenced field, and even with regular access to food and water, sheep can find themselves in danger. Coyotes and other predatory animals love nothing better than fresh lamb chops, and fences alone will not keep predators from easy access to the sheep. This is perhaps where the image of God as our shepherd becomes more meaningful. A shepherd does not *create* the dangers for the sheep, any more than God creates dangers for us. Danger is inherent in the world around us. A shepherd seeks to protect the sheep from the dangers that are naturally present. When danger cannot be avoided, however, a good shepherd stands *with* the sheep so they do not have to face the danger alone. While God may not physically intervene between us and threats, God does remain with us throughout the danger. As I hinted earlier, God also relies on us to help care for God's sheep. In John 21, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter

answers, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus' answer? "Tend my sheep." Understanding God as our shepherd does not imply that God is or needs to be physically present with us. It does mean, however, that God inspires others to help in our time of need, just as God encourages us to help others in our times of abundance. We are, after all, the hands and feet of a very good shepherd.

Journaling focus: What is an example from my life where it seemed a good shepherd was watching over me?

April 5
A Merciful God

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51:1-2

If there were a *Golden Boy* in the Bible – the high school jock blessed with athletic ability, good looks, confidence, popularity, and who could seemingly do no wrong (even when doing wrong) – it would be David. He was perhaps the king of all sinners in the Bible, and yet God used him in mighty ways. There is no greater example of God's unfailing mercy than in the story of David.

In the 11th chapter of 2 Samuel we find King David on the roof of his palace. He observed a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, bathing on the roof of her home. David sent for and slept with her. Bathsheba became pregnant, posing an embarrassing problem since her husband, Uriah, was away fighting one of David's wars. In a lame attempt to make it look like the baby was Uriah's, David had Uriah leave the battle and come home to his wife. Uriah, troubled by the fact that he was home and his fellow soldiers were not, refused to sleep with his wife and returned to the battle. David ordered that Uriah be sent to the front of the battle where he would most certainly be killed. Uriah died, freeing Bathsheba for David to take as his wife. In a relatively short period of time, David used his position and power to commit adultery and murder. The cowboy wisdom of old that advised one who found himself in a hole to stop digging was clearly not heeded by David.

Psalm 51 was allegedly written by David sometime after these events as his way of seeking God's mercy for his despicable behavior. The Psalm provides sage insight into the merciful face of God, as well as how we can

experience it. First is that contrition is internal. This may seem obvious, but too often, even in biblical times, we prefer to make amends outside of ourselves through sacrifices and other methods that only serve to mask the demons lurking within us. Until those demons are exposed, however, we keep digging ourselves into the same holes. In Psalm 51:17, David writes, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a *broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart."* If our transgressions do not break something inside of us, opening us to new understandings, building a desire for change, and teaching us new ways to behave, we cannot receive God's mercy. If we are not sufficiently willing to allow God to change us from within, God's love and mercy towards us will never *stick*. It is not that God withholds mercy from us as much as we are not in a state to receive it.

In Psalm 51:6, David writes, "You desire truth in my *inward being*, therefore *teach me wisdom in my secret heart*." Likewise, in verse 10, "Create in me *a clean heart*, O God, and put a new and right spirit *within* me." Wisdom is internal, and we must open ourselves – make space –for it to enter. In the New Testament, this is called *repentance,* or turning ourselves around.

I believe we suffer, collectively, from a poor self-image. Either we forget, or we are afraid to believe the image and likeness from which we were created. We feel unworthy to receive the mercy of God because we focus on our sin instead of our destiny. We forget that we are always in a process of *growing toward* our destiny, which is our union with God. In God's eyes, our sins are not so much evil as they are growing pains. Every child falls many times before he or she attains the ability to walk confidently and competently. We do not think less of them for their clumsiness; we lovingly help them back up.

In spite of his numerous human frailties, David went on to become Israel's most celebrated and beloved leader. While David and Bathsheba's first child died young, they had another son, Solomon, who became another accomplished and treasured leader for Israel. If God showed mercy to one displaying the *growing pains* of David, how much more will God be willing to show mercy to us? And, as God shows mercy to us, how much more should we show mercy to each other?

Journaling focus: Who is a person in my life in need of mercy from me today?

April 6
The Timeless One

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. Psalm 90:1-4

I had a revealing dream several years after my father's death. He died suddenly, early on a December morning, when I was 14. In the years that followed, a series of dreams haunted me where I knew he was present, but just out of sight. I would run to where he was, but by the time I got there, he would be gone. The revealing dream was this: My sister and I were looking out the front window of our home when I saw dad park the car and get out with a bag of groceries – and then I woke up. The dream told me that one day, the years without my father will seem no more significant than the time apart from a trip to the grocery store. The reason this is true is that our experience of the passage of time is but a moment in the context of eternity.

Psalm 90 equates a thousand years to yesterday. Likewise, 2 Peter 3:8 tells us: "…with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." Spirit time is not the same as human time. Here is a way we can perhaps visualize how this is possible. If we were two-dimensional beings – experiencing life only through height and width – we could only experience the third dimension (depth) in time. In other words, in any given moment we could see above and below, side to side, but not front or behind. We would only be able to experience moving forward or backward via the passage of time. To us now, as three-dimensional beings, it is clear what lies immediately ahead for our two-dimensional friends because we can perceive all three dimensions at once. As the theory goes, we experience the next dimension beyond our physical perception as time. The question is this: What is the nature of the fourth dimension that three dimensional beings can only experience in time? When freed of our three-dimensionality, what expanded reality will be revealed to us, in the same way that depth appears to a two-dimensional being? I believe this is at the heart of our quandary, that our earth-bound perception is limited to three-dimensionality, and the mysterious reality beyond our moment to moment experience unfolds for us in time.

The creation story in Genesis records that God created the earth and everything in it in six days. Some Christians believe creation occurred in 6 twenty-four hour periods less than 10,000 years ago. Many scientists believe the creation occurred with a Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago. For me, the question of which timeframe is correct is irrelevant and unanswerable because time for the creator – the Timeless One – is inconceivable to us.

Albert Einstein proved, mathematically, that time is relative and not

absolute. In other words, time is not a precise measurement that exists independent of our observation of it. In fact, in his later years, Einstein concluded that past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the fourth dimension, which he labeled as *time-space*. The point is this: Time, as we experience it, is only accurate in a limited way and for a limited cross-section of reality. When we are freed from the limitations of the earth-bound portion of our lives, the spans of decades, centuries, and eons will seem no longer than a trip to the grocery store.

All of this is to say that there is both biblical and scientific evidence that time is not as we believe, nor is the world we experience the entirety of everything created. Our lives are one part of an eternal creation that stretches from before our birth to beyond our physical death, when we will rejoin the Timeless One in an existence beyond earth-time.

Journaling focus: Reflect on your life from your earliest memory to today. What blessings have unfolded that you could not have imagined earlier in your life?

April 7
A God of Vengeance

O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Psalm 94:1

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. Nahum 1:2

There was a distinct face of vengeance put upon God in parts of the Old Testament. God was often portrayed as a great punisher, one who would discipline those who did wrong and help gain revenge against those who offended or harmed God's *chosen people*. Early faith was expressed in the belief in a vengeful God who punished those who behaved in ways that the scriptures or cultural norms defined as wrong. In the mostly tribal cultures of the Middle East, past and present, the people sought an advantage over other tribes, and the God of Israel was rendered as the difference-maker who would give the faithful an edge over the idol-worshiping infidels next door.

While we all want to believe God is on our side, and I believe that is an accurate assumption, it behooves us to carefully examine whether *our side* represents something that is Godly in nature. Would God really show preference for one group of people over those of other nations, religions, sexual orientations, or races? Granted, the Israelites claimed themselves as

the chosen people of God, but is that actually played out in the Bible? It is clear to me that the Israelites had a *relationship* with God, which does not appear to have meant that God was willing to serve as a secret weapon against their enemies. Clearly, the Israelites were looking for security, and the face of God they felt they needed was one willing to be vengeful. God, however, seemed to have a different concept about what provided security.

When I compare the faces of God on display in the Old Testament with the face of God manifest in Jesus the Christ in the New Testament, I find some of the differences hard to reconcile. The prophet Nahum describes God as "jealous and avenging," "wrathful," and "rag(ing) against his enemies." I find no similar traits in Jesus. The only people Jesus consistently showed displeasure with were the scribes and Pharisees – the religious elite who followed the letter of the law while dismissing the spirit in which it was given. His annoyance was reserved for those whose teachings were false or misleading to others (which should be a warning to those of us who pretend to any level of spiritual understanding). Otherwise, Jesus was non-violent and accepting of all – no jealousy, no vengeance, no wrath, no exclusion. Only love. Even on his final night on earth, as Peter drew a knife to protect him from the Temple police, Jesus told him to put away his sword because "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Sir Isaac Newton's third law of physics states, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." In many tribal cultures, the norm is that you are either the attacker or the attacked. Little wonder that we see power passed back and forth, within and between succeeding generations. Could it be that the Israelites of old were simply experiencing the yet-to-be-named third law of physics? They would attack another nation and win. Another nation would attack them and Israel would lose. When they won, they praised their vengeful God for leading them to victory. When they lost, they attributed it to God's punishment for their infidelity. What if God was neither helping nor hindering them in their violent exploits? What if God was simply allowing them to experience and learn from the natural consequences of their own decisions?

Clearly, it is difficult for me to reconcile the person of Jesus with a violent, vengeful God. I have to wonder if the vengeful face of God is a face created by us in our own image.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time in your life when it seemed God was punishing or rewarding you.

April 8
The Book of Love

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
1 Corinthians 13:4

The 1950's music group, The Monotones,[20] asked the question, "Who wrote the book of love?" Six decades later, I answer the question. The apostle Paul wrote it. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes a comprehensive essay on what love is and what love is not. No doubt, it was timely 2000 years ago when he wrote it, but it is still relevant today. Our society thinks too narrowly about love, usually limiting love to romance. While romantic love is one important and pleasing manifestation of love, it is far from the only or most enduring. All of us want more love in our lives, but until we know what we lack and what we desire, we cannot begin to find it. The purpose of this section is to help the reader find a true, lasting, dependable love.

Fr. Richard Rohr and other Christian mystics point out that we do not think our way into a new way of acting, we act our way into a new way of thinking. The same is true for love. We cannot intellectualize our way into love. Love is an action, so when we decide to increase the experience of love in our loves, we do so by intentionally *acting* in more loving ways. *Feelings* of love may follow, but feelings cannot lead, at least not in a dependable manner.

Therein lies the beauty of 1 Corinthians 13 – it provides a list of specific *actions* that define love. It provides some of the most straightforward guidance for how to become a more loving person, and in the process become more worthy of receiving the love of others. We reap what we sow, and this truth is never more evident than in matters of love.

The first specific reference to love in the Bible occurs in Genesis 22:2, where God orders Abraham, "Take your son, your only son whom you *love*," and offer him as a burnt offering. A few chapters later, we find Jacob working seven years to be able to take Rachel as his wife "because of the *love* he had for her." There are over 150 references to love in the Psalms alone – God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for each other. As Moses details the laws of righteousness for the Hebrew people in Leviticus (19:18), he writes, "You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself." This commandment to love others is repeated by Jesus in all four Gospel accounts, "I give you a new commandment, that you *love* one another. Just as I have *loved* you, you also should *love* one another." (John 13:34) Clearly, there are many variations of love recorded in the Bible, but throughout the Bible, love is non-negotiable.

Love is sacrificial in nature, meaning we hold what is dear to us

loosely, willingly offering whatever we possess to our beloved. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, was evidence of his love for God above all else. The story is immoral and inexcusable by today's standards, but the lesson is sound – we often willingly sacrifice in otherwise unthinkable ways for the sake of love.

A word of caution as we begin: love is about relationships, but it is not intended to suggest that *all* relationships should be endured. Abusive, unhealthy, one-sided relationships should be terminated, not withstood. An abusive relationship is *not* a loving relationship.

Paul wrote the book of love 2000 years ago, and it remains as profound and vital today as it was in his day.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I experience love in the course of a normal day?

April 9
The Gift of Love

"The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in the hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love." Parker Palmer[21]

The traditional Chinese character for love contains the symbol for a heart surrounded by acceptance. Love is described as a graceful emotion. The symbol is interpretted as "a hand offering one's heart to another hand." Many languages have various words that represent different manifestations of what we, in English, lump into the word *love.* It is a common mistake for us to limit the broad, inclusive reality of love to only one of its manifestations – romantic love. Because many of us are disillusioned by romantic love one or more times in our lives, we may avoid a serious consideration of the sheer practicality, necessity, and breadth of love. Understanding what love is and what love is not, we learn to live better – not only for others, but also for ourselves. We are happier, freer, and richer by living a life in love than in any other way.

We like to imagine that love comes without cost, that if we can only find unconditional love, or if we can only find *Mr. or Mrs. Right,* or if we could only change our partner to be more like us we would be happy forever. Of course, that is not the nature of love. Love is necessarily two-

sided and it requires give-and-take from both sides in order to work. We must be willing to change in order to manifest love's blessings. Hopefully, our partner will change, too, but the only behaviors we have direct control over are our own.

Frustrating as it is to realize, our partner mirrors us. In particular, the very traits that drive us nuts about our loved ones, are almost certainly traits we hate or repress in ourselves. Believe it or not, this is the gift of love – that we become more self-aware by seeing ourselves through our partner's eyes and behaviors. In this way we learn where to begin in making ourselves more loving and more service-oriented to others. When we expect love only to serve and please us, we miss the deeper significance and importance of having and maintaining loving relationships.

As Parker Palmer so eloquently expresses at the beginning of today's reflection, love deepens us, but not always in comfortable or expected ways. To do otherwise would not be love.

Journaling focus: In what ways has love deepened me?

April 10
A Noisy Gong

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 1 Corinthians 13:1

We can all likely identify a number of "noisy gongs" and "clanging cymbals" in our lives (too often, one stares back at me in the mirror), and there is nothing musical or pleasing about them. I tend to shy away from loud, boisterous, self-glorifying people, so it is difficult for me to give any credence to anything they may say or do because I cannot get past their annoying presentation. In moments of compassion, I wonder what life experience in their past or present makes them feel they must communicate in bold, capital letters all of the time. When the manner in which we present our gifts is neither genuine nor gentle, our gifts cannot be received in love, regardless of the intent behind them. When I wonder why my wife sometimes does not receive my words and actions in the way I expect, the problem may be in my presentation. Perhaps I should examine my motives, my words, and the manner in which I am sharing them. Were my words and intentions loving? Did I share them in a loving manner? Was I being a noisy gong or a clanging cymbol?

Love is not something we achieve on our own; rather, it manifests in relationship to and with others. Most importantly, love originates in God. Love is a two-way flow – back and forth, call and response – not unlike electricity. For electricity to flow there must be a pole sending *and* a pole receiving the current. For love to flow, there must be a giver and a receiver. For love to flow freely, the giver and receiver must switch roles often. When love is flowing freely, immense power is generated – a *spiritual* electricity, if you will.

Motives matter. If we only *appear* to be acting out of love, our superficiality hurts our relationship more than if we were overtly acting in unloving ways. At least in the latter case, we are being honest. Intentional deception leaves no basis for trust and no ground upon which to build in the future. While solid relationships can be built upon honesty, being honest is a double-edged sword. For love to flourish, we must learn to be *delicately* honest – respectful of the feelings of the other while also being truthful. In the law of relationship, we have no right to blurt out whatever comes into our minds. Thoughtful, considerate communication enhances healing for struggling relationships.

Love is always other-oriented and never solely self-serving. When we treat others in ways that are primarily geared to serve our own purposes, even when our actions are done well, we turn others away. We may feel we are making beautiful music, but we are only a clanging cymbal. We may have many talents, and we may speak eloquently, but if genuine love does not motivate whatever we do, we are just more noise in an already boisterous world.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I be blocking the flow of love between myself and others?

April 11
Wasted Power

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
1 Corinthians 13:2

Paul's message, clearly, is that nothing we do or accomplish will amount to anything worthwhile if love is not behind it. It does not matter what we learn or how far up the socio-economic ladder we climb. If love is not at the heart of what we do, our actions will ultimately count as nothing.

Love does not speak or understand the language of the intellect. Our thinking mind separates everything into categories of good or bad, right or wrong, useful or useless. Love unites. College degrees, mathematical prowess, superior reasoning ability, religious fervor – none of these speak the language of love. Our external learning is just that – external. Love speaks and listens from a completely different center of intelligence; not the head, but the heart. There are at least three centers of intelligence within each of us: the head, the heart, and the gut or instinct. Each is a powerful center of perception and understanding, although we tend to ignore the latter two in favor of the first. Love requires a deeper dive into the heart. If we try to understand love using only our minds, we will fail. Trying to understand love with the mind is like trying to read a novel by only reading every third word. We may catch the general drift, but we will miss context and depth and end up with only a partial understanding of what the author is trying to communicate.

Paul emphasizes that no matter how much we learn intellectually, or how faithful we become, our accomplishments account for nothing if they are not motivated by love.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I help assure my actions are motivated by love?

April 12
Unfruitful Generosity

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:3

Apparently, even our generosity counts as nothing if love is not behind it. I consider myself relatively generous. My wife and I have given significant portions of our income to our church and other causes we consider worthy. This is the current, common, first-world practice of sacrificial giving. I fear, however, this manner of giving is exactly what Paul points to in today's verse. It is so much easier to write a check for a cause than to roll up our sleeves and join in the actual work. Do not get me wrong – causes desperately need financing. But worthy causes also need hands, feet, and hearts *working* for the cause, standing in the gap between the haves and have-nots, and working at the site of the suffering.

Giving of our money is one thing. Giving of our time and personal attention is quite another. What does love require? If one of my children

calls to say their heart has been broken, what am I going to do – write them a check? No, love demands my time and attention.

Paul suggests we examine our acts of generosity. Giving money is important, and it is sacrificial, but it is not always the most loving or appropriate response we can make. When we are made aware of a need, Paul's words encourage us to ask, "What does love require of me in this situation?" Love may require money. Love may require a few kind, encouraging words. Love may require getting dirty. Love may require a hug, a card, or a phone call. Love may also, however, require an extended period of gentle listening and compassionate presence.

When we limit our acts of generosity to our bank account, we limit and cheapen our experience of love. In the words of Paul, "(we) gain nothing." Herein lies a secret of true sacrificial giving – we may set out to serve others, but in our sacrificial service, we also receive. For example, when we give money, we recevie a tax deduction. To receive more, we must give more (and give differently).

Journaling focus: What is love requiring of me today?

April 13
Love is Patient

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Martin Luther King, Jr.[22]

Love is patient. 1 Corinthians 13:4a

There was a popular saying not long ago that went, "Be patient with me. God is not finished with me, yet." I am not a fan of maxims that oversimplify or trivialize complex or vital concepts, or of those that seek to shift individual responsibility elsewhere. This saying, though, expresses a profound truth in simple terms – *God is not finished with us.* In that sense, we are equal because we are all in various states of *becoming.* No one is complete; no one is perfect.

Whenever we and others are in the process of becoming, patience is necessary. Of course, with each earthly breath we take, we are in a process of becoming, so patience is *always* warranted. In parenting, this is obvious. We do not expect a two-year-old to possess the conversational skills of a 22-year-old, so we are patient with their limited communication

skills. We do not expect a child in Kindergarten to be able to understand Algebra, so we patiently teach them basic numbers and counting first. There is a point in a child's growth, however, where we begin to lose patience. With adults, our patience is often very short. We forget that the process of growth is lifelong.

Impatience is the product of unmet expectations – not meeting our own expectations and not meeting those of others. People simply do not behave in the ways we wish them to behave. Sometimes we show tremendous patience with certain people and very little with others. The person we typically have the least patience with is our self. Most of us are aware of what we are capable of becoming and how we wish to behave, so when we fall short, we forget we are in the process of becoming. We simply are not there, yet. Sadly, the others we are most frequently impatient with are those we love the most.

Speed, or lack thereof, is often a trigger for impatience. Someone is not moving or *becoming* as quickly as we believe they should. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience."[23] The same is true of love. Step one in becoming a more loving person is to become a more patient person – patient with ourselves, patient with others, patient with God. Clearly, patience should not be confused with inaction, but we have our entire earthly lives to become what we can on earth, and we have eternity to finish what remains. There is no rush. Where love is the goal, there is always room for patience. A life of love is a patient life.

Journaling focus: Where in my relationships is more patience needed?

April 14
Love is Kind

Love is patient; love is kind. 1 Corinthians 13:4a,b

Plato, the 4th century BCE philosopher, is credited with saying, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle."[24] As we explore Paul's definitions of love, we find that love is first *patient*, and then love is *kind*. Plato, 2500 years ago, nailed the essence of the need to be kind by saying that we cannot know the magnitude of the needs and struggles of others. We like to guess, but in so doing we place ourselves in what we believe to be the circumstances of the other and, in too many cases, incorrectly judge their situation to be more favorable than it is.

As in all instances where we compare ourselves to others, our vision is limited, biased, and usually inaccurate. Everyone needs and deserves love, including patience and kindness. In one of the most straightforward biblical passages on what God expects from us, the prophet Micah (6:8) lists three things: Be just, be kind, and be humble.

What does it mean to be kind? The compassionate focus of kindness is on someone else and his or her situation and needs. When we are kind to someone because he or she *deserves* it, we are not being kind, but only giving the other what he or she has already earned. Kindness is *given*, not earned. In that sense, kindness and grace are related. Several years ago, a movement encouraged random acts of kindness – doing something nice for someone else for no reason other than to be kind. The thought was that if I perform a random act of kindness for you, you will be inspired to be kind to someone else, and at some point everyone would receive acts of kindness, making the world a nicer place for all.

We should be kind to others not because they deserve it, because they are kind to us, or because we feel sorry for them. Our motivation for kindness should rise from a loving center within us that understands that being kind to others enriches *all of* life, including our own. It is a natural instinct to want to bless another from our own abundance. The blessing need not be expensive, extravagant, or well planned – a note, a hug, or a smile. A simple kindness is sufficient, and that is what loving people do as a matter of habit, almost unconsciously and often anonymously. We should never doubt that the kindness we share with another may be received as a loving and long-awaited sign from God by the other. A sign that they are recognized and valued; a sign that they are not alone or forgotten. Kindness is an important quality of love and a habit that loving people cultivate. Kindness is an *action* we are all capable of executing regularly.

Journaling focus: Who in my life am I being too hard on? In what ways?

April 15
Love is not Envious

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious. 1 Corinthians 13:4a-c

Near the end of the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*,[25] the Wizard gives the Tinman a heart and says, "Remember, my sentimental friend, a heart is not measured by how much you love, but by how much you are

loved by others." The deeper we dig into Paul's writings about love, the clearer it becomes that love is only experienced through relationships with others. We cannot be a loving person – we cannot experience deep love – without first becoming a person who loves others. The Tinman loved his colleagues deeply and sacrificially, but he felt unworthy of receiving love from them because he did not have a physical heart. Paul writes that love is first patient and kind. He follows that with a list of things that love is not, beginning with *envious*.

Envy is a feeling of discontent with another's accomplishments, successes, or good fortune. It orients us in a negative, covetous manner to another. It is impossible to freely love someone toward whom we feel significant envy or jealousy. One reason we have negative feelings for others is that we compare ourselves and our situations with others, which puts us in a confrontational position toward the other. One of us is always better looking, more talented, richer, smarter, better dressed, or more socially acceptable. Whenever we compare, there will be a winner and there will be a loser.

True love, on the other hand, is not threatened by the good fortune of the other. The Tinman was genuinely thrilled that the Scarecrow received acknowledgement for his intelligence, and that the Cowardly Lion was rewarded for his courage. When we compare ourselves to others, we feel threatened whenever something good happens to them that is not also happening to us. When our self-esteem is based on how we perceive ourselves to be better than others, something good happening to another feels like something bad has happened to us. That sort of immature, emotional (and all-too-common) response is narcissistic, making it incompatible with love.

This leads to the basic belief that underlies envy – that of scarcity. If we believe, even subconsciously, that there is only so much love and blessing to go around, then we will see the love bestowed on others as love we cannot get for ourselves. We become envious because someone else has something we fear we will never be able to have. God, however, is a God of *abundance*. Being envious shows our lack of faith that God will provide good things in our lives, too. One way we can reduce the envy in our lives is to recognize and name the abundance we experience. Less envy results in more love.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I approach relationships with abundance?

April 16
Love is not Boastful or Arrogant

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant.
1 Corinthians 13:4

Two of the characteristics Paul lists as representing what love is NOT are *boastful* and *arrogant*. I address them together because they are similar traits. In general, one boasts out of one's arrogance. Election seasons, which seem to run year-round these days, are times when boasting and arrogance are on display in all their narcissistic glory! Obviously, these traits are not the exclusive domain of either political party, nor of a specific gender, age group, or ethnicity. All of us display these qualities to a greater or lesser extent, especially me.

As a country, we want leaders who are accomplished and confident. Winning elections is about convincing voters that one's experience and/or objectives are evidence of his or her ability to do the job well, as well as selling one's vision of a better future. Educating an audience about one's accomplishments can easily deteriorate into boastful bluster, particularly when one is insecure about those accomplishments, or when others are questioning the value of or truth about those accomplishments. In a similar way, our attempts to display confidence can very quickly devolve into a show of blatant arrogance. There is a thin line between confidence and arrogance that many, including the non-candidates among us, find ourselves crossing with regularity.

Yet, I digress. This reflection is about love, not politics. Even so, we live in a politicized world. What would a candidate who based his or her campaign on love look like? I am not referring to love of country, as in patriotism, but a genuine love of humankind – all of humankind, regardless of sexual orientation, race, gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion – *everyone!* I am talking about a *Jesus*-kind-of-love. Such a candidate would reach out to the poor, the sick, the lost, the lonely, and the sinners. Of course, Jesus also spent time with tax-collectors – likely the wealthy of his day – but never to the exclusion of the poor. Our candidate of love would be patient and kind, even to and especially with his or her attackers. Would such a candidate have a chance of winning a national election? Sadly, I fear not.

Paul's writings about love make it obvious that becoming more loving requires becoming more vulnerable. A loving person will not brag about their own accomplishments because they have no need or desire to make themselves appear superior. They focus less on what has been accomplished and more on what remains to be done. Loving people are humble and recognize everyone has strengths and weaknesses. We are

stronger when we stand together as one. Love requires mutual vulnerability, but vulnerability does not win elections. It does win hearts, however, and strengthens relationships. Boasting and arrogance only serve to isolate us.

Journaling focus: In what ways should I become more appropriately vulnerable in my daily life?

April 17
Love is not Rude

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
1 Corinthians 13:4-5a

One who is rude to another is not only unkind but is *deliberately* unkind. After he lists two of the characteristics of love – patience and kindness – the apostle Paul begins his list of traits uncharacteristic of love. Envy, boastfulness, and arrogance begin the list of unloving qualities, followed by the declaration that love is not *rude*. It is one thing to hurt a person unintentionally; it is quite another to hurt someone on purpose. Many times I have said or written something that someone else received in a negative way that I did not intend. That is not rude. It may be careless or thoughtless, but it is not rude.

What motivates us to do something intentionally that we know will offend another? A common cause stems from our personal insecurity. We feel a person has more than they deserve and so we seek to cheapen their good fortune by surmising that they probably inherited their money, moved up in an organization in unethical ways, or they were born with superior genes. A less obvious manifestation of rudeness occurs in gossip – speaking poorly about a person who is not present. Gossip can be intentionally cruel when we say hurtful things about another in their absence that we would never say in their presence.

Love manifests in relationship with others. It is a verb, meaning action is required. Even though love demands that we act in ways that are not harmful to another, I find myself most likely to be rude to those I profess to love the most. Love and rudeness are uneasy partners, although much rudeness stems from our inability to love as we should.

I will go out on a limb and proclaim that the number one reason many people act in rude ways is that they feel unloved and unworthy of receiving love. Somewhere in their past, their inherent need to be loved was shunned, perhaps repeatedly, and they learned that being cynical is less risky

than trying to reach out or respond in love. Such a person becomes like the Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas.*[26] They gain a measure of pleasure in seeing others suffer. It gives them comfort to know that others hurt, too. When pain has been the primary outcome of our key relationships, pain is what we naturally give. Seen in this light, rudeness is a desperate cry for help. We are not offended when a baby cries out in the middle of the night. We recognize the need in another that they cannot yet express in a more loving manner. It should be no different with the adults in our lives – more difficult, certainly, but no different. Everyone needs and deserves love. Sometimes, we are called to love through the pain of another, even and especially when they are rude.

Journaling focus: In what ways might the rudeness I experience from others be a cry for help? In what ways can I offer assistance?

April 18
Love Does Not Insist on its Own Way

(Love) does not insist on its own way. 1 Corinthians 13:5b

The fifth behavior that does *not* characterize love is insisting on its own way. Most of us have had experiences dating back to childhood with others insisting on their own way. It might be a sibling, a bully at school, or a bossy cousin, but there is often someone who insists that whatever a group is doing be done in his or her way. (If this does not ring a bell, that person may be you!)

When we insist on our own way, we imply that we know best, or that we are the smartest -- thus, everyone else is dumber. It is selfish and narcissistic, in most instances, to insist that our ideas are always superior. Certainly, we can and should express our opinion, but when we demand others always comply, we cross the line into unabashed vanity. We become like the boss with the philosophy of "My way or the highway!" or a child forever threatening to take his or her toys and go home. At least in a work setting, one is compensated to put up with that sort of disrespectful, unloving behavior. In general, when we always insist on getting our way, we are telling others they are neither important nor are their opinions valued. That is not a solid basis for a loving relationship.

Love does not insist on its own way because love is *other*-focused. Even though there is often a return to us from our acts of love, that return is not our primary motivation. Genuine love is not conditional. It does not

have to be earned or repaid. We act in loving ways toward another because we care about them, because we want good things for them, and because we love to love. Love is its own motivation, and acts of love spring from an internal sense of abundance that longs to be expressed.

A common cause of tension in relationships is the need to be right, which is a form of insisting on one's own way. Recently, I saw a post that said, "Would you rather be right or happy?" Being right and being happy are not always mutually exclusive, but when our need to be right tears down others in our key relationships, happiness will be impossible to achieve. When one person is right, the other person is usually wrong. It sets up a win-lose situation, which is not ideal for a mutually beneficial relationship. It is much better for us and for our relationships to swallow our pride and seek the greatest good for all involved. If the relationship or group we are in does not respect or recognize that which is important to us, it is probably time to find better company.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I find myself unnecessarily insisting on my own way?

April 19
Love is not Irritable

(Love) does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable. 1 Corinthians 13: 5b,c

Some people seem to have a natural ability to annoy me. I can name several who cause my blood pressure to rise just by entering the room. I probably do the same to them. Whether these people cause irritation intentionally, or whether it is a natural byproduct of the way they were created is a mystery to me. What I do know is that something about them causes me to respond in an irritable maner. In other words, something in *me* becomes irritable in their presence. This is an important distinction because the people that annoy me may have no such impact on others. In fact, others may *enjoy* their company. This is a humbling reality.

The origin of the word *irritate* suggests an arousal to anger, excite, or aggravate. Irritation can be emotional or it can be physical. For example, I like to tell others that shopping for too long, particularly for clothes or (ugh) shoes, gives me a rash. Of course, I do not get a physical rash, but the emotional toll on me is similar. What I mean is that I am likely to display irritable behaviors when shopping for too long. An example of a physical irritation in nature is the annoyance caused by a grain of sand in the body of

an oyster. The irritation causes a reaction within the mollusk that eventually creates a pearl. When we learn to turn our irritations into pearls of wisdom, we have transformed that which was irritating into something of value.

The 20th Century psychiatrist, Carl Jung, observed, "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."[27] Personally, I find this quote irritating. When someone annoys me, I do not want the finger of guilt pointing back at me as the one with the problem. But of course, that is exactly what happens. When we are in a relationship with another, the other is often a mirror for our deepest, most repressed characteristics. The weaknesses, insecurities, and annoyances we recognize so clearly in the other are most likely reflections of our own weaknesses, insecurities, and annoyances. It is much safer and easier to project our shortcomings onto others than to have them exposed in ourselves. Is it any wonder we feel so irritated at times, with others holding up mirrors reflecting our most secret inner failings?

The bottom line is that when I am irritable, I am neither patient with nor am I kind to others, Paul's first two traits of love. My blood pressure rises, my vision constricts, and my head hurts. Being irritable is not a loving behavior toward others. It is also not consistent with self-love. Acceptance of the shortcomings of others is the first step to being more accepting of ourselves.

Journaling focus: What traits that I find irritating in others might be reflections of my own tendencies?

April 20
Love is not Resentful

(Love) does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.
1 Corinthians 13:5

Resentment is an indignant feeling of ill will because of something regarded as a wrong, insult, or injury. The act associated with the resentment may or may not have been done intentionally, may or may not have been intended for the person who is now resentful, or have been an act that others would consider wrong, insulting, or injurious. Resentment is an individual *perception*, and as such is a choice we make. We can be wronged or injured and choose not to become resentful, even though we may experience disappointment or anger. When we do not express our feelings of anger or disappointment about something that truly bothers us, we

repress those feelings and become resentful. Like an over inflated balloon, repressed emotions explode when exposed to heat.

In the context of a loving relationship, resentfulness is a double-edged sword, meaning it cuts both partners. Nelson Mandela, the South-African revolutionary, put it succinctly: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."[28] When we give another the *silent treatment*, we are likely resentful of something. We want him or her to repent of their sin(s) and treat us as we believe we deserve to be treated. Resentment is an immature, self-serving, passive-aggressive way to treat others, as well as an ineffective way to achieve what we want. Humans (especially husbands) are terrible mind readers. When we desire to receive an apology but we are not willing to expose the offending behavior, we are not very serious about building or maintaining a strong, healthy relationship; nor are we likely to be successful.

None of this is to say there are not behaviors worthy of resentment – intentionally cruel behaviors, for example. If we are in a loving relationship and the other person does not respond in positive ways to our sincere needs, the relationship is probably not a good one for us. In those cases, our resentment is more likely to hurt us than the other.

It is clear why the apostle Paul lists resentfulness as uncharacteristic of love. Love requires specific, positive actions we do for and with another. When our regular response to a relationship is resentment, the relationship is not a healthy or loving one for either party.

Journaling focus: In what ways does resentment manifest in my life?

April 21
Love Does Not Rejoice in Wrongdoing

(Love) does not rejoice in wrongdoing. 1 Corinthians 13:6a

The last of the unloving traits listed by Paul is to rejoice in wrongdoing. Most of the time when we do something wrong, we already feel ashamed. To have our shame be the reason for someone else's rejoicing just multiplies our hurt and sadness. Likewise, to revel in something we did wrong to another is equally unloving, especially when it was something we did intentionally. Rejoicing in the misfortune of others is cruel, and yet it is all too common. Much gossip is of this nature. The competitive part of me enjoys seeing someone else make a poor judgement that allows me an

advantage in a game. I do not believe that, in itself, is wrong. It would fall to the level of unloving, however, if I did a happy dance in front of the other.

Often, we rejoice in the wrongdoing of another as a way to lift ourselves up, particularly when it is a person we believe has a better life than we have. We think, "Ha! Now you know what *my* life is like!" None of us, however, can know the life experience of another. It is too easy to judge the circumstances of another through our own biases. Easy, yes, but always inaccurate.

The problem with lifting ourselves up at the expense of another is that we are intimately interconnected. None of us can truly rise above life's circumstances unless and until we all rise. It is like being in a boat with someone and laughing at the hole in his or her end of the boat. Ultimately, everyone in the boat is going down.

In marriage, two lives become one life. One person cannot "succeed" in a marriage if the other is not also successful. That would be like saying my right hand lived a full, happy life, but the rest of my body failed miserably. The same is true in organizations, families, and groups of friends. We succeed or fail, rise or fall, together. In many of his letters, the apostle Paul refers to the church and its members as the *body* of Christ. He writes in Romans 12:4, "…we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Finally, on his last night on earth in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that we all would become one with him, just as he was one with God. Contrary to popular belief, our fates are tied. Acknowledging our interconnectedness can solve many of the world's ills. Loving relationships require *unity*. If we rejoice in the wrongdoing of another, we cannot be in union with him or her. Love demands that we lift others up in their weakness, not tear them down because of it.

Journaling focus: Recall an event where you feel someone rejoiced in your misfortune. How did that impact your relationship?

April 22
Love Rejoices in the Truth

(Love) does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 1 Corinthians 13:6

Of the 15 characteristics Paul lists about love, seven are positive, or things that support love, and eight are negative, or things that inhibit love. I

find the groupings interesting. He begins with two traits that characterize love, followed by eight qualities that do not, and closes with another five positive qualities. It seems to follow a common pattern for worship services today – begin with a positive, uplifting tone, move to something more somber, and then end on a positive, encouraging note. It also follows a common pattern of our lives, where the good and not-so-good are always intertwined.

That "love rejoices in the truth" may seem obvious, at least at first. After all, why would love rejoice in a lie? Would not honesty be a prerequisite to love? Yet, what poses as "truth" is often harsh and not always true at all. Attempts to expose truth may take the form of a significant other being a little too honest with us, or a boss providing an all-too-candid performance review. In her book, Lean In,[29] Sheryl Sandberg writes, "Communication works best when we combine appropriateness with authenticity, finding that sweet spot where opinions are not brutally honest but delicately honest. Speaking truthfully without hurting feelings comes naturally to some and is an acquired skill for others." When we consider love in relationships, we often need to be "delicately honest" with the truth – not that we should lie, but there are many ways to speak the truth in an unloving manner. When we speak truth without a perceptible love for the other behind it, we simply make the other person defensive, or worse. Once that happens, the opportunity for a meaningful and healthy dialogue is likely lost, at least for a time.

On the other hand, Jesus says, "…and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Knowing the truth is supposed to be a freeing experience. It seems contradictory to our experience to say the truth will *always* make us free, however. Is it always best to know how another truly feels about us? Is that truth? Is it best to know where we stand with our boss, or how our abilities rate against others? Probably, but that is not necessarily the whole truth. It is best to know these things *when we first know we are loved and accepted as we are and not judged for what we are not.* In an unloving environment, knowing the *truth* will not be a freeing experience at all. We will not rejoice – we will be devastated. The truth is found in the knowledge that who and what we are is good enough for love and acceptance as a child of God – only then will the truth set us free. As a result of that truth, relationships become more genuine, love based in truth thrives, and there is much rejoicing! The foundational *Truth* is that we are loved with an eternal, freeing, undeserved love that is both beyond comprehension and that will not be taken away from us; and for that we can rejoice!

Journaling focus: How can I better handle truth, both in giving and receiving truth?

April 23
Love Bears All Things

Love bears all things. 1 Corinthians 13:7a

A vow recited in nearly every wedding ceremony I attend includes these words: "…for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part." It is a promise we make as a married couple to bear one another's burdens – together. The 12th trait of love, according to Paul, is that love bears all things. Of course, Christian love goes beyond the love and commitment of a married couple, but the expectation is the same for all relationships. Serious followers of Christ will not stand by and allow others to suffer alone. When we are in a loving relationship with another – and Jesus emphasizes that love is the expectation for all – we assume responsibility for that relationship. A part of that responsibility is to provide assistance, support, and companionship as needed and according to our ability.

One thing that is perhaps different today than in Jesus' day is our reluctance to ask for help when we need it. Our Western culture is rooted in a fierce independence that can make it difficult to confess we are carrying too heavy a load to bear. Too often we believe we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and power through the current circumstances. We do not want to be a burden to others; our present condition is of our own making; we will get through this in time – the excuses are too familiar. That is, after all, the American way. It is not, however, the Christian way. The Christian way is based in loving, nurturing, mutually dependent relationships.

Assisting another with a burden should not be a hardship; it should be a joy! I think of the "barn-raising" events of the past, where a family would need a barn, and neighbors and friends would gather over a weekend and build it together. They would work side-by-side, eat, talk, rest, and bask in the fellowship. Today, we hire a contractor. In our haste not to impose on others, we starve our relationships by not allowing space for the precious gifts of giving to and receiving from one another. What greater gift can we give another than a portion of our abundance? Our material wealth and our overflowing schedules have led us into a state of poverty in our social relationships.

We lack an integrated, interdependent worldview, where we recognize that your burdens are my burdens, too. Bearing one another's burdens is what we do in community, and it is what we do when we live a life of love. Robert Greenleaf,[30] an early proponent of servant leadership, said we must bear *unlimited liability* for others. With the exception of abusive relationships, we are encouraged to bear *all* things, not just *some* things.

Journaling focus: What burdens of others should I offer to share? What burdens of mine should I consider sharing with another?

April 24
Love Believes All Things

(Love) bears all things, believes all things. 1 Corinthians 13:7a-b

In my late teens I dreamed of being a famous musician. Folksingers who told stories, played guitar, and sang astounded me. I was certain that was my destiny. I spent countless hours learning my favorite songs, writing songs of my own, and practicing repeatedly. When I felt ready, I met with the owner of the club I had chosen for my debut. Her name was Elizabeth Dring, and her club was *The Windjammer*. It was located in a shopping mall in Topeka, Kansas. She booked me for a single night. To say my performance was terrible that night is a vast understatement. I was embarrassed and devastated, and I decided to give up on my folksinger dreams. Three days later, Elizabeth called to schedule more dates. I was stunned. I told her I was awful and was quitting. She said, "You were nervous, but you have talent. You will get over the nervousness." She believed in me, and I have performed with my guitar – alone and with bands – for over four decades now.

There is no gift greater than someone who believes in us. There are few favors more loving than our belief in another's inherent goodness and ability. Those who see through the surface to the core of a person have an amazing skill. Elizabeth Dring believed in me, and my life changed as a result. Paul writes that love believes *all* things. Goethe wrote that our beliefs shape us. In a similar way, our expressed beliefs about others shape them, in both positive and negative ways. We shape others not in our own likeness, but in a way most becoming of who they truly are. In many accounts of Jesus' healings, he explains, "Your faith (belief) has made you well." Belief has power. When we believe in another, when we see beyond their uncertainty, we give a gift of love they may never receive from anyone else. It is as if God uses us to speak truth to another.

Of course, the realist in me feels obliged to add that no matter how strongly others and I believe I will become a professional sports star, it simply is not going to happen. That belief is incongruous with who and what I am. It also serves no ideal other than my own ego. Desiring to become something inconsistent with our inner nature is like trying to trim a plant created to grow round into a square shrub – we may force it into an

uneasy square for a time, but it will always strive to regain its roundness. It is when our belief and the faith of others mesh together with the way we were wired at birth that magic will manifest.

Believing in others is a vital part of any loving relationship.

Journaling focus: Who in my life needs a word of encouragement from me today?

April 25
Love Hopes All Things

(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. 1 Corinthians 13:7a-c

Just as love is other-focused, so hope is present and future-focused. True hope, however, is not wishful thinking or daydreaming. Hope looks forward with a knowledge and optimism rooted in actual experience, projecting the future from the potential evidenced in the past. When we make time to reflect on our experiences and we look back over our lives, we recognize recurring patterns. Every time a situation looks dire, eventually, something (often unforeseen) happens to help the situation work out – not always in the way we wish, but always in a way that helps us grow. When we recognize this pattern of grace, we begin to develop – uneasily at times – a nebulous sense of hope. This hope is not rooted in a future vision we can specifically see or know, but in a faith that no matter what life brings, we will be loved and cared for, and we will come through the other side stronger and wiser. It is often easier for those of us in the second half of our lives to experience this hope simply because we have more years from which to have proven the reason for hope.

In Romans 8:24-25, Paul writes, "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." If I hope to experience a beautiful sunrise today after the sun has risen, that is not hope because it already happened. I can hope, however, to see another beautiful sunrise in the future because I *know* from experience there will be more sunrises that are beautiful. I do not know the specific days or the frequency with which those will occur, but I have confidence they will happen. I wait *expectantly* for them, knowing they will manifest, although not knowing when.

My grandmother Hildenbrand saw a version of me she knew I could become, which was much different and more optimistic than the person I saw as myself. She looked beyond my flawed exterior, saw and

acknowledged possibilities that seldom matched the reality. Sometimes I felt guilty and unworthy because I was not as good as she gave me credit for being – or was I? Perhaps it was *my* vision that was flawed. This is the amazing impact of hope on the object of our love – that we see beyond petty failings to the image of God from which we were created. Someone who believes in us, who hopes the best for us, and who sees the heart God created and animated within us is someone who will inspire us to greatness. These are the people who understand the power of hope, and these are the people whose unfailing and unconditional love inspires us to love others with a similar hope for *all* things.

Journaling focus: What are three reasons for hope in my life?

April 26
Love Endures All Things

(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
1 Corinthians 13:7

The 15th characteristic of love, according to Paul, is that *love endures*. Love is persistent and determined. It does not give up easily. When we think of endurance, we often think of sports and the extended and extensive training required to achieve at the highest levels. Sports are not a bad metaphor for loving relationships. When we commit to *love* another – whether in marriage, friendship, or other committed relationships – we commit to being with and for them over the long term. We agree to support and accompany them in good times, in bad times, in boring times, and in all times in between. We vow to love them when they treat us well, when they treat us poorly, when they act in ways we wish they would not, as well as when they treat us as if we were the only other person in their life.

That we remain committed to another does not mean we simply weather the difficult times, however. It also means we work to transform our relationship from those difficult times into something rare and beautiful. Enduring for endurance's sake is self-imposed torture. There needs to be a higher purpose for our endurance; a purpose like love. I am told that wine made from grapes whose vines grow in poor, rocky soil and that endure challenging weather conditions have a depth and body that other wines lack. Some of the most beautiful things on earth require time and struggle; time requires endurance, and difficulty over time often makes the results more beautiful. The rings of trees record the relative ease or

difficulty of the individual years of the tree's life. A weathered face reflects a life lived in the elements. Friendships we maintain for many years have a level of comfort and acceptance that simply cannot fully develop otherwise. Endurance is a blessing.

Where there is a foundation of mutual fondness, respect, and benevolence, endurance will shape a relationship in ways not otherwise possible. There is a saying in sports, "No pain, no gain," which suggests we must endure difficult practicing and training in order to reap the benefits of athletic achievement. The same can be said for loving relationships – the benefits come from a diversity of experiences with the other, not by only accepting the good and rejecting the less-than-good.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I been blessed by enduring difficult challenges?

April 27
Love Never Ends

Love never ends. 1 Corinthians 13:8a

> *"You see, love is one. Love is the whole. Love is an endless sea that you fall into. And once you fall into it, you can't fall out. It's not something you do. It's something that is done to you, and all you can do is let go."* Richard Rohr[13]

The last of the specific characteristics of love is that *love never ends*. Love is eternal. It existed before we were born, and love will continue beyond our lives on earth. This endless flow of love allows us to participate, or not, as individuals during our life on earth, but the flow does not depend upon our participation. Love endures, which is an expression of its flowing and eternal nature. Just because an object of our love moves on to another lover or to another stage of life does not mean that love has ended, only that one particular expression of love has taken another shape, painful as that can be.

As we explore Paul's writings about love, it becomes increasingly clear that love permeates every aspect of our being. Love animates every part of creation. Because God *is* love, love is ever-present, everywhere, always, and forever. Too often, we limit love to an emotional expression we feel and share with a limited subset of people. In reality, how we love any one person is how we love everyone. Love is a state of *being with*, not a transient state of emotion.

It may seem I am making love out to be cold and impersonal, but

love is *intensely* personal. Love recognizes and celebrates our individual natures, but true, lasting love is a celebration *in communion* with others. It is not that we are not special and unique creations in and of ourselves, but that everyone else is, too! We are special and lovable in relation to and with others. Remember, love requires relationship; it is not a reward for individuality. When we do not feel the love around us, it does not mean we do not live surrounded by love. It only means we are not in a state of being to recognize or accept it. Sometimes our lives become so distracted by our busy-ness or by our self-centered distractedness that there is no room in our life for love to find its place. We seek love in the wrong places, or our understanding of love is too limited to perceive it. Love is always *expansive* in nature, seeking to include more of others and of ourselves.

Love never ends, just as God never ends. Our lives as physical beings will end, but our loving relationships continue to impact generations after us. I believe, at physical death, our soul enters this eternal flow of love that we only sense dimly from our physical existence.

It is a blessing to be participative co-creators in the river of love that is always and ever available to us.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better enter the creative and eternal flow of love in my life?

April 28
The Partial Will End

Love never ends. But as for prophesies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 1 Corinthians 13:8

Few, if any, of us have experienced love in a way that is consistent, unconditional, and life-long (or eternal). Even the best of friendships rub nerves raw at times. The best of marriages struggle through difficult times. Long-adored soul mates pass on. The children who once worshipped our every move grow into teenagers who often can barely tolerate breathing the same air as us. Does that mean the love we experienced ended? I do not believe so. I think it means the love we experienced was only experienced in part – a wonderful part, perhaps – but in part, nonetheless. If love never ends, then love must encompass more than just the good and easy times. Nothing of the earth is always good or easy.

As has been noted elsewhere in these reflections, we tend to consider love too narrowly. If our understanding of love is of something we

only experience with one other person, or a small group of people, then how can we begin to grasp the love of a God who loves everyone? If we reject the pain, frustration, and disappointment that accompanies the love, acceptance, and joy of relationships, we cannot expect love to endure. If love is all-inclusive, then love must include the good *and* the bad. When we accept only in part, the whole will elude us. Our lives on earth are mired in paradox – light and dark, hot and cold, black and white, wet and dry, happy and sad. All are manifestations of the same reality, however, and we cannot know one side of that reality without also knowing the other. In fact, the two sides define each other, as in darkness being the absence of light.

Elie Wiesel[31] writes, "the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference." Indifference is consumed by the presence of love just as darkness recedes in the presence of light. Even so, we appreciate love more by having experienced indifference. As light is not diminished by the number of people accessing it, so love includes and is sufficient for all in its presence. If our perception is that love has ended, the experience we called love did not encompass the entirety of love. Only when our boundaries for what love is are too narrow will love appear to have ended. Love, in all its fullness, does not end even though it may assume many different forms.

Paul writes, "When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." When love appears to have ended in our life, it is much healthier to believe that one *chapter* of love has ended. The ending of one chapter, however, sets the stage for the next chapter in the larger story. The love story of our existence necessarily has a happy conclusion. There will be twists and turns, struggles and challenges, and tears and disappointments before we arrive at that happy ending. When the partial – the chapters – end, however, the complete story will be richer for the difficulties.

Journaling focus: How has love assumed different forms in my life?

April 29
When I Was a Child

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 1 Corinthians 13:11

On the surface, the passage about speaking and acting like a child seems to have little to do with love. It also seems to contradict Jesus' teachings about our needing to become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Childish love, however, is 100% conditional, as any parent of a 2-year-old knows. As long as the child is receiving everything he or she wants, in the way he or she wants it, and at the time he or she wants it, love is given freely and abundantly. At the first sign of not meeting what the child thinks he or she needs at any given moment, however, that loving bundle of joy can turn into a hateful, selfish demon who loathes your very being. There is an enormous difference between childish love and adult love, even though some adults barely grow beyond a childish understanding of what love requires. Until we understand that love is an *action* we must participate in, love will remain only an emotion that will come and go like waves crashing on the shore. Here is one way to understand Paul's line above: If we think and speak with childish reasoning, our thoughts will not be mature. As we learn and grow, our understanding of love should deepen. Thus, as we reach adulthood, we should put away our childish understanding of love as being conditional.

On the other hand, we have Jesus saying, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3) Jesus is talking about certain traits of children many of us lose as we become adults. Specifically, he refers to a loss of humility. Many of us give ourselves credit for being far wiser than we are. When we believe we know as much as is worth knowing about life and love, we lose our curiosity, our ability to continue learning, and our ability to love freely and trust completely. We retain the narcissism and other self-centered traits of childhood and become immature adults. In Paul's words, we do not put away our childish ways. Rather, we put away the very characteristics of childlike love that prepare us for entry into the kingdom of heaven.

The resolution for this paradox of becoming like a child, but also putting an end to childish things, seems to be in retaining key elements of childhood innocence and vulnerability, while tempering them with the insight and perspective of adulthood. That combination will lead us to a deeper and more complete experience of love.

Journaling focus: Where in my relationships have I placed conditions on my willingness to act in loving ways?

April 30
In a Mirror Dimly

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 1 Corinthians 13:12

It should probably not be a surprise that one of the most profound statements in the Bible, in my opinion, is found in this *love* chapter. Paul writes that during our life on earth we "see in a mirror, dimly." While this may not be obvious, it explains a lot – not just about love, but about life in general. The reality is that our vision is inadequate for making sense of much of what happens in life. We often find our circumstances shrouded in mystery and beyond our ability to understand. How can a loving God allow the horrible events that happen on a daily basis? We cannot see directly or clearly to the essence of what underlies our experiences.

Paul's reference to seeing in a "mirror" is particularly interesting. The first actual mirrors (as opposed to water reflections) likely appeared about the time of Paul. But the image in even the best of mirrors is not an identical recreation. We call it a *mirror image* because everything is reversed – the right side is now left, foreground and background switch positions, and as we reach toward our image, our image reaches back from the opposite direction and with the opposite hand. Even so, a mirror gives us a likeness of what we are observing, albeit an imperfect and partial glimpse. When our vision is clouded by a lack of focus, such as from a dirty mirror, the image we see is an even less reliable likeness of reality. Of course, the creation story says we were created in the *image* of God. For me, this adds another intriguing element to the concept of seeing "in a mirror, dimly." Dimness can result from poor light, a dirty lens, or an image being out of focus – all of which may apply to our earthly lives. As we consider love, a limited or poorly focused view of love will result in a limited understanding of what love is and what love is not.

All of this helps to explain why our experiences of love on earth do not always live up to the expectations created by the Bible, not to mention movies, novels, and fairy tales. When we see and experience love "in a mirror, dimly," we only gain an approximation of the enormity and inclusiveness of love at its core. We catch a glimpse of the reality, our brains compensate accordingly and convince us we have seen it all, when in fact we have only seen in part. When we rely only on our earthly senses to gage love, it will appear to wax and wane like the phases of the moon. We must also see through the eyes of faith with an optimistic hope in order to grasp even part of the fullness of love.

Journaling focus: In what ways might my perspective of love be out of focus?

May 1
The Greatest is Love

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:13

To *abide* means to continue, to remain with, or to stay. It elicits images of stability and permanence. Therefore, when Paul says "faith, hope, and love abide," he separates these qualities as uniquely enduring. While we know that much of what we work for on earth – homes, cars, clothing, food – will not endure, we confess these are the priorities that consume most of our waking hours. We seldom lay awake at night worrying about a lack of faith, hope, or love. Instead, we worry about a lack of money, or a meeting with an unpleasant co-worker, or an appointment with the doctor about an abnormal test result. Faith, hope, and love are not commodities we can purchase, steal, or trade, but they are characteristics we can develop. Some come more naturally to certain people than others, but all of us are capable of cultivating a more-than-sufficient degree of all three.

Because Paul says the greatest of these is love, I think it is fair to assume that love is inclusive of faith and hope. If we are to love others in the ways described in 1 Corinthians 13, we must have faith in the innate goodness of others, or their worthiness of our love. Such goodness is not always obvious, but when we recognize that everyone is a child of God, we accept that everyone is loved and valued by God. We connect in love with their image-of-God essence, attempting to look beyond their all-too-human exterior.

A loving relationship also inspires hope. There is an optimism in loving relationships that springs from the knowledge that all things are possible and, in the end, all things work together for good. We always hope for the best for those we love.

As we look in depth at 1 Corinthians 13, we begin to picture the expansive and inclusive nature of love. It permeates every created thing and connects us all. Love is the thread of our interdependence, connecting us together as one, regardless of whether we ever recognize or affirm our unity. Love expresses intensely in committed relationships but goes well beyond romance. Love is the essence from which we spring and the destination to which we journey. Love is God, and God is love. Without love we cannot recognize God's presence in our lives, nor can we love ourselves or others as we should. We feel separate and out-of-step with life's rhythms. Ultimately, the most pervasive sin of our time is that of separation – failure to recognize our unity with God and others. Separation, like all sin, is its own punishment. It makes us miserable; it makes us feel unworthy; and it makes us feel alone. Love is the antidote to sin and

separation. Where faith and hope abide, love grows – and so will we!

Journaling focus: In what ways have I seen that "all things work together for good" in my life?

May 2
The Bible is My Story

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Bible is difficult for me to read. It is hard to relate to, and harder yet to apply to my life. The violence that is sought and celebrated in the Old Testament troubles me, not to mention the apparent support for slavery, the lack of standing for women and children, and the over-the-top laws governing human behavior. Even the New Testament seems dated. I find myself justifying my casual attitude by saying it was written for another time, and times have changed. The problem, however, is not with the Bible, its authors, or the time in which it was written. The problem is that I have not recognized myself in its pages. I have always read it as someone else's story.

The first decades of my life were spent building my identity – who I am, what I do, and finding my place in the world. It has been about me, me, and me. This is a common and necessary focus for most of us early in our lives. I shared the life of Greg with others, of course – my wife and children, co-workers, and friends, but it was still *my* kingdom I was building, my *nation*, if you will. I dedicated significant energies to *winning,* even with the awareness that for me to win, others would lose. I believe the Old Testament can be read as the metaphorical story of the first half of our lives. The focus is on *nation-building*, or building the self we identify as uniquely us. It is full of win-lose scenarios. A nation is either the conqueror or the conquered, the persecutor or the persecuted, the slaveholder or the slave. I am not proud to confess that has been my story, too, constantly seeking to triumph over others. The Old Testament is my story whether I claim it or not. The Old Testament is also the story of our world today, as is illustrated daily at sporting events, in board rooms, elections, international relations, and on our streets. We all try to win at all costs.

The New Testament, however, moves to a new covenant, an invitation to abandon nation-building, past win-lose situations, and on to

something greater than the individual. It invites *me* into *us*. The New Testament is about community and what we can accomplish together. It invites us to look to the good of the group – the family, the community, and the world, and to trust that as the group prospers, so will each member. It encourages us to join a larger body which the apostle Paul calls the Body of Christ. We are all gifted in different ways to serve as various parts of the body, and when we do our part, the entire body prospers. We need to be careful, however, how we limit our definition of the collective body, or we fall back into our Old Testament ways. For the promise of the New Testament to manifest, the body must be all-inclusive or it will be incomplete and vulnerable. As soon as we begin excluding other groups, we cut off parts of the body. It does not matter if they are LGBTQ, Muslim, communist, or left-handed; inclusion is necessary. Some behavioral accommodation is required on all sides, but not excommunication. Whenever we wonder if someone is worthy of inclusion, we can ask, "Who would Jesus exclude?" The answer, of course, is that Jesus would not and did not exclude anyone.

In the second half of my life, I find I am not so much interested in the nation of Greg as I am in Greg's part in the Body of Christ. The nation of Greg will fall, as do all nations, and another nation will consume it for its own narcissistic purposes. The nation of Greg must surrender and devote its resources to building the Body, as described in the New Testament. We can and must do better. One place to begin is to accept the Bible as our story.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better accept the Bible as my story?

May 3
Do Not Judge

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. Matthew 7:1

When I think of judgment, I remember a scene I witnessed several times growing up. The parents of one of my friends had matching easy chairs in their living room with a small table between them. They would smoke, drink, and comment, usually critically, on whatever they saw on television, in the neighborhood, or standing in front of them. My image was of a self-appointed king and queen meting out judgment on their lowly subjects and rarely granting anything smacking of mercy. As one who was

sometimes the recipient of their sharp judgments, the memory is not a pleasant one. Even as I write this, decades later, I realize I am judging them in return, albeit posthumously. Interestingly, this is exactly what Jesus tells us will happen when we cast judgement on others – that we, too, will be judged.

I believe most Christians are aware of Jesus' instruction not to judge. What constitutes judgement, however, and whether casting judgement on another out of concern for his or her "salvation" creates a large divide among us. For example, if one truly believes that living outside of the Bible's behavioral guidelines condemns one to an eternity in hell, would not the loving thing be to tell a friend or family member that they need to repent? Of all the issues that turn people away from the Christian faith, however, the sense that we are overly judgmental is one of the most common. When a person sets foot inside a church and is accosted by language about salvation and other accusations that make them feel less than welcome or worthy of God's love, it is little wonder so many of our churches are struggling. Personally, I think Jesus tells us to tend to our own house, first.

There is a foundational reason why it is so difficult not to judge: our minds are designed to judge. We constantly categorize what we see, hear, feel, touch, and taste. This is good, that is bad; this is beautiful, that is ugly; this is worthy of my attention, that is not; this is safe, that is dangerous. These judgments are usually made much too quickly to know anything or anyone at more than the shallowest of levels. Yet, this is what our minds do. In that sense, Jesus is asking us to overcome our natural tendency to judge – both for ourselves and for others. More accurately, Jesus asks us to become more discriminating about how and when to act on our judgments.

One common and frequently overlooked form of judgment is gossip – saying things about a person in his or her absence that we would not say in their presence. Gossip is often malicious, but not always. I sometimes catch myself saying things about someone in a way I would not say to him or her face to face. Usually, I am not trying to hurt them, but rather to be funny. I attempt to be funny, however, at someone else's expense.

There is an even more important reason to be careful about casting judgment, however. That which we find most worthy of judgment against another is almost certainly a reflection of a similar trait or tendency within our self. If we are not consciously aware of that particular tendency, we likely have repressed our awareness of it, often out of shame. Bringing those types of issues to light and acknowledging them can be painful. The old saying that when I point a finger at you there are three pointing back at me is often truer than we care to admit.

When it comes to our own shortcomings, we desire mercy for ourselves more readily that we typically grant it to others. When we see something worthy of judgment in another, perhaps our first thoughts should be, "What within me is reacting so negatively to this behavior? Am I guilty of the same thing?" Once we have those answers, we may not be so quick to judge. No one is perfect, but we seldom improve or grow from the harsh judgments of others. Allowing our repressed memories and immature tendencies to rise to conscious awareness helps us to transform those hidden parts of ourselves into something good. Somehow, that transformation also seems magically to transform others, or at least our perception of others. Because the mercy of withholding judgement is something we desire for ourselves, Jesus suggests we grant the same to others.

Journaling focus: What are a few strategies to help me become less judgmental of others?

May 4
Hope Springs Eternal

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. 1 Peter 3:15b-16a

There is a huge difference between hope and wishful thinking. Hope is grounded in knowledge and experience, unlike uninformed wishful thinking. At Christmas we may *wish* for a new video gaming system, nice jewelry, or a family board game, but we *hope* for love in our families, rebirth in ourselves, and peace on earth. This is the essential difference between hope and a wish. Most of what we wish for is temporal, where our hopes look to the long-term.

The leaders we most willingly choose to follow are full of hope. No one is inspired by a pessimist – cynically amused, maybe, but not inspired. Most pessimists prefer to be called *realists*, meaning their view of life is based on what they consider reality. Unfortunately for themselves and others, their view of reality tends to be a small, fatalistic one. Pessimists and realists believe that for every good thing that happens to us, something bad must occur in order to balance things out. When life is good, we need to be cautious because there will be hell to pay later. Theirs is a philosophy of limitation, not a recognition of the abundance from which we were created.

Certainly, we need to be aware that with life comes death, with joy

comes sorrow, and with light comes dark. They are parts of the same reality. It is not that we must pay for our joy with sorrow, but in order to fully experience joy we must also embrace the sorrow that is sometimes a part of it. It is when we refuse to fully experience life that it hurts, that it leaves us sad, or that we feel we cannot go on. Joy does not bring sorrow any more than day brings night. They are manifestations of the same reality. They go together. One cannot exist without the other, so trying to separate them or experience one without the other is impossible. Hope does not tell us to be wary of life because death always follows. Hope assures us that with life comes death and *both* are good, when experienced to the fullest.

Looking to the future with a confident hope frees us to live fully in the present. We *know* the future will bring its blessings, challenges, and solutions, so we need not allow tomorrow's possible calamities or yesterday's injustices prevent us from fully experiencing today. From God's perspective, the future is now, and it is good. Because we exist in time and space, we co-create the details and experience them as they unfold.

When the day comes that our physical body gives out, we *hope* for a new life that retains everything good from our days on earth and places it in a new life beyond. For those who know the Gospel, this is not wishful thinking; rather, it is the hope that is in us, rooted in our knowledge of and experience with God. Like a spring continually fed by an unseen source of pure water, life springs eternal; and life is good. *That* is the source of our hope.

Journaling focus: List three current wishes. List three current hopes. How do they differ?

May 5
Faith Heals

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak., for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.
*M*atthew 9:20-22

The relationship between healing and faith is difficult to understand, impossible to predict, and a connection Jesus mentions many times throughout his ministry. He often healed someone, only to give credit to that person's faith. I used to believe Jesus was being modest. After all, he seems like a humble man. He credits faith with healing so many times,

however, that I find myself rethinking his modesty. Dare we believe that faith truly does heal?

I have tried to apply faith with instances of serious illness in people I know, but with ambiguous results. I remember praying hard for my mother's recovery from a stroke. She had been a healthy, determined woman, and I could easily visualize her fighting her way back to health. But she never did. Rather, her health steadily declined, and she passed away ten weeks later. The times when an unlikely healing has occurred, and there have been a few, I find myself wondering if it was a God-healing or a talented physician. Clearly, God works through the hands and hearts of God's people. If I were keeping score, however, of the number of times I believe my faith brought the outcome I prayed for, faith would be losing by a landslide. Is this due to my weak faith, or my lack of understanding about healing?

Not all healings are equal, nor all they all physical. When we pray for healing, we are generally praying for restoration to a prior state of being. We pray for what we, in our limited understanding, believe to be the best outcome. Do we possess the perspective to know what is best in any situation? There are numerous examples of physical healings in the Bible, but we can assume all those people died of something, eventually. There are also instances where God does not heal the physical ailment of a faithful person – Paul comes to mind. Paul used his infirmity as a reminder of his total reliance on grace. Even Jesus, the night before his crucifixion, prays for God to "take this cup from me." Ultimately, he yields by saying, "Not my will, but yours be done." I have often wondered why God did not rescue Jesus from the cross. But wait, Jesus was rescued via his resurrection. He was not, however, rescued in the way we humans would have requested.

If faith truly does heal, there is a lot of pressure on us to be well. Wellness becomes a faith issue that is under our control, instead of our being victimized by illnesses we can do nothing about. Most of us find a comfortable balance between faith healing and utilizing more traditional forms of health care, depending on the malady. Either way, faith is our connection to God. It is the thread by which our humanity connects to the divine. Faith assures us there is more to life than what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell – there is more beyond our human knowledge and efforts. Would God grant us a desire contrary to our ultimate good? As a parent, there were many times I refused to grant a desire of my children, knowing they were better off without having their wish granted.

What is out there, and how and when it may or may not bless us remains a mystery. Dare we believe that faith heals? Dare we believe it does not?

Journaling focus: What types of signs would be required to strengthen my faith?

May 6
Alone Time is Important

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:5-6

Growing up, I learned to pray with others. My father prayed before family meals, and our pastor led us in prayer at church. The Lord's Prayer, spoken collectively, was a common fixture in worship. There was also a bedtime prayer, spoken in unison with a parent:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I remember sitting in church as a child wondering how the preacher could possibly think of so much to pray about. The prayers seemed to drone on, and it was very difficult to remain focused. I kept my eyes clamped shut as long as I could, afraid someone might catch me peeking. Prayer was not very comforting in those days.

I am not certain when I learned to pray by myself, but however it happened, time alone with God quickly became my favorite method of prayer. I am an introvert, so time alone is a necessary part of my life, anyway. Jesus modeled alone time with God for us. Many times in the Gospels, he goes off alone to pray. Like spending time with a close, intimate friend, words are not always necessary in prayer. In fact, I find more of my prayers as I age to be of the silent type. I have no idea what I could verbalize to God that God does not already know better than I can put into words. There are times, however, when a spoken prayer can help us organize whatever is on our mind. Even so, being in God's presence is enough. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought." I find this to be true. In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing." This seems to be an encouragement toward wordless prayer – staying in communion with God at all times, but not necessarily with words. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel always. When necessary, use words." This applies to prayer, too. We can remain in constant contact with God without a constant verbal dialogue. In fact, our dialogue makes it impossible to hear what God might be saying to us.

My point is not that we should always pray silently; rather it is that *alone-time* with God is important. We need worry less about *what* we say and more about being present. Whether in meditation, contemplation, reflection, yoga, or any number of other methods, a quiet mind attunes our

awareness to God's presence. If Jesus needed quiet, alone time with God in order to center himself, recharge, and reconnect in the days prior to television and the internet, think how much more we need it today.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I rearrange my life in order to make space for alone-time with God?

May 7
Words are Metaphors

Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. James 1:21b-22

There are many words that, when spoken to another, create a visual sense of shared meaning, at least in general terms. For example, if I say, "I see a large *rock*," you would envision something hard, inanimate, and bigger than a closed fist. The word *rock* is a metaphor for the broad swath of reality that we call rocks, but the word is *not* the reality. There is another category of words that point to something less tangible. For example, if I say, "I *love* her," or "That is a *beautiful* tree," you might be able to imagine the emotion I express but there will be little or no shared visualization of the detail behind the word. The important point here is that words are metaphors, or our *names* for different things we encounter in our environment. Words are *not* the things themselves. Much of the information in the Bible falls into the latter category of words – those that point us in a direction but cannot give us the individualistic experience or expression they describe. We see this manifesting in our relationships, where I use certain words to express something and my partner hears those same words but envisions something very different.

While many believe the Bible is the *inspired* word of God, as 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us, God did not *dictate* the Bible to its writers. I believe the writers had a wordless God-encounter that they graciously put into words, to the best of their ability, for our sake. The words recorded were their own, however, not God's. Verbally, God is mostly silent; yet God inspires us with regularity. Trying to contain that inspiration in words to share with others is difficult at best. Trying to describe that inspiration in a way that allows others to attain the experience is essentially impossible.

So, if words are only metaphors, dare we believe anything in the Bible? Certainly so! Metaphors are full of meaning and truth, providing

important context for facts, which too often leave us feeling cold and confused. Being a metaphor does not mean something is not true – in fact, metaphors may express truth more accurately and on several different levels. Attempting to understand something deep and powerful from a verbal description, as opposed to an actual experience, often leads to a shallow and partial understanding. We may understand the *letter* of the communication but completely miss its *meaning*. We must work to understand a metaphor. It invites us to wrestle with it, pondering what it says about God, about life, and about us. Seldom will answers come quickly or easily, and our understandings may change at different stages of our lives.

The beauty and purpose of metaphor is that it leads us on a journey of discovery, as opposed to a one-time destination. The goal of spiritual development is not to attain an intellectual understanding of the words, but to *experience* the Living Word to which the words point. Metaphors are much better suited to this latter task. The Living Word is implanted within every being, as the writer of James tells us. We need not strive to understand that Word as much as to allow it to express itself within and around us.

Journaling focus: What is one metaphor I hold onto that distorts the experience it describes?

May 8
The Way Out is Through

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."
Luke 23:34a

"I shouted out, 'who killed the Kennedys?' When after all, it was you and me."
Sympathy for the Devil, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards[32]

We live in a violent time. Pundits of every persuasion speak with certainty about the causes and cures for the current violence. I am unconvinced. What I am listening for and not hearing is someone recognizing and accepting personal responsibility for a solution to the violence.

Long ago, I was taught that one cannot solve a problem without accepting some level of responsibility for its creation. Once I recognize my part in a problem, I am better able to begin making meaningful changes that may actually have a positive impact. The change, however, must begin

within me. If not, I join the legions of complainers, finger-pointers, handwringers, pontificators, and other reactionaries that only perpetuate the problem, often with the best of intentions. As Christians, we have the audacity to claim Jesus took the sins of the world – past, present, and future – to the cross to purchase our salvation. Do we understand the nature of that sacrifice, however? Do we know how to apply it in practical ways? One lesson of the cross is how to participate in the reconciling of social ills. What Jesus modeled for us is this: *The way out is through*.

Jesus, an entirely innocent victim, knew a horrible death he did not deserve was waiting. He would endure the worst torture that humanity knew how to inflict at the time. The social systems of Jesus' day, like today, were unjust and violent. They wrongly believed, as we believe, that progress – however the culture defines it – comes by force. Jesus recognized the corrupt underlying system and, in his humanity, refused to participate in or perpetuate it. Once accused, he did not get defensive or try to shift the condemnation onto others. He knew the only way out of the situation – to begin a social healing process – was to accept his condemnation, take up his cross, and go *through* it. In that act of civil disobedience, Jesus modeled what happens when we go through a difficult challenge – we come out the other side changed. All efforts to avoid, go around, or deny a problem leave it for another day.

What are my roles in today's issues? Where are my actions toward others discriminatory and unjust? Which of my cultural assumptions are repressive? How do my words exclude others from kinship as fellow children of God? Specifically, what am I doing, or *not doing*, that contributes to the problem? As a Christian, American (the only category of American without an ethnically based prefix), heterosexual, white male, I have no significant experience with discrimination. I am near the top of the socio-economic ladder by accident of birth. Until I understand and accept my role in perpetuating a violent, discriminatory culture, I remain firmly a part of the problem – without ever raising a fist or pulling a trigger.

From the cross, Jesus looked with mercy on those who inflicted the horrible injustice upon him and asked that God forgive them. They did not know what they were doing; and neither do we. The spiral of violence we find ourselves in will only be solved when a critical mass of people accept responsibility for their part, say "Enough," take up their cross, and go *through* the problem, including acceptance of its inevitable consequences.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only love can do that."[33] In these dark times, only love can carry us through to the other side. We underestimate how rare that sort of love is, however, let alone the level of sacrifice and focus it requires. Not all of us will survive the challenge, at least not physically, but deeply imbedded social ills require much sacrifice for the future good. Jesus showed us the way. Non-violent

leaders like Dr. King and Gandhi gave their lives for it. They faced evil head on, absorbed the worst evil could throw at them, and came out triumphant on the other side.

Journaling focus: What is a situation I am currently trying to avoid? Why am I reluctant to go through it?

May 9
The Road to Nowhere is the Road to Everywhere

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground.
Isaiah 42:16

Many years ago, a friend and mentor introduced me to Eastern philosophy. Much of it seemed nonsensical at first. It was full of circular, impossible-to-fathom sayings that were intriguing, but seemed not to lead anywhere. Being a child of the West, I learned to discern fact from fiction, right from wrong, north from south. There were important distinctions to recognize and lines to be drawn between this and that. The great Eastern teachers' lessons were mostly vague and noncommittal. What drew me to their words, however, was the way they grabbed something inside of me and held on until I engaged, like a wrestling match with one's shadow. A paraphrase of one of my favorite sayings (from an unremembered author) is: "If you cannot find happiness where you are standing, where do you expect to wander in search of it?" In retrospect, that sounds exactly like the sort of thing Jesus would say. Of course, Jesus *was* from the Middle East.

Many of us feel we simply must change our physical location, our job, or our significant other in order to find happiness or personal fulfillment. Sometimes, as in cases of professional opportunities or abusive relationships, that may be true. If we have always dreamed of living near an ocean or in the mountains, staying in Kansas may not be a good choice. The point, however, is that happiness, fulfillment, and contentment are primarily internal states that have little to do with our external environment. Often, when we feel we simply must go somewhere else, we are only running from something inside ourselves that will follow us and manifest again, no matter how far away we run. At some point, we are better off to stay put, honestly and openly reflect on our life, and take the road to nowhere.

The road within is not an actual road; but it is a journey – a journey

of self-discovery. Eastern philosophy helped me understand the importance of looking within for the sources of love, strife, strength, and life in ways that my Western upbringing seemed to disavow. Virtual roads to happiness extend in every direction from where we stand at any given moment. These roads are internal, and we find them as we face our own demons and learn to be content with what we have, even as we strive for more. Happiness and contentment are not *out there,* somewhere; they are always *in here*. Our creator planted them where they lurk closer than our next breath. It may seem like bad news that we cannot run from ourselves. The good news is that we take the road to happiness with us wherever we go, even and especially on the road to nowhere.

Journaling focus: In what important aspect in my life do I tend to look external to myself for satisfaction?

May 10
Honoring Our Parents

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." Exodus 20:12

When I was young, I thought my parents were awesome. They were so smart, strong, and always there when I needed them. As a teenager I thought my parents were completely out of touch with reality. What little they knew was from another era that bore little relevance to my world. And they were everywhere I did not want them to be. As an adult I began to realize their knowledge wasn't as dated as I once thought. I also understood their presence around me protected me from much I could not see. However, I never fully appreciated the incredible challenge of parenting until having children of my own.

In today's passage from Exodus we are told to honor our parents "so that (our) days may be long." This can be interpreted in at least a couple of different ways. Long days are what the parents of many teenagers experience – arguments, petty bickering, excessive drama, late nights wondering who, what, where and when. Cosmic justice occurs when challenging children give birth to children of their own; and the grandparents smile knowingly…

Another interpretation is that honoring our parents is a vital component for a long and fruitful life. We honor the role they played in caring for us from birth to adulthood, standing up for us when no one else

would, loving us at our most unlovable, however imperfectly they may have played their role. Our parents are our earthly models for God, so honoring good parenting is also honoring to God. Both masculine and feminine traits were created from God and both are required for a healthy upbringing. Unfortunately, not everyone has the benefit of strong mother and father figures and must seek to fill those voids with non-biological role models.

Our parental role models provide the vital feminine and masculine influences we so desperately need—the nurturing, protection, gentle touch, encouragement, and unconditional love. When I remember how my parents filled a God-ordained role in my life I rejoice in their willingness to sacrifice for me. Their influence will be passed to my children, and to my children's children. There is an eternal impact to parenthood, which should come as no surprise since parents are one of the primary vehicles through which God cares for and blesses us, even when the example they set is one we choose not to follow.

Journaling focus: How has my relationship with my parents shaped my view of God?

May 11
Brokenness Leads to Wholeness

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:17

The eggshell must be broken at the right time for the chick to emerge. The caterpillar must be broken and bound for the butterfly to emerge. The skin of reptiles must split open for them to molt into their next stage of life. And, painful as it often is, our current state of life must be broken in order for us to move to the next stage of our development. Life is a series of deaths and rebirths and being broken is at the heart of the process. I do not enjoy it; but I can either be broken willingly, or I can fight it tooth and nail, but broken I will be.

The central problem is that a full and satisfied heart lacks the motivation to change. When we are satisfied, we fight to maintain the status quo. We do whatever we can to minimize change, even when a change is necessary to improve the lot of our self and others. In political contests, one candidate is often portrayed as the "change" agent and the other as the "establishment." The former makes the case that the political system is broken and needs to be rebuilt. The latter claims the current system is good

enough to provide a solid foundation from which to improve and only requires strategic tweaking. In many cases, who we favor depends on the level of brokenness of our current state in life. While I do not advocate change for the sake of change, brokenness, in its time, is necessary for the sake of growth.

I am not advocating that we break a perfectly good life – destruction is a process that happens naturally enough, with or without our prodding. When we feel the status quo of our life starting to quiver, however, it may be time to embrace a change. The wavering may be the Spirit moving in our lives in a way that will lead us to a new level of wholeness. Sometimes, that may mean breaking away from negative influences by ending a toxic relationship, leaving a disrespectful employer, or receiving help for an addiction. Other times, we need to break away from our own inertia by intentionally committing ourselves to a new relationship, forming new, healthier habits, or beginning a regular prayer or meditation practice.

Sometimes we have already been broken, but we have not yet embraced the new possibilities. We, like Humpty Dumpty, have fallen off the wall, and we expend energy and resources trying to rebuild what once *was* instead of taking stock of what is *now*. Being broken opens a new world of possibilities for us, but we will never see the possible until we willingly let go of the shattered past. An old saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." There are times, however, when we do need to break something in order to move ahead in life. At the very least, when we feel unavoidable change coming, we can perhaps find peace knowing whatever the shape of the post-change life, there will certainly be new opportunities and blessings.

Journaling focus: What needs to be broken in my life? How could I go about breaking it?

May 12
Sin is Separation

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:1-2

At an early age, I learned I was a sinner. I believed my thoughts and actions were unacceptable to God, and the only thing I could do about

it was to try to hide my awful nature. I pretended to be a "good, little boy" to friends and relatives, and especially to people at church, so they would consider me one of them – the *good* and the *chosen* – instead of the wretched misfit I thought myself to be. I am not certain how I came to believe I was such a terrible person – I suspect it was at church. I do not recall my parents instilling an abhorrent self-belief, but sin was a weekly topic in the church where I grew up. That God knew my every thought and watched my every action convinced me I would likely spend eternity in hell. As an adult, I cautiously believed I was no worse than other folks I knew, so if I were condemned to hell, I would be in good company. I realized that everyone sins, and sin is a common and shared characteristic, rather than something that was a struggle only for me.

Today, however, I view sin differently. Viewing sin as *separation* opened an entirely new understanding of sin for me: Sin is what sets us apart – apart from God and apart from each other. When I sin against you, I do something that divides us, something that harms our relationship. In order to restore our relationship, I must confess my sin (admit I did wrong), repent (meaning "turn around" or change or apologize), and seek your forgiveness (ask you to reengage our relationship). That sounds like a pretty natural and common progression in any relationship worth maintaining.

Traditionally, we track the "original" sin to the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve defying God's command not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their punishment was expulsion from the Garden, where they had enjoyed a direct, unfettered relationship with God. In other words, they were *separated* from God. I now believe the original sin was not the eating of the fruit, but the leaving of the Garden itself – their *willful separation* from God. The very act of a soul taking on flesh and blood and becoming human is an act of separation – a *sinful* act, if you will – because as humans we enter a reality that appears individualistic and separate. From our human vantage point, we cannot see God, nor can we see our interconnectedness with each other. We believe ourselves to be separate, independent entities, and that separation is the illusion at the root of most of our problems. In my opinion, that illusion of separation is the true original sin.

At times, we Christians are quick to point out the sins of others and equally remiss in pointing out the divine grace and forgiveness that is as close as their next breath. In the very act of judging another, we commit sin by driving a wedge between another and ourselves. Sin, because it creates division with others, is its own punishment. God need not punish us further. In fact, God reaches out to rejoin with us. When I was a child, I had a miserable self-image because I did not feel worthy to be in close relationship with others. Yet, close relationship is what we were created for and is the reality behind the illusion. Without it, we are miserable.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I separate myself from others and from God?

May 13
Sin is its own Punishment

Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you. John 5:14c

In my opinion, there are many misconceptions about sin. One common misconception is that sin is offensive to God. We are created in the image of God, and it is an inescapable consequence of our physical human being that we sin. God may not be amused, but God is not surprised. A second misconception is that God keeps track of our sins and, like a big Santa-in-the-Sky, one sin too many puts us on the dreaded Bad Child List. Another misconception is that we must somehow be purified of our sinful nature in order to be loved and accepted by God.

For me, one way to view sin is like hitting my thumb with a hammer. There is no one to blame except me, and the resulting pain serves as an effective teacher to become more attentive in the future. As I wrote in yesterday's reflection, sin is that which separates us from God and others. God does not abandon us in our sin, but *we separate ourselves* from our awareness of God's loving presence as a natural consequence of our sin. If we believe, as I do, that God lives in, through, and with us, then God must suffer *with* us in our sin. If we become obese and live with diabetes or other health issues, God suffers with us. If we commit a crime that lands us in jail, God joins us in our cell. Similarly, when we suffer an illness or condition with no traceable connection to anything we have ever done, God does not abandons us. So, the consequences of sin are never just borne by us because God shares our burdens with us. God never *leaves* us, however, nor does God love us any less passionately. It is only our awareness of God's love that waxes and wanes.

Frequently, it is our suffering that motivates us to make needed changes. The Gospel is an invitation to grow toward Christ, to become evermore Christ-like. Paradoxically, our sin – at least the pain of separation it causes – motivates us to grow in ways that help us better experience God's presence. God neither wants nor wills our sin or suffering. But whenever we hurt, God crawls into the hole of our pain – or onto the cross – with us. Contrary to how it may feel at the time, God never runs *from* our suffering, God runs *to* it. And in our times of darkness, we find ourselves

craving an ever nearer experience of the divine. We are motivated to transform those actions that separate us from what is good – our sin – and grow toward a life more expressive of loving union with God and others. Because sin is its own punishment, God neither keeps track of our sin, nor specifically punishes us for it. The price of sin is automatically included in the act.

Journaling focus: In what ways does seeing sin as separation change my former views of sin?

May 14
Meekness is not Weakness

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

Among the definitions for the word *meek* are docile, spiritless, obsolete, and overly submissive or compliant. These do not sound particularly holy, given that Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth. The word *meek,* however, can also mean humble, gentle, and kind. As we wonder why Jesus held meekness in such high esteem, the latter definitions may lead us to a better answer. Certainly, Jesus modeled these positive characteristics of meekness.

To say that the meek will inherit the earth seems like a paradox of giant proportions. As we look around our world today, we see a small percentage of people controlling the largest share of the earth's bounty. My perception of the very rich is hardly meek. I see people who are bold, aggressive, assertive, opportunistic, and hard-driving risk-takers. While some may be humble, gentle, and kind in their private lives, their stereotyped public persona is very different.

Meekness, in any of its forms, is not encouraged in personal development by our current culture. We have popular, anti-meekness bits of folk wisdom like, "Go for the gusto," or "You only live once," or "Just do it!" I suspect the type of meekness Jesus advocated for was not the sniveling, whiney, frightened, spiritless, spineless sort we often associate with the word today. Rather, the meek who will inherit the earth are the strong but humble, gentle, and kind people who place others' needs above their own. These are common traits found in women and men who model their lives after Jesus.

One difficulty in understanding this concept is our understanding of what it means to *inherit* the earth. If our desired inheritance is one of vast

riches, nice homes, fancy cars, lavish clothing, or a private jet, then meekness is not likely to get us there. These riches are transient, in that they do not last beyond our time on earth. There are other riches uniquely of the earth, however, that imprint on our souls and, I believe, shape our existence beyond this life. For example, enjoying a stunning sunset, watching the full moon rise over a still ocean, experiencing long-term, deeply loving relationships, making a positive difference in someone else's life, and working for causes greater than our own. These are opportunities this life gives that are available to all but are only sought and valued by those with a propensity towards meekness. Only the meek will inherit the blessings of these more lasting gifts of the earth – everyone else will forego them for something more material.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I seek to become meeker in the way Jesus was meek?

May 15
Graduation as Death and Resurrection

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Luke 24:36-37

My son moved out of his fraternity house following his graduation from college. After four years at the University of Kansas, after completing the many celebrations, and after the honors and congratulatory hugs, it was time to move on. When I asked this ever-optimistic young man about it, he declared it a sad day. He said goodbye to the Beta house and to the 22 members of his pledge class, and while he will undoubtedly see both again, it will not be the same. Although Reid was ready to move on, there was a somber sense of nostalgia that lingered, as is often the case whenever we move from one phase of life to another.

We are not always ready for the graduations of our lives. Some just happen in the normal course of living. Some are expected, while others catch us unprepared. College, for my son, was a four-year *experience*. That was the way it was planned, and that was the way it happened. He did not necessarily seek a life change, nor did he seek to avoid it. The change just happened, and the end came quickly enough that perhaps it caught him off guard. Many milestones in our lives are that way: marriages, job changes,

health challenges, the loss of a loved one. Ready or not, we "die" to one phase of life and are born into another – like Jesus, we are resurrected into a new version of our life.

Starting over can be exciting and it can be hard – both at the same time. I remember the transition from elementary to middle school: transitioning from being a part of the biggest, smartest, and most in-control students to being the smallest, dumbest, and least in-control – at least that was how it felt. Having comfortable surroundings change is seldom welcomed. Moving on due to a graduation of some sort, however, should also involve moving up. We find ourselves in a new situation, but with the knowledge and experience gained from the past. We are changed, and we will never be the same.

It is interesting how Jesus, following his crucifixion and resurrection, appeared to his disciples a number of times and was usually not recognized. It was Jesus, but it was the *resurrected* Jesus – the graduated Jesus, if you will. I imagine it was similar to seeing a formerly close friend one has not seen for many years. We must look twice and consider carefully in order to remember who this is and in what context we knew them. The person has changed, although vestiges of their past remain. We are products of our many graduations. Life moves on and invites us to do the same. Death and rebirth are the cycles of life, as inescapable as the cycles of day and night, winter and spring. It is life, and though sometimes sad, life is good.

Journaling focus: How have my graduations shaped the life I have and the person I am today?

May 16
Judgment is Self-Incriminating

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Matthew 7:1-5

I remember being taught that when I point a finger at someone, three fingers point back at me. It was a lesson in judgment – as in, be careful when tempted to criticize others. We are all mostly blind to our own shortcomings. Author William Wharton writes: "What we all tend to complain about most in other people are those things we don't like about ourselves."[34]

I am ashamed to confess how judgmental I can be. I not only judge the words and actions of others; I judge their motives. There is no way for me to honestly know the motivations of another. As individuals and as a society, we gossip ruthlessly, we bully, and we discriminate. Rendering harsh judgments has become such a common and accepted practice we hardly realize we are doing it. When we judge behind another's back, we do it not so much to tear others down as to build ourselves up. How did we become so insecure as to build our own self-esteem at the expense of others?

The tendency to judge others is not new. Two thousand years ago, Jesus spoke harshly about casting judgment, telling his followers to attend to the "log" in their own eye before worrying about the "speck" in the eye of another. We will be judged by the same measure we use to judge others. He called us "hypocrites." None of us is perfect or righteous enough to stand in judgment of another, especially when that criticism is unfair and unfounded.

This is one reason why I grow weary of political campaigns – candidates consistently try to build themselves up by pronouncing judgments of unworthiness upon their opponents. The fact that I am so bothered by this, unfortunately, is probably an indication that I tend to do the same thing. Ugh. Perhaps it is like a balloon (filled with hot air) and being squeezed at one end, causing the other end to expand. Whenever I deny or repress undesirable parts of myself, those thoughts or actions enter my awareness through others.

One of the clearest commands of Jesus was to love each other. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them."[35] This may capture the core evil of judgment – that we cannot love and judge at the same time. Perhaps, instead of criticizing another, we should be looking within for something we can improve in ourselves. In the words of Fr. Richard Rohr, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better."[36]

Journaling focus: Upon whom in my life am I most likely to cast unfair judgement? Why?

May 17
Our Possessions Possess Us

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

My wife and I are blessed to live in a large house on five acres of land. It is located in the rolling hills south of Lawrence, Kansas, among a beautiful mix of field and forest. We enjoy stunning sunsets on a regular basis and can view much of the night sky that is invisible to our city brethren. Even when our children were home, we had plenty of room for everyone and everyone's *stuff*. Musical instruments, clothes, books, music, furniture – you name it, we probably have it.

As I age, I notice that much of what I was excited to possess in earlier days requires an amount of time and resources that is disproportionate to its current value to me. So many things I simply had to have in my younger years now have me wondering what I was thinking. Even trying to thin out the excess, however, is a difficult process. First, one never knows when something might come in handy – or when a friend or family member might need it. Second, there is sentimental value in much of what we have. It is difficult to throw things like old photographs away, no matter how old and faded they have become, and no matter that we cannot remember the names of the people in the pictures. Third, passing things on to others means cleaning, moving, and organizing. It is often easier to hoard (or to leave the problem to the children).

Jesus warned us not to store up for ourselves treasures of the earth. Actually, I think his point has to do with what we *value,* more than what we possess. If we keep things we do not need, however, we are assigning a value to them. There are reasons that holding onto stuff in excess of our need is inconsistent with Christian teaching. First, there are those who really *need* some of what gathers dust in our homes. Second, there are maintenance costs associated with everything we keep, and those costs are resources unavailable for other, more important uses. Third, and most important in my opinion, *our possessions possess us.*

In too many ways, I am a slave to my possessions. When I spend my weekends maintaining my large yard or trying to keep the contents of our big house in order, I have neither time nor energy to dedicate to other needs of my family, friends, and community. If I must first rearrange my old stuff to make room for new stuff, I accomplish nothing of value – for myself or others. If my heart – my time, my attention, and my God-given resources – is consumed in caring for my *stuff*, where, when, and how can I

have a heart for others? It is a challenging spiritual dilemma, and one I will likely wrestle with for the rest of my life.

Journaling focus: Which of my possessions most possess me? In what ways?

May 18
Non-Violence is Non-Negotiable

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Matthew 5:38-39

I do not know how I missed it, but Jesus modeled unwavering non-violence. That would not be an issue for me, except that Jesus' most frequently repeated directive was "Follow me." Based on Christian teachings, as recorded in the Gospels, if we are to be followers of Christ, non-violence is non-negotiable. I cannot imagine any way that we can justify violence of any sort as being consistent with Jesus' teaching. Other parts of the Bible can be read as condoning violence, but not the teachings or the life of Jesus.

We were born into violent times, however, so what are we to do, turn the other cheek? Apparently so. What about wars? What about those in our military, charged to protect our national interests in sometimes-violent ways? Let me assert that I do not condemn those serving in our military, past or present. These faithful and brave servants do what is necessary for the rest of us to live as we do, and God bless them for it. Even so, how do we reconcile any sort of violence with the Christian teaching of non-violence? I think the key lies within us, as individuals, in our personal lives. Soldiers do not create the conditions that lead to violence; leaders do that. And we elect those leaders. Ultimately, the responsibility is yours and mine, and in more ways than one.

Violence is a daily occurrence on our streets, in our workplaces, and in our homes. I am told that a shared characteristic of essentially every violent person is a violent upbringing. Typically, a violent or absent father, who himself likely experienced a violent childhood, demonstrated that violence is how one gets what one wants. If things are not going as one wishes, a few loud, nasty words, a punch, or a weapon may help bring the desired outcome. Road rage, bullying, name-calling, and gossip are all current examples of indirect violence. We justify them as not *really* hurting

anyone, but is that true? At the very least, our harsh reactions, even when they are not physical, contribute to the violent environment of our world.

Violence begins at home. If we are to manifest a non-violent world, it must begin with our self. Widespread non-violence will not happen in my lifetime, and probably not in my children's lifetimes, either. But it can and must begin with me – and you. When I feel my anger or frustration beginning to build, I need to examine my choices prior to reacting. What is the most appropriate response that does not lead to or perpetuate violence? How can I serve to end what is likely the latest in a long string of violent acts, possibly dating back many generations? In what ways can I commit to physical, emotional, and intellectual non-violence in my own part of the world? Within my heart is where non-violence must first manifest.

Journaling focus: Where do I find violence manifesting in my thoughts, beliefs, and actions?

May 19
There is a Third Way

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." John 8:7

I can imagine the excitement building in Jerusalem. The crowds were ready for some gruesome entertainment. A woman had been caught in the act of adultery, and the Law was clear – she should be stoned to death. Stoning was a religious mandate that the crowds could participate in. The pious, religious authorities were there, and the people were ready to begin, stones in hand. There was one problem, however – Jesus. The Pharisees, hoping to trap Jesus into denying the legitimacy of the Law of Moses, asked him whether the woman should be stoned. Jesus bent over and wrote something on the ground. When they continued pressing him, he suggested that anyone without sin should throw the first stone. One by one, the people dropped their stones and walked away.

Jesus modeled a *third way*, or a higher truth. The Law was clear, and the Hebrew people believed their salvation was dependent on obedience to that Law. Jesus did not challenge the Law. Instead, he transformed the situation by challenging the justice of one sinner punishing another. It was a brilliant move. It was a third way that did not deny the Law, nor did it condone the woman's behavior. It forced everyone present to examine his or her own lives and actions. There may not have been other adulterers in

the crowd, but there were no sinless purists, either.

We tend to reduce our choices to two options – right or wrong, light or dark, male or female, condone or condemn. There is a significant portion of each day that is neither light nor dark, however, but somewhere in between. The same is true for our lives overall. There are circumstances that are not clearly right or wrong, depending on the perspective from which they are experienced. When we narrow our choices to two, supporting one and denying the other, we limit the possibilities of our existence and perpetuate an either-or world. Thus, the importance of the third way.

Finding the Third Way is seldom quick or easy but is always inclusive and respectful of peoples and traditions. The third way may not be any one particular group's preferred way forward, but it will allow all people to progress. The third way may not achieve perfection, but it will move us closer to just and righteous solutions. One of the many shortcomings of our two-option focus is that we become more vested in defending our position than in solving our problems. When the only tool you have in your possession is a rock, your options are limited by the tool at hand.

Journaling focus: Where might I begin in finding third way solutions to my challenges with others?

May 20
Marginalized Lives Matter

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Matthew 25:34b-36,40b

A marginalized person is one who is at the edges of society – not outside *per se,* but not exerting influence or experiencing the blessing of full inclusion, either. Marginalized people need advocates, or people firmly within the privileged societal circles to work on their behalf. If they have no such representation, they often end up forgotten, shunned, and disenfranchised.

Before proceeding further, let me confess that I a member of the

privileged class who perpetuates the current cultural norms – fully abled, white, heterosexual, American, and male. I write this to explore ways to better understand how to be a part of the solution. In the years prior to my writing this reflection, the *Black Lives Matter* movement formed in reaction to the marginalization of people of color. Though given equal rights under the law in the 1960's, the arrest and incarceration rates, unemployment and murder rates, discrimination and racial profiling, and the prevalence of poverty remain unacceptably high for the African-American race as a whole. Some tried to make the movement more inclusive by saying *All Lives Matter*, which is true, of course, but it misses the point. In his blog, Pierre Khawand writes, "When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority."[37] A society can only rise as high as it is willing to lift and include the least within it. In a truly just and fair world, there would be no need to focus more attention on certain segments. Unfortunately, that is not our world. All lives will matter when no lives are marginalized.

Marginalization is not limited to a specific race. The homeless, the poor, those whose first language is not English, the variously challenged, and the addicted, are all often kept on the fringes of our society, hidden from view as if they were invisible and unimportant. Who will stand for the marginalized? Who will advocate with power for the LGBTQ community, or the girl with the unwanted pregnancy – or her unborn child? Who will stand in the gap with sleeves rolled up and work for a just and caring world? *Jesus makes clear that it should be us.* In today's passage from Matthew, he lists the marginalized of his day and says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Can it be any clearer? I do not know how I can overlook it. When I walk by a person in an unfortunate circumstance, when I witness an injustice, when I see someone broken-hearted or lonely, I see a broken member of Jesus' family. That person is loved and cherished by the one I claim to follow. If I pass them by in their hour of need, I pass Jesus by in his.

We marginalize others when we fear them, when we ignore them, or when we treat them differently than we desire to be treated. One solution that is deceptively simple, but monumentally challenging, is written in Matthew 7:12: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you." As we do to others, we do also to Jesus.

Journaling focus: In what ways am I contributing to the marginalization of another?

May 21
There is Power in Powerlessness

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Our pain is exacerbated by feeling powerless over it. Physical or emotional hurt is one thing, but when there is nothing we can do to ease that pain – when we have no control over it – our level of misery increases significantly. When we work in a hostile environment, or when we live in abusive surroundings, we may not see many good alternatives. Further, we may believe the status quo is preferable to the unknown of leaving the current situation. While this holding to what is known may seem a logical choice, unpleasant as it is, that is exactly the issue that prevents us from stepping out of the old and into a new existence. Positive change requires us to give up something that is known and familiar.

The condition of powerlessness is an illusion, however, or at best is only a partial truth. The fact that we cannot exercise control over a situation does not mean there is no power at work for our good. Scripture and experience assure us that *all things* work together for good (Romans 8:28). Powerless situations may actually prove to us that the power we thought we had was imaginary. In reality, we are not nearly as powerful over the flow of our days as we believe. Certainly, we have influence over the impact our environment has on us, but time marches relentlessly on in ways we can do little to change. I remember a Superman movie where something disastrous happened and Superman made the earth reverse its orbit long enough to turn back time so he could change the outcome. We have no such power; we can only change our outlook and our interpretation of the experience. Experiencing powerlessness, however, forces us to rethink our view and understanding of the world. It is only when something we have held to be true and good is shown to be false that we open our mind to other, higher possibilities. It is only when life has become unbearably unpleasant that we willingly let go of the old and open ourselves to something new. We are creatures of comfort and familiarity, and we go to great lengths to preserve both, often at our own peril.

Powerlessness is an illusion, though, because the power of God's Spirit flowing through us is always at work. Indeed, without that Spirit, life is not possible. It is our spiritual oxygen. We will not knowingly experience the power of the Spirit, however, until we let go of the illusion that we are in control. As long as we feel in control, we are not open to surrendering to

a higher source of control. It is only in our powerlessness that we experience God's power.

Journaling focus: Where is one area of my life where lessening my need for control be beneficial?

May 22
Exclusion Leads to Implosion

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. Mark 2:15

I am not fluent in astrophysics, so forgive my pseudo-scientific musings, but there seems to be agreement that our universe is expanding at an ever-increasing rate. There are elements within our universe, however, that are contracting. Black holes are former stars that have died and imploded into themselves, retaining all their mass, but in an infinitely small space. Anything near a black hole is sucked into that hole and cannot escape, not even light.

Some churches remind me of a black hole. They worship what seems to me a very small God, and they exclude large swaths of humanity from those they say are redeemed. They believe themselves to be God's "chosen ones," and everyone else will burn in Hell. They identify certain words that must be said, rituals that must be practiced, rules that must be followed, and they are certain in their knowledge that they are right and everyone else is wrong. These churches, not unlike a black hole, suck everything into themselves so that nothing good can escape, not even love or light. I believe this type of exclusion would cause Jesus to roll over in his tomb (if he were still there).

Jesus was inclusive and rejected no one. In fact, much of the criticism he received had to do with the choices he made in followers. He hung out with sinners and those usually excluded from recognized social circles like prostitutes, tax collectors, fishermen, adulterers, lepers, and foreigners. In fact, the only group he consistently criticized was the religious elite who sought to exclude others from their pious circles. Jesus preferred to hang out on the fringes where he could invite those standing outside the circle into it, ever expanding the reach of inclusion into God's family.

Spirituality, in general, and Christianity, specifically, calls for an ever-increasing circle of invitation and inclusion. Inclusion is what love requires, even when those we include create discomfort, and even when we

may not approve of the lifestyles, beliefs, or practices we allow in. Whenever we question if someone is worthy of inclusion into our family circle we should ask, "Who would Jesus exclude?" The answer is that Jesus did not exclude anyone. We also need to remember the "circle" does not belong to us, anyway. The circle belongs to God, and it is only by God's grace that we are included within it. Whenever our reading of scripture leads us to exclude, we should read more carefully Jesus' examples of inclusion. Otherwise, we risk creating a spiritual black hole where the mass of our being collapses into itself. No love will enter, and no light will escape. The universe God created is expanding its reach. Are we expanding with it?

Journaling focus: What areas of my life would benefit from an expanded, more inclusive persepective?

May 23
Worshiping ≠ Following

Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also.
John 12:26

Twenty-one times in the four Gospels, Jesus says, "Follow me." Clearly, Jesus desired followers. In order to follow, we must commit to two types of action, especially when the leader is not physically present. First, the follower must *learn* the values and priorities of the one he or she professes to follow. Second, the follower must *act* in ways that are consistent with the priorities of the leader.

In the case of Christians, sometimes we confuse *following* Jesus with *worshiping* Jesus. Do you know how many times in the Bible that Jesus asks us to worship him? Zero. Follow me = 21; worship me = 0. Therefore, worshiping ≠ following. I find this bit of math interesting and telling. Jesus does mention the importance of worshiping the Father throughout the Gospels, but never once says we should worship *him*. Jesus apparently was more interested in our actions on his behalf than in our praise. Jesus spelled out a mission and vision for life that he felt needed to outlive his days on earth. It had nothing to do with enhancing his personal glory; but it had everything to do with tending to those he loved and cared for.

I believe this tells me that going to church on Sunday mornings, which is an act of worship, is not enough to claim myself as a follower of Jesus. I am not saying that attending worship does not have value or that it

cannot help us grow as followers of Christ. Worshiping is not enough, however, at least not by itself. A good church can help us understand what was important to Jesus, but it is up to us to act on that knowledge. Some of the most spiritual, Christ-following people I know choose not to attend church on a regular basis, if at all. If going to church on Sunday mornings does not motivate us to follow Jesus into our world, we may be missing the point. We might as well stay home. I believe our churches need to be more than houses of worship. They also need to provide an inspirational call to action to make our world a better place for everyone within it.

To worship is to revere, adore, or pay homage to someone. For many of us, worshiping is primarily an intellectual, non-self-sacrificing act, and that is not good enough for Jesus. Jesus wants our mind, yes, but not without our heart and body. A mind can think great thoughts and still accomplish nothing of value. A mind that guides the work of the heart and body into the world can accomplish great things. Jesus called for human *verbs,* not nouns – he was faith in action, and *acts* of faith are what he seeks from us.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do *today as an expression of being a follower of Christ?*

May 24
The Enemy is Within

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4:1-2

When I was growing up, there was a popular comedian named Flip Wilson. He would do something he knew he should not do and say, "The devil made me do it!" It was funny because everyone knew it was his own lack of self-control that was to blame. Today, there is significant disagreement about whether the devil is an actual being with power to lead us to evil acts. Because I have not had conscious experience with a power outside of myself encouraging me towards evil, I tend to believe there is no such separate entity. I believe we use the devil as an excuse for something within us that we are unwilling to acknowledge, like Flip Wilson, or we blame the devil for something external to us that we do not understand. Having said that, I know people who feel they have had an encounter with an outside, evil spirit, and I respect their perspective.

The issue at hand is not whether there is evil in the world, but

where that evil originates. I am not so naïve as to believe there is no evil in the world, but where does our evil enemy reside? Do evil acts come from people who are selfish, ignorant, or whose motives are malicious in the context of an unjust society, or do they originate from some external, spiritual being bent on our destruction? Clearly, I lean towards the former explanation. The latter simply gives us a reason to let ourselves off the hook when our behavior does not line up with expectations.

I believe the source of *all* evil – the birthplace of every enemy – is the misguided perception *by individuals* that we are separate, independent beings. Once we learn to recognize and honor our absolute interconnectedness with others, we will have no enemies, only reflections of our own internal conflicts. There will always be those who do not have our best interests at heart, but we will recognize them for what they are – immature, narcissistic, and misguided. They are fellow humans fighting their own internal demons, not necessarily evil incarnate. They need understanding and help (and sometimes avoidance), not hatred and scorn.

Our sense of an enemy stems from our lack of understanding of the significance of the other. We fear who and what we do not understand. As we begin to realize that what we see external to ourselves is largely a mirror reflecting our internal struggles and unfinished business, we begin to accept responsibility for our part in the evil that manifests in our world. We are connected to all that is, and all that is is connected to us, intimately and securely. The good news is that we can do something to change our external world by changing our internal world. The bad news is that wherever we go, our enemy goes with us.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life where I tend to blame others instead of looking within?

May 25
Resurrection is a Reoccurring Reality

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12:24

I do not know how I missed it, but resurrection is all around us, all of the time. To be sure, it is called by different names – the changing seasons, graduations, marriages, childbirth, death, sunrise, sunset – but the changing from one phase of life to another is constant. The cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth is forever present in us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

As a Christian, I associate resurrection with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What I missed, however, was that the same pattern is repeated in all of life as a natural, on-going process, albeit not always in such a dramatic fashion. The resurrection of Jesus is a core belief of Christianity, and the resurrection – having its central figure return to life from death – is the distinguishing feature separating it from other enduring religions.

Among Christians, we debate about how much of the biblical record we believe *literally,* but we tend to overlook how much of the lives recorded therein serve as a metaphor for our lives and the life around us. Science confirms that rebirth is an on-going process. Every cell in our bodies is replaced at least every seven years, so we are entirely remade many times over the course of a lifetime. Jesus talks about wheat in today's Bible passage. He says unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and "dies," it will forever remain only a single grain of wheat. Once the seed dies, however, it grows into a plant that forms a seed head with hundreds of grains of wheat. When those grains fall to the earth and die, thousands of grains of wheat result. Knowing that, did the initial grain of wheat die, or did it *transform* its existence? Clearly, it was transformed, and so are we whenever a part of us dies. When Jesus rose from the dead, he was not the same person in the same body. He had been transformed. Even his own disciples did not recognize him until he spoke.

The moral of resurrection is that change is good and necessary. New life cannot begin until an old life passes away. This is rebirth, and death is its prerequisite. It is what provides second chances and new starts. Much as we may feel safe and secure in our current life, nothing remains the same for long. We are designed for change, and we are led into numerous transformations over the course of a lifetime. We can change willingly, or we can go kicking and screaming. Either way, we will die to our old self and be reborn to a new one.

Journaling focus: What resurrections have I witnessed from the deaths I have experienced?

May 26
Unity ≠ Uniformity

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
John 17:22-23

As a young adult, I was fascinated with Eastern philosophy. A common theme was *unity,* or *oneness.* Writers spoke frequently of becoming *one* with God, or with one's environment, or with others. In marriage, scripture tells us two lives become *one* flesh. In my western mind, I thought the whole concept of oneness was repulsive. Why would a single drop of water intentionally fall in the ocean and lose its uniqueness? I remember reading once, about marriage, that the ultimate result of two people becoming one was two half-people. Cynical, yes, but it reflects the western emphasis on individuality, making one's own way, and expressing one's distinctiveness.

Interestingly, the point in my life when I was ready to enter into marriage was the point at which I had grown tired of my individual expression. I did not like what I had and had not achieved in life; I felt stagnant and stuck; and I was more than ready to give up the life I had worked to build for a chance of reaching for something better. Marriage changed my life in wonderful ways too numerous to count, but it hardly stole my uniqueness. Rather, unity in marriage provided a larger context of support where I could develop and express my individual gifts more completely. And that is the point about unity that is often overlooked: unity does not equate to uniformity. Unity is about fitting one's uniqueness into place along with the distinct qualities of others to create something greater. Think of the pieces of a puzzle – each piece has a unique coloration, shape, and place, but when the pieces are fit together as one, the result is far beyond what any one piece could produce.

Striving for unity requires a leap of faith. A person must be willing to risk the self they have identified with in order to attain a larger purpose or goal. The math of unity is 1+1+1=111. There is very little logic to it, but we know two or more people working in unison toward a common purpose can accomplish more than can be accomplished individually. The power of relationship is the immeasurable wildcard. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) It is an early definition of fellowship, and it implies that a supernatural force develops from oneness.

Every trait that made me unique in my single days, both good and not-so-good, I retain today, so I lost nothing. Instead, I found a greater context within which to express that uniqueness.

Journaling focus: In what ways does my individuality inhibit me from standing in unity with others?

May 27
Experiencing the Presence

"Refuse to come into the presence of the Lord and not experience it." Harvey Carey

This is a quote I heard at a worship conference. If I asked where the presence of God is, what would you say? Perhaps the most obvious answer would be, "Everywhere." But I also suspect you, like me, have places where it is easier to sense the presence of God than others. One place (hopefully) is in worship. Perhaps it is in the mountains, or other places where you feel close to nature. Another, for me, is the area of my home where I most often go to pray, study and meditate. I call it my *nest*. There is something powerful about places where God has been sought and experienced for some time. Ditto for places that are bathed in silence, or at least free from the sounds of the daily grind.

I have had the opportunity to be in a number of European cathedrals, some of which date back to the 13th century. They absolutely *ooze* with a spiritual presence most of our current churches can only dream of one day attaining. Sounds linger longer. People automatically speak softly, if at all, and walk pensively and reverently. There is simply no doubt that the ground on which you stand is holy ground, made holier by centuries of worship, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. The faithful have returned to these places through many ages, all seeking the blessing of the Divine in the same space. It leaves a mark, an indelible impression. It is simply unthinkable to enter such a place without sitting quietly and experiencing the Presence.

And yet, that same presence, perhaps less obviously, is alive and well in our worship spaces today. Our places of worship have seen the turning of the centuries, the wars across the planet, racial and ethnic tension, traces of which linger and are embedded within their walls. Even in nature, traces of those who walked the ground in ages past linger. We can feel it when we are present to it. Refuse to enter any of these sacred places without experiencing the presence of God-with-us lingering there.

Journaling focus: Where am I most likely to feel the presence of God?

May 28
Searching for Truth

"Just because something isn't true, that's no reason you can't believe in it. Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things a (person) needs to believe in the most: that people are basically good; that honor, courage and virtue mean everything; that money and power mean nothing; that good always triumphs over evil; that true love never dies. It doesn't matter if they're true or not. A (person) should believe in those things because those are the things worth believing in." Uncle Hub, from *Secondhand Lions*[38]

In the movie *Secondhand Lions,* 12-ish year old boy is left in the care of his two crusty, old great-uncles. One uncle (Michael Caine) tells bizarre tales of valor and honor about the wild exploits of the brothers in their younger days. The "kid," as they refer to the boy, is constantly questioning the truth of the stories and just when he is about convinced they are nothing more than the product of a wildly overactive imagination, something happens to make him realize they may have actually happened after all. Ultimately, the movie is about the search for what is true and dependable in life. The kid has been raised by an unstable mother and is desperately seeking something solid in which to root his life. Uncle Hub (Robert Duvall) has a speech he gives boys about to become men, and the quote above is the part of the speech he gives to "the kid."

The speech reminds me of issues Christians sometimes quibble about. We argue about whether events in the Bible are actually "true" or not, whether they actually happened as recorded or whether they are accurately portrayed. But in doing so we risk missing the vital lessons contained in the events and stories. The Golden Rule tells us that treating other people as we would like to be treated is always a good idea, both for us and others, regardless of whether the Golden Rule is factual. Loving our neighbor as our self is simply a good, caring practice, but cannot be scientifically proven to be *true*. If our world is limited to that which can be replicated by research, it is a very small and colorless world indeed.

Is good triumphing over evil in our lives? Has true love ever died? Sometimes our understanding of life and love are far too limited. Our lives are not over. Does anyone know how or when their life will actually end? Can we see beyond the grave? Of course not. There are principles we should believe whether they can be proven as "truth" or not. They are guides for a fruitful life. Spiritual practices encourage us to ponder these truths and reaffirm what we believe. We may not have a great-uncle Hub to remind us of what is important, but we do have the wisdom and stories of the Bible to inform us.

Journaling focus: What unprovable truths do I believe?

May 29
Limping With Jacob

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him…The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip." Genesis 32:24-25,31

The story of Jacob wrestling with an angel of God is told in the 32nd chapter of Genesis. Jacob is very distraught and alone on this sleepless night and wrestles with this heavenly being. They wrestle to a draw as the sun comes up and Jacob refuses to let the being go until it blesses him. In the being's blessing he changes Jacob's name to Israel and says, "…for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Jacob may have prevailed, but the limp he received from his dislocated hip was a scar he carried the rest of his days, a mark of his wrestling with God.

I have wrestled with God as I've watched unrelenting illnesses ravage the bodies of friends and family, and as I've seen mental faculties leave aging loved ones. I wrestled with God at the tragic death of the five-year-old daughter of a co-worker. When I read of countries at war, starving children, addicted persons and broken homes I wrestle with God over what merits divine intervention. When life doesn't go the way I feel it should or when I'm faced with a task I really do not want to do, I argue and cajole and plead and pray and cry and scream and kick and, well, I wrestle. I think we all do. Most such battles I lose, at least in the sense of not getting my way. But those battles leave a mark – maybe not a visible or physical mark like Jacob's limp, but a lasting impression, nonetheless. When we struggle with God, the encounter necessarily changes and marks us. And that's exactly the point. God invites us to bring what troubles us to the wrestling mat. And, as with Jacob, God doesn't seek to destroy us, only to change us in ways better suited to God's purposes. Be warned: no one can enter the presence of the Almighty and not be changed.

Jacob's limp probably wasn't an attractive feature, even in his day. But it was tangible evidence of his encounter with God. In wrestling with God, he was molded and made over, shaped ever closer to the image of God he mirrored at creation. We can probably expect the same for ourselves.

Journaling focus: Describe a "limp" you have from wrestling with God.

May 30
The Root of the Matter

Then I thought, "I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix; my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches; my glory was fresh with me, and my bow ever new in my hand." Job 29:18-20

The hanging baskets at our home struggle the most, along with the other potted plants. Flowerbeds fare slightly better, with shrubs and trees doing the best. The combination of hot sun and lack of rain during Kansas summers creates crippling stress on plants, and some struggle more than others. Our plants are fortunate on at least two fronts, though. First, they live in an area that does not have frequent restrictions on water usage. Second, they live at our home, where either my wife or I can be out with a hose as needed. Certain plants wither from the heat alone, regardless of their access to water. Our lovely river birch trees are quick to drop leaves and look neglected in spite of adequate moisture. The red oak outside of our bedroom stands tall, aloof, and apparently unaffected. Yet the heat takes its toll, even if some plants whine less than others do.

Heat stress is visible in the plant world. The ability of trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses to survive and thrive in difficult summers corresponds to the depth of their roots. Trees like Mr. Oak, with roots spread deep and wide, tolerate stress well. Flowers and grass, with their entire root systems in the top few inches of soil, struggle mightily. They need lots of human and/or divine intervention to survive.

Humans suffer under stress, too. Heat and drought affect us, for sure, but our stressors are often less tangible. Aches, worries, conflict, and social pressures take their toll on us year-round. Some of us are good at putting up an unaffected front, like Mr. Oak, so that our internal condition may not be readily apparent. Many people deal well with stress, and, like their leafy counterparts, it has a lot to do with their roots. Some people have a deep spiritual life, with roots anchored deep in Scripture, prayer, and a faith community. Others have a stable home life, drawing strength and reinvigorating nutrition from a loving and supportive family. Of course, there are also those who are not so blessed, having shallow roots barely clinging to life in the poorest of soils. The first hints of drought dry them up, and they wither and crumble. Christ calls us to plant our roots deeply in his word and life, where we will find refreshment and renewal. There, no earthly drought can penetrate.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I best encourage my spiritual roots to grow deeper?

May 31
Compassionate Emptiness

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8

Most people's lives are too full. They wake up early, eat breakfast, and check the news before heading off to work for the day. Evenings go by in a flash until they can no longer hold their eyes open. They fall into bed, exhausted. With such full lives, how can we make room for anything beyond the urgent, pressing demands of the day? Unfortunately, many things of critical importance will not *demand* our attention, such as spending quality time, in sufficient quantities, with our children and our spouses. Spirit-building activities like spending time with God in prayer, contemplating scripture, and immersing ourselves in silence, are among the common casualties to a busy life. That which seems urgent will crowd out that which is truly important, unless we are intentional about our priorities. We may not realize what is of greatest value in our lives until we find ourselves in crisis.

Even when we make time for others, we are often so distracted that we are never actually *present* with them. When our minds are occupied by reports to write, phone calls to return, and the image we present to others, we are unable to fully attend to the emotional needs of those most important to us. We may hear the words they say, yet never catch the message behind the words. If my cup is already full, how do I make space for others? How do I put myself in a position for God to speak to or to influence me? To truly listen to another means I am willing to be influenced, willing to allow my mind to be changed. If we cannot sufficiently empty our minds to allow new ideas and insights to enter, we close ourselves off from being influenced, improved, or blessed by others. At the same time, we deprive others of the opportunity to be blessed by us.

I first heard the term *Compassionate Emptiness* in a class on Servant Leadership. The context was that we must empty ourselves of all distractions, worries, and thoughts in order to be fully attentive to, and to understand what is on the mind or heart of another. That type of emptiness is compassionate because others desire and deserve our full attention. In the context of our relationship to God, we must empty ourselves for God's love and compassion to enter us. Emptiness is a prerequisite for compassion.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I integrate compassionate emptiness into my daily routine?

June 1
One in the Spirit

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Acts 2:1-4

Many years ago, I was on vacation in Florida with one of my brothers. It was early on a Saturday evening and I was driving a long stretch of highway. My brother had fallen asleep and I was flipping through radio stations to pass the time. I landed on a station where a man with a deep, rich voice was telling a story about a small town in Minnesota. The winding tale kept returning to a rural pastor who frequently got hit in the groin. Whenever that precise hit happened, the pastor would begin speaking in tongues.

What does that story have to do with Pentecost? Probably nothing, but every time I think about speaking in tongues, I am taken back to that Florida highway where I first heard Garrison Keillor give the *News From Lake Wobegon*. Let's face it, many of us have little or no experience with speaking in tongues and it seems, well, weird. I was at a gathering once where people spoke in tongues as a regular part of their worship and it was, well, weird—at least to me. Interestingly, it wasn't enough just to speak in another tongue; an interpretation was also provided so everyone could understand what the Spirit had (apparently) spoken. Although it sounded like gibberish to me, the speaker would faithfully relay, in English, what had just been said.

The today's passage from Acts tells about a gathering of many people from many different lands who spoke many different languages. When the Spirit came over them, everyone in the crowd heard what the speakers were saying in the listener's own native tongue. The significance was they could all understand what was being said, and they were amazed! There seems to be a uniting quality to the Holy Spirit that is expressed in this chapter of Acts through speech. Through the Spirit they were able to overcome language barriers and communicate. Even though the Holy Spirit is the most difficult of the three persons in the Trinity for me to grasp, I

recognize it as a uniting force. It unites us with Christ. It unites Christians with each other. It unites heaven and earth. Even if we have not been given the gift of tongues, the Spirit has given us the gift of oneness. And us guys don't even have to take a painful shot to the—well, you know where…

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time in your life when you encountered the Holy Spirit.

June 2
Humble Worship

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. Matthew 6:1

Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you. Matthew 6:2

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door. Matthew 6:6

Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites. Matthew 6:16

The first half of the sixth chapter of Matthew contains some unsettling instructions for worship. Jesus contrasts the ways hypocrites worship with a methodology more consistent with accessing the kingdom of heaven. Spoiler Alert: humility is required! Jesus does not criticize the religious practices of his day – praying, fasting, and giving – but he does give specific direction for the *way* those practices are carried out. If we are practicing religion in order to look good to others, we are not likely to enter the kingdom of God.

It is easy to get into a comfortable rhythm of worshiping but neglect whom we worship. Certainly, we claim God as the focus for worship, but does God really care about how we are dressed or that we sing our songs of praise loudly, in tune, or even if we sing at all? If we are honest, much of how we approach worship is to either impress, or at least avoid the criticism of our brothers and sisters in the worship space. I wonder about the motivation of folks who post their church attendance to social media – not that that is inherently bad. If they advertise their church attendance to encourage others to join them, fine. If they do it to show themselves to be holier than their neighbor, shame on them. Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." Why? He continues, "For then you have no reward from your

Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). Once we are honest about whose response we are most focused on receiving, we know who we worship.

It is easy to become obsessed with our appearance to others. Ultimately, this is a form of idol worship, seeking our rewards from someone or something other than God. And this is exactly Jesus' point – that our focus needs to be on God. What is apparently important to God, according to Jesus, is a humble and focused heart. "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). It is safe to assume that this sort of private worship is not only what connects most effectively with God but is also the most beneficial form of worship for us. Everything else is window dressing – obstacles and idols we place between God and ourselves that inhibit any sort of a direct connection. Certainly, there is an element of safety in approaching the throne of God with others. And granted, we need to approach God in awe and with reverence, which naturally includes an element of fear. Our fear of coming face-to-face with God and exposing ourselves in our naked imperfection, however, is a fear we must learn to overcome if we wish to experience the all-inclusive love of our creator. We are loved as we are, where we are, completely and unconditionally, but we cannot fully receive that love when our attention is directed elsewhere.

When we give our offerings, we should not announce it to the world *in order to be praised by others*. Yes, we should be generous according to our ability, but we should give for the furtherance of God's work on earth, not for our own glorification. When we fast, we are not to make a production of how intolerably we are sacrificing. Rather, we are to sacrifice with joy, knowing that fasting is a practice that opens our heart to the presence of God. Giving and fasting bring their own rewards.

Focusing on ourselves or how others perceive us makes our God too small. The purpose of worshiping God is not to make ourselves feel insignificant and sinful, but to acknowledge and know that we are intimately connected to something large, loving, and wonderful. Ultimately, our joy resides within the community of believers, members of the body of Christ. And not only is our joy there, but also our security, for abiding in that body is the only truly safe place to reside. To enter that amazing space of worship, however, we must enter with humility.

Journaling focus: What is an area of my life where I should be more humble? How can I best accomplish that?

June 3
Predestined Prejudice

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." John 6:51

In the verses that precede today's Bible passage from the sixth chapter of John, the Jews are complaining that Jesus is claiming to be the "bread that came down from heaven." They say they *know* this Jesus and they know his mother and father; so how could he be anything more than a carpenter's son from Nazareth?

We do this with people, don't we? We say, "That child will never be an athlete—I know his parents and, well, there's just no way…" Or we claim, "I know that kid will never amount to anything. His father was worthless, as was his father's father…" It is comforting to pigeon-hole people into boxes that define (and limit) our expectations of them. It lessens our risk of being disappointed or hurt by them.

But Jesus declared he was much more than a boy from the nothing-town of Nazareth! He was much more than a regular man of flesh and blood! By partaking of his life – his flesh – we gain access to the Spirit, the 100% God-part of his being. It's like eating bread that gets absorbed into every fiber (a little pun) of our being, except this bread is never converted to energy and burned away. It ingrains (another pun, sorry) itself into every part of our life and connects our spirit to God's. When we share communion, we take a part of Christ's body into ourselves, making us One with Christ, who is One with the Father. This is no ordinary bread. Jesus was no ordinary man.

Who are you underestimating? Yourself, maybe? Aren't we really more than the sum of our ancestors and our environment encased in flesh and blood? We are also spirits connected to the Eternal. The possibilities are endless when we see our potential through the eyes of faith.

Journaling focus: In what ways am I underestimating my potential?

June 4
Encountering Greatness

"He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him; because he was going to pass that way." Luke 19:3-4

When I was in college, I worked at a nursery in Topeka that was located near the Governor's mansion. President Gerald Ford was visiting Topeka one day and was scheduled to see the Governor. We anticipated the motorcade would travel along Interstate 70, some 500 yards distant from the fence many of us stood along, hoping for a glimpse. We heard the sirens long before we saw the vehicles. The motorcade we saw, however, was not traveling on the Interstate, but along the street barely. 10 yards from our fence! It was an impressive sight and, although I was never entirely certain which vehicle actually held the President, I was pleased to have been so close.

What does my story have to do with Zacchaeus? Maybe very little, but I remember the excitement of having the opportunity to catch a glimpse of someone well-known that not everyone gets to see up close. I remember strategically wondering which spot along that fence would provide the best view. Zacchaeus, being *vertically challenged*, climbed a sycamore tree for a better view. And not only did he see Jesus, Jesus saw him. Jesus called to him, told him he would be dining in his home that day and the encounter transformed a petty, selfish thief into a faithful servant.

How do we react when we encounter greatness? Don't get me wrong. I do not equate Gerald Ford, the man, with greatness, nor the President with the Lord. But an encounter with the President of the United States? That is an awe-inspiring encounter, regardless of the person filling the office. How would I have responded if the President had stopped his motorcade, rolled down his window and said, "Greg! I am coming to your apartment for dinner tonight!" I would've felt unworthy. My apartment was small and dirty, the furnishings sparse, my cooking skills unworthy of entertaining a President. But I would've done my best to clean up my act and make myself worthy of the company. Exactly as Zacchaeus did. We cannot know why God chooses us to love and accept, but we can respond with gratitude for being chosen—exactly as Zacchaeus did.

Journaling focus: When have I been pleased to have been chosen by someone I did not expect to choose me?

June 5
Possessed by Possessions

"…Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15

Sometimes I get totally obsessed with wanting something. Not needing it, mind you, just wanting it. Often it is not some inexpensive item either, but a major purchase by our standards. I research it diligently to learn more about which variation of the 'thing' will best meet my desire. Then I'll research its cost, availability, places where I can buy it and other information that may be important as I move towards a possible purchase. Often, if the *thing* is relatively abundant, I will watch how its availability and price change over a period of a time. Most often the last things I do are to pray about the purchase and discuss it with my wife, which, of course, should be the first things. By the time these two critical conversations have occurred, I have long decided this purchase is not only necessary, but the time is *now* to buy it. And very little that my wife or God could say would change my mind at that point.

Am I alone? I often wonder if this type of purchasing strategy is more of a guy thing. Somehow, I think some women suffer from the condition, too. It's not unlike hunting or fishing, formerly life-critical activities rooted deep in our common ancestry. Significant time is spent preparing for the actual capture of some unsuspecting animal. The difference, of course, is I am talking about a possession – a guitar or a car – not putting food on the table.

What I sometimes find is I enjoy the search, the *hunt* for the item as much or more than purchasing and possessing the item itself. Sometimes I have hunted for months for a deeply desired thing – once it was an accordion – only to have it sit and collect dust following its capture. Unlike hunting for dinner, the actual hunt for another possession may be more life-giving than the possession itself. If it doesn't enhance one's life, it is not a wise purchase. I am reminded of the many sayings with the moral: *the joy is in the journey*. I need to be careful about distinguishing between life-enhancing possessions and life-draining possessions. Many of us are better off finding joyful journeys that do not terminate in unwise purchases.

Journaling focus: Where should I be more focused on the journey than the outcome?

June 6
Close Proximity

"…and you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum. And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.'" Luke 4:23b-24

When I was in high school and college I played in rock bands. Although the bands were mostly based in Topeka, most of our performances were out of town. We were much better known and popular in areas outside of Topeka than we were in our hometown. The band *Kansas*, which had huge national success in the 1970s and 1980s, was also from Topeka. Until they hit the *big-time,* they also had a relatively modest following at home, paling in comparison to their following across the country. I often wondered why it seemed so difficult to obtain the same level of appreciation and notoriety at home as was experienced elsewhere. I think it might have something to do with familiarity.

Jesus, too, had problems establishing his legitimacy at home. The powerful words he spoke drew cynical comments like, "Is not this Joseph's son?" Does being familiar with one's lineage automatically disqualify one from being recognized for having special gifts? How often do companies hire in-town consultants? In my experience, not very often. There seems to be a bias that someone from out of town will be more knowledgeable and worthy of attention, as if distance and credibility were directly related.

Of course, the bias against my bands of old, if it actually existed, worked to our advantage out of town where local bands probably scratched their heads wondering what we had that they lacked. It's a matter of proximity. Can Jesus and his message become too close and familiar? Perhaps we become blinded because we've lived *around* others for so long, when we need to be living *with* them, internalizing them and their skills. Familiarity can make something seem so commonplace we lose our sense of wonder and cannot experience it. We become complacent cynics, rather than zealous participants. Unfortunately, it happens in families, too.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I not be recognizing the value of those near to me because of their close proximity to me?

June 7
Humble Participation

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor; except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'" Mark 6:4

I am not a prophet. I am not a saint. To my knowledge I have never been accused of remotely resembling either. However, there were times in my professional life, where I led a company of highly skilled

people, that I felt pretty important. There were times when I got recognized for the accomplishments of many in our organization and, even though I tried to dutifully acknowledge the key role played by others, part of me would sometimes pat my back and congratulate myself for being so incredibly awesome and worthy of praise!

Then I would go home. Whatever I may have accomplished at work did not get the trash out at home. It did not get the vacationing neighbors' chickens and goats watered and fed, nor the eggs collected and cleaned. The grass continued to grow, ditto for the weeds in the flower beds. My children were not impressed with my self-acclaimed leadership acumen. The bagworms continued to munch my pine trees, completely oblivious to the fame and fortune brought by my workday's accomplishments. How dare they???

Home has always been a great humble-*izer* for me, and I have always been a homebody. Not because home is so humbling, but because it is the most honest reflection of true reality I know. At home it is so obvious, like no place else, that everything I have in life is a result of the merging of my gifts with those of others. Often, my part is very small indeed. There is no room for arrogance at home as it has nowhere to roost. It is a ruse that cannot take root in an atmosphere of truth. Home is where interdependence provides comfort and safety, and independence brings isolation. I do not have to pretend to be a great leader or a great anything. I only have to be present and participate.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I been humbled after feeling a little too important.

June 8
Lipstick on a Pig

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. Matthew 7:6

When Jesus says, "Do not throw your pearls before swine," I think of the old proverb, "You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig." The point of the proverb is that you cannot change the inner essence of something simply by redecorating the exterior. Another similar, though perhaps unrelated, saying that comes to my mind is this: "Arguing with an engineer (or insert the profession or person of choice here) is like wrestling in the mud with a pig. After a couple of hours you realize the pig is enjoying it."

While Jesus' words in today's scripture are less crude than the folk wisdom I cited, I believe the point is similar. *Who* and *what* we are dealing with should determine *how* we proceed. Jesus says if we give what is holy to a dog or pearls to pigs, they will not treat our gifts with a level of reverence or appreciation that we consider appropriate. Why? Because they do not perceive the inherent beauty and value that we see. Is that a fault in their character? Of course not! It is *our* perception that ascribes the value, and pigs and dogs have a much different perspective of what is valuable or useful for their purposes. Consider the thought of giving a new computer to a person in a third world country who has no access to electricity, let alone to the internet. They might use the computer as yard art, as a doorstop, or as a conversation piece with their neighbors, but it will never open their eyes to the world we know in the way we may have hoped. It cannot do what we wish for that person, no matter how good or honorable our intentions, nor can the other appreciate it in the way we intend. Likewise, if we give a Rolex watch to a toddler, they will just chew on it.

The lesson in Jesus' words has nothing to do with dogs and pigs, however, but in how we treat others. If someone does not share our appreciation for enlightened readings, why would we share them with that person? They will treat what we value as if it were worthless. Who is likely to be offended? It is us, of course! A better approach to share the joys of enlightenment is to find out where the other person is in his or her spiritual journey and meet them there. Who knows, we may find they are enlightened in ways we are not.

The reason Jesus provides for not giving gifts that others cannot appreciate is not only that they will *trample them under foot,* but also that they will *turn and maul you.* They may actually strike out in anger against us. One problem with giving something we think another person needs or wants is the very assumption he or she needs or wants anything from us. It may be more an expression of our well-intentioned, but arrogant assumption than his or her actual need or desire. If, in our sincere effort to help, we offend instead, if we make them feel less a person, we can expect a negative and perhaps aggressive reaction. Particularly in giving advice, we cannot show a person a better way unless and until we know they (1) actually *need* a better way, and (2) desire to receive what we have to offer. Otherwise, we are simply throwing our "pearls" before swine, to paraphrase Jesus.

I hope not to imply that I consider those who have different thoughts about what is holy and valuable than me to be dogs or swine. I must remind myself regularly that what I value is what *I* value – nothing more, nothing less. Further, if I want to give something to others, it is best to give unconditionally, meaning without expectation of whether they use or appreciate the gift in the way I intended. If I cannot give something

freely, I am probably still too attached to it and am likely to feel I have just given pearls to pigs.

Finally, I cannot resist sharing another "pig proverb," this one from the author, Robert Heinlein: "Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and it annoys the pig".[39]

Journaling focus: Reflect upon a time you gave a gift that was not received as you had imagined.

June 9
A Divine Spark

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Matthew 3:11

There is a divine spark within each of us. It burned before we were born, and it continues to burn after our earthly passing. Some call it our soul, our spirit, our True Self, our essence, but it is that which connects us to God – and to each other. When the Bible records in Genesis that we are made in the image and likeness of God, it is telling us that this spark within is from and of God, as if we were a candle lit from the flame of God.

When we come to earth, that spark clothes itself in a human body, grows, and gets lost in the various phases of our earthiness. The spark within often becomes buried so deep beneath our busy schedules and many obligations and material distractions that it is hard to find or even sense its presence. But it continues to burn. When our earthly body gives out – as everything of the earth eventually does – that spark, which makes us who we are at our core, exits its physical body and continues on, because it is inseparably connected to the eternal God.

There are moments in life when we find ourselves very close to that spark – times when we feel most like our true, genuine, and naked selves, most at home, most contented, most at peace, most loved, and most loving. Simone Weil said that everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty is the presence of God. Sometimes those moments occur in periods of great sorrow, but it is in those moments we may catch a glimpse of God shining through others and us. It is in those moments when we learn something of the nature of God, and the nature of ourselves in God. In those grace-filled times, we experience a connection that stretches into eternity, and we know with a knowledge beyond all knowing that God

is good – that God is *Love*. Once we have approached that fire, we cannot keep ourselves away from it. We are drawn to it like a moth to a flame. We are baptized by fire, to use an image provided by John the Baptist.

Like all fire, we may be warmed, or we may be burned, but we will be changed. When we trust in God's goodness, we know that however the fire of the spirit changes us, the change will be for good.

Journaling focus: Journal about a time you felt close to God.

June 10
Filling Holes

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." Mark 7:37

I have heard we are born with a God-shaped hole in our being. We spend much of our lives trying to fill that hole, often in ways that have nothing to do with what we actually need. Many followers of Jesus hoped to be made whole. Their infirmities had left them on the fringes of society. The sick, blind, deaf, mute, crippled all sought him. They believed he had the power to restore them to wholeness. Through the many healings documented in Scripture, we know Jesus did, indeed, have the power to heal various maladies.

Not all ailments are physical, however. Worry and fear can paralyze us into inaction. Many people are plagued by a nagging sense that their lives are directionless. Sometimes we experience a persistent desire for something we feel will make us happy. It may be new shoes, ice cream, or a new guitar. Experience teaches us, though, that these desires are seldom, if ever, satisfied by things of the earth. These types of "ailments" may be manifestations of the God-shaped hole in our lives. New shoes simply cannot fill that hole, no matter how many pairs we buy. Rather, our God-shaped hole cannot be filled by anything short of the eternal presence of God in us.

Jesus' followers were not always people with physical ailments. The majority were likely physically fine, just like most of us. What they lacked is more difficult to pinpoint. Some had a thirst for the knowledge Jesus imparted. Others longed to be in his presence. Curious folks wanted to see how he measured up to the Messiah promised in Scripture. But all were drawn to him in the hope of having a hole in their lives filled. Still today, we

gather to learn, seek, and follow. We seek wholeness. In Matthew, Jesus says wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he will be, too (Matthew 18:20). What we seek is the healing presence of Christ in our midst. We need that presence today, just as Jesus' followers needed it 2,000 years ago — and for the very same reason. A God-shaped hole can be filled only by a God-shaped Savior.

Journaling focus: Describe an unsuccessful attempt to fill the God-shaped hole in your life?

June 11
What is Good?

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12: 2

For a few years in my professional career, I chaired a committee of about sixty people from across the nation who worked on numerous difficult and contentious issues – issues that divided our professional community into three distinct camps. The first group believed everything was fine and no significant changes were needed. The second group believed we were headed for hell in a hand basket if we did not make significant changes soon. The third, and largest group, stayed outside of the confrontations of the first two, preferring to be noncommittal. This group was either too wrapped up in their day-to-day tasks or they were so put off by the divisive discussions they simply tuned out.

While we were united in our search for what was good for and in our industry, we were deeply divided about what we believed would lead to that greater good. More than one conference call got ugly. It is one thing to have testy discussions over issues or positions. It is quite another when those discussions get personal. Or when one person makes a false statement and others jump in and build upon that false statement. Discussions can spiral out of control very quickly. In my mind I found myself wishing all sorts of ill-will on some of my colleagues. I, too, was getting personal, just not in a verbal manner.

I would come home from these calls exhausted and frustrated. One night, as I was trying to calm my mind in preparation for sleep, I read today's Bible passage. It is a familiar and favorite verse to me, *"Don't be conformed to this world…"* I knew I should not join those who used less-than-

honorable tactics to attempt to strengthen their positions. *Be transformed by the renewing of your mind…"* Yes, I knew I needed renewal. I needed rest, and I needed to distance myself from the unpleasantness of the discussion. I prayed for renewal and perspective, *"…so you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Inevitably, I would feel much better in the morning. Taking a long walk in the calm of the morning would help. On my drive to work I would (almost) be ready to recognize that the people I was so angry with were also children of God, just like me; passionate about their profession, just like me; and opinionated, just like me. Coming to agreement in a large group of people on what is right, or at least what is best, can be a painful process. But seeking renewal through the transformation of our minds helps keep the process in perspective. And helps us treat others with love and respect.

Journaling focus: What is a situation in my life that could use a renewal of my mind? How might I go about that?

June 12
Suffering with a Purpose

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3b-5

This passage comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, encouraging them in their young Christian faith. I suspect in Paul's day, having hope was more challenging than it is today. Particularly in the United States, finding any number of churches where a person can learn, grow, and be nurtured in his or her faith is easy. In Paul's day, however, such opportunities were few and far between, and they often occurred in secret in order to avoid the persecution of the participants.

Early in life, I heard the saying "Suffering builds character." Some years later, I heard a twist on that statement: "Suffering does not build character; it reveals character." I cannot count the number of times the uglier parts of my character have surfaced when things were not going the way I had hoped. Anger, impatience, frustration, and the occasional *word-I-would-not-want-my-grandmother-to-hear* are parts of my character I try to keep hidden. Perhaps my difficult days build character in me. They certainly reveal parts of me I'd prefer not to show.

Paul tries to encourage the Christians in Rome through their suffering. He points out that suffering builds endurance. Endurance is valuable, because it builds character. As character grows, we find hope in God. Hope is not in vain, because God's love pours into us through the Holy Spirit. Our suffering begins a chain of events that will ultimately end positively. When our hope is in God, suffering leads to peace.

Even though Christian worship is not the rare or dangerous experience it was 2,000 years ago, the lesson here remains timely. Everyone suffers. It is part of our human condition. Try as we might to avoid it, no one can be completely successful. Paul assures us there is a greater purpose for our suffering than misery. Regardless of whether we are aware of it, our suffering builds character and hope. Through our character and hope, we manifest the love of God through the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Journaling focus: Recall an instance of suffering in your life. Did anything good grow out of the experience?

June 13
Old Prayers

There was a tree at the center of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew strong, its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth. Its foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed. Daniel 4:10-12

A Bengali chant begins: *Silence my soul, these trees are prayers.* It was written by the writer and poet, Rabindranath Tagore. I have had a life-long love affair with trees. I climbed them as a child, built treehouses in their branches, swung from their limbs, and researched them in college. I have admired, planted, and cared for trees all my life, and they have cared for me. I love gazing through their branches and watching the sunlight dance from leaf to leaf. I love the sound of the breeze meandering through them. I am spellbound, walking through forests of trees. I am in awe of the stark contrast their dark, barren branches create against the cold blue of a winter sky, like cracks across a plate of glass. I love trees, but I have never considered them prayers.

And so, when I read the chant: *Silence my soul, these trees are prayers,* I was intrigued by the possibilities. First, I do associate trees with silence.

Certainly, many trees grow in noisy environments, but they rise above the noise and bustle of the lives they shelter. They stand still, unnoticed, watchful, and mostly unaffected by the chaos below. Second, trees, particularly old trees, reach up to the heavens, weather storms (although most bare scars), and meticulously record and secure each year of their lives in the rings of their wood. They provide shade and shelter for all types of living creatures. We say of old homes, "If these walls could talk…" The same can be said of trees: "If these trees could talk…" If these trees could talk, we might hear an old prayer, or many.

What would be the contents of the prayer of a tree? I suspect it would include the passionate promises of young lovers and the wordless grief of the widow. Such a prayer would stretch across years and generations, and so capture moments measured in decades, not minutes. The prayer of a tree would not be concerned with the busy-ness or distractedness of the hurried and harried life beneath it, but its perspective would be one developed over generations of human life. It would be a long, deliberate prayer, and it would resonate with a timeless beauty. To hear such a prayer would require listening with the heart and not with the ears. You may hear a tree blossom.

Silence my soul, these trees are prayers.
I asked the tree, 'Tell me about God;' and then it blossomed.[40]

Journaling focus: Describe an experience with with a tree. If nothing comes to mind, make time today to stand or sit in silence under a tree, preferably a large one. Journal about the experience.

June 14
A Time to Act

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:36-37

It happened at a large gathering of family and friends, in the front yard of my in-laws' home. There was a 20-foot table of food, at least half of which was an irresistible assortment of homemade desserts. Fifty-some people were eating and visiting when my wife's frail, wheelchair-bound uncle laid his head on the table and closed his eyes. My mind spun into action. What should I do? What if we need an ambulance? Could we land a helicopter in this maze of people and vehicles? What if he is sad and crying?

Do I have time for this inconvenience? Something needed to be done quickly. My first reaction was to play out a bunch of scenarios in my head. Sadly, I could have easily talked myself out of doing anything at all.

Today's scripture is the closing passage of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the story of a man traveling on the dangerous Jericho Road. He has been robbed, beaten, and left by the side of the road. Several people passed by without stopping to help. It was a man from Samaria who took action. He stopped and bandaged the injured man's wounds, took him to the next town, and paid for his care. The parable is meant to shed light on what it means to love your neighbor, as well as on who we should consider our neighbors to be.

Back at the family gathering, while I was busy contemplating the most appropriate course of action, my wife walked over and tapped her uncle on the shoulder, asking, "Uncle Bob, are you OK?" He opened his eyes, raised his head and smiled, "Oh, yes. I just needed a rest after eating all this good food!"

Both action and contemplation are noble and necessary human characteristics. Everyone utilizes both to a greater or lesser extent. My wife and I are at different ends of the action-contemplation spectrum. I admire her ability to see a need and jump into action. In your time of need, pray that an action-oriented, Good Samaritan like my wife discovers you. You will receive help faster than if found by a good-intentioned, but contemplative person like me. A person could drown in the sea of my good intentions while I formulate the best course of action.

Journaling focus: Recall a time when your action was required. Recall a time when you needed to stop and think prior to acting. What was different between the situations?

June 15
Owning Our Sin

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:5

I do not like to be reminded of my sinful nature. I fear that by acknowledging my sin I appear as a weak and undesirable person, and others will think less of me. I can easily recognize sin in those around me, and I too often comment, if only to myself, on their feebleness. Sinners murder and lie and steal. They commit adultery and take the Lord's name in

vain. Surely my shortcomings are not, well, that short. I like to believe I am above such abysmal behaviors.

Although I have never committed murder, physically, when I am honest with myself I know my words and actions sometimes injure others. Is causing mental or emotional anguish less of a sin than causing physical injury? I fear it is not. Just because our legal system does not prosecute mental and emotional harm in the same way it does physical harm does not mean the sins are not comparable when viewed from a higher perspective – or from the heart of a wounded soul. Indeed, physical wounds often heal more quickly and completely than emotional wounds.

We lull ourselves into believing we have only sinned if we get caught, or if there is some direct and negative consequence of our behavior, or if there is no one else to blame it on. We forget that we reap what we sow, and the seeds we sow grow from our thoughts, words, and actions. When we sow harmful behaviors towards others, the resulting pain stems from us, regardless of whether we are identified as its source. Our sins are actions that separate us from God, as well as those that separate us from others. We all sin and need forgiveness, so being a sinner is not something we can truthfully hold against another anymore than being a sinner is something we can realistically deny in ourselves. Recognizing and confessing our sin, however, is healing both for ourselves and those impacted by our sin. Taking responsibility for our actions is an important stage in our growth as human beings and as children of God. Accepting responsibility is also the critical first step in addressing our sins and moving past them.

Journaling focus: Recall a sinful behavior that you have not accepted full responsibility for. How might you best come to that acceptance?

June 16
Healing Faith

Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."
Luke 17:19

Once upon a time, there were ten lepers. Jesus approached their village, and the lepers cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus healed them, and they all went on their way. Not one bothered to thank

Jesus, except for a foreigner from Samaria. Christ's response is one of the *Jesus lines* we read often but understand poorly. He said, "Your faith has made you well."

Does faith heal? The Bible tells us the presence and power of Jesus, combined with faith in who he was, resulted in healing in the story of the ten lepers. Does faith in the power and presence of Jesus still heal today? It is a difficult, soul-searching question. We know of people who have experienced miraculous healings. We are thankful and give praise for God's phenomenal healing grace. However, we also know of people who have not experienced healing in spite of our heart-felt prayers. Good and faithful people succumb to illness, addiction, and violence everyday. Who or what determines who receives healing and who does not? What role does faith play in the different outcomes?

I suspect the actual presence of Jesus was sufficiently awe-inspiring to make people's faith skyrocket. To be around one so wise, loving, and holy would suspend anyone's unbelief. After all, he commanded the dead to rise, the lame to walk, and the lepers to be made clean.

Obviously, Jesus is not physically present to heal us today. Healing today originates in the third person of the Trinity that is God: the Holy Spirit. When Jesus departed the earth, he said he would send the Holy Spirit to be present with us in his place. It is our faith that allows us to experience and draw on the power of the Spirit. The question now is this: Where is the Holy Spirit when bad things happen to good people? No doubt, the Spirit is always present, in good times and in bad. It is often we who are absent.

As with much in our lives, healing can be a matter of perspective. We believe our life on earth is but one part of the life of a soul. We trust whatever incompleteness remains on earth will be completed in the eternal after-earth. Our faith in the hereafter thus makes us well, because it assures us our lives continue to exist after death, free of our limitations on earth. From this perspective and looking forward, we have already been healed. Our faith assures us of a hereafter. Even so, we will not always receive the healing we desire in the time and space confines of earth. Our faith keeps us looking forward to a better place and a life made whole, just beyond where our eyes can see.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time your prayers were answered. Reflect on another time your prayers were not answered. What lessons are present in the two experiences?

June 17
Taking a Pray-cation

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward." Matthew 6:5

Many families take an annual vacation. It is an opportunity to get away from the daily routines of work and home. Vacations provide time for rest, relaxation, and renewal. My family tries to take a vacation each year, but it is not always easy. There have been lean years, financially, where the cost of an extended vacation was out of the question. As our children have grown the larger problem has become matching schedules. Some years the best we can do is a long weekend together. Even a long weekend together is better than no vacation at all.

As the costs of travel continue to increase, the idea of a *stay-cation* has become popular. When a family stays home, or opts for a short trip near home, they experience a *stay-cation*. Among the typical benefits are less cost and easier scheduling. Done well, a *stay-cation* brings a measure of the rest, relaxation and renewal a vacation is intended to accomplish. Upon returning from a well-orchestrated break, we face our daily routines with revitalized energy and enthusiasm.

Of course, vacations can create more stress than they relieve. Sometimes families spend more money than they should, or the work involved in making the vacation happen is not shared equally. When internal strife builds from too much time, too much togetherness, or too much money, the best part of the vacation is sometimes when it ends.

When our underlying need is for a break in our routine, there is another possibility. It costs nothing. It is easy to schedule, even with little or no preplanning. There are no lines and there is no traffic. It is a *pray-cation.* A *pray-cation* is time alone with God. It can occur in the car, at a workstation, while washing dishes, or anytime the need occurs. It can last a few seconds or extend over days and weeks. A *pray-cation* can be taken alone, or with family and friends. There is no matching of schedules or reservations to make. God is available 24/7. There will be no comparisons with extended family members or co-workers over the quality of your most recent *pray-cation.* It is not a competition. It is a time of rest, relaxation and renewal. It is a break from routine. A *pray-cation* prepares us to meet life's challenges with new energy and enthusiasm.

Journaling focus: Try taking a pray-cation today. What did you experience?

June 18
Suffering for Good

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 1 Peter 2:19-20

All people suffer at some point in their lives. They fall physically, mentally, or emotionally ill, and they hurt. For most of us, suffering occurs off and on throughout our lives. Those with chronic conditions may be in some sort of pain on a continuous basis. We all know suffering, although we do not all suffer in the same ways.

Those who have been believers for some time know that Christians feel pain just as much as non-Christians do. In fact, particularly in some areas of the world, Christians may suffer more. The difference is that Jesus gave us a vision and hope for a life beyond our suffering which he called the Kingdom of God. Jesus provided a perspective that gives purpose to our trials.

Laura Story, a worship leader and songwriter, has known more than her fair share of hardships. Even so, she writes and sings with such passion and energy that one might mistake her for having had a life of relative ease. She wrote the stunningly beautiful song, *Blessings*. The lyrics, in part, are:

> *What if Your blessings come through raindrops?*
> *What if Your healing comes through tears?*
> *What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?*
> *What if the trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?*[41]

In the first letter of Peter, the author notes that unless we suffer for some wrong we have done, we receive God's approval from our suffering. Many of us look back on painful events and see blessings that might not have been otherwise received. I was a teenager when my father died suddenly. Difficult as that was, I grew in countless ways from it. I learned not to let my feelings of affection for those I love to go unexpressed. I learned life can change in an instant, for better or for worse. I learned moments are to be cherished. When life appears hopeless, reasons for hope can manifest from unlikely sources. When our hearts break, God's heart breaks with ours. We do not suffer alone. I learned that when my vision forward is so clouded with doubt that I can only see one step ahead, that one step will move me far enough forward to see the next step. Do not get me wrong; I still prefer to see God's mercies through joyful events.

However, like Laura Story, I have often known God's mercies through the trials of my life.

Journaling focus: Recall a time of suffering and the blessings that flowed from it.

June 19
Saints-in-Waiting

To the church that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:2-3

Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth, says its members are "called to be saints." The church today refers to members who have passed from this life as saints. The Catholic Church has a formal process by which certain persons may be awarded *sainthood* after their death. Regardless of the methodology, I have a recent experience with a mostly regular guy receiving sainthood – my brother.

I lost my middle brother, Wade, in 2015. By most accounts, Wade was a pretty regular guy. He had a typical mix of good and annoying qualities. He had close friends. He worked for a living, loved his children and grandchildren, and he valued his family – including his extended family – above all. Still, most people would have considered Wade a "good old boy," not a saint. Had I called my brother a saint, he would have scoffed, much preferring the "good old boy" title.

Those speaking at his memorial service, however, showered Wade with praise, and appropriately so. He was a loyal friend and confidant to many; he cared about the marginalized of society; he was generous to a fault. With a quirky sense of humor, he was quick to put those around him at ease. Listening to the many who spoke about my brother, one might think he walked on water, which he decidedly did not do. Wade was very human, with all the accompanying disappointments and frailties. Still, I have seen this magical transformation, from sinner to saint, occur repeatedly. Apparently, all most people must do to attain sainthood is to die.

Why is it that we remember people more positively when we are no longer in close, physical proximity to them? Once loved ones are gone, an outsider might believe we worshipped the ground they walked on, something far from the truth in most cases. Numerous artists died

penniless, only to have their works sell for millions after their death. Coincidence? I doubt it. Sins are quickly forgiven, once we know they cannot be repeated. In addition, we are quick to value that which is no longer readily available to us. Ultimately, I think we are all saints-in-waiting. Our good and true selves cannot always shine through our earthly failings, at least not until the earth falls off of us. It is not easy to live up to the expectations of ourselves, let alone those of others. The good in each of us is so much more apparent when there is no less-than-good competing with it. This is not to diminish sainthood in any way. It is deserved, for my brother and the other saints. An oft-forgotten requirement for saints, however, is to first be human.

Journaling focus: Journal about a saint in your life. How has your relationship with them changed since their passing?

June 20
Nature and Nurture

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 2 Corinthians 5:17

One of our family vacations was to the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was a wonderful trip and included stops in the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, and Crazy Horse. We stayed in a cabin, deep in the Black Hills and soaked in the stunning beauty of the area. The Black Hills Spruce is a native tree, known for its short needles and deep-green color. On our last morning there, my children and I borrowed a kitchen knife and went in search of seedlings wanting to migrate to Kansas. We found five yearlings, each only a few inches tall, growing in the rocks beside the road – a certain death sentence as they grew. We carefully dug them up, wrapped them in wet paper towels, and placed them in a plastic bag to retain moisture for their journey south. Once home, I replanted them in pots and nurtured them in a protected area near our sunroom.

Over the years, the four survivors have grown taller than me and are happy, thriving participants in our home's ecosystem. What is interesting about our adopted trees is that they no longer look like Black Hills Spruce, even though that is what they are, genetically. Instead of the short, dark-green needles characteristic of their species, they have longer, bluish needles, much like a Blue Spruce. Clearly, they are still spruce trees, but they no longer resemble their siblings in the Black Hills. Their new

environment has changed them into a different version of their old selves. In the words of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, they have become a new creation!

There is a lot of research regarding whether how we are born – our genetics – or how we are raised – our environment – is most influential towards what we become. Obviously, some things will not change regardless of the environment. My spruce trees will never become oaks, raccoons, or granite statues. Within their genetic make-up, however, they have some flexibility. Becoming a Christian will not convert us, by itself, into a concert pianist or a professional athlete. Following the example of Christ, however, *will* help us become a more complete version of our self. Just as the new environment changed my spruce trees into something they would not otherwise have become, a good spiritual foundation will help us grow in ways not likely otherwise. We may look similar, but our lives will turn in a different direction.

My spruce trees were changed from the outside in. Living with God as the center of our lives does the same. We no longer live just for ourselves, or as if this life is all there is. We do not hang on for the end of the workday, nor do we simply hope to cruise into the weekend. As new creations, our lives have a renewed purpose and a deeper meaning, and we have a divine legacy to follow. Are Christians perfect? Certainly not, but we have a perfect leader to mold and shape us into useful vessels to help manifest the kingdom of God.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I changed as my living environments have changed?

June 21
Unanswered Prayer

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Psalm 22:1-2

Through my teen years and into my young adulthood, I had one goal in life: to make it *big* in music. I did not know exactly what that meant, but I knew I wanted whatever it was. I enjoyed traveling, but not too much. Being on the road was fun, as long as I could choose where to go and how long to be gone. I enjoyed writing songs, but I did not want to do a lot of tedious rewriting. I enjoyed recording, but too much time in the studio got on my nerves. Seeking perfection was never my thing. I did not want to

move to one of the cities where most music companies were located — New York, Los Angeles, or Nashville — because I did not want to live in a big city. Aside from those caveats, however, I *really* wanted to make it big in music! I prayed for my dream to come true. It is clear to me, in retrospect, that my prayer was best left unanswered.

I prayed for my mother's complete recovery following her stroke. Instead, she steadily declined and passed away ten weeks later. I prayed hard for the healing of the mental illness of one of my brothers, but my prayers seemingly fell on deaf ears. I prayed desperately for the reconciliation of the marriage of friends, but divorce resulted anyway. I have prayed for the faith to move mountains, but most days I can barely move the soil in the garden without getting a sore back. My list of unanswered prayers is long. Although, in hindsight, I am thankful some prayers went unanswered, I cannot say that for all of my prayers.

What is the difference between an answered and an unanswered prayer? What moves God to fulfill some prayer requests and not others? Not surprisingly, that is perhaps the great mystery about God. I believe in the power of prayer, but my experience is that prayer is not always answered, at least not in the way or time frame we ask. I do know this: When I pray, particularly when I pray earnestly, fervently, and with a singular mind, I enter an intimate communion with God. I become a participant with God in whatever happens, rather than a victim of it. In such a communion, I know that whatever I experience I do not experience alone. The words from Psalm 22 are familiar to us. They were among the last utterings of Jesus on the cross. Even Jesus felt abandoned at times, but he sought communion with God to the end.

Journaling focus: When have I felt particularly close to God in prayer.

June 22
Guiding Vision

"Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keeps the law, happy is he."
Proverbs 29:18 *(King James 2000 Bible Translation)*

Many organizations have a Vision Statement which addresses the question, "What do we want to become?" A good vision statement looks ahead and describes a desirable future. It establishes an inspiring dream for people to rally around and work to achieve. Vision statements guide the way forward, like a lamp on a dark path. They help refocus efforts on what

is important, especially when less-important issues distract us. Many individuals develop a personal vision statement for the very same reasons. A vision statement reminds us of who we are, whose we are, and what we hope to become. In the woodlands of life, vision describes the forest so we do not get lost in the trees.

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., established a dynamic vision for society with his *"I Have a Dream"* speech. It reads in part:

> *"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today."*[42]

The dream of Dr. King was a vision of racial equality and social justice. It was deeply inspiring at the time and remains so today, generations later. It established a grand picture of the future, one we continue to work towards today.

In his essay, *Foresight as the Central Ethic of Leadership,* Daniel Kim writes, "…without vision, our people suffer death by a thousand paper cuts."[43] He describes how those with no vision wander aimlessly to their graves, engaging in activities with no meaning. He calls them our *walking dead.* The writer of Proverbs in today's scripture reading tells us people perish without vision. Unfortunately, the guiding vision for many is simply to get through the day. We stumble through our weeks with an eye on the weekend. Surely, we were not created in the image of God to succumb to such low expectations.

As Christians, we received a vision two thousand years ago from Jesus. It is to *love one another.* Like Dr. King's Dream speech, the Bible lays out ambitious goals for which to strive. Those ideals give meaning to our days. As with all good visions, the Bible and the Dream speech lay an inspiring path before us to travel the rest of our days. Those types of visions keep us focused on purposes larger than ourselves.

Journaling focus: What is my vision for my life? (If you do not have one, I encourage you to begin developing one.)

June 23
Holy Irony

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Psalm 62:5-8

One of life's ironies is that the times I have most needed God are the same times I've found it most difficult to feel God's presence. Like the Psalmist in today's scripture, I believe God is my rock, my salvation, and my fortress. I believe my deliverance and honor rest on God. My difficulty is in the fifth verse: "For God alone my soul waits in silence." When I'm facing a great deal of stress, life seems to spiral out of my control. When I'm facing a mountainous difficulty that I cannot see beyond, my mind races. Random thoughts bounce between my ears in dizzying fashion as I seek answers. I cannot quiet my mind enough to find God to save my soul, literally.

Times of stress provide quite a contrast to times of relative centeredness. Some moments, I can sit and close my eyes and hold on to one thought or blessing for an extended period. From this *center,* I am able to focus on the nuances of the object of my meditation and listen for the lessons. The times I can pray intently and feel very close to God are special gifts. In those times, it is as if we are connected by a divine ethernet with unlimited bandwidth. When I am able to quiet my mind and control my thoughts, I find God easily. There is no fear or frenzy in that place of peace. While I am always aware of suffering around me, I also have a sense that all is well. God is in control, and, in the end, all things will work together for good. We cannot see the future, but our lack of vision does not mean good things are not in the works.

It was during a crisis in my life that the phrase "I'll be praying for you" took on new meaning. I had always thought it nice when someone let me know I was being prayed for, that God was being petitioned to help me through my time of trial. In this particular circumstance, it was clear people were not just praying *for* me; they were praying *in my place.* In such emotional turmoil, I was unable to find the center from which to pray effectively. It is similar to mowing the lawn for someone recovering from surgery, or to shoveling snow from the sidewalk for someone too frail to do it all alone. Praying *in place of* someone who cannot pray effectively for him or herself is a very special type of service. It is a service we can all provide. The needs are great. We can all pray for others.

Journaling focus: Who can I pray in place of today?

June 24
Containing Contentment

"…I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need."
Philippians 4:11b-12

Today's scripture tells me to find contentment. With whatever I have. Hmmmm. That's a large expectation, and yet that's what Paul claims for himself in his letter to the folks in Philippi. For much of my life I had little, at least by American standards. I grew up in a lower, middle-class home. The six of us rented older, smaller homes in very modest neighborhoods. Most of our vacations were to one or both sets of grandparents' homes. We were one of the last families I knew to have air conditioning (a single window unit) or color TV. But I didn't often feel deprived. For the most part I was content. When I moved out on my own I had very modest apartments, duplexes, even a small trailer home. Although I was doing my best to move up the socio-economic ladder, I was mostly content with my lot in life. I never went hungry or without any of life's basic needs.

So, I like to tell myself, with Paul, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have…" But have I? If I were forced back into the studio apartment where I lived in the weeks before Carrie and I were married, would I be content? If a fire wiped out our home and all its contents would I be content? It is easy to look back on my past realities and say, "I was content, then." But Paul seems to be hinting at something very different. That we should be able to find contentment *regardless* of our circumstances, even if we teeter between poverty and wealth and back to poverty, again. It reminds me of Steve Martin in the old movie *The Jerk*[44] where he claimed to have been "born a poor black child." In the movie, he achieved tremendous wealth, and then fell back into poverty. He found contentment in the relationships with his family that made poverty preferable to wealth.

The punch line from Paul, not quoted above, comes in verse 13: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me."* Contentment is directly related to that on which we lean. If we lean on meeting societal expectations, we set ourselves up for unhappiness. If we lean in faith on the goodness of the spirit, we find stability regardless of our socio-economic status.

Journaling focus: Where are my sources of greatest discontent?

June 25
The Leper and the Church Lady

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. Mark 1:40-42

There is a story of a church lady who would get on her knees during prayer time every Sunday and pray to win the lottery. She prayed fervently, "O God, my Rock and my Redeemer, if you let me win the lottery, I promise to devote the rest of my life to feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and caring for the needy." Her prayer continued unanswered until, one Sunday, she heard God whisper back, "Maybe you should buy a lottery ticket."

The purpose of sharing this story is not to promote playing the lottery as a way to serve God. It's to point out that sometimes we expect God to do all the work in our lives, and we act as if we can just sit back and collect the blessings. I believe God is looking for blessing *creators* and not just blessing *receivers*. In today's scripture lesson, the leper goes to Jesus, kneels before him, and acknowledges two very important points. First, that Jesus has the power to heal him, recognizing Jesus' Lordship over his condition. Second, he acknowledges that Jesus has the free will to heal him. He recognizes that, for whatever reason, Jesus may choose not to do so. Jesus says, "I do choose. Be made clean!" And the man is made clean.

One of the confounding mysteries is when, how, and under what conditions God chooses to intervene in our lives. I have no doubt God does choose to intervene, at least at times. I have seen and experienced God's intervention. I have also seen and experienced times in which God seems to opt not to intervene. What is different?

A number of years ago, I was sick with what I thought was influenza. I was feverish, achy, and miserable. Given my low tolerance for pain, I thought I was going to die. My wife took me to the hospital, where I was diagnosed with pneumonia. I was given fluids and medicine and was sent home after a few hours, feeling like a new person. Sometimes we simply need to take advantage of the resources readily available to us in order to allow God's healing power to work in us through others.

If there is a magic formula to receive God's intervention, I have not found it. Even so, times come in which we must act. When we are sick, sometimes we must go in search of help as opposed to waiting for God to come to us. Sometimes God calls us to participate in our own healing, to help shape our blessing, and to actively seek what we most desire for ourselves and others. Like in the stories of the leper and the church lady,

sometimes we must take the initiative.

Journaling focus: What issue in my life might I need to take more initiative in resolving instead of assuming God will take care of it without my participation?

June 26
Humble Yourself

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 18:4

In general, I try to build people up and make them feel good about themselves and their lives. I truly believe that everyone and everything is an amazing and unique work of creation, unlike anything created before or that will be created in the future. We are literally the *only* one of ourselves out of countless trillions of beings. In that sense, we are special beyond comprehension. Our specific blend of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual traits will never again see the light of day when we pass. We could interpret this as a reason for arrogance.

While some may agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment, others are suspecting there is a catch. And there is. Are you ready? Yes, you are unique in all of creation. BUT (make sure you are sitting down for this). Here's the catch (take a deep breath now): *Everyone and everything else is a completely unique creation, too!!!* This includes the pebble in your shoe and the gnat you swatted away from your food at dinner. God expresses absolutely uniquely in and through the specific nature of everything. I once heard a bit of business wisdom that goes, "If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority." The corollary on the topic of uniqueness is this: "If everyone is a unique creation, no one is unique." While this is may be overly cynical, it does perhaps shed some light on why Jesus tells us to humble ourselves.

The context for Jesus' words in today's scripture is that he is sitting with his disciples who ask who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds by setting a child on his lap and saying, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Indeed, the call for humility is not unique to Jesus in the Bible. The Old Testament prophet Micah (6:8) wrote, "…and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to *walk humbly with your God!*"

It is interesting and instructive that Jesus uses children to illustrate humility. Many parents, myself included, put enormous amounts of energy into building our children's self-esteem and trying to assure they develop a positive self-image. We want our kids to celebrate their distinct place in creation and to know themselves as beloved children of God. While we do not want them to feel inferior, we also do not want them to believe themselves superior to others, either. Uniqueness does not equal preeminence.

In general, children are curious, optimistic, joyful, easily awed, and have short memories. They are not *smart* in the ways of the world, but they learn to shape their unique character into the puzzle of the life around them. Children possess important traits of humility we often forget as we grow up and become *wise*. Children are more likely to be present to the moment, and in that moment to see and appreciate the beauty and joy in the specificity of everything around them. Jesus warns that the childlike traits we shed as we age are the very ones we should most strive to retain.

One might wonder about the purpose for our unique blend of skills, characteristics, and insights if not for us to gain an advantage over others in life. At least two responses come to mind. First, we are creations *of God*, created in God's image and likeness, so whatever uniqueness we have comes from God and not from anything we have done. Where, then, is our cause to brag? Secondly, we are given special qualities in order to *make this world a better place for ourselves and others.* For every talent we are given, there is a need nearby that we alone are uniquely gifted to meet. The biggest question is whether we are humble enough to use our talents in service to others, as Jesus did. That, I think, is becoming humble like a child and holds the key to the kingdom.

Journaling focus: In what ways am I uniquely blessed? How can my gifts best be used in service to others?

June 27
Living Water

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." John 4:13-14

The story of the woman at the well is interesting and informative in many ways. Jesus is resting beside Jacob's well when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Jesus, weary from his journey, asks her to draw water

for him to drink. It was an unusual, socially inappropriate, and politically incorrect request. In that era, Jews and Samaritans did not intermingle. As the woman questions why Jesus would ask her to draw water for him, Jesus reveals personal and embarrassing details about her life. He could not have known such intimate details except divinely. Jesus saw deeply into the past the woman was trying to hide, and he showed her acceptance and guidance. He told her about the *living water* he could give that quenched one's thirst forever.

Clearly, Jesus was referring to something other than the water in Jacob's well. He was referencing a *spiritual* thirst, not a physical one. This spiritual thirst penetrates our daily lives. By the use of a common, physical example, the need to quench one's thirst, Jesus illustrated an enlightening spiritual truth. While we draw physical water from a well, *spiritual* water must be drawn from the Spirit. Both are equally vital to life. We cannot satisfy physical thirsts without also attending to spiritual thirsts. The relationship between the physical and the spiritual that's suggested here is intriguing.

Does spiritual reality cause physical reality? While we cannot answer with scientific certainty, I believe it does. The woman at the well had a spiritual problem that manifested as a recurring physical reality: failed relationships with men. She tried to hide that information from her human counterparts. However, she could not hide it from Jesus, who saw with eyes that read the spirit. While the woman at the well was ashamed to be known so intimately, Jesus did not condemn her; rather, he offered her a path to salvation.

Jesus sees through whatever we attempt to hide. He loves us unconditionally and offers us living water. That water will quench our spiritual thirst and, after that has been satisfied, will heal our physical reality. It becomes in us "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Journaling focus: What physical or spiritual realities might Jesus be waiting for me to disclose today?

June 28
The Blessings Ledger

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. Matthew 5:3-6, 12a

A blessing is a special favor, mercy, or benefit. A trial causes difficulty or suffering. Here is a test, with respect to blessings and trials:

1. Are the blessings of today greater than those of yesterday?
2. Are the blessings in my life increasing or decreasing?
3. If my life were to end today, would the weight of my blessings outweigh the weight of my trials?

Everyone receives a mix of blessings and trials during their lives. How one experiences those blessings and trials, however, varies greatly from person to person. Some people seem happy regardless of their difficulties. Others seem perennially unhappy, even though their problems may seem trivial to others. One of the primary determinants of how we experience the ups and downs in our lives has to do with the perspective from which we view them.

There are times, particularly during times of trial, when we need to expand our perspective in order to see beyond the difficult moments. We need to look forward to a happier future or to remember a joyous past. Other times, especially when we are bored, call for us to look deeper into the moment for blessings we otherwise miss. For example, when we walk a route we usually drive, we allow ourselves to see in more detail that which is normally a blur to us. We slow down our experience in order to expose hidden or subtle blessings. January in Kansas can be a dreary, cold month. But even in January, buds swell on the trees. In the middle of the dead, brown stems of grass, green crowns wait patiently for their time to explode. The seeds of spring prepare to burst forth. If I focus on the bigger picture – trees without leaves, brown grass, cold temperatures – January is a month without blessing. The blessing is there, however. I simply must look closer to find it.

Here is the irony: our trials are often the steppingstones to our blessings, like traversing winter to arrive at spring. Granted, some of our blessings will not manifest on this side of the grave. Our lives are bigger than the days we walk the earth. But no matter our situation, there are blessings to be found in abundance, if we learn how and where to seek them. If our blessings ledger weighs heavier on the trials side, we may need to use a different scale. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven!"

Journaling focus: Reflect on a blessing that only came as a result of a trial.

June 29
Letting Your Light Shine

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

In grade school, the Beatles magically appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and I was hooked. I dreamed of playing the guitar and becoming famous, loved, and revered by everyone! I dug out my dad's old guitar and, with the help of a chord book, learned how to finger a few chords. I mowed lawns all one summer to buy a guitar of my own. I practiced and dreamed and practiced and dreamed. In junior high I began performing in bands and was "on my way!"

After many years of performing and writing and still not being able to meaningfully support myself without working other jobs (not to mention not being famous, loved, or revered by anyone), I was sick of my dream. I didn't like performing in clubs or the music I was playing or the music I was writing. So, I quit. Selling most of my equipment, I prepared for a non-musical life. In the context of today's scripture lesson, the lamp I had lit and nourished for years was now hidden under a bushel basket. Miserable from my failed attempts at pursuing my dream, it was time to move on.

A short time later, my wife and I were married, became members a church and were promptly recruited as youth sponsors. A few weeks into that adventure the youth director mentioned how they really needed a guitar player. So, I began leading songs for the youth group. Shortly after that, the senior pastor wanted to start a new type of worship service – a *contemporary* service with guitars and some of the songs we were singing with the youth. Fast-forward a couple of decades and I am having the most fulfilling fun of my musical life as a worship musician. Famous? Certainly not. Making money hand over foot? Not a chance because I volunteer. But I have a life I love, a church family I love, and a place for my lamp to shine!

Everyone has talents that they are tempted at times to hide under a bushel basket. We are sensitive about revealing that which is very personal and important to us, fearing it will be ridiculed. Many have the gift of making others feel welcome. Others enjoy cooking, cleaning, or making videos. Still others love to teach, babysit, fix things, make phone calls, run errands for others, visit the homebound, stuff envelopes, pray, read, sing, encourage others, paint, dance, hug, or an endless variety of sparks just waiting to light someone's darkness. The world around you needs your light to shine!

Journaling focus: What light of mine is hiding under a basket? Why?

June 30
Run, Forrest, Run!

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.
Isaiah 40:31

The namesake of the movie, *Forrest Gump,*[45] was bullied as a child. His schoolmates made fun of him, hurling insults and rocks. His only friend, Jenny, encouraged him to flee from his tormentors, saying, "Run, Forrest, run!" And so he ran. Running away from trouble was clearly his best option as a youth because he was always outnumbered. He soon discovered that he could often outrun trouble. Not only was he fast, he could run fast for a very long time. During one of her visits to Forrest as a young adult, Jenny bought him a pair of running shoes. When she left again, leaving Forrest heartbroken, he decided to run. He ended up running across the country, coast to coast, several times before deciding he was finished with running.

Many of us run from trouble because running seems to be our best option. In his childhood, Forrest ran from his tormentors. As an adult, he ran from the hurt of losing the love of his life, Jenny, repeatedly. The problem with running away from trouble is that we cannot run forever, and trouble usually catches up to us anyway. Obviously, most of us do not physically run from our problems, as Forrest Gump did. We do, however, let dreaded phone calls roll to voicemail. We commit to beginning the diet our doctor says we need – tomorrow. We avoid confronting and repairing dysfunctional relationships. These are ways to run that are not so hard on the knees, but they are hard on the emotions and the spirit.

At some point, we must face our life challenges head-on. One of the reasons we avoid our problems is fear that we do not have the resolve or the resources to address them. We cannot see how to solve a problem, and so we avoid it for as long as we can, often making the problem worse. In that sense, avoiding our challenges is a faith issue. The author of the book of Isaiah writes that if we "wait for the Lord" our strength will be renewed, and we will "run and not be weary." In this passage, waiting on the Lord refers to trusting in or relying upon the Lord. To trust in the Lord does not mean that we impulsively act on a problem without first researching and praying about our options. God sometimes provides

guidance in obvious ways, but God's communications are often subtle. For me, at some point, I begin to feel at peace about one option over the others. At that point, I know it is time to act. We prayerfully wait on the Lord for guidance, and then we act. There is no need to continue running away from what we fear.

Journaling focus: What problem can I stop running from and face head-on?

July 1
A Box of Chocolates

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7a

In the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest often had difficulty understanding life's twists and turns, as well as the way others acted. His mother had a way of putting life's puzzles into words Forrest could understand. One of his favorite sayings from his mother was, "Life is like a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you're gonna get." Forrest loved chocolates, so he understood the analogy. Inevitably, when he bought a box of chocolates for someone, he would eat a few before giving the rest away. He knew that there were varieties of flavors in every box of chocolates, all sharing at least one thing in common – chocolate.

Personally, facing a box of chocolates is somewhat daunting for me because I do not like coconut. I do not like the taste, and I abhor the texture. I learned, early on, that many, but not all, of the circular and oval chocolates were filled with coconut. I also learned that many, but not all, of the square and rectangular candies had caramel or some other filling I really liked. Even trying to sort chocolates by geometric shape, however, did not always prevent a mouthful of something I detested. I never knew for certain what I was going to get.

Forrest's mother's reference to life being like a box of chocolates is certainly true when dealing with people – you never know what you are going to get. Although the candies in a box of chocolates look relatively homogenous on the outside, they are very different on the inside. With people, however, the homogeneity is more internal than external. Most folks look and act very differently, but there is something good and pure within everyone, which is the Spirit of God. Connecting deeply with

another, spirit to spirit, is not unlike the taste of chocolate on the tongue – sweet, savory, and satisfying. And that connection, once made, can cover for a lot of unpleasantness on the surface. Those we love are not perfect. They are fully capable of leaving us angry, sad, hurt, and disappointed. Yet, we stay with them because of connections that bind us together in spite of our quirky frailties. All the candies in a box of chocolates share something good in common – chocolate – just as all people share something good in common. When we open ourselves to truly experience another person, we will find deep beauty only when we look beyond skin color, hairstyle, clothes, sexual orientation, and education level. On the surface, people are like a box of chocolates – you never know what you are going to get. Deep inside, however, we find the image of God.

Journaling focus: Who is someone in my life I am reluctant to connect with because of their outward appearance?

July 2
Not Enough Rocks

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Psalm 51:10-12

In a touching scene from the movie *Forrest Gump,* Jenny returns to live with Forrest for a time as she strives to stabilize her wretched life. After years of drug abuse and wandering in search of something to build a life upon, she returns to her hometown and to the one person who had loved her in a healthy way since childhood, Forrest Gump. Jenny and Forrest walk leisurely together, ending up in front of the run-down, deserted house where she grew up with her abusive father. Jenny's countenance immediately changes to one of intense anger. She begins picking up rocks and throwing them at the house, eventually breaking a window. She falls to the ground in an exhausted and emotional heap, weeping. Forrest sits down beside her and says, "Sometimes, I guess, there just aren't enough rocks."

Jenny made many poor decisions in her life. The house of her childhood stood as a reminder of the years of anguish from which she had long tried to escape. She threw the rocks in a fruitless attempt to find peace by harming this physical remnant of her nightmare childhood, perhaps in hopes that it would suffer a portion of the pain she experienced within its walls. Although the house was not the cause of her childhood abuse, it was

inseparable from the painful memories.

Similar recollections occur with us today. For example, I cannot drive by my old high school without remembering the violent racial tension that existed during my years there. Decades later, the memory makes me uncomfortable. The building, while having nothing to do with the unrest, stands as a reminder and a transport vehicle back to that difficult time in history. It is natural for us to develop aversions to people and places that are associated with pain from our past. We must remember, however, that the physical objects are separate from our suffering. Our on-going pain from hurts of the past is a spiritual issue that requires spiritual healing. The writer of the 51st Psalm cries for God to create a "clean heart" within, complete with a "new and right spirit." If we truly desire restoration from pain to joy, we need a loving and understanding God.

Granted, there are times when we feel the need to strike out in retaliation against our pain, even when the objects were only innocent witnesses. That sort of striking back may actually help in some cases, if only temporarily. Some people feel a need to hold onto their suffering, and God gives us free will to do so. To actually *heal* our pain, however, requires the intervention of a Savior and a good therapist to help us work *through* the pain instead of avoiding or ignoring it. Because sometimes, there just aren't enough rocks.

Journaling focus: When have I felt there simply were not enough rocks to throw at my pain?

July 3
As Stupid Does

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.
1 Corinthians 3:18-19a

There is a verbal exchange that recurs several times in the movie, *Forrest Gump*. A character asks Forrest, "Are you stupid or something?" Forrest's immediate and rote response is, "Stupid is as stupid does." Forrest's character is one with a seemingly low IQ and, at least by common standards, would be considered marginally functional, at least intellectually. His mother taught him the saying as a defense against those who would imply that he was less worthy of love and kindness than anyone else was. Like many of Forrest Gump's sayings, one wonders if he grasped the depth

of the statement. I consider myself relatively intelligent, but I have spent much time pondering some of his one-liners. Indeed, that is part of the charm of the movie. There is little doubt that Forrest Gump, while a fictional character, is of low intelligence; but he is also of high understanding.

The saying, "Stupid is as stupid does," is a variation of similar sayings in other works of fiction like, "Handsome is as handsome does," or "Beauty is as beauty does." The underlying theme is that we find real truth or beauty beneath the surface, and often times what is underneath is the opposite of the outside appearance. Stupid is not the one who *appears* stupid, but the one who chooses to *act* stupidly. In the movie, many of his classmates, soldiers, and other townsfolk act unkindly, if not stupidly.

Forrest Gump has an uncanny ability to cut to the heart of an issue. He has no intellectual capacity to waste on superfluous window-dressing. Forrest has a handle on what is important in life and keeps his focus on those things: family, friends, home. That limited and laser-like focus is what makes a person like Forrest, who appears stupid, to actually be deceivingly perceptive and wise. It also makes him a heck of a Ping-Pong player.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul labels earthly wisdom as foolishness to God. When we participate in wrongdoing, either as an active participant or as a passive bystander, we act foolishly. When we refuse to act contrary to others out of fear of what those others might do to or think about us, we are fools in God's eyes. God's instruction to us is unambiguous, at least in terms of how we are to treat others. Love, respect, and caring for needs – especially for the sick, unfortunate, and social outcasts – is our standard. Even Forrest Gump, low IQ and all, understood those directives perfectly.

Journaling focus: What is an area of my life I need to attend to in a more intentional manner?

July 4
In Dependence Day

"Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."
John 8:31-32

Every July 4, many U.S. citizens celebrate Independence Day. People gather with friends and family for the food, fun, fellowship, and fireworks. Obviously, the holiday recognizes the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, by which the United States declared itself free from the rule of Great Britain. 'Taxation without representation' was a primary complaint.

In the spirit of the day I looked up the definition of *independence*. One dictionary said "freedom from the control, influence, support, aid, or the like, of others." And I thought, "Hmmm." I understand the desire to be free from the *control* of another, but do I really want to be free from the influence, support, or aid of others? Certainly, I appreciate the freedom to at least choose whose influence, support and aid I receive. I decided to look up *freedom*. Freedom is defined as "the state of being free or at liberty, rather than in confinement or under physical restraint." I appreciate that. Further, freedom is the "exemption from external control, interference, and regulation," and "the power to determine action without restraint." Well, after this little research project I have to say I am fully, 100%, unequivocally in favor of independence and freedom, at least within limits. When I think about freedom as the power to act without restraint, I think of a handful of evil people throughout history who use and used their power to impose unspeakable evils on multitudes of innocent victims. Hitler comes to mind. Certainly, independence and freedom must be tempered with measures of personal responsibility, accountability and social consciousness. No doubt, the authors of our Declaration understood such would need to be the case. Hence, our Constitution established the structure for the creation and enforcement of laws restricting certain freedoms, in the interest of the majority. We have established freedom and independence, within limits.

Jesus equates freedom with truth. If we know the truth, the truth will set us free. And we know the truth by following Jesus and trying to live as he lived. It seems contradictory, doesn't it, that in order to be truly free we must limit our freedom by submitting to our Savior? Personally, I cherish my independence. There are times, however, I am thankful to be *in dependence* on others for influence, support, aid…oh, and salvation!

Journaling focus: In what ways do I willingly limit my freedoms in order to receive influence, support, and aid from others?

July 5
Love and Freedom

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14

One of my favorite singer/songwriters is the late Dan Fogelberg. He had a wonderful talent for uniting intriguing lyrics with beautiful melodies. Many of his songs held me spellbound. One of his lesser-known works was *Sweet Magnolia,*[46] the story of two young, independent souls whose paths crossed in a fierce, romantic way. The line in the song that has stuck with me since my first listening is this: "Magnolia, now I see, that freedom isn't free, and love's the only true redeemer." The two people who fell madly in love also held a similarly impassioned love for their freedom. As is often the case, love and freedom, when not properly understood or expressed, cannot peaceably coexist. When focused exclusively on freedom, one longs for the blessings that come from freely giving up a portion of that freedom for love. The opposite is also true. Giving up a portion of our freedom to unite with another in love, as in a committed relationship, can result in a different type of freeing experience. Thus the line, "Love's the only true redeemer."

I was a bachelor until I was 33 years old, and I vividly experienced that my freedom was not free. I had time to myself, as well as a home I did not have to share. I could come and go as I pleased. I was free to be me! The problem was, wherever I went and whatever I chose to do, *I* was always there, too. I became a slave to *me*. Wherever I went, I could not get away from my personal shortcomings. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says we must use our freedom to become slaves to one another. Dan Fogelberg says freedom is not free because love is the only true redeemer. Love must be shared with another in order to manifest. To give and receive love requires a relationship, and a relationship requires a sacrifice of some degree of freedom. In his letter, Paul is not specifically talking about romantic love. He is, however, talking about relationships and giving, receiving, and utilizing the freedom we are granted in Christ to perpetuate that flow of love.

Paul says we are called to freedom. Jesus redeemed us from our enslavement to sin. He provided the opportunity for new life and healing through faith. Redemption brings freedom. Even so, just because something is permissible does not make it a wise or preferred choice. We have free will to choose one path over another, but Paul warns us not to use our freedom for self-indulgence. Rather, we are to serve one another in

love. For what is love without freedom, or freedom without love? No one wants love from another who is forced to love him or her. We want love from those who choose to give it of their own free will. Freedom finds its highest expression in love. Love finds its highest expression in sacrifice. Like Jesus on the cross, love is the true redeemer.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I struggle with the tradeoff between individual freedom and maintaining loving relationships?

July 6
Love Is a Verb

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.
John 13:34-35

Jesus uttered the words in today's Bible passage at the Last Supper with his disciples. They had eaten; he had washed their feet, and he was spending what he knew to be his last moments preparing them for what was to come.

One of the central themes of Jesus' ministry was the importance of loving one another. To say Jesus' life modeled exactly what loving one another means would not be a stretch. He endured criticism for his choice of companions: common folks, such as fishermen and shepherds. He sought the unpopular and outcast, the sick and lame, the tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers. He gave his critics much fodder for their attacks. Jesus consistently reached out to the unloved and needy, no matter their circumstances.

Strange as it may sound, I am thankful Jesus commanded us to *love* one another instead of to *like* one another. Loving someone requires action and is possible to accomplish by an act of will. Liking someone is an emotion that is subject to the ups and downs of hormones and other less-than-stable influences. Arguably, loving another is easier when we also like them, but fondness is not required. Love implies attention to a need: feeding the hungry, finding shelter for the homeless, providing a shoulder for the brokenhearted. Loving acts done in response to the needs of others do not require anything in return, nor should a return be expected. On the other hand, liking someone is dependent on a desired return for our attention. Some people in need are not easy to like, and they may look or act differently than people we're used to interacting with. By providing

loving attention to their needs, we may or may not grow to like them. However, through our loving deeds, we are continuing a tradition of love inspired by Jesus.

Does loving someone mean we never encourage him or her to alter his or her life path? Loving a drug addict surely requires efforts to encourage the person to get treatment. My love for my children sometimes required corrective action and intervention. If a dear friend heads down a path I believe to be dangerous, love demands I let him or her know. Truly loving interventions are rooted in uncommon knowledge and wisdom applied with a laser focus on what is best for the object of our love. Such action requires a tremendous amount of patience, care, and prayer.

Journaling focus: Describe someone you are called to love that you find difficult to like?

July 7
Providing Comfort

Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him. 1 Samuel 16: 14, 23

King Saul was a temperamental man. Those around him said he had an "evil spirit from the Lord [that] tormented him." He was given to fits of rage as well as the unpredictable and unpleasant behaviors that accompany ill humor. Saul was persuaded, in a calmer moment, to have his servants find someone who could play music to soothe him. His servants found David. As recorded in today's scripture passage, when David played his lyre, "Saul would be relieved and feel better."

As a teenager, I wrote a song titled *My Friend*. The *friend* referred to was my guitar. Music helped me through the tumultuous years of my teenage and young-adult life. Some days I felt as if I were teetering on the brink of a meaningless life. I would pick up my guitar and release my pent-up frustrations in song. "And so I come to you, again, my friend," was one of the lines from the song.

Where do we turn when an "evil spirit" descends upon us? I feel my gift of music was a divine outlet. Others use gardening, reading, spending time with friends, exercise, or meditation. One thing is certain, however: When life turns sour, we must find a way to put distance –

physical, mental, or emotional – between our unpleasant situation and ourselves. I used my guitar; Saul used David's music. We not only need to find an outlet for ourselves, but we are also called to help others with outlets in their times of need.

The example of David furnishing comfort to Saul symbolizes our call as Christians to deliver comfort. In the passages we call the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful" and "Blessed are the peacemakers." We are directed to care for those who cannot care for themselves, as well as to intervene in unfortunate situations. We are to be calming spirits in helping others find relief. God gifts us with many opportunities for helping ministries: writing letters, making phone calls, providing transportation, fixing a meal, and a host of other kindnesses large and small. The needs are tremendous, and they are all around us. God does not expect us to solve all of the world's problems. God calls us to positively impact one person at a time according to our gifts.

Journaling focus: What gift can I use to help another in their time of need today?

July 8
The Master Craftsman

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unmade substance. In your book was written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. Psalm 139:13-16

For most goods and services today, variation in the end product is considered undesirable. Companies spend enormous sums of money each year to reduce variation in how they do what they do in order to make everything they produce as identical as possible. Reducing variation in goods and services leads to consistency, predictability, and reliability. Early in my career, I taught people how to measure the variation in their performance by using statistical control charts. In that way, they could identify sources of variation in their work and strive to reduce those to a minimum. It is the path our world uses to approach what we consider *perfection*, but it is a perfection defined more by functional characteristics

than by aesthetic qualities or compassion.

The goal of a production line, whether it is producing new cars, vacuum cleaners, or hamburgers, is to produce as much as possible, as consistently as possible, and as efficiently (meaning profitably) as possible. That is the reason we can buy a Happy Meal at McDonald's anywhere in the country and expect it to look and taste the same as a Happy Meal anywhere else. The same is true for a Ford pickup or a Samsung television. In general, we value predictability and consistency whenever functionality is the goal.

Mass production of essentially identical products is a wonderful thing for both consumers and producers in a capitalistic society. It is also 180° different from the way God creates. Based on the evidence everywhere around us, God places great value on variation. Nature is much less predictable and reliable than a Taylor guitar, and individual human behavior is nearly impossible to predict. For example, we have two genetically identical Red Maple trees planted 30 feet apart in our backyard, yet they have grown into very dissimilar manifestations of their red-mapleness.

The point is that God is a master craftsman, not a production line foreman. A production foreman forces the materials at his or her disposal to conform to the product design demanded. A master craftsman, on the other hand, alters the product design to accommodate the unique traits of the material at hand. No two creations of an artisan will be identical. Of the roughly seven billion people alive on the planet today, no two are identical. No two people in history have been identical creations, not to mention no two trees, blades of grass, snowflakes, sunsets, rocks, or any other created things – nor will they ever be. Psalm 139 describes how God made us and knows us "in (our most) inward parts." God's knowledge of us is not general or collective; God's knowledge of us is specific, personal, and intimate. To the extent that God has a plan for us, that plan will be perfectly suited to our God-given nature and never something that forces us against the natural grain of our being. God recognizes and revels in our uniqueness. While the Bible often calls us to be united with each other (John 17, for example), it does not demand uniformity. In God's creative scheme, uniformity may be akin to blasphemy.

Journaling focus: What tasks in my life require craftsmanship over efficiency?

July 9
Lost, But Loved

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Luke 15:4, 7

I have two children. I love them equally, but I also love them differently. They are different people, and, as their father, I worry about them both. I worry differently for each of them according to their individual natures, and I do not treat them the same. I may encourage one to get out with friends more often while trying to persuade the other to spend more time at home. I may try to lighten the mood with one while attempting to subdue the mood with the other.

The point is: My children are different, but those differences make them uniquely valuable and irreplaceable. God creates each of us individually and values us for the distinct creations we are. I believe if I had 50 children, I would love them all equally. And I would love them all differently. If one were sick or lost, I would leave the others in a heartbeat to do whatever I could for the one. That would not be because I valued the others less, but because the need of the one was greater at that moment. No matter how many children I might have, I would not be willing to lose any of them. Such is the immeasurable value of a unique and individual treasure. As is true of all unique and individual treasures, they are irreplaceable.

The parable of the lost sheep in today's scripture has gained special meaning for me through my personal experiences as a father. I understand the actions of the shepherd completely. As in many of Jesus' parables, the shepherd is God and we are the sheep. No matter how many of us there are, God considers and knows each of us as beloved children. God does not treat us the same, but God does love each of us fiercely and equally.

Journaling focus: Where in my life do I experience being equally loved but differently treated?

July 10
You Give Them Something to Eat

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." Mark 6:35-37b

The feeding of a large crowd is one of the miracle stories of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels, albeit in slightly different variations. The core of the story has Jesus teaching to a crowd of about 5,000 men, plus women and children. The hour is getting late, and the disciples are concerned that the people will need something to eat. They ask around and find only a paltry amount of available food – five loaves of bread and two fish, in Mark's version. It was far too little for so many. Jesus takes the meager offering, raises it to heaven in blessing, and tells the disciples to distribute it to the crowd. Everyone in the crowd eats their fill, and the disciples collect the leftovers, filling twelve baskets.

God miraculously multiplied the small amount of food into an abundance to feed the hungry crowd. The question is this: How did God do it? Did God take a little, apply the Word, and magically transform it into a lot? Perhaps. I do not question God's ability to accomplish such a feat. My life experience, however, makes me think God may have worked in a different way. Imagine that the disciples had asked people in the crowd what they could contribute to feed the masses, but only a few were willing to contribute a small bit of what they had, the five loaves and two fish. Once others saw that some people were contributing, however, their hearts opened and more became willing to offer what they had with them. When the little, which was first offered, was combined with the abundance that was actually in the crowd, there was more than enough for everyone to have their fill. Is this telling of the story any less miraculous than if God alone had created the abundance? I think not. In fact, I find it more compelling.

We see this at church with potluck dinners. The church provides a little and everyone else brings something to contribute to the common meal. The amount of food always exceeds the hunger. Perhaps the feeding of the 5,000 is the biblical version of the story of Stone Soup. In that story, a traveler stops in a town at dinnertime, but can find no one willing to feed him. He takes his pot to the river, fills it with water, and places one round stone in the bottom. He builds a fire in the town square and starts heating the water. Curious townsfolk stop by to see what he is making. He says, "Stone Soup. It's delicious!" He tells one person it would be better if only he had a few carrots. She says, "I have a few carrots I could bring." He tells

another that onions would be nice. Another person offers seasoning, and others bring potatoes and meat. In the end, they share a delicious and abundant community meal to which everyone contributed, despite their initial reluctance.

Here is why I believe the story seems more plausible along the lines of the Stone Soup legend than that God performed a miracle alone: I believe God works *through* us as much or more than God works *for* us. God provides the inspiration and the nudging for us to perform generous acts we might not otherwise perform. In the current example, one clue lies in Jesus' words: "*You* give *them* something to eat." It is a directive to personal action. It reminds me of Jesus' parting instructions to Peter in the Gospel of John (21:15-19). Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and Peter assures him he does. Jesus responds, "*(You)* Feed my sheep." God relies on our hands and hearts to do the physical work of God's will on earth. Very often, as in the case of the feeding of the 5,000, that work requires a handful of people to begin contributing something, inspiring others to follow suit. There is plenty for everyone when faithful people trust God's abundant provision and share what they have.

Who should feed the hungry? You and I should. God reveals the need and gives us the opportunity to take it from there. God, acting through and with us, is the initiator of miracles.

Journaling focus: What was a miracle I witnessed that was the product of many people contributing a little.

July 11
The Ten Commandments

"Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." Exodus 19:18-19

Is it any wonder the Israelites feared God? God tells Moses to gather the people at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God will come down in their sight. However, God warns the people not to touch the mountain or try to go up it, for they will be put to death for doing so. When God descends upon Mount Sinai, it is in a thick cloud of smoke with thunder, lightning, and fire. A trumpet blasts so loud it makes the people tremble.

The entire mountain shook violently. In the Gulf War of the 1990's, the United States began its attempts to unseat Saddam Hussain with a bombing campaign described as *Shock and Awe*. I imagine God's appearance to the Israelites as the original shock and awe campaign. Moses spoke to God, and God answered in thunder. It was in this setting that God gave the Ten Commandments, the original laws of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Old Testament. Their first appearance is in Exodus 20, with a repeat appearance in Deuteronomy. God carves the words onto two stone tablets for the people, and Moses carries the tablets to the camp at the base of the mountain, after having spent forty days with God at the summit. They build an elaborate *Ark of the Covenant* to house and carry the stone tablets. The six-hundred-plus laws contained in the Old Testament are probably outgrowths from the Ten Commandments, or perhaps guidelines for their application. Even so, many of those laws appear unrelated to any of the commandments to us today. It is not unlike the thousands of laws in our society, and the millions of legal regulations, all emanating from our relatively brief Constitution.

The Ten Commandments are among the most widely known of biblical writings. They form the basis for many of our western laws and appear in many courthouses and other public places. They are recognized and taught in most of the world's major religions, either in the form given to Moses, or in a similar version. Some are obvious, some are subtle; all are important and form the basis of justice, as we know it today. That is why they are the Ten *Commandments*, and not the Ten Suggestions. In the coming days, we will explore each of the Ten Commandments. Although some appear straightforward, a closer inspection creates room for contemplation and discussion.

Journaling focus: Why does God appear to the Hebrew people as a thick cloud?

July 12
No Other Gods Before Me

"Then the Lord God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other Gods before me." Exodus 20:1-3

When I was an adolescent, there was a clear distinction drawn

between having a *girlfriend* and having a girl as a *friend*. There was a degree of *exclusivity* to having a girlfriend. There was a type of relationship in both cases, but I could have as many girls for friends as I wanted. I could only have one girlfriend, however; at least only one at a time. Particularly early in adolescence, having a girlfriend did not necessarily imply anything particularly romantic, holding hands perhaps, but it did require more time and attention than for a friend who was also a girl.

The wording of the first of the Ten Commandments is particularly interesting because of the words *"before me."* The commandment does not say, *"…you shall have no other Gods."* It says, *"…you shall have no other Gods before me."* The wording is a nod to the many gods people commonly believed existed at the time. Certainly, Hindus continue to recognize hundreds of Gods. In the West, we worship numerous Gods, including our homes, cars, jobs, and social status. Even so, my Christian upbringing left the indelible impression there is only one God. It reminds me of girlfriends from my past, who left the indelible impression there was only *one girl!*

Could there be more Gods than the one we worship? Those who distinguish our Christian God from the God or Gods of other religions intrigue me. While I believe there is only one God, I recognize and honor that there are many unique understandings and experiences of that one God. I do not believe that we, in our human state, have the capacity to grasp the entire vastness we know as God. We latch onto that which is within our comprehension. Unfortunately, when we do not acknowledge that there are aspects of God's nature beyond our comprehension, we use our limited understanding to build a religious wall separating ourselves from others with a different understanding. We criticize another's limited understanding of God by judging them based on our limited understanding.

Even so, whether we believe there is one God or many, the first commandment is unwavering that we are to have none above our God. We are to lavish time, attention, and praise on our God. After all, this is the God who freed our ancestors from their bonds of slavery in Egypt. The same God, today, frees us from the bonds of our slavery to sin today. The gods of today that we are most likely to place above the eternal God are things like material possessions and other temporal parts of life that have no permanence.

Journaling focus: What are some of the gods I tend to place before the Lord?

July 13
A Jealous God

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" Exodus 20:4-6

The first of the Ten Commandments is to have no other Gods before our God. In the second commandment, God admits to being a "jealous God," and warns us not to make or worship idols. In Old Testament days, it was a common practice to make and worship various idols. Some were made of gold, others of stone, wood, or other materials available at the time. The practice always seemed to bring about the ire of God.

I wonder what God thinks about some of our current religious and spiritual practices. We often worship in the presence of items like crosses, candles, incense, icons, and other objects of spiritual significance. Are those idols singled out under the second commandment? How about praying the rosary, or praying to the saints? In my church, there are no prayers or worship directed to beings other than God; but when we kneel at the altar and gaze up at the cross, are we worshipping the object of the cross or acknowledging the God who died there on our behalf?

I suspect violations of the second commandment have more to do with the focus of our worship than the objects used to help focus our worship. The true idols of today are those objects that compete with God for our faith, attention, and devotion. Television, money, work, the desire for advancement – many things can become the primary focus in our lives, thus attaining *idol* status. When we desire anything more than that which enhances our relationship with God, our faith and trust are misplaced. A promotion at work might temporarily boost our ego or our checkbook, but it will seldom help us grow closer to God. God is the source of our being, not our employer.

The second commandment claims that God is a jealous God. While it is difficult for me to picture God succumbing to a human type of jealousy, it is easy for me to believe God wants what is in our best interest. Certainly, it is best for us to focus our worship on the one, true God, from whom unfailing and unconditional love for us flows.

Journaling focus: What are the objects of worship in my life? Which have attained idol status?

July 14
Wrongful Use of the Name

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name." Exodus 20:7

Names have power. Names describe what something is and is not, and they limit the perceived essence of the named. For example, the name of the tree outside my window is River Birch. That name establishes that it is not an oak, a maple, or a redbud. The name also establishes it as a tree, and not a raccoon, a daffodil, or a mountain. Names define and limit the named in ways that help it be known. When we realize that names have power, we understand that misusing a name is a misuse of power. The early Israelites asked Moses for the name of God. God's answer, in Exodus 3:14, was "I am who I am." The people wanted to know something about God, something that would make God more knowable; but God refused to provide a name that limited God's nature in any way.

Some Bible versions translate this commandment as saying not to use God's name in vain. However, I believe that translation misses the commandment's broader meaning. We can misuse God's name in ways that have nothing to do with cussing. For example, I believe we misuse God's name when we overemphasize the masculine aspect of God's nature by constantly referring to God as *He*. Certainly, the Bible is full of masculine references to God; indeed, even Jesus referred to God as Father. Given the male-dominated cultures the Bible arose from, the masculine emphasis is not surprising. However, the true nature of God certainly transcends earthly gender. Unfortunately, referring to God in male terms disenfranchises those who have unjustly suffered at the hands of cruel, abusive fathers or other men on earth. In order to reach these broken souls, we must reach out in ways that help them break their connection between God and a specific human male. My only point is that, while it may be comfortable and common to refer to God as *He*, it is a naming of God that limits God's perceived nature in a way that repels some people. Ultimately, God is not a He or a She. God is who God is.

This is not to let us off the hook for using God's name in vain. When we make a common statement of profanity, asking God to *damn* something or someone, we are asking the source of all power in the universe to focus a curse on some object or person. Is that *really* our intent? Using such language is a clear misuse of the power of the name of God, and one we can only hope God will chose to ignore. Clearly, we need to use God's name with care and reverence, both for ourselves and for others. Attempting to limit God's nature or essence in any way or using the power available through God's name to the detriment of others are what the third

commandment encourages us to avoid.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I be violating the commandment not to misuse God's name?

July 15
Keep the Sabbath Holy

"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work…For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it." Exodus 20:8-11

The sabbath is to be a day of rest. Setting aside one day per week for rest goes back to the creation story (Genesis 1:2-3). Following six days of creation work, God rested. Recognizing the sabbath as a day of rest was the source of much tension between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day. Many Gospel stories tell of Jesus healing people on the sabbath, only to be accused of violating the fourth commandment to keep the sabbath holy. For example, John 5:1-18 tells of Jesus healing a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When the Jewish leaders criticize Jesus for "working" on the sabbath, he responds, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." Of course, that comment drew twice the ire, because Jesus not only confessed to working on the sabbath, but also referred to God as his Father, a statement of perceived blasphemy.

If the sabbath was truly intended to be a day of no work, as the religious leaders seemed to believe, then I am guilty of violating this commandment on a weekly basis. I believe Jesus' words, about he and his Father working on the sabbath, confirm this day of rest was never intended to become a day of doing nothing. God continues doing the God-things that sustain life in the cosmos. Jesus clearly felt justified in working to meet the needs presented to him on the sabbath. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus points out the hypocrisy of his accusers by noting that they would rescue one of their sheep that fell into a well on the sabbath. It simply makes no sense to turn the sabbath into a day to avoid doing needful activities.

Rather, the intent of setting aside one day per week as a day of *rest* is not unlike setting aside the last hours of the day as a time for sleep. Our bodies must have rest to function properly, and our lives need a break from their normal routines for renewal and recharging. When I was a child,

Sundays were family days. We would play family games, eat meals together, and attend church together. Sundays were a break from the weekday routines of school and work. We function best when we rest from our routines, at least occasionally, allowing us to attack them with renewed vigor and enthusiasm in the new week.

To make something *holy* is to set it apart and treat it differently, with reverent commitment. The fourth commandment calls us to dedicate regular time for renewal and reflection, if not on Sunday, then on some day; if not for an entire day, then for a significant part of a day.

Journaling reflection: How can I create a regular sabbath time in my weeks?

July 16
Honor Your Father and Mother

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." Exodus 20:12

The remaining six commandments address our relationships with each other. Commandment number five is to honor our mother and father, so our days will be long. As a child, I interpreted this to mean that if I obeyed my parents, they would allow me to continue living. If I did not obey…well, you get the picture (see Leviticus 20:9). To honor someone means to hold him or her in high regard or esteem. I confess I did not always do this, either as a child or as an adult. I was probably too quick to focus on the human frailties of my parents, although that was likely the result of my high expectations of them. Certainly, today, I continue to reap the blessings of having had two loving parents, and I grieve for those who are not so blessed.

However, I believe this commandment goes beyond our relationship with our parents. Our responsibility to care for the elderly is a common theme throughout scripture. Our parent's generation, as well as the generations before them, laid the foundation on which we live today, both spiritually and physically. We have a responsibility to assure our predecessors are cared for, with love and respect.

However, I believe this commandment goes beyond caring for the elderly, too. It is interesting to consider the setting in which the Ten Commandments were given. The Hebrew people, recently exiled from their slavery in Egypt, were living for an extended period in the desert, awaiting

admission to the homeland God had promised. There was restlessness among the people, some of whom were making the case to return to slavery in Egypt as a better alternative than waiting, in limbo, in the desert. George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."[47] I suspect many of the Hebrew elders, who spent their lives as slaves, were *not* among those making a case to return to Egypt.

An important and practical part of honoring our parents and elders is learning from them. As a child, I often thought the ways of my parents and grandparents were old-fashioned. As I have grown, I appreciate the wisdom of their ways. There is value in the traditions of those who have traveled these roads before us that we ignore at our peril. We honor those generations by learning from their lives in a way that respects their struggles and experience. By utilizing their wisdom and experience, we build upon that which has already been learned, thus helping assure better days ahead.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I better honor my parents and elders?

July 17
Do Not Kill

"You shall not murder." Exodus 20:13

The notes in my Study Bible state the key word in this sixth of the Ten Commandments can be translated appropriately as either *murder* or *kill*. A quick survey of popular Bible translations shows a slight preference for *murder* over *kill*, but both are used. While killing is the taking of another life, murder is the *unlawful* taking of another life. By earthly law, most killing in war is lawful killing. However, is it appropriate to interpret biblical directives in the context of human definitions of right and wrong? Is it human or divine law that determines when the taking of another life is permissible? Does the commandment only apply to killing other people, or does it also apply to animals? What about insects or plants?

I confess to being a conflicted pacifist. I want to believe killing others is not an effective solution to what ails us. Even in war, the soldiers killing and being killed do not begin, sustain, or end the war. The initiators and controllers of the conflict usually stay safely away from danger. Please understand: the past and present risks taken, and the sacrifices made by military personnel, humble me. I appreciate their selfless dedication and service; and I understand I am able sit at my desk and pontificate because of their willingness to lay down their lives for mine. In spite of my

professed pacifism, I imagine scenarios where another person threatens my family. I have no problem visualizing doing whatever is necessary to protect those I love, up to and including killing the person doing the threatening. Is that personal situation significantly different from killing for one's country? Does this commandment prohibit us from protecting others with *all* options available? Is there a moral difference between killing someone to protect others and killing someone in self-defense? How does Jesus' command to *turn the other cheek* inform the discussion?

I turned 18 as the Vietnam War was winding down. When I registered for the military draft, as was required at the time, one question asked if I had moral or religious objections to killing others. I thought of this commandment and checked, "Yes." Subsequently, I received Conscientious Objector status, an interesting designation. Had I been drafted and sent to war, I probably would have served without objection, although perhaps as a medic. However, I did not understand how else to reconcile my Christian beliefs with the question about killing. In my mind, I played out a scenario where I had my rifle pointed at an enemy soldier, who was pointing a rifle at me—would I shoot? In John 15:13, Jesus says there is no greater love than to lay one's life down for one's friends. Ultimately, it was not laying down my life that conflicted me, but the taking of the life of another. Is it permissible to kill a person if that act will save the lives of others? Certainly, that is one justification for war. The Jewish authorities justified the killing of Jesus as necessary to preserve the way of life for the entire Jewish community. It would be helpful if this commandment contained clarifying commentary. As written, some of us struggle mightily with its application. In truth, I believe that struggle is exactly what God intends for us.

Journaling focus: In what ways am I conflicted over the commandment not to kill?

July 18
Sex, Lust, and Adultery

"You shall not commit adultery." Exodus 20:14

Note to parents: This reflection contains a frank discussion of sexual topics that may not be appropriate for young children. Please review first, and then use your discretion.

The seventh of the Ten Commandments is short and to the point: You shall not commit adultery. A dictionary definition of adultery is as

voluntary sexual relations between a married person and somebody other than his or her spouse. There are several key elements to adultery. First, it is *voluntary* in that adulterers make a choice. Second, it involves *sexual* relations. Finally, adultery involves at least one *married person* and someone other than their spouse. Jesus, however, expands the definition of adultery. In Matthew 5:28 he says, "…everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Presumably, the same applies for women looking lustfully upon men. Jesus raises the behavioral standard much, much higher. Adultery is no longer just a physical act, but also a mental one. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus provides additional and difficult commentary on adultery. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus says, "…whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." Between the dictionary and Jesus, adultery can include a broad range of common behaviors like gawking, premarital sex, extramarital sex, pornography, masturbation, and divorce, to name a few.

Sexual attraction, by design, is a powerful force. Like other powerful forces, sex enhances our lives dramatically when enjoyed appropriately. Electricity, heat, and physical strength are also powerful forces that enhance our lives when used appropriately. However, electricity electrocutes, heat burns, and physical strength bruises when used inappropriately. Sex becomes an incubator for sin and hurt when used carelessly, sometimes resulting in significant physical, psychological, and emotional damage. Sin is that which separates us from others and from God. Because sin is harmful to others and ourselves, we should always strive to eliminate or minimize its presence in our lives.

Sexual freedom allows us to enjoy the amazing gift of sex in all its fullness. All freedoms are subject to abuse, however, and sexual freedom is especially ripe for abuse, as in the case of adultery. Adultery is an act of conscious betrayal – to one's spouse, to family and friends, to one's self, and to God. As Christians, we must respond *very* carefully in the face of adultery. Our responsibility as a faith community is not to cast judgment, but to surround struggling people with love and respect. Unfortunately, some use passages like the ones from Matthew as a hammer to pound guilt into an already troubled soul. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. To judge others by unyielding standards is, at the very least, a violation of Jesus' command for us to love one another. Consider Jesus' reaction to the woman at the well in John 4:1-42; or the woman caught in the act of adultery in John 8:1-11. Jesus met sinners where they were and helped them to a better place. We are to do the same. When faced with the pain of another, our response should offer the type of mercy offered to us in response to our own sin. No sin is unforgivable, and no broken life is beyond repair. Jesus came to meet us in our sin and carry us through it, not to shun us because of it.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I be misusing the power and beauty of sex in my life?

July 19
Do Not Steal

You shall not steal. Exodus 20:15

He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.'" Matthew 21:13

The eighth of the Ten Commandments, like the sixth and seventh, is straightforward: Do not steal. The common interpretation is that we are not to take what belongs to someone else. While I do not deny it is wrong to steal from another, there are instances that give me pause. The first such instance occurs in a life-or-death situation, when taking something from someone else without their permission will help. For example, if my children were starving and I had no other options or resources to acquire food for them, I would steal to preserve their lives. Although this is an unlikely situation, it is an example where I believe the circumstance warrants theft.

A more common, but related situation occurs when people are food-deprived elsewhere. Does their right to life override my right to decide the fate of that which I possess? If I have enough resources to prevent the starvation of another, is it stealing for someone to take those resources from me and give them to the other? Is it a form of theft for me to hoard resources well beyond my need when others are in desperate need of those same resources? These are difficult faith questions, and stealing is a faith issue. For the thief, taking what belongs to another shows a lack of faith that God will provide for his or her needs. However, I believe it is equally faithless for those with much not to share their abundance with those in need. Indeed, inspiring people to share is a basic way that God provides for the poor and needy. The faith issue for the richly blessed among us manifests in our decisions about sharing our gifts. If we are miserly in our giving to others, our faith is likely small.

Finally, the story of the *moneychangers* in today's scripture from Matthew illustrates another interesting area of theft, one that sends Jesus into a rage in the Temple. The moneychangers and other vendors exchanged currencies and sold sacrificial animals for worshippers. The

problem was that they marked their prices up so high they were essentially stealing from those who came to the Temple to worship. Jesus felt this was unacceptable and drove the moneychangers out. Our commandment not to steal goes beyond simply taking something that belongs to another. The commandment requires us to reconsider hoarding more than our need requires, as well as those times when we give less than we can comfortably give.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I be more generous with my blessings?

July 20
False Witness

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Exodus 20:16

Witnesses in Old Testament days, as now, were vitally important. The Jewish Law reads, "A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained" (Deuteronomy 19:15). In other words, conviction of a crime based on the account of one witness would not stand. There had to be at least two witnesses to testify against the accused. The Law goes on to deal with a *false witness*, saying, "If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other" (Deuteronomy 19:18b-19a). As such, a *false* witness received punishment equal to the consequences for the accused, had the accused been found guilty. If a witness testified falsely against another, and the punishment for the accused behavior was death, the false witness would be put to death.

The contemporary term for bearing false witness in a legal proceeding is *perjury*, which continues to be a serious offense. The ability to apply justice in a fair and impartial manner is dependent on receiving truthful testimony from witnesses. Although the Old Testament Law is formal and bears resemblance to judicial proceedings today, the ninth of the Ten Commandments has a practical and daily implication – do not lie about others.

Lying goes beyond making a false statement about another in a court of law. It includes making false statements about others in social situations, including *implying* something untrue about another, such as often occurs in gossip. Our legal system assumes a person is innocent until *proven*

guilty, but social situations have no such protection. In Biblical times, two or more witnesses had to agree a person was guilty for a charge to stick. Today, one careless post on social media, or a few careless words overheard by the wrong ears can tarnish a person's image for years, even when there is no factual basis for what was written or said. Some people counsel us not to respond to false accusations; but sometimes when a person does not respond to an accusation, others assume the accusation has merit. Being falsely accused causes all sorts of complications. It is like asking a man if he is still beating his wife. There is no good answer because once the charge has been made the implication lives on regardless of the answer. Like trying to stuff toothpaste back into the tube, our words cannot be easily retracted. For these reasons and more, we must strive to speak the truth. Speaking the truth is especially important when we are speaking of others.

Journaling focus: Recall a time when false witness was bore against you. How did it make you feel?

July 21
Doubting God's Generosity

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.
Exodus 20:17

A typical dictionary definition of *covet* as to desire wrongfully, inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others. Clearly, the last of the Ten Commandments addresses the importance of controlling our desires. There is an important distinction to make, however, between *controlling* and *eliminating* desire. Desire is a good and Godly force that animates our lives, and the commandment does *not* call for the elimination of our reasonable longings. Desire for a legacy drives us to excel in our profession, or to marry and have children. Aspiring to a better life provides the motivation to work hard in order to get from where we are to where we want to be. Our desire for an improved future is a good thing, unless that desire leads us to try to improve our future at someone else's expense. Our longing crosses the line into covetousness when we want a specific something that belongs to our neighbor. Like the commandments against stealing and committing adultery, the prohibition against coveting has to do with respecting that which belongs to another.

There is another aspect to covetousness, however, which is an issue

of *faith*. When we covet something belonging to another, we indirectly express our dissatisfaction with what we have. In the context of the gifts, talents, and relationships given by God, when we covet the gifts, talents, and relationships of others, we cast doubt on God's generosity. Coveting and contentment cannot co-exist. To covet is to be selfish to an extreme degree and is not likely to end well. Our desires should drive us to attain our goals through hard work and persistence; our faith should make us content, regardless of the results.

The Ten Commandments have laid out a foundation for our worship life, as well as our life in community with others, for thousands of years. The first four commandments guide our relationship with God by warning not to have other gods before our God, not to worship idols, not to misuse the name of God, and to keep the Sabbath day holy. The remaining commandments guide our relationships with others: we are to honor our parents, not murder, not commit adultery, not steal, not lie, and not covet. Taken together, the Ten Commandments form a timeless set of rules for living, as relevant today as when first written.

Journaling focus: Recall a time your desires may have crossed the line into coveting.

July 22
Plato's Cave

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints." Ephesians 1:17-18

The *Allegory of the Cave* is found in Book VII of Plato's work *The Republic*, dating back a few hundred years before the birth of Christ. A very rough paraphrase goes like this: Imagine people living their lives in a cave, chained in such a manner they can neither move nor look around. All they can see is the cave wall in front of them and the shadows created and animated by the fire behind them. Others pass between them and the fire with statues of animals and other figures. To the prisoners of the cave, the shadows of these figures are just as real as their own shadows, for they do not have the wherewithal to distinguish what is real from what is shadow.

Imagine how limited our knowledge and life-experience would be in Plato's Cave. The story may seem far-fetched, but it illustrates Plato's belief that the world we perceive is but a shadow of the real world. Paul

expressed a similar sentiment in 1 Corinthians 13, *"For now we see in a mirror, dimly..."* Just as reality for those in the Cave was limited to shadow, so our understanding of reality today is limited by our senses, intellect and the restrictive nature of human experience.

If you were one of Plato's cavepeople, imagine how dramatically your "reality" would change if your chains were released and you could actually look around. You would see the dancing flames of the fire behind you as well as your fellow cavepeople and the persons carrying around the inanimate figures that appeared so real in your world of shadows. Then, imagine being freed from the cave and able to experience the world outside in all its glorious color, fragrant beauty, and melodious song. We would be amazed at how different actual reality is from what we perceived in our former existence in the cave.

Clearly, our experiences in this life are only part of a much greater life-experience, perhaps only shadows of reality. We are chained to and by what little we can see and believe we understand, and we dismiss everything else. We trap ourselves in caves of our own making. Only with the eyes of faith can we see outside of Plato's Cave.

Journaling focus: What can I do to see more of the reality of my life?

July 23
The Time of Trial

Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Matthew 26:41

In today's scripture reading, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane with three of his disciples. It is his last night on earth, and he comes to the Garden to pray. A few hours earlier, Jesus and his disciples were sharing his Last Supper. At that meal, Jesus washed his disciples' feet and instituted the sacrament of Communion. In the Garden, Jesus is agitated, knowing what will soon occur. The disciples are tired – perhaps from the late hour, a big dinner, worry about what is about to unfold, or some combination of reasons. He asks them to stay awake while he prays, but they fall asleep.

Times of trial come to all of us, sometimes several times in a day. There are at least two ways to handle life's challenges. First, we can avoid them as diligently and for as long as possible. Second, we can face them head–on, resigning ourselves to the fact that we are not going to be able to avoid them. The first method makes us a victim, often reacting to our

difficulties kicking, screaming, and fruitlessly begging for things to return to the way they were. The second method allows us to become a co-creator, or co-controller of the challenge. We face what we need to address with our eyes wide open and our senses fully engaged. This does not have to be a masochistic act. Rather, it is accepting what is to come and knowing, with God's help, we will make it through. It involves seeking help when necessary. Regardless of the trial – surgery, interpersonal strife, financial hardship, depression, serious illness, or job dissatisfaction – people choose to either run from the problem or to journey through it. Too often, the most destructive effect of a looming trial comes from our worry about it. Research consistently shows that most of our worries do not happen, and what happens is seldom as bad as we imagine. When we do not know what is coming, we imagine the worst. We make ourselves physically and emotionally sick from worry long before our specific challenge manifests itself, if it ever does.

I believe Jesus' message to the disciples to "Stay awake!" serves as a reminder for us to remain present and faithful in each moment. Jesus knew he was about to suffer a horribly painful death. Jesus also knew that, with God's help, he would make it through to the other side. We are assured of the same. Jesus wanted his disciples to be fully present to the events of that moment in time. It is in the *moments* of our lives that we find the power and strength to handle our times of trial, not in the pre-trial anxiety. We must learn to stay awake and present to our moments, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Journaling focus: What is a strategy you can apply today to help you remain present to the day's events?

July 24
Strain a Gnat, Swallow a Camel

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Matthew 23:24-25

Today's scripture passage is part of a rant Jesus releases in Matthew 23 upon the religious leaders of his day, the *scribes and Pharisees*. He accuses them of perpetuating ignorance while pretending to be guardians of knowledge. He calls them hypocrites, blind guides, snakes, and a brood of

vipers. He says they are full of greed and self-indulgence, hypocrisy and lawlessness. In verse 27, he says, "For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth." Is it any wonder they had him killed? Jesus may have been physically non-violent, but he could be a verbal assassin when he felt it was justified.

Jesus *knew* the leaders of the Temple were selectively applying scriptural principles for their own benefit. The leaders were not just embarrassed by the accusations, some almost certainly feared Jesus might be right! The common people looked to them for guidance in understanding the scriptures most had no access to and could not read if they did. Instead of receiving the picture of how the Bible applied to their daily lives, the people were given a bunch of rules to follow that mostly benefitted the leaders. These rules served to perpetuate the Temple institution more than the community it was erected to serve. The rules also served as a means of behavioral control over the people. It is ironic that the same thing continues today in many houses of worship. Certain charismatic religious leaders convince followers to empty their pockets for the "work" of the church – never mind that a significant work of some churches appears to be the glorification of the pastor. I remember a joke about a pastor who was asked how he determined what money in the collection plate was his and what was God's. The pastor replied, "I take the money given each Sunday and throw it all up to God. God grabs whatever He needs and lets my share fall back to me."

Jesus said, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." We do the same thing today when we overly focus on a single word or line in scripture and strain out the spirit and the context of the larger work or historical trend. When we focus on minutia, straining gnats, we almost certainly miss the big picture. Father Richard Rohr writes that the lowest level of understanding of scripture is the literal level. In my opinion, we invite the camel when we believe scripture was *dictated* by God, instead of being *inspired* by God and written by imperfect, human beings. These words of Jesus stand as a warning to all, myself included, who pretend to have more than a vague sense about the nature of God. God cannot be known as we know other things of the earth. The things we know are *of* God, but they are not God. We can only observe where God has been. Any attempt to capture or limit God in words is like trying to catch the wind. If someone assures us he or she is serving God for dinner, we can rest assured it is more likely a camel.

Jesus says we "neglect the weightier matters of the law" like justice, mercy, and faith when we focus on minutia. It is easy to give rules and dole out salvation based on one's compliance with those rules. The weightier matters of the law require *us* to change. When Jesus calls the scribes and

Pharisees blind, he accuses them of ignorance. They can only focus on minutia because either they do not understand the bigger picture, or they choose not to acknowledge it. Worse, they encourage others to focus on minutia, and so the ignorance perpetuates itself. Wrestling with the totality of scripture is hard and reveals parts of ourselves we prefer to remain hidden. Jesus tells us not to ignore any part of the scripture, but to apply it in a way that includes the difficult and self-incriminating issues of justice, mercy, and faith. Only such an application of religious practice is consistent with the unwritten Word of God which inspired the Bible.

Journaling focus: When have I fallen victim to someone applying the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit?

July 25
An Inclusive God

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:15,17

The story of Jonah shows a face of God that will manifest fully in the New Testament in the person of Jesus – a face of inclusion. The prophet Jonah was told by God to go to Nineveh and warn the people to change their wicked ways. Jonah did not want to go because Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a country that had long dominated Jonah's homeland, leaving Jonah's people bitter. Jonah did *not* want to go to Nineveh carrying the Lord's message of salvation because Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh. He would have preferred that the Lord destroy them for their past trespasses, instead of providing another chance to change their ways through the warning of a reluctant prophet.

As the story goes, Jonah received his instructions to head east to Nineveh; instead, he boarded a ship headed west to Tarshish, fleeing from the Lord. Jonah fell asleep below deck as God caused a great storm to hit the ship, threatening to break it apart. The crew, frantic to save their lives and their ship, confronted their run-away passenger. Jonah confessed that God was causing the storm because of his disobedience. He told the crew that throwing him overboard would calm the seas. Eventually, the crew threw Jonah over the side and the seas grew calm. A large fish swallowed Jonah, and he spent three days in its belly before being spit up onto dry land. The Lord, again, tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time he goes and tells the people to turn from their wicked ways. Much to Jonah's likely

chagrin, the people repented, and God did not destroy them.

Trying to hide from God is never a successful strategy, at least not in the Bible. Beginning in Genesis with Adam and Eve trying to hide from God in the Garden of Eden, many different characters try to hide from God in various ways, but they never succeed. I catch myself trying to hide from God sometimes, although I am old enough to know better. Anytime I say or do something that I know is inconsistent with the way Jesus lived – something selfish or harmful to others – a part of me hopes God does not notice. I can be a narcissistic person, and I believe God provides me with opportunities daily to help me become more *other-focused.* It is those opportunities from which I often try to hide or ignore.

Jonah preferred that the people of Nineveh should die in their sin. He felt that was what they deserved. God, however, is an inclusive and persistent God of grace. This God is portrayed by Jesus as the good shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 to save one wayward sheep who has wandered away (Matthew 18:12-14). This is the same God that in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), throws a huge party in celebration of the return of his long, lost son. God rejoices when any lost child (regardless of age) is brought back into the fold. We humans are quick to judge, and we are quick to label others as good or evil, Christian or non-Christian, right or wrong. God, however, sees beyond our dualistic categorizing to the heart of a being created in God's likeness. All are precious, loved, and worthy of redemption, regardless of what the Jonah's among us believe.

When we try to hide from God's calling, we often find ourselves in a dark and lonely place. We are given time to reconsider our actions – hopefully not in the belly of a fish – and we are always given another chance for more inclusive behavior. God's patience is infinite, and God's persistence is relentless.

Journaling focus: What area of my life may I be trying to hide from God?

July 26
The Face of Calm

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark 4:39-41

When we think about the faces of God displayed by Jesus, we must

consider the face of calm. Many times in the Gospels, Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid. This is consistent with the numerous Old Testament writings where those having an encounter with God or angels were told not to be afraid. When something well out of the ordinary occurs, our natural reaction is fear. If I were to come across a bush that was burning and not being consumed, I would be curious. If and when that bush began speaking to me, I would probably be afraid. In today's passage from Mark, Jesus is crossing the sea with his disciples. Jesus falls asleep and a great windstorm hits, threatening to swamp their boat. The disciples are terrified and wake Jesus up, accusing him of not caring that they are about to drown. Jesus tells the wind and the sea to be still, and they obey. He then turns to his disciples and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Tying fear to a lack of faith is profound and an often-overlooked connection. Did Jesus think it was not appropriate for the disciples to be afraid when the waves were crashing over the sides of their boat? Was he criticizing them for not trusting his ability to keep them safe? Did he think they should not be afraid to die for his ministry? These questions are not answered in the Gospel story, but there are other ways to understand the story aside from a literal reading.

If we look at the chaos from the windstorm as a metaphor for the chaos sometimes caused by the circumstances in our lives, the story takes on a very personal meaning. When I work myself into a frenzied state over something that may or may not happen in the future, when I become frustrated with traffic, or when I feel shame over something I did or said in the past, I can almost hear Jesus whispering over my shoulder, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The most obvious answer, whenever I succumb to these manifestations of fear, is that my faith is very small. I have lived long enough to experience problems being solved and stormy seas being calmed in ways I could never have imagined and that clearly were accomplished by a power beyond anything I am capable of exerting.

There are several elements to this story. The first is that Jesus displayed power over the wind and sea. That alone would cause both fear and wonder. Indeed, the disciples respond, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Perhaps they were still uncertain about the divine nature of Jesus, or even unaware of what a divine being might be capable of doing. I think one lesson of the story is that we cannot know or predict how God may intervene in our lives on our behalf.

A second element to the story is Jesus criticizing their fear of the situation, their lack of faith. One can make a good argument that we have nothing to fear, *ever!* If we truly believe God is lovingly present in our lives and that God can transform whatever is evil in our lives into something beautiful, what could we possibly be afraid of? Our fear, like that of the

disciples in the boat, simply shows our lack of faith in God's care.

Finally, and most instructive to me, is the need to become quiet enough to hear the voice saying, "Do not be afraid." It is counterintuitive that we must silence the chaos in our own minds before we can hear and know the still small voice of God that has all situations well in hand. And yet, that is exactly what the calm face of God in Jesus encourages us to do.

Journaling focus: Recall a recent situation that might have gone better had you taken a few moments of stillness prior to reacting.

July 27
The Face of Submission

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.
Luke 22:42

The setting for today's passage is a garden on the Mount of Olives, moments before Jesus is betrayed into the hands of the temple police to be tried, tortured, and crucified. Jesus is spending his final free moments on earth in prayer with his Father. He asks if this *cup,* referring to his upcoming suffering and death, can be eliminated and some other, perhaps less gruesome way to accomplish God's purposes be found. He closes by *submitting*, however, saying, "…not my will but yours be done."

There are those who claim Jesus could have saved himself from the agony of his final hours by exercising the divine powers he displayed throughout his ministry. Perhaps he could have set a series of plagues in motion, as was done to the Egyptians. Maybe a crumbling of the city walls, as occurred in Jericho. A pillar of cloud could have covered Jesus and allowed him to escape unnoticed. While these options may have been possible, none were realistic. Jesus could not escape the fate awaiting him without denying the essence of who he was. It was the fact that he expressed his divinity in his humanity that threatened others so. No doubt, the religious and political elite would have preferred to have Jesus renounce his divine nature, to deny that he was the Son of God (and thus equal to God), discrediting Jesus for the rest of his days and allowing everyone peaceably to go back to their normal lives.

Being true to who and what we are makes us *vulnerable* and forces us to *submit* to certain realities. When we commit to love another, we make ourselves vulnerable to that person. Jesus' foundational commandment was for us to love each other. In our relationships, we submit to some things we

might otherwise resist because the value of the relationship outweighs the value of our own preferences. The deeper we love and submit, the more exposed we become; thus, the deeper we can be hurt. Jesus loved unconditionally, he submitted completely, and he suffered tremendously at the hands of those he loved. And yet, from the cross, he sought forgiveness for those who took his life because he understood they did not know what they were doing. They could not help themselves.

It seems counter-intuitive to think of God as submissive, as bending to *our* will, but that is a face manifested in Jesus. When we remain faithful to who we are, we open ourselves to criticism, persecution, and hatred, especially by those who have no such grasp of their own identity. When we know the *why* of our existence – our *purpose* for being – we become a threat to those who do not. To be in the presence of one who understands their *who* and *why* is a powerful and humbling experience. It often leaves those who are less secure feeling inferior and frightened. In Jesus' case, they captured him, beat him, publicly shamed him, and killed him the in most excruciating manner known at the time. It was the best option their limited identity at the time could find. Jesus understood that reality and submitted to it. He loved, in spite of the high personal cost.

Jesus, in all his acts on earth, manifested God as *love;* and love submits. Always, and in all situations, love submits to the higher good. Does this mean we do not defend what we believe is right, that we do not resist evil and correct injustice? Certainly not! It only means that we refuse to act in ways beyond what love and our identity allow. For example, if we identify with the non-violent face of God, we might physically shield a loved one from danger but not take the offensive against the perpetrator. Love's focus is outward to the beloved, not inward to the personal needs of the lover. Jesus modeled that face perfectly on the cross. Love is always *other-focused,* always true to its nature, and always submissive to greater purposes, even to the death of the lover. *Not my will but yours be done.*

Journaling focus: In what ways can I become more loving by becoming more vulnerable?

July 28
The Face of Normal

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only (child), full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. John 1:14,18

In his book *Convictions*,[48] the late theologian Marcus Borg has a chapter titled *Jesus is the Norm*. Borg's thesis is that trying to discern and follow the will of God from scripture and other religious teachings can be confusing. We only need one source to follow – the life of Jesus. The more we know about how Jesus lived, the more we know about how we can live in harmony with the divine. This stems from the belief that God took on flesh in the person of Jesus and lived among us as a divine example. God, as Spirit, is invisible and mysterious. God in Jesus, however, became visible and tangible. The question, "What would Jesus do?" has often seemed trite to me, and yet it recognizes Jesus as the standard-setter for our behavior. So, what are the implications for our lives if Jesus is the face of normal?

To find answers, we look to the stories of Jesus in the New Testament. Matthew's chapters 5 and 6 are full of words of wisdom to guide our lives. For example, in 5:42, Jesus says, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." With regard to nonviolent resistance, "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (5:39). A few passages later (5:44), "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." There are lessons in humility, as in 6:1: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." For the hoarders: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (6:19). And for the worriers, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (6:34).

Words of wisdom are a start, but applying them is another matter. How did Jesus live these principles? In Matthew 8:16, "That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick." Healing the sick was one of the primary acts of Jesus' ministry. While we may not be able to cast out spirits with a word, we are all capable of something, perhaps giving our attention, fixing a meal, doing yardwork, or visiting the lonely. Healing does not only occur by removing, but also by relieving the physical or mental symptoms. Another pillar of Jesus' interactions was to feed the hungry. In Matthew's account of Jesus feeding five thousand people, Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (14:16), and he made certain there was food enough for all. Jesus was not afraid to challenge established authority when they used their power in improper ways. For example, when his disciples were criticized by the religious elite for not observing their dietary laws, Jesus rebuked them, saying, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (15:3). Jesus also demonstrated the importance of individual and private communion with God. From 26:36, "Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over

there to pray.'" If alone time with God was important for Jesus, it is important for us, too.

This is a small sampling from the Gospel of Matthew about how Jesus thought and lived. If I knew anyone who practiced a fraction of what Jesus taught, I would consider them *extraordinary*. But if Jesus is to be believed, these are not extraordinary acts, they are the *norm*. Rather than feeling discouraged and inadequate, however, we should remember that the people in Jesus' time probably did no better than we do. Otherwise, Jesus would not have felt the need to show them a better way. Patterning my life after Jesus' life is a herculean task from where I am today; but by studying his life I can discern a next step, and then another, in order to draw my life closer to the face of normal.

Journaling focus: What action can I take to draw my life closer to the life of Jesus'?

July 29
A Human Face

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. John 1:18

There is a significant difference in the faces of God presented in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is mostly mysterious, unpredictable, and intangible. God appears in dreams, as a pillar of cloud, and as a burning bush that is not consumed. God is all-knowing and all-powerful, but aloof and inaccessible except to a select few. In the Jewish Temple, the Holy of Holies – the innermost shrine where God was believed to reside – could not be entered by anyone except the High Priest, and then only once a year. Although God's grace manifested throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the exiling of the Jewish people from their bonds of slavery in Egypt, God is presented as being mostly unapproachable and capricious, at least for the common folks.

The New Testament presents an entirely different face of God, taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In anticipation of the birth of Jesus, the coming child was referred to as *Emmanuel*, which means "God with us." Unlike the God often portrayed in the Old Testament, Jesus had a distinct affinity for regular people and particularly for the outcasts, sick, lame, foreigners, widows, and children. He reserved

his stiffest criticism for the religious leaders who piously set themselves and their God apart from being accessible to everyone. Jesus called common fishermen and despised tax collectors to be among his chosen disciples. He associated with prostitutes and lepers. He healed, taught, and fed everyone who came to him with a sincere hunger to know and experience *God with us*.

According to John's Gospel, *Jesus came to make God known*. There would be no more struggling to understand the cryptic teachings of the priests and the prophets as *go-betweens*, mediating between God and God's people. In Jesus, God was present for all to be touched and witnessed, to be healed, and to experience. Instead of saying, "Obey my commandments," Jesus said, "Follow me." In other words, "Do as I do." Loving and caring for others, tending to those on the fringes of society, welcoming the stranger – God, through Jesus, displayed concrete actions that people could observe and emulate. Jesus modeled non-violence in a decidedly violent world. He preached a message of abundance to a world where food, shelter, and other necessities were hoarded by a few to the detriment of many. He shared a message of love for all to a world sharply divided along lines of race, religion, tribe, and nationality. Thankfully, he shared parables that are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago because most of these divisive realities are still present today.

John 1:17 says, "The law indeed was given through Moses (Old Testament); grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Verse 18 names Jesus as God's Son, "who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." The authors of the Old Testament described a God whose mercy and justice was mediated through a set of rules governing human behavior. In the New Testament, God is revealed as a human being, allowing us to learn how to *be with* God, to *be with* others, and finally to *be with* ourselves. God is love, and it is in that love that we find God. Ultimately, we can only find the essence of our being in God. Becoming, or growing into that love is what Jesus modeled for us. Jesus was God in a human body, fully human and fully spirit. When we realize that we too are a manifestation of this unity of body and spirit, we gain the ability to truly follow Jesus not just as God's creation, but as co-creators with God in healing our broken world, even as we heal our own broken lives. The human face of God in Jesus calls to us: "Follow me."

Journaling focus: What is an action I can take today that would mimic Jesus?

July 30
A Prophet in Their Hometown

"…and you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum. And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.'" Luke 4:23b-24

When I was in high school and college, I played in rock bands. Although the bands were mostly based in Topeka, most of our performances were out of town. We were much better known and popular in areas outside of Topeka than we were in our hometown. The band *Kansas*, which had huge national success in the 1970s and 1980s, was also from Topeka. Until they hit the big-time, they also had a relatively modest following at home, paling in comparison to their following across the country. I often wondered why it seemed so difficult to obtain the same level of appreciation and notoriety at home as was experienced elsewhere. I think it has something to do with familiarity.

Jesus, too, had problems establishing legitimacy at home. The powerful words he spoke drew cynical comments like, "Is not this Joseph's son?" Does being familiar with one's lineage automatically disqualify them from being recognized as something special? How often do companies hire in-town consultants? In my experience, not very often. There seems to be a bias that someone from out of town will be more knowledgeable and worthy of attention, as if distance and credibility were directly related.

Of course, the bias against my bands of old, if it actually existed, worked to our advantage out of town where local bands probably scratched their heads wondering what we had that they lacked. It's a matter of proximity. Can Jesus and his message become too close and familiar? Perhaps we become blinded because we have lived *around* his message for so long, when we need to be living *with* it, internalizing it. Familiarity can make something seem so commonplace we lose our sense of urgency to experience it, our sense of wonder and our sense of appreciation. We become complacent cynics, instead of zealous followers.

Journaling focus: Reflect on an area or person in your life that you may discount because it or they are too familiar.

July 31
Earlier Times

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." Psalm 19:14

When my son was a teenager, I had the opportunity to visit parts of the countries of Lithuania and Latvia in eastern Europe with him and his choir. Both countries were occupied by the Soviet Union until its collapse in the early 1990's. That occupation began at the end of World War II. Prior to that they had been occupied by Hitler's Germany. Prior to that, it was the Russians, again. So, for most of the 20th century these peaceful people lived under the thumb of ruthless dictators. Many of their most beautiful buildings were destroyed by their occupiers in an attempt to get rid of any remnants of their culture. Land was taken from its owners and drab, concrete high-rises were built to contain the families in as little area as possible. The pipes of most church organs were melted down for ammunition during the war. We saw one cathedral where the pipes survived, thanks to church members who hid the pipes behind a false wall and convinced their occupiers the pipes had already been taken. We walked by the remnants of concrete walls, very similar to the Berlin wall, that used to house Soviet military equipment.

Everyone we met, at least everyone over the age of 20, would have remembered the occupation. They would have remembered the armed troops patrolling the streets. They would have remembered tanks at every large gathering.

At the end of June, 2009, Lithuania celebrated its 1000 year anniversary, marking the first recorded time that people in their land were referred to as Lithuanians. That was in 1009. They are not a wealthy people by any means. The concrete, high-rise remnants of the Soviet occupation remain and although in the United States we would assume them to be a blight on the surround area, they are still home to tens of thousands there. The average family income when I visited was $300 per month. Still, they celebrate their freedom!

We have so much to be thankful for in America. When I visited Lithuania, I was with people who hold dear the freedom we often take for granted, including the freedom to worship as we choose. Sometimes we forget the sacrifices required for the freedoms we enjoy.

Journaling focus: What in my life was gained at a significant cost?

August 1
The Desperation of Poverty, Part 1

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Luke 6:20-21

As I prepared for a mission trip to Honduras, I checked the State Department's website for information. At that time, there were three countries with travel warnings for U.S. citizens: Chad, Syria, and Honduras. Robbery, kidnapping, and murder rates of U.S. citizens were particularly high in those countries. I had not thought of Honduras as a particularly violent country, but there were hints of the violence visible immediately on our arrival. There were armed guards at the airport – military personnel grouped in twos or threes, all carrying machine guns, patrolling the corridors. In addition, most housing and business areas looked like fortresses. Concrete walls, razor wire, barbed wire, and electric wire surrounded most of the homes and housing areas we saw. Doors were metal and windows barred. Many businesses had armed guards standing at the door. As we drove to and from a church service on Sunday, we were warned to keep the tinted windows of our van closed so locals could not see that the van was full of white people. Beggars and panhandlers populated the street corners, walking into traffic seeking money. The church where we worked during the week was locked down tight, and at least one worker and two guard dogs were there 24/7 to discourage looting of the tools. You get the picture – crime was rampant, and the measures taken to keep violence out also kept people like me locked inside. Honestly, one of my initial questions was whether I was being protected from the people of Honduras, or whether they were being protected from me. Perhaps the truth was some combination of both, and I found that sad.

The parts of Honduras I became most familiar with, the worksite and the mission house, were hardly filled with anything likely to be stolen in the United States. They were, however, valuable in Honduras, modest as they were by our standards. For a hungry person with few options, even a worn-out shovel could be traded for a meal. Our landfills are full of items that would have much utility in third-world countries. No doubt, many U.S. families throw out more food in a week than some Honduran families consume.

The poverty I witnessed in Honduras led to various types of desperation. People went to great lengths to protect what little they possessed. Large numbers of people sought tips for providing various unsolicited "services" like pumping gas, carrying luggage, helping guide cars into parking spots, and selling cookies or pirated CDs at restaurants. What I

witnessed was the desperation of poverty, and it was a side of humanity largely foreign to me, at least to this degree. I remember the line from an old Bob Dylan song, "When you ain't got nothin', you ain't got nothin' to lose."[46] I think I observed the conditions that breed criminals and terrorists. I witnessed hard realities in one small area of one small, third-world country among the dozens that populate so much of our planet. I do not know the solution to poverty or the desperation it brings. I only know that having witnessed such poverty, I can no longer not see it.

Journaling focus: In what ways does my lifestyle perpetuate cycles of poverty in the world?

August 2
The Desperation of Poverty, Part 2

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. 1 Timothy 4:10

During a mission trip to Honduras, a line from the movie *Still Alice*[50] lingered in my mind. The movie is about a woman with early onset Alzheimer's Disease. Alice is asked to share her experience with a group of researchers while she is still lucid enough to do so. She writes out her thoughts over a period of weeks so she can read them on stage. The line in her speech that struck me was this: "I am not *suffering;* I am *struggling*." I thought it was odd, as it seemed to me she was both struggling *and* suffering – at least that was my interpretation of her condition.

I just named what I believe to be one of the biggest obstacles to helping those we label as in need of assistance, that we impose *our interpretation* of their condition upon them, and then seek to interject *our* solution. We do this with the most charitable and best of intentions. For me, I contemplated the difference between struggling and suffering in the context of the people I met in Honduras. Certainly, there are conditions they struggle with – clean drinking water, for example, but they also found ways to cope with most issues. They struggled with high crime rates and an inadequate infrastructure, at least by our standards. I saw much of what I considered substandard housing. What I did not see, however, was a lot of suffering. In fact, and in retrospect, I think the cross-section of folks I met in Honduras suffer less than a similar cross-section of folks in the U.S., depending on how we define suffering.

Our interpretation of the condition of another is pivotal to how we

react to them, as well as how or if we try to help them. For a suffering person, we offer comfort and support. We may feel pity and offer sympathy for their condition, sometimes even empathy. We often try to assure them things will get better, even when we do not know that to be the case. We respond to suffering with acts of mercy to try to ease the distress.

For a struggling person, however, acts of mercy, pity, and sympathy may not be well received or helpful. A person who is struggling is attempting to better his or her own condition, but circumstances beyond their control often work against them. They may need *assistance,* but not interference. Consider beavers. They build dams in streams to form water pools for their nests. Unfortunately, a beaver dam stops the water from flowing as it normally would, causing problems for those up and downstream. Sometimes, a beaver dam must be removed in order to restore the water flow. I think this illustrates the plight of many struggling people. One way we can help is by identifying where the "flow" of resources is blocked and assist in getting materials flowing as needs demand.

Two manifestations of the desperation of poverty are suffering and struggling, and if we are to help those in poverty, we need effective tools for both. Everyone deserves the respect to say how or if they receive assistance. Suffering and struggling are two very different conditions, and if we are to help, we must recognize and honor the difference.

Journaling focus: How have I experienced the difference between suffering and struggling?

August 3
The Desperation of Poverty, Part 3

For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. Mark 14:7

I live a fortunate and blessed life. I have never had to worry about where my next meal would come from or whether I would have a roof over my head. I have always had people in my life who loved and valued me. I confess this so you know I do not write about poverty from first-hand experience. I have observed it from a distance, including in Honduras, but I have never lived in poverty, nor do I have a desire to do so.

All four Gospel accounts have Jesus saying something to the effect that the poor will always be with us. Some use this to argue that there is nothing effective we can do to eradicate poverty – and they may be right, at

least on a global scale. I think, however, they miss the point. Certainly, poverty is a pervasive issue, but it is also an individual faith issue. Whenever we encounter poverty, suffering, or human struggles, we have decisions to make. *Can* I help this person or situation? If I can, *am I willing* to help this person or situation?

A third manifestation of the desperation of poverty is personal. It is my desperation to understand how I can best help. Many of us, myself included, regularly walk past people asking for money on our streets. There are reasons why we do that, some of which have a measure of validity. If I give money to everyone who asks, how long will it be before I am on the streets begging for money? What if I give them money, and they buy drugs or alcohol with it? I work hard for my money, and they should, too. How do I really know these people are worse off than I am? These are pretentious questions, however, because in most cases we cannot know the answer. Again, we miss the point of being confronted by the poor. The point is *how* we decide to respond, and how we justify that choice. I am less convinced there is a right answer to the question and more convinced the poor pose a universal conundrum meant to illicit serious soul-searching on our parts, individually and collectively.

We are not called to solve world poverty. Indeed, the poor will always be with us. Jesus made clear by his examples, however, that we are to help. The fact that we cannot do *everything* does not negate the fact that we can do *something*. What we do and how we respond is the faith issue facing us. Some will respond with money, others with non-monetary gestures, others will feign ignorance. All of us make choices about our responses. Examining the motivations underlying our responses is a worthwhile exercise in self-awareness.

Journaling focus: How can I bring presence to my response to a person begging on the street?

August 4
Christian Values: *Service*

Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. Ephesians 6:7-8

You're gonna have to serve somebody, It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, But you're gonna have to serve somebody.[51] – Bob Dylan

In research on the most significant Christian values, the characteristic of *service* referenced in the Bible is cited more often than any others, except for justice and love. In the preface of his book, *The Case for Servant Leadership*,[52] Kent Keith writes, "There does not have to be so much pain and suffering, so much war and violence, so much starvation and disease, so many crushed dreams and untapped talents, so many problems unsolved and so many opportunities ignored. *The world does not have to be like this."* Keith attributes much of what is wrong in the world today to leaders who are more concerned with their own advancement, their own accumulation of wealth and power, and their own legacy, than with providing leadership committed to the service of others. The term *Servant Leadership* was coined by Robert Greenleaf, who believed the world needs leaders whose core motivation is their desire to serve – those who are servants *first*. Greenleaf's test of a servant leader is this: "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served,* become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?"[53] That is a standard not taught in most leadership training.

Typically, we associate service and servants with the lower, not the higher levels of business and society. Many of the well-known leaders in the Bible, however, clearly were servants first. In Matthew 20:26b-28a, Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." In Philippians 2:3, Paul says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, wrote "Do all the good you can…to all the people you can, for as long as ever you can."

Songwriter and philosopher Bob Dylan sings that we are all going to have to serve somebody. Our world needs unassuming and dedicated servants at every level of every business, church, community, and government. According to the writer of Ephesians, in today's scripture passage, we are to render service with enthusiasm because whatever good we do, we will receive the same from God. If we are going to have to serve someone, we may as well serve God and others, and we may as well serve cheerfully. The road to greatness is a path of service to others.

Journaling focus: What is one way I can become a better servant today?

August 5
Christian Values: *Justice*

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:18-19,24

The second most referenced value mentioned in the Bible is *justice*. A common definition of justice is the quality of righteousness, equitableness, or moral rightness. It can also refer to the administering of deserved punishment or reward. Justice is often symbolized as a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales in one hand and a sword in the other. She is blindfolded to indicate that justice is determined the facts of an issue and not its appearance. The scales designate the unbiased weighing of the evidence from both sides. The sword is for punishment, should a proceeding find the accused guilty. Thus, justice is the product of an objective consideration of the facts, at least in theory.

The prophet Amos, in today's reading, writes about the justice of the Lord as a day of reckoning, along the lines of the second definition above. He warns that the Lord's application of justice will not necessarily be pleasant for us. Further, he says the justice of the Lord is not something we can escape. The image of fleeing from a lion only to run into a bear is a revealing image. Amos portrays an unavoidable judging of our decisions on earth.

There is another aspect of justice expected of Christians, however – social justice, which is assuring that every member of society has access to opportunities for life, liberty, and happiness. For the body of Christ, social justice is a mandate. We are to care for the disadvantaged members of our communities. Several years ago, I visited with a nun who had worked beside Mother Teresa for a time. She and her fellow sisters felt guilty for having cots to sleep on, food to eat, and shelter from the elements, when many they were serving had nothing. Why should those comforts not be given to the unfortunate folks they were to help? Mother Teresa explained that disadvantaged people needed to see a better life to reach for and to grow into. The sisters' purpose was to help the people to an improved and sustainable state for themselves, in ways that could be continued once the sisters were gone. Mother Teresa told them we cannot lift another up unless we are in a higher position relative to them – sinking to their level makes it more difficult to assist.

At times we argue over whether justice and mercy require us to give people a hand *up* or a hand *out*. The fact is that justice for folks in need often requires both. Certainly, we are to seek just and sustainable solutions.

And we will almost certainly be held accountable for the justice we work towards in this life. Let justice roll down like waters.

Journaling focus: What is one opportunity for me to work for justice in my community today?

August 6
Christian Values: *Love*

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34a-35

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. –Song of Solomon 8:6-7

The value most frequently mentioned in the Bible, no surprise to anyone, is *love*. The command to love one another is one of the few passages repeated by Jesus in all four of the Gospels. The word *love* has many meanings in the English language, most of which involve some degree of affection for another. The Biblical usage of love, however, usually implies caring for the needs of another, and does not commonly imply romance, desire, or even familiarity. For example, in Luke 10, Jesus is discussing the commandment to love our neighbors, and he illustrates that type of love with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story, a traveler shows love by caring for a man in need that he does not know. In Luke 6:35, Jesus says, "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." Clearly, Jesus' concept of love is more inclusive than the exclusive types of love we read of in fairy tales and romance novels.

It is not surprising that love encompasses many other important Christian values. Great acts of love are often also great acts of *service*. For example, when a soldier dives on a live grenade to prevent the shrapnel from injuring his or her comrades, the soldier has performed a selfless act of both service and love. Other noteworthy acts of love are done for the cause of *justice*. Martin Luther King, Jr., comes to mind as a person whose tremendous love manifested in his passion for achieving a more just society.

Love is the life-blood of our existence. Just as the blood flowing through our veins carries the nutrients required to sustain life, so love nourishes and animates our relationships. When blood stops flowing, death

is imminent. Without the passion and energy provided by love, our lives become mind-numbingly dull. Love is a raging flame that floods cannot drown, according to the passage from the Song of Solomon. Love makes a house a home; love turns business associates into a family; love makes strangers feel welcomed and valued; and love inspires a couple to bind their lives together into one life. Love brings happiness and purpose into our lives, and then spills over to bless others. Some say God is love. I agree. Without love infusing our words and actions, our lives lack purpose, joy, and meaning. As the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:2, "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

Love may not be all we need, as the old Beatles song implies, but everything we do and say requires love to attain its highest potential for good. We make our discipleship known by showing our love.

Journaling focus: What is one act of love I can and should perform today?

August 7
Christian Values: *Happiness*

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. Psalms 84:10-12

Happiness is the fifth most cited of the Christian values. Of all the instructions contained in scripture for living a righteous life, references to happiness occur more frequently than all but four other ideals. Important synonyms for happiness include joy, pleasure, delight, and contentment.

Some may feel happiness, while pleasant to experience, is not an important ideal to strive for as a Christian. One might argue that happiness is a fleeting emotion that can result from distinctly non-Christian acts, such as making fun of another. Others would say there are no guarantees Christians will have an easier life than non-Christians will, so how can happiness relate to following Christ? Personally, I believe one needs to consider the context in which happiness occurs in the Bible, along with its synonyms of joy and contentment, in order to understand Godly happiness.

Certainly, earthly parents desire happiness for their children, so why would our heavenly Parent desire less for us?

Followers of Jesus find joy in God's presence. The Psalmist says, "…a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere." Likewise, "No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly." Christian happiness is not a fleeting emotion, but a perpetuating state of being growing from a strong relationship with God. In that holy relationship, believers feel secure, loved, and valued. The love of God helps followers transcend the challenges of days, weeks, months, and even years of hardship. When one's life-foundation is solid, deep, and immovable, the life built on that foundation is better able to withstand whatever storms and hardships come at it. Christian happiness sprouts from that type of a spiritual foundation, one that gives us reason to live with optimism and joy, finding pleasure in simply being a part of God's creation regardless of the current circumstances.

Everyone desires happiness, so being happy is an effective evangelizing tool because it invites others to seek the source of our joy.

Journaling focus: Upon what does my happiness depend?

August 8
Christian Values: *Peace*

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Matthew 5:9

The importance of peace in Christianity can hardly be overstated. Of the many desirable characteristics the Bible names, only three are referenced more frequently than peace. In both the Old and New Testaments, peace is a reoccurring theme. Often, Scripture describes the processes used in attaining peace between tribes or nations. At other times, one individual is encouraged to make peace with another. Perhaps most challenging are the passages calling us to find peace within ourselves, as well as to make peace with God.

We cannot understand peace without considering security, for the two are inseparable. Through the ages, nations have invaded other nations in order to protect or to enhance their security interests. Countries invade other countries because they want more land, more resources, or more access to strategic locations. Anytime our security is threatened, our sense of peace is also threatened. Likewise, when someone threatens those in our charge, such as our children, we are likely to react in less-than-peaceful

ways. A certain level of security is a prerequisite to peace; and where we find our security is where we will also find our focus.

Some consider peace to be the absence of tension. Tension threatens our security, and thus, our sense of peace. Most of us do not like tension in our lives and strive to eliminate it. Indeed, excess tension is a common cause of physical and emotional maladies. In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer discusses the tension between reality and possibility. He writes, "…we must learn to hold the tension between the *reality* of the moment and the *possibility* that something better might emerge."[54] Palmer believes we too often settle on less-than-desirable solutions to conflicts because we desire a quick release of the tension. Rather than taking the time and doing the work required to attain a mutually beneficial resolution over the long term, we seek the quickest and easiest way to *peace,* even if that peace is short-lived. Sources of tension that are not appropriately resolved tend to recur.

At its core, finding peace is an individual pursuit, and what we depend upon for our security is where we will find our peace. If we seek security in money and material possessions, we will always feel insecure because those types of treasures are transitory and impermanent. According to today's Bible passage from Matthew, it is the *peacemakers* who will be called the children of God. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, a peacemaker does not simply strive for the absence of tension. A true peacemaker finds his or her security in God, and then works towards solutions to problems that honor the dignity, interests, and worth of all involved. Security in God comes from the belief that God loves and values us as we are; and that reassurance should be enough for a strong sense of inner security.

Peacemakers recognize that true peace is not a short-term endeavor. They understand their efforts may actually increase tension for a time, and ultimately may only contribute a small portion to the overall goal of bringing peace to the world. Even so, working for peace is what children of God do, and external peace necessarily begins with internal security.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today that will help bring peace to my corner of the world?

August 9
The Bridegroom

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:29-30

Here is an unexpected face of God: the bridegroom. In its context, today's Bible passage is John the Baptist speaking to his followers who are wondering if they should now follow Jesus. John confesses that his own ministry must now decrease so that of Jesus can increase. John was the warm-up act, but Jesus will be the main event. This was not reason for sadness but for rejoicing. In fact, John says that hearing the voice of Jesus made his own joy complete, and therein lies a lesson for us.

We live in obsessively individualistic times, and the idea of willingly taking a back seat to anyone seems absurd. Many of us act as though the universe revolves around us, which in a sense is true, but only in a *very* limited sense. Anything and anyone that might remove us from our privileged pedestal is a threat. Certainly, one of the biggest and most frequently occurring threats is that of change. Our ego does not like change, except for when it is someone else who changes to accommodate our desires. In order to allow Christ to increase in our lives, however, our ego must be coaxed out of the limelight and corralled into its intended role of subservience.

The biblical analogy of Jesus as the bridegroom positions us, including those of the male gender, as the bride ("He who has the bride is the bridegroom."). Although this reference is not widely used in the Bible, it is particularly interesting and thought provoking. In Genesis (2:24), speaking of marriage, the author writes: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." Could it be that Jesus left his Father in order to become one life with us? I think that is exactly the implication. A marriage implies a close, intimate relationship, so close that the two lives become one. The New Testament references to a wife submitting to her husband (Titus 2:5, for example), so troubling for so many, may stem from the need for us, as the bride, to submit to the Lordship of Christ, the bridegroom.

In this context, masculine and feminine refer to an *orientation* to another and not a gender assignment. Any of us can choose this orientation in a particular situation, regardless of our gender. Although some feminine traits may come more naturally to those born as a woman, we all possess unique combinations of masculine and feminine characteristics. In Ken Wilber's book *Integral Spirituality*, he writes, "…the healthy feminine principle tends toward flowing, relationship, care, and compassion…"[55] The inference is that in order to receive the invitation of the bridegroom, we need to be in a flow with the divine, to be in right relationship with God and others, and to have those relationships characterized by care and compassion.

God in Jesus manifested as a perfect union of physical body and spirit – 100% human and 100% divine. With the Christ as our bridegroom,

we are invited into what some contemplatives refer to as a *mystical marriage.* It is mystical in the sense that it is not a typical physical union – we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch this bridegroom. We must develop a broader set of perceptual capabilities, or spiritual senses, in order to consummate this union. A mystical union is one where two lives unite yet retain their individual natures. Jesus' humanity did not diminish his divinity, nor did his divinity diminish his humanity. He retained all of both. A new being is created – reborn, if you will – that is neither, yet both; not one *or* the other but one *and* the other.

The face of God as bridegroom invites us into a mystical union where we do not lose the traits that make us who we are, but which strips those traits of the distortions that limit their use for higher purposes. In other words, we become far better and holier versions of who we already are in Christ.

Journaling focus: To what powers or people might I submit in order to further my spiritual growth?

August 10
The Face of Compassion

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" John 5:6

To paraphrase Fr. Richard Rohr from several of his writings, "God is found where the suffering is." Nowhere is that more evident than in the accounts of the life of Jesus found throughout the New Testament. This should surprise no one, since Jesus was a manifestation of God in human form. Although we can argue whether Jesus actually sought out suffering people, he clearly did not shy away from them, either. Particularly with those who were shunned by society – those with leprosy and other visible infirmities, for example – Jesus not only acknowledged their existence and worth, he also brought healing to them.

In today's story from the Gospel of John, Jesus found a lame man lying beside a pool, begging for someone to help him into the pool at the stirring of the water. There was a belief that whoever was first into the pool when the water stirred would be healed. Because of the man's disability, he was never able to get himself into the pool in time. Jesus asked him if he *wanted* to be made well. The man complained that he had no one to help him into the water, assuming that was his only hope. Jesus told the man to

get up and walk, and the man got up and walked.

The religious leaders chose not to rejoice about a lame man who was made well. Rather, they complained that Jesus had violated the Law by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus responded in verse 17: "My Father is still working, and I also am working." In my opinion, too many religious people and institutions continue to focus on rules, laws, and their own perpetuation while ignoring the pain and suffering in their presence. God's compassionate gaze, manifest in Jesus, would not pass suffering by, regardless of the social norms, laws, or day of the week.

We see this same compassion throughout the ministry of Jesus, including with the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11), the man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-27), the woman suffering from hemorrhages (Matthew 9:20-22), and the healing of the Centurion's servant (Luke 7:2-10). And here is a lesson for us: God-in-Jesus told us to show compassion, too. For example, in Matthew 25, Jesus told about the judging of the nations and said of those who will inherit the kingdom, "…for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." The crowd asked when these things occurred, and Jesus responded, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." While we may or may not have the ability to completely heal another, any one of us can ease another's suffering in some way, if only by directing some of our attention to them. We imitate and follow Jesus when we serve others in need.

Reading the accounts of Jesus and suffering people makes me wonder what he would do if he walked the streets of my hometown today. How would he react to the panhandlers, to the mentally ill, or to the homeless? I walk by them too often, pretending I do not see or hear. I cannot believe Jesus would do the same. How does the compassionate face of God call us to respond to the suffering in our world? That question is one I believe those of us with privilege wrestle with throughout our lives. We should not be too hard on ourselves as we reconcile our hearts and our actions, however. God's is a face of compassion and encouragement, not one of condemnation.

Journaling focus: What is an opportunity for me to display compassion to another today?

August 11
The Most Needful Thing

"But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'" Luke 10:40-42

I am certain you know a Mary and a Martha. Not the sisters that Jesus visited in today's passage, but the traits represented by Mary and Martha are manifested in people all around us, including within ourselves. Mary likes to visit and be in relationship. We find Mary with others: talking, listening, laughing and relating. Martha is a busy-body and cannot sit still when there is work to be done. And when isn't there work to be done? There is cooking, cleaning, children to care for, lawns to mow, email to answer and on and on and on. The Martha's of the world may consider the Mary's of the world lazy and irresponsible. The Mary's of the world may consider the Martha's as high-strung and more than a little holier-than-thou. No doubt, the battle between the two rages in every generation.

In the scripture story Jesus comes to the home of Mary and Martha and while Martha is busy in the kitchen, Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens. While Martha is working *for* Jesus, Mary is *being with* Jesus. Martha is furious and asks Jesus to rebuke Mary for not helping her prepare for their guests. Instead, Jesus gently rebukes Martha for having her priorities turned around. We have many chances to eat, and few people will starve by missing one meal. But they had only one chance to sit at the feet of Jesus, in their own home, and just *be* with him. I have found that many tasks needing to be done are still there, still needing to be done, tomorrow.

I have a little bit of both Mary and Martha in me, as do most of us. I am probably a little heavier on the Mary side than Martha, however. But *both* Mary and Martha traits are important. There are times to focus on the work needing to be done, and there are times to rest, relax, listen and learn. Our challenge is in deciding what is the most needful thing for any given moment. When we spend time with Jesus, does he find us 'in the kitchen' or sitting attentively at his feet? The choice is ours to make.

Journaling focus: In what ways am I like Mary? In what ways am I like Martha?

August 12
Cures That Do Not Heal

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Matthew 10:8

In the afternoons during a mission trip to Honduras, several of us led Vacation Bible School for the kids. It was a blessing to have fun with the children, even though we could not understand most of what they said. For my daughter and me, these interactions with the children were among the most enjoyable of the trip.

The Honduran homes located beside the church where we worked were deplorable, at least by our standards. Small, concrete brick structures with tin roofs. For the most part, they were colorless and barely habitable. Although the condition of these homes was worse than some we saw, the scene was common. There were two boys in Bible School who lived next door to the church. Angel and Daniel, aged about 6 and 4, were happy, cute, well-behaved, slightly ornery boys, not unlike typical youngsters in my hometown. They did not appear undernourished or under-loved, and I have no reason to believe they were. They lived in conditions we considered unacceptable, however. I never saw the inside of their home, but it is likely they had little of the *stuff* we consider necessary for a normal upbringing in the United States. Did they have TVs or Internet access? Could they watch movies or play video games?

We talked about how easy it would be to "rescue" one or more of these children from their poverty and adopt them into our home, where they would have access to our abundance. Wouldn't their lives be improved? As the week progressed, however, the answer seemed clear: No, their lives would probably not be better. Different, yes; better, no. One of the many realizations I made in Honduras is that our *first world* lives are largely lived vicariously in the past and the future. We relive the past and dream of the future, often missing the present moment. Many Hondurans do not have that luxury. The realities of their environment force them to live in the moment, focusing on the needs of now – food, water, work, love, togetherness, etc. – so there is little energy left to regret the past or ponder the future.

We worry about the future of Angel, Daniel, and the other children. Will they become victims of the prevalent gang violence in their community? Will they be sold into sex trafficking? Will they live their entire lives in housing conditions like these? We cannot know. We also rejoice, however, in the pure joy that Angel, Daniel, and the other kids found in the moments of Bible School. Singing, coloring, jumping rope, kicking a soccer ball – they savored moments fully. Their depth of being and their joy in

fellowship with us and the other children was beautiful and inspiring. I doubt that could be duplicated here.

I am convinced the solution to the dilemmas in Honduras is not to (North) *Americanize* the people. Rather, we must find ways to preserve the uniquely beautiful parts of their lives and culture, while moderating the violence and poverty that so endanger them. Otherwise, the cures we export may be worse than the illnesses we attempt to heal.

Journaling focus: Where might my efforts to help actually create more problems than solutions?

August 13
Where Are You?

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" Genesis 3:8-9

According to the creation story in Genesis, God created the earth and the universe from formless nothingness. God created Adam and Eve to shepherd over life on the newly formed earth. The serpent came into the Garden, tempting Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they ate. Having so eaten, the writer of Genesis says, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:7)." And they tried to hide from God.

Could God really have not known where Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden? It likely wasn't God who didn't know; but Adam and Eve. They were hiding from God because they were embarrassed and ashamed, thinking if they could postpone an encounter with God they might find a way to hide their guilt. It is very human, having done something we know we shouldn't, to try to cover the evidence.

What would I say if God asked, "Where are you?" Honestly, I am hiding behind my busy-ness. I have a large yard to care for, painting to be done, kids' activities, church commitments, obligations at work, and a to-do list that goes on and on and on. Never mind trying to find regular time to exercise, relax, or (gasp) pray or read the Bible or spend focused time with God. Besides, it is nearly impossible to come into the presence of God without facing up to my shortcomings. Not because God seeks to condemn

me, but because being in the presence of God, the very act of acknowledging one so great and so powerful is bound to make us feel insignificant, vulnerable, and unworthy. It is easier to mow the grass. Yet, God relentlessly seeks us. And when we respond, God wraps gentle arms around us so we know we are loved and treasured beyond measure. Humbling ourselves and confessing our mistakes, difficult as it may be, is ultimately a healing and freeing experience.

So, where are you? Where is your relationship with God? When was the last time you had a one-on-one with God? When was the last time you sat in silence, listening for what God has to share with you? For me, it has been too long.

Journaling focus: How can I carve out time in this day to spend in God's presence?

August 14
Getting Here

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you. Luke 17:20-21

I read something long ago that recurs to me regularly. I do not remember the author, although it is almost certainly a bit of Eastern philosophy, but my paraphrase of the line is this: "If you cannot find happiness where you are standing, where do you expect to wander in search of it?" The point is that happiness originates from within. People can wander the earth in search of happiness and never find it, because they carry their discontent with them. Abraham Lincoln is rumored to have said, "People are just as happy as they make up their minds to be." If we are unhappy where we are at, we almost always have the power required to change our level of contentment without changing our location. There are obvious exceptions – abusive relationships, for one – but the key to success in finding happiness is in figuring out how to get *there* without having to leave *here*. After we have found a lasting contentment, it matters little where we go as our contentment will travel with us.

Jesus taught frequently about the kingdom of God, which he also referred to as the kingdom of heaven. A subtle, but important point contained in Jesus' words about the kingdom is that he speaks of it in the

present tense, not as a future state. There is a lot of confusion about the kingdom of God, and understandably so. I want to propose, however, that when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, that he was referring to a state of being available to us *right now, right here.* It may or may not be a *place* we go to after we die. It is, however, a state of existence available to us in the present moment.

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed." There are several interesting parables about the kingdom of God/heaven in Matthew 13:10-50. In Luke 9:27, he says, "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." He issues a warning in Matthew 18:3, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Finally, in Mark 4:11, he says, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables." These are not descriptions of the traditional heaven I was taught as a child. These tell of a kingdom that is very near, as well as a kingdom accessible to all who follow Jesus – not someday, but *now;* not somewhere far away, but *here.*

Journaling focus: What changes in my understanding of heaven when I consider it as a present state?

August 15
A Middle-Eastern Hue

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

Being born white in the central part of the United States, it is no surprise I was raised with a *white* Jesus. I was raised with a Caucasian, male God, too. The images came from artist's renderings, along with an unspoken assumption that we white folks were God's chosen people, just as the Israelites believed themselves to be God's chosen people of old. The whiteness of God was not anything I challenged; it just was what it was. My upbringing was not anything consciously intended to hurt those of other ethnicities. It was simply a product of being raised white in a very white culture. It also laid the foundation for my racism.

While I understand, intellectually, the conscious and subconscious pain a white God causes those of other races, I cannot pretend to know

how deep that pain goes. Millions of African Americans were forced from their homes and away from everything and everyone familiar to be sold into slavery in America. The indigenous, nomadic peoples of my homeland were forced off the lands that had supported them for countless generations onto pitifully inadequate and constricting reservations where they could no longer carry on life as they knew it. My western-European ancestors claimed this land as their own. For them, America was the new Promised Land, and no sacrifice was too great to make it so, even when that sacrifice denied and destroyed the personhood and the livelihood of entire cultures of people.

It is not my intent to tear down us white folks, but we cannot appreciate the deep-seated suffering that continues to divide us along racial and cultural lines without acknowledging our history of and our participation in, if only indirectly, the gross injustices of the past. Like any deeply repressed memory, it oozes to the surface at inconvenient times, manifesting as poorly understood hatred and violence. Because there is no safe place to hide, the problem belongs to us all. One starting point for healing, in my opinion, is for people like me to acknowledge that God is not white, and Caucasian is not God's chosen race, any more or less than any other race.

It is not that my ancestors were bad people. They were mostly good people acting on mistaken beliefs. They used whatever means seemed necessary to attain their end of developing a self-proclaimed, God-given Promised Land for their purposes. Unfortunately and too often, the means were violent and oppressive. The end, however, is justified by whatever means are required when we believe we are carrying out the work and will of God. The weight of that generations-old oppression still weighs heavily on the backs of too many of our brothers and sisters, mostly beneath their conscious awareness. Those of us who are descendants of the oppressors still bear the guilt, if subconsciously, and the healing must begin with us. While I do not know what forms of healing will be required to transform this pervasive wounding, I believe the first step is acknowledgement of my indirect culpability and the benefits that have accrued directly to me because of the unjust actions of my ancestors. *White privilege* is real, and I must own it.

Jesus, God in human form, was born into what we call the Middle East. His skin color certainly reflected that of his neighbors (i.e., *not* white). He would have appeared with neither the dark skin typical of the African peoples to the south, nor the light skin common to the Scandinavian races to the north. Rather, Jesus would have been a blend of those colors. In addition, the Middle East was a blending of cultures. The Western cultures came to practice mostly Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Eastern peoples tended more towards Hinduism and Buddhism. Jesus lived at the

crossroads of humankind, inclusive of and accessible to all. Honestly, where else would we expect God in flesh to appear? He blended cultures and hues because his Father, our God, created and loves them all. Thus, there is a Middle-Eastern hue to the face of God. As Paul tells the Galatians, we are united as one in Christ. Our challenge is how best to honor the many and varied hues of God with the love and respect accorded them as fellow and equal children of our one God. That is where the healing will begin.

Journaling focus: What are some of the roots of racism I need to own?

August 16
Becoming More

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." John 6:51

In the verses that precede today's passage from the sixth chapter of John, the Jews are complaining that Jesus is claiming to be the "bread that came down from heaven." They say they *know* this Jesus and they know his mother and father; so how could he be anything more than a carpenter's son from Nazareth?

We do this with people, don't we? We say, "That child will never be an athlete—I know his parents and, well, there's just no way…" Or we claim, "I know that kid will never amount to anything. His father was worthless, as was his father's father…" It is comforting to pigeon-hole people into boxes that define and limit our expectations of them. It lessens our risk of being disappointed or hurt by them.

But Jesus declared he was much more than a boy from the nothing-town of Nazareth. He was much more than a typical man of flesh and blood. By partaking of his life, or his flesh, we gain knowledge of the Spirit, the 100% God-part of his being. It is like eating bread that gets absorbed into every part of our being, except this bread is never converted to energy and burned away. It ingrains itself into every part of our life and connects our spirit to His and our soul to God. When we share communion, we symbolically take a part of Christ's body into ourselves, making us One with Christ, who is One with the Father. This is no ordinary bread, and Jesus was no ordinary man.

Who are you underestimating? Yourself, maybe? Are we not more than the sum of our ancestors and our environment encased in flesh and

enlivened by blood? We are also spirits connected to the Eternal. The possibilities are endless when we see them through faith.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I underestimate and limit my potential?

August 17
Mud and Spit

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Then he went and washed and came back able to see. John 9:6-7

Two naturally occurring substances that devolved into manifestations of unpleasantness in my life are saliva and mud. When I was a child, it was common for my mother to lick her finger or handkerchief to clean something from my face or clothing. To clean his glasses, my dad always put a lens in his open mouth, huffed moist air onto the lens, and then wiped it off with his handkerchief. My friends and I regularly played in the mud, making pies, forts, and balls. When there was not enough mud readily available, we made more with the water hose. It was great, readily available, albeit messy fun. Today, it seems, playing in the mud is only slightly more sanitary than swimming in the sewer.

I have a less-than-pleasant memory of the first (and last) time I tried to clean something off the face of one of my children (in the presence of my wife) by first licking my finger. My wife, unlike me, was not raised on mom-spit as a cleaning solution and did not approve of her children being subjected to it. It was not convincing to remind her that saliva is a Biblical remedy. In John 9, Jesus restores a man's sight with mud made by spitting in the dirt. In Mark 7, Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man by licking his finger and sticking it in the man's ears and on his tongue. Apparently, there must be a difference in the composition of my spit and that of Jesus.

I suspect my mother used spit as a cleaner because it was always available. If we were near a sink, she might have used a wet rag to wipe the debris from my face. Her use of mom-spit was probably less about hygiene and more about expediency. Even so, I am not ready to concede that there is something inherently harmful about a little parental saliva on otherwise unbroken skin – or mud, for that matter, including mud made with saliva.

Sometimes in life, we need something readily available more than we need something perfectly suited to the job, something with the *Good*

Housekeeping Seal of Approval. It is a fundamental reason I am thankful for my faith. When I need to remember who I am, or that I am loved and valued, or when a sin-smudge appears on my cheek, I know God is always available. I do not have to remember a bunch of prayer rules, nor do I need to be in church or kneeling at my bedside. I do not have to worry about the words I use, my enunciation, or being grammatically correct. God knows, sees, and hears my heart and is always ready to attend to me, perhaps even with a wet finger.

Journaling focus: In what ways might I sacrifice hygiene for expediency?

August 18
In Search of a Tingle

Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Exodus 3:5

Several years ago, my daughter and I were hiking a few of the trails around Sedona, Arizona. A local person told us that there were several "vortexes" on those trails, described as areas where concentrated magnetic energy rises from the earth. Apparently, some folks have life-changing experiences on a vortex, while others feel a vibration emanating from the ground. Not surprisingly, some people feel nothing, but many feel a *tingle*. The actual locations of the vortexes are not marked, but we went in search of a tingle anyway.

I have read about *thin places* on the earth, where God has been revealed to someone. The event leaves an imprint that can be felt by others. Thin places are described as areas where the veil between the kingdoms of heaven and earth is more transparent, places where we may feel the presence of God with greater clarity. Another name is a *liminal space*. These are places where we know the ground on which we stand is holy. These places, which may be either a physical or a psychological location, once we find ourselves in one, command silence and demand our full presence.

While I did not feel a tingle emanating from the earth on a hiking trail near Sedona, I have certainly experienced thin places elsewhere. The centuries-old cathedrals in Europe qualify. The accumulation of weddings, funerals, baptisms, conversions, and worship – the faithful seeking of God – leaves a palpable imprint, especially when occurring over centuries. My own church, though young by comparison, also falls into the category of a

thin place. The area in my home where I pray, meditate, write, and ponder spiritual matters is, for me, a thin place. Awe-inspiring landscapes also qualify: the unfathomable depth and breadth of the Grand Canyon, the power of the Pacific Ocean, a stunning sunrise, the red rocks of Sedona, to name a few.

Whether we go in search of a tingle at a vortex, a thin place, or another sort of holy ground, we are not likely to experience anything otherworldly without first being in a state of mind to receive it. Silence. Focused attention. Listening. Seeking. When our minds are mulling our to-do lists, when we are consumed by disappointment with others, when we are shrouded in worry over an uncertain future, we could be sitting in front of a wide-open gate to heaven and never recognize it. I believe it matters less *where* we seek God and more that we *do* seek. If God is truly always with us, we should be able to engage with God wherever we are; but we must first be in a receptive mindset. Lives are changed in the presence of, and under the guidance of God. Perhaps lives are more easily changed on a vortex; but when a vortex is not accessible, we can find a holy and thin place wherever we are, simply by being willing to allow God to work in our lives.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to put myself in a better position to experience the presence of God?

August 19
Weightier Matters

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Matthew 23:23-24

How does one eat an elephant? An elephant is eaten one bite at a time, of course. No doubt, the same is true of swallowing a camel. Years ago, I heard the parable of the boiled frog. If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog will simply jump out. If you place a frog in room temperature water and bring it slowly to a boil, the frog will lay in the water, comfortably, until it has been boiled to death. The proverbial *slippery slope* offers a comfortable path-to-nowhere-good. Before long, in Jesus' example from today's scripture passage, we become so consumed and comfortable straining gnats that we find we have swallowed a camel.

Biblical references to the *Law* consist of over 600 laws listed in the first 5 books of the Old Testament, the rules for righteous living established by the early Hebrews. The belief was that one must obey the Law, all of it, in order to earn one's salvation. The scribes and Pharisees that Jesus was often so critical of were the religious leaders of the day. They were pious and believed themselves to be a holy cut above the common folks. Modern day equivalents to the scribes and Pharisees may be some of the televangelists and others who believe their grasp on ultimate truth is exclusive. They tell us the Gospel is so clear and the path so easy that all we must do is follow a set of rules they are more than happy to glean for us from their reading of the Bible. To me, this is the "camel" that Jesus references – we lose sight of the forest by focusing on the trees; we miss the larger purpose by focusing exclusively on the details.

Jesus called the scribes and the Pharisees *hypocrites* because they attended to the *letter* of the Law but ignored the *spirit* of the law. Granted, the spirit of the law is more difficult to discern, requiring much prayer and reflection over an extended period of time. The spirit of the Law is not generally black and white because it can vary from situation to situation. It requires the application of *love* and perspective, which makes decisions more challenging. What is a loving act in one arena may be received as cold and heartless in another. In Jesus' own words, the "weightier matters of the law," or the spirit of the law, are "justice and mercy and faith." It is much easier to ignore justice, mercy, and faith and simply follow a set of rules. It is much easier to write a check to a soup kitchen than to actually go and serve the poor. Certainly, soup kitchens need money, but if we think we can fulfill our obligations for justice and mercy by simply writing a check, we have probably swallowed a camel. We miss the point. God's children need benefactors, certainly, but they also need helping hands and personal attention. The weightier matters of the Law require service to others that improves their condition, not simply following a set of rules. Those who follow a blind guide down a slippery slope may end up swallowing a camel.

Journaling focus: When was a time I found myself following a blind guide?

August 20
Love Your Enemies

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you… Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Luke 6:27, 31

A number of years ago, a former pastor of our church did a series of sermons entitled, "Things I Wish Jesus Had Never Said." Although I no longer remember the specific Bible passages used, I do remember a long string of uncomfortable recommendations from Jesus to us. Unlike the more familiar Ten Commandments of the Old Testament (Thou shalt not kill, steal, covet, etc.), these are less intuitive and clear-cut, but in many ways are much more difficult. Some of us may go through our entire lives without *really* wanting to kill someone. But few of us make it through a day (or hour) without wishing harm to someone we dislike, even if it's just a character on a television show.

Today's scripture passage is full of things I wish Jesus had never said: "Love your enemies." "Do good to those who hate you." "Bless those who curse you." "Pray for those who abuse you." These are *hard* things to do because they go against the grain of our natural tendencies. They stretch us well beyond our comfort zones. These commandments are *really hard* to follow because they challenge us day after day after day after day after day.

I once read that if we are to truly love our enemies, we must treat everyone as equal to ourselves. That means we cannot consider ourselves better or worse than anyone else. And yet we are always comparing ourselves to what we see in others: "I would never treat others as poorly as my boss treats me." Or, "If I had the blessings and gifts of (this person) I would be much more generous than they." Or, "That person has no reason to complain…" I think Jesus may be telling us we *are* that person; and the change to the person he calls us to be begins within.

One key to understanding these easier-to-ignore commandments comes a few verses later: *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them*." (Luke 6:32) Jesus calls us to be different, to stretch ourselves beyond our natural tendencies, to be known by our real and active love for others, even (especially) the unlovable. If we act like everyone else, what good are we to them? Or to ourselves? Or to the world?

Journaling focus: What would it take for me to bless someone who curses me today?

August 21
A Long-Term View

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am; send me!'" Isaiah 6:8

When I was a child my dad got paid on Fridays. And every Friday he would come home from work and say, "Who wants to come to the grocery store with me?" And all four of us kids would beg him, "Take me! *Please,* take me!*"* You see, we knew the routine. Dad would go to the store, cash his check and use a portion of the money to buy a bag of candy for us. The child who went with dad not only got to help select the candy, but also got the first piece. We *knew* it would be an adventure worth sacrificing whatever else we might have been doing at the time. And we *knew* we would be rewarded.

Today, in the age of direct deposits, my wife and I would say to our kids, "Who wants to come to the grocery store with me?" If we got a response at all it was likely something like, "In your dreams," or "Can you just jam bamboo shoots under my fingernails, instead?" The call to the grocery store did not hold the same excitement it once did for me as a child.

Immediately prior to today's scripture passage, the speaker had his sins taken away and was so thankful to the Lord that, when asked, he was ready and excited to go wherever asked. Do we have that kind of excitement and willingness to serve our Lord today? I wish I could say I did, but to be honest, most of the time I do not. When I was a child, I knew the rewards of volunteering to go with my dad to the store. However, our spiritual rewards are not always so certain or immediate. Those rewards often require a long-term view and a short memory.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life that would benefit from a longer-term view?

August 22
Let My Words Be Few

Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.
Ecclesiastes 5:2

I regularly practice the spiritual discipline of silence. I am an early riser, and I begin my days sitting quietly in God's presence. I relax and quiet my mind, which is no easy task. Random thoughts pop in and out of my head constantly. I acknowledge them and let them pass, determined not to engage in an internal dialogue with any of them.

I have always considered prayer as a conversation with God, so silence is not a traditional sort of prayer for me. Some classify the practice of silence as contemplation or meditation, although I think of meditation as a state of focusing on something in particular. Being in silence is different, not unlike the difference between talking to a person and simply sitting in their presence. In the final days of her earthly life, I sat in the presence of my mother quite a lot. She could not communicate, nor was she noticeably conscious of her surroundings, except in brief episodes. I would talk to her, but I would quickly run out of things to say and fall into silence. In retrospect, I think I felt closer to mom during the times of silence. Somehow, I suspect she appreciated the silence, too.

Talking to God, as in prayer, is a comforting and healing practice. Particularly when no one else will listen or understand, we always know we can go to God. I think, however, there is an additional level of communing with God, and that is in silence. When we are silent, when our thoughts have paused and there are no distractions, we begin to feel the deep, loving presence of God around and in us in ways we cannot otherwise perceive it. Words cannot describe the presence of God because it is beyond words. There is no need to talk, no need to listen, no need to analyze – only to *be.*

Clearly, I could write more about silence and stray even farther from the core message of this reflection, but I will not. Enter the silence and be.

Journaling focus: Enter the silence and be still (for 20 minutes, if possible). When finished, journal about the experience.

August 23
Déjà vu All Over Again

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. Acts 17:29

One of my high school pictures looked a lot like recent heartthrob, Justin Bieber. We did share a few similarities. We were both young musicians, and we were both pretty full of ourselves. He, of course, achieved wealth and fame. I, however, only dreamed of such accomplishments.

We are a very image-conscious society. Within the physical limitations of our genetic wiring, most of us strive to portray a particular image. When we look in the mirror, what image do we wish to see reflected

there? In general, we all possess a random combination of physical characteristics from our biological parents. But who do we seek to imitate physically? More importantly, who do we imitate spiritually? From the beginning to the end of the Bible are reminders that we are created in the image of God. We are God's offspring, God's children. Surely, we bear a resemblance to God, just as we do to our earthly parents. God expresses in an infinite variety of wonderful and beautiful ways, although there are recurring patterns that resemble each other – patterns that makes us think we have seen this before. Like the similarities in the pictures of Justin Bieber and a teenage me.

There are traits shared in common by those seeking to emulate God. Among those characteristics are love, justice, mercy, service, and peace. These God-like characteristics are just as recognizable as any physical image we attempt to portray, and a whole lot more useful to the rest of humanity. The molds of spiritual superstars are like déjà vu all over again, repeated throughout history, holy images waiting for aspiring disciples to emulate. Unlike our physical features, which tend to deteriorate over time, our spiritual qualities mature and expand. Whatever degree of physical attractiveness we possess, at least as it is defined by current societal norms, will fade for most of us as we age. When we consider whose image we seek to portray for others, it is wise to choose an image that will improve over time.

Journaling focus: What is a spiritual trait I would like others to see in me?

August 24
Unlimited Liability

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:12-13

Much is written about sacrifices made out of love for others. Military personnel risk their lives on a daily basis out of love for their country. Firefighters and law enforcers risk their lives out of love for their communities. Jesus willingly gave up his earthly life out of love for us. Stories of sacrificial love are inspirational; and we wonder at the sort of love that leads one to lay down their life for another, especially when that other is unknown to us.

Most of us live a relatively tame and safe lifestyle thanks to the

risks and sacrifices of others who make it so. And the thought of needing to lay down our life for another is foreign to most of us today. But that may be too limited an understanding of what it means to lay down our life for our friends. In his essay *The Leader as Servant,* Robert Greenleaf discusses love in the context of community. He writes, "*Love* is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability! As soon as one's liability for another is qualified *to any degree*, love is diminished by that much."[56] The context for these words has to do with our tendency to isolate those members of our community who, for various reasons, do not blend well into typical community structures and norms. He mentions orphanages, penal institutions, mental health hospitals, schools, and nursing homes, noting that sometimes separating the constituents of these types of institutions from the greater community works against efforts to ever successfully incorporate them into it.

Greenleaf's underlying message is one of love and community, and assuming personal responsibility for both. For a community to thrive it must work for *all* its members. We cannot simply quarantine away those who do not easily fit, with the reasonable exception of those who pose a significant danger to others in the community. But sometimes we quarantine folks because it is inconvenient to accept responsibility for them, even when they are family. Thus, his concept of *unlimited liability*. When we accept unlimited liability for another, we act as though there is nothing helpful and within our power we will not do for him or her, whether at home, at work, or in the world. And the difference in this type of laying down one's life for another is not so much a willingness to die, as a willingness to inconvenience ourselves. Perfect love claims unlimited liability for another. When we love another perfectly, we simply will not give up on them.

Journaling focus: Who, if anyone, in my life would I accept unlimited liability for?

August 25
The Boxer

In the clearing stands a boxer, and a fighter by his trade,
And he carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down or cut him 'til he cried out
In his anger and his shame, "I am leaving! I am leaving!" But the fighter still remains…
The Boxer, Paul Simon

I am not a fan of boxing, so I do not pretend to have been a follower of Mohammed Ali. I thought it curious when he joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name from Cassius Clay. I knew little of the Nation of Islam, except that their "Nation" seemed obsessively angry. Mohammed Ali impressed me as loud and arrogant. Like most other white folks at the time, I did not understand his perspective, nor the centuries of oppression and pain from which it arose. Even today, I cannot understand in the same way as one who is a member of the countless generations of oppressed people. No, I did not appreciate Mohammed Ali, the boxer, but I do admire the passion with which he stood up against racism, discrimination, and the Vietnam War; the way he used his fame to give voice to a greater cause.

In the late 1960's, the folk-prophet Paul Simon wrote a song titled, "The Boxer."[57] The song tells the story of a young man in New York City who suffers a series of *knockdowns*, but always manages to get back on his feet and climb back into the *ring* of his life. The song is an analogy for our life journey. We each "carry the reminders" of our struggles, our failures, and our losses. We have scars, limps, aches, and pains from life's many battles. Even the great Mohammed Ali was silenced in his later years by Parkinson's disease. Most of us do not age gracefully and, sooner or later, the combined forces of life deal a knockout punch from which we will not rise, at least not on this side of the grave.

The popular bit of folk wisdom, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle," is often and arguably attributed to Plato. There are times in every life when our only comfort comes from the shadows, times we feel we cannot take another step or fight another day. The enemy might be cancer, betrayal, or the loss of a loved one, but we find ourselves in a boxing ring not of our choosing. Something inside drives us to continue through our anger and our shame, sometimes against our will, to whatever lies on the other side. We get hit where we live, and it hurts. Eventually, we find ourselves down and out. We only hope to have left a positive mark on the world that so scarred us, praying the battles we fought somehow improved the world that also blessed us so richly.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a battle that has scarred you. What blessings resulted from the battle?

August 26
Repent!

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 4:17

The first instruction from Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark is to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15). This line is exactly what John the Baptist is quoted as saying earlier in Matthew (3:2) and occurs after Jesus has been baptized by John and spent 40 days in the wilderness. It seems safe to assume these words hold a special significance, since they mark the beginning of his ministry. What does it mean, exactly, to *repent*? The current understanding has largely to do with being sorry for poor behavior. In Catholic traditions, parishioners can attend *confession*, where they share with a priest where they believe they have fallen short in the recent past: "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned." Certainly, confessing our shortcomings and seeking forgiveness is a healthy practice, but the fuller meaning of repentance goes beyond being sorry for less-than-stellar behavior.

To *repent* is to turn around or to attempt to change one's life for the better. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia,* which refers to a transformative change of heart: especially, a spiritual conversion. To repent is to make a conscious choice to change the direction of one's life. It goes to the core of our being and seeks to change us from there. Much more than saying, "I am sorry," to repent is a determined, sustained, and conscious action to chart a different course for one's life. This, then, is Jesus' initial instruction for those who wish to follow him.

For me, there is an Advent-feel about repentance in that it invites us to prepare for something magical and mystical. It is magical in that the life Jesus calls us to is largely foreign to our daily routines. It is mystical in that it cannot be explained or foreseen except by faith. In Luke 3:4, John the Baptist, echoing the prophet Isaiah, says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John's Gospel records the words as "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). To the extent that John's words are a call to repentance, it is a call to a *process* and not a single event; a preparation for an extended journey, as opposed to a specific destination.

This directive from Jesus for repentance is about a new focus for our lives. Jesus offers a bridge to this new life, but the first step of this *journey of the heart* is ours to choose. This journey is not one of becoming upwardly mobile in order to rub elbows with the societal elite. There is not anything wrong with upward mobility, *per se*, except that is not an orientation conducive to finding God. Its motivations are wrongly placed. Our deepest essence cannot be focused on material gain and also upon

God. In fact, the journey Jesus invites us to is more likely to take us among those society rejects. We, along with Mary and Joseph, must make the long *heart-journey* to Bethlehem and find our way to the dark of the stable. The Christ within will not be born among the lights and parties at the Inn with everybody who is anybody. There is no room there for this birth. The Christ within is born in the simplicity, solitude, and minimal provision of the stable.

To repent is to change our priorities. We focus less on ourselves and more on others. We are less concerned with accumulating *stuff* and more on acquiring useful items for those in need. Our priorities shift from success to meaning. This change is not something forced upon us, that we are guilted into beginning, or even something that is possible without our willing consent. As we turn our faces toward God, we are naturally pulled in a new direction, a direction an earlier version of ourselves likely would have shunned. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Journaling focus: What is one step towards repentance I am willing to take today?

August 27
Follow Me

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."
Mark 1:16-17

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35

The childhood game of *Follow the Leader* consists of one person, the leader, acting in certain ways while the other players do as the leader does. If the leader takes 3 steps forward, twirls around, takes 2 steps back and then does a summersault, it is up to the followers to copy the leader's actions. In a way, Jesus invites us into a game of *Follow the Leader*. He says, "Follow me," and we are to do as Jesus does. One foundational habit of Jesus, found throughout each Gospel, is going to a quiet place to pray. Some of us pray before meals, at bedtime, and in church with a congregation, but how well do we follow the way Jesus modeled prayer? First, Mark says Jesus got up while it was still dark. We receive so much visual stimulation from our surroundings that darkness is foreign and frightening. Yet, how can we expect to focus on God's presence when the

seductive lure of visual distractions constantly bombards us? We may be better able to commune with God in the dark. Second, Jesus went to "a deserted place" to be alone with God. When was the last time we sat alone, longing only for God's company? Jesus found solace and rejuvenation in his prayer life. Do we? Perhaps we are not comfortable with prayer because we have not fully entered into it the way Jesus did. Following Jesus, I believe, begins with grounding ourselves in prayer.

In the context of Jesus saying, "Follow me," it is important to remember he did not say, "Worship me." Jesus worshiped God the Father, the one so far beyond our earthly comprehension that all we can do is fall on our knees in reverent submission. God is unknown and unknowable to the human mind. On the other hand, we can know and love Jesus as we would any other person. God came to earth in the person of Jesus, as one of us, so we could know God through him and *follow*. There is an important distinction between worshipping and following. We can only worship or fear that which we cannot comprehend. One appropriate response as we consider the vastness of God is astonishment and awe – like standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon or tracing the path of the Milky Way on a clear, dark night. God in Jesus, however, was comprehensible. Sometimes we act as if he were not in order to ignore the personal obligation to follow him, which can be uncomfortable and inconvenient. We are to *worship* God, but we are to *follow* Jesus. Following is an act of presence, dictated by the circumstances of the moment. The Gospels help us understand what Jesus did in his day and, through that understanding, to project how Jesus would likely act today.

Some Christian churches, my own included, spend a lot of time and energy on issues that Jesus apparently never addressed. To our knowledge, Jesus did not mention homosexuality, gay marriage, women in the priesthood, or allowing practicing LGBTQ persons to serve as clergy. Regardless, these issues define and divide many churches today, both between denominations and within congregations. I suspect these divisions in the church named for him make Jesus weep. Remember, there were no "Christian" churches in the time of Jesus, who was a Jew. The followers of Jesus formed the Christian church because they desired a new forum within which to more faithfully follow him. How far have we strayed from following our leader?

Most of what we know of Jesus' actions on earth fall into the categories of loving, teaching, healing, and including. He brought acceptance and grace where there was judgement and condemnation. He gave knowledge where there was ignorance, and healing where there was illness. He reached out to those condemned to the outskirts of society and brought them in. What does it mean to follow Jesus? One thing it means is for us to provide love, knowledge, healing, and inclusion wherever we find

hatred, ignorance, illness, and exclusion. To do so requires a centered presence with and attentiveness to the life around us. A regular practice of quiet time alone with God, as Jesus modeled, is a good place to begin.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I rearrange my life for regular, quiet time with God?

August 28
The Kingdom is Near

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 4:17

Jesus' first instruction to his followers was to "Repent." He follows this directive with a brief justification. In my paraphrase, Jesus says: "You need to change the focus of your life *because* the kingdom is very near and available to you here and now, but you will never experience it from the path you are on." The kingdom of heaven Jesus refers to may or may not be a place we go when we die, but it most certainly is a state of being *here and now*.

It is difficult to overemphasize the central position the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God has in the teachings of Jesus. This kingdom is the nexus from which his teachings emanate. Jesus refers to the *kingdom of heaven/God* 85 times in the four Gospels. He condenses the reference to *the kingdom* another 34 times. Clearly, there is something significant about this kingdom that Jesus invites us to know and experience.

Most of us were taught to think of heaven as a faraway place where the good and faithful go after they die. The alternative, *hell*, is where those not qualifying for heaven go. Our stay in either place is rumored to be eternal. While I do not wish to speculate about possible states of being after our physical death, I have certainly experienced both heaven and hell on earth. It is to these present states of the human condition that I believe Jesus is referring when he tells us the kingdom is near.

What Jesus says about the kingdom is instructive. Aside from the many comparisons he draws, i.e., *the kingdom of heaven is like…,* Jesus refers to the kingdom as a place that is very close. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven *has come near*" (emphasis added). Elsewhere in Matthew (12:28) he says, "the kingdom of God has come to you." In Mark 12:34: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." From Luke 17:21: "the kingdom of God is among you." The unmistakable common theme is that

this kingdom is not somewhere far away, but this kingdom is *here*. As if this is not convincing, in Luke 9:27, Jesus says: "But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." Point number one is that the kingdom is near. Point number two is that the presence, knowledge, or experience of Jesus is integral to our ability to enter the kingdom. Third, while many Christians believe Jesus is *the* entry point to heaven (Jesus, in fact, claims as much in John 14:6), I do not believe the Christian experience of Jesus is the *only* entry point. Rather, all points likely require a knowledge or experience of God in the flesh, which is exactly what Christians believe of Jesus. In other words, entry into heaven on earth requires a *Jesus-like encounter* with the divine, which is available to all, including those who have never heard of or experienced the Son of God manifested in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, in referring to the kingdom, is talking about a state of being that is present *now*, while we are alive on earth, and we enter it through Christ, the physical embodiment of God. We are not separate from God; only our lack of faith makes it seem so. Although the body of Jesus left this planet 2000 years ago, he is still present through the reality of the Spirit, offering us entry into the kingdom whenever we are ready – right here, right now, next week, or after we die. The ticket to the kingdom is repentance – rearranging our priorities. Once our heart is set on the right path, Jesus will lead us to the kingdom.

Journaling focus: What have been my most recent experiences of heaven? Of hell?

August 29
An Allegorical Christmas, Part 1

He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." Luke 18:27

There are those who shun the biblical telling of the Christmas story because it is too difficult to believe factually. From the impregnating of Mary by the Holy Spirit, to Joseph agreeing to marry his pregnant fiancé (as opposed to having her stoned to death), to the bright star in the sky, the shepherds leaving their flocks, and the wise men journeying from far away to pay homage to this Prince of Peace. Truly, it is an incredible story. While I believe that all things are possible with God, I also believe we can discern God's truth allegorically, and not just physically or factually.

What can one learn from the Christmas story, or any biblical story, who is not ready to make the leap of accepting the Biblical record as written? Let us begin with the spiritual impregnation of Mary. This story is foretold in the Old Testament book of Isaiah (7:14): "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'" Fast forward a few hundred years to the first chapter of Luke where an angel tells Mary, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Mary responds, "How can this be, since I am a virgin." The angel explains, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

The virgin birth is a profound element of the Christmas story. Typically, virginity refers to one who has not had sexual relations. The word *virgin*, however, has a larger meaning. It also means pure, undefiled, new, and inexperienced. For example, a *virgin forest* is one whose trees have never been harvested. The Christmas story tells of the birth of a child – a child with an earthly mother and a spirit Father. Heaven and earth came together in this child. The Christmas story is not just the story of Jesus, however. It is the story of us.

We all wish to express both our physical *and* spiritual natures. To do so, the spirit must i*mpregnate* us by entering to awaken and develop our spiritual nature. That experience begins to make us *whole* – fully human *and* fully spiritual. In order to awaken our spiritual nature, however, we must be sufficiently *pure* for the Spirit to enter. We must be submissive and willing not only to conceive but also to *receive* the new creation that will result. When that happens, we too have experienced an Immaculate Conception, not exactly in the way the Bible describes, but in the way the Bible *implies* can be true for all of us. Seen allegorically, this is our blueprint for achieving wholeness – becoming pure enough, open enough, *virgin* enough for the Spirit to express through us.

When we are willing to explain what the Christmas story means at its deepest and most personal level, the love of God will reach a mass of humanity who otherwise will continue to celebrate only the secular version of Christmas. Allegorically or factually, we find the same God trying to reach us in many different ways.

Journaling focus: How can I become more open to impregnation by the Spirit in my life?

August 30
An Allegorical Christmas, Part 2

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:3b-5

The Christmas story can be understood either as a historical, factual narrative or as an allegorical teaching about our personal, spiritual journey. Taken only in the former manner, the impact of the telling is lost on people who do not accept the biblical record as a historical event. Today, I consider the Christmas Star, which is recorded in Matthew 2:2: *"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising…"*

From this passage, we assume the "star" must have been very bright and noticeably different from the other heavenly bodies. Modern day astronomers have looked for evidence of a convergence of planets, a comet that streaked across the sky, or perhaps a supernova around the time of Jesus' birth. There is no astrological evidence, looking back 2000 years, of such an event, however. If we assume, as many do, that these "wise men" were astrologers – people who carefully studied the movements and interactions of the stars and planets – the occurrence now called the Christmas Star may have only been noticeable and unique to one trained in such matters. The rest of us may not have noticed anything different.

Regardless, the question posed in this reflection is whether the Christmas Star has meaning for those who choose not to believe it was a real star. Allegorically speaking, the answer is "Yes, of course it does!" Stars bring light to an otherwise dark sky – light in the darkness. A light in the darkness has been the story of God's impact on our lives since the dawn of creation. In Genesis, God's first spoken act of creation is "Let there be light." And there was light where there had been only darkness. When there is light in front of us, we find hope. We have reason to believe our times of darkness will end. Creating hope only requires a little light – a candle in a dark room, or a star resting over a humble stable. In difficult times, we need light, and we need hope. And hope is what the Christmas Star provides, both historically and allegorically.

Was there a Christmas star 2000 years ago? Of course there was! Maybe it was not a star as we portray it today, but it was a light for our darkness, and hope for our despair.

Journaling focus: What is a resource or person I find that brings light to my darkness?

August 31
An Allegorical Christmas, Part 3

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6

"Big things come in small packages," we sometimes say. Regarding the Christmas season, we are often referring to jewelry, gift cards, and other items that may have great value belying their small size. The Christmas story tells of another small package in the birth of the Christ child. In Luke 2:10-11, the shepherds hear from an angel: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The story of the worship of a newborn, deemed as our Messiah before the child can even speak, is difficult for some to accept. Where does this part of the Christmas story leave those who doubt its historical validity? Fortunately, as with most of the Bible's seminal teachings, there is a profound message in the story regardless of whether we accept it as fact. In the case of the boy King, there are at least two common misunderstandings: the deeper relevance of "a child" and the nature of Jesus' kingdom.

The deeper aspect of *smallness* has to do with being childlike. This does not mean being in a child's body but perceiving with the openness of a child's mind. Young children have few preconceived notions about life and about others. A childlike brain is like a sponge that soaks up everything around it, free of judgment or prejudice. As we age, and certainly by the time we are teenagers, many of us have our minds made up about most things in very divisive ways – I like this, I do not like that; that person is my friend; that person is my enemy. As adults, some of us simply solidify our adolescent biases. We close our minds to other options and influences and call it wisdom or steadfastness. Truly, it is neither. There is nothing wise about a closed mind. It makes our view of God very small. One lesson of the boy King is that we need to redevelop the openness and curiosity of a childlike mind.

As we consider God coming to earth as a baby, we are encouraged to remember that small does not mean insignificant. Meek does not mean weak. Caring for others does not include being abused by them. The peaceful imagery of Isaiah – of the wolf living with the lamb, and the calf with the lion – must be perceived through the mind of a child to be believed. The story reads more like a Disney movie than an adult narrative. With our fixed vision, there is no hope for peace. We cannot imagine the possibilities because that requires a child-like imagination. "A little child shall lead them." Yes, a little child shall lead us, but that little child is not insignificant, weak, or an easy target for abuse. That little child is a King,

and we must become like little children to gain the wisdom to follow.

Journaling focus: What is a situation in my life today that might benefit from a child-like view?

September 1
Come and See

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." John 1:38-39

In John 1:35-42, Jesus walks by John the Baptist and a couple of his disciples and John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" John's two disciples begin following Jesus, who turns around and asks, "What are you looking for?" The men ask where he is staying, and Jesus says, "Come and see." This directive to Jesus' first disciples two thousand years ago remains a directive to those of us wishing to follow Jesus today: *Come and see.*

To "come" implies we must leave wherever we are, and to "see" means to open our eyes, heart, and mind to what is revealed in our coming. Those who wish to see must first come. Another important word in this story is the word translated as "staying," which can also be translated as *abiding*. There is a way to consider this encounter that I find instructive. When John's disciples saw Jesus, identified by John as the *Lamb of God,* they immediately wanted to know more. Something about Jesus intrigued them. Perhaps they saw something in him they were missing in themselves. Therefore, they asked where he was staying. Personally, I think what they asked was more along the lines of *Where do you abide?* The difference is significant because if, indeed, the disciples were drawn to Jesus, they would want to know about his spiritual nature, or certainly something deeper than his place of physical habitation.

Where we abide can refer to our state of consciousness and/or a state of relationship. It is our go-to mode for living. It is where we reside internally, as in the center point from which we live and move and have our being. Jesus, as the Lamb of God, was in a relationship with God that these men wanted to experience for themselves. Thus they ask, where are you abiding? Those of us who seek to follow Jesus will eventually ask the same question. If this interpretation of the story is reasonable, the journey Jesus invites us to is an internal journey more than an external one. Jesus invites

us not to a different geographic state, but to a different mode of conscious awareness.

Jesus tells the men, "Come." That means to leave wherever you are. In this case, it meant for the disciples to leave their current lives, including leaving their mentor, John. For us, it may mean many things, but wherever it is Jesus invites us, it is not our life as it is today. To come somewhere is to leave one's current abode. Jesus might as easily have said, "Leave!" The command requires an affirmative decision, followed by action on our part to accomplish.

Finally, Jesus says, "See." Only after we have come to where he abides can we begin to see what he wishes to reveal. To witness the inner reality of Jesus is to experience what it means to live in unity with God. It is not enough to listen, nor is it sufficient to read or talk it out with others. We only experience this divine reality by trusting, following, and committing to this new type of freedom, this new state of being.

Here is the problem for many of us: our lives are like a hamster wheel in that we confuse activity with progress. We are worried and distracted over many things and overwhelmed with the day's demands. We run faster and faster, but at the end of the day/week/year we have progressed no farther along any road upon which we wish to be traveling. This is completely discouraging because no matter how hard we work, neither the scenery nor the schedule changes, and the only tangible result we have to show is total exhaustion! I understand Jesus' invitation to come and see as one to step off the hamster wheel, leave the cage, and enter a new, expanded reality. How we actually do this, from a practical standpoint, is another matter that each of us must figure out for ourselves – just as Jesus' disciples had to figure out how to leave their former lives in order to attain a new one.

Journaling focus: What is my current abode or present state of consciousness. What, if anything, would I like to change?

September 2
The Poverty of Wealth

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Luke 10:38-40a

In his book *Here and Now*, Henri Nouwen writes:

> *It always strikes me that rich people have much money, while poor people have much time. And when there is much time life can be celebrated. There is no reason to romanticize poverty, but when I see the fears and anxieties of many who have all the goods the world has to offer, I can understand Jesus' words: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." Money and success are not the problem; the problem is the absence of free, open time when God can be encountered in the present and life can be lifted up in its simple beauty and goodness.*[58]

I first read this passage while on a mission trip to Honduras. I am convinced the juxtaposition of the reading and the trip was divinely arranged.

While in Honduras, I expected to meet a suffering mass of people living in poverty. What I found were happy, joyful people, many living in poverty, but with an abundance of time to spend with others: Time to sing, time to worship, and time to enjoy life. It hit me that while many Honduran people live in material poverty, many of us in the United States, myself included, live in spiritual and relational poverty. The people of Honduras lack many of the material benefits we have in abundance, like clean drinking water and adequate sewage treatment. Because of the time-sucking obligations of our material abundance, however, we have little time left for others or life's simple pleasures. The two worship services I attended in Honduras (at two different churches) both exceeded two hours in length, not including the extended fellowship time before and after. At my church, people get antsy as a worship service approaches one hour. We have things to do and possessions to care for – yards to mow, sports teams to follow, children's activities to attend, and housework to be done. We are busy, busy people and must actually schedule visits to see friends and family.

I am reminded of the story of Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke. Martha is so busy preparing for Jesus' visit that she misses the blessing of the actual visit. Mary leaves the housework alone and sits at Jesus' feet to experience the blessing of his fellowship. Do not get me wrong – cooking, cleaning, dusting, mowing, and painting are all important activities, especially when there is an abundance to be cooked, cleaned, dusted, mowed, and painted. The contrast is stark, however, between seeking a blessing from our "stuff" and being blessed by the presence of others. We struggle to find an appropriate balance. We may be able to help the Hondurans with some of their basic needs. They can help us, however, learn to live with less, freeing up time for relationships with each other and with God.

Journaling focus: What is one way I can free up time today for important relationships?

September 3
The Eternity of a Moment

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Luke 1:14-15

Living in the moment is a constant challenge for me. I find reliving memories of the past or dreaming about the future much more compelling. Unfortunately, neither of these activities is productive. In fact, it is downright unhealthy when the past and/or the future pull us out of the present. The only place where we can act is in the now; this time is where we meet reality. I realize this may sound uncomfortably abstract, but it is actually extremely practical.

If I stand in an open field, tangents emanate on a two-dimensional plane from that point in every direction – north, south, east, west, and everywhere in between. In a truly open field, I can move in any direction I choose and, at least in theory, alter the course of each moment based on my choice of direction. That is not all, however, because we do not live in a two-dimensional world. The tangents emanating from that moment also extend out spherically above and below me. Although I may not be able to travel physically along those paths, I can send a degree of consciousness along them, again altering my momentary experiences. The key to living a moment is in exploring its many dimensions.

Every moment presents us with infinite possibilities, the combination of which shape our future realities in both small and large ways. When we choose to focus on the past or future, ignoring the moment, we give up more than we can imagine. In fact, our world becomes *imaginary* because we cannot actually live in the past or the future. We separate ourselves from those around us. Living in the moment is a conscious choice we must make repeatedly and requires focus and attention. It is much easier for me to allow my focus and attention to wander and, when it does, it wanders back or forward in time. The now, however, is an infinitely richer, safer, and more interesting state in which to exist.

The kingdom of God is always near and available to us from any point in space and at any point in time. It is a matter of whether we choose to enter fully into the moments we are given. Only by being fully present can we experience the nearness of that kingdom. If we are lost in past regrets or day-dreaming of future possibilities, we miss the opportunity. Jesus told us many times that the kingdom of God is near. We will never experience the kingdom until we learn to be fully present to our moments.

Only then, will we know *and* experience the good news of the kingdom of God.

Journaling focus: How much of my day do I spend focused on the present moment? How can I increase that focus?

September 4
Peace! Be Still!

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. Mark 4:39

Jesus had been teaching to a crowd on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Evening came and he said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." Jesus fell asleep in the back of the boat when a "great windstorm" arose and threatened to swamp the boat. His disciples woke him up and said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus got up and rebuked the wind, saying to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The wind stopped blowing and "there was a dead calm." Jesus said to his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

How many times in life have we felt beaten and drenched by the winds and rain of life's challenges and wondered, "Lord, do you not care that I am perishing?" Serious health issues, suffering loved ones, job insecurities, troubled relationships, bills piling up – name any issue and many people experience the feeling of drowning under that particular pressure. Difficult times seem to attract more difficult times. Old wife's tails like "God will never give you more than you can handle" are discouraging, at best, if not patently false. Even so, Jesus looks out over our situation and says, "Peace! Be still!" In my experience, the seas have always calmed down eventually, although seldom on my timeline. During the calm after the storm, I hear Jesus patiently whisper, "Have you no faith?"

And yet, this is our journey. Iron is sharpened by iron, and our faith is strengthened by our doubts. Anyone can be faithful when life is easy. Life, however, is never smooth for long. Our emotions rise and fall like the waves, turbulent and rough one moment and smooth as glass the next. We tend to believe we have life under control during our moments of calm, only to experience something that sends us flailing in the waves again. We become victims of our emotions, unless and until we learn to rise above the turbulence of our surroundings to the dead calm of Christ.

A little-understood fact of life is that there is no security, no stability, and no calm outside of our total reliance upon the provision of

God. There is no bank account large enough, no home solid enough, no body healthy enough, no relationship strong enough to stand against every storm that may come. There is no insurance policy comprehensive enough to assure the restoration of life to a previous state. Everything of the earth deteriorates and dies, as has been true since the beginning. Our world is in a state of constant flux as God creates and recreates new life in its stunning diversity. If we are unwilling to consciously change with our surroundings, we will be worn down like a boulder stubbornly fixed in the middle of a raging river. The wearing down over time, however, will not be the fault of the river or the rock, it is simply the nature of creation.

Perhaps when Jesus looked out over the stormy sea and said, "Peace! Be still!" it was as much a command to his frightened disciples as it was to the sea. "Trust me, I've got this," may be another helpful translation. Yes, life will be rough. But it is our own resistance to what is that makes it so. It is *our* lack of faith that is on display, not God's lack of care for who we are *at our essence*, which is eternal.

Some changes to our world – hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires – cause immeasurable suffering to many of the individual lives who inhabit it. But life, as a whole, survives and thrives. Individual life on earth was never intended to be permanent because the earth must continually redistribute the elements that compose our bodies and all of creation into new life forms. We are blind to the grace of every circumstance because we mourn what we believe we have lost instead of rejoicing in what is gained.

Jesus' words, "Peace! Be still!" are a directive, calling us to trust God's sometimes-raging river. When we strap ourselves in and commit to enjoying the ride wherever it takes us, we are less likely to be consumed by the seeming tragedies that occur along the way. We, too, will perish in God's stormy sea one day. Paradoxically, only then will we truly know the peace of Christ.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life where I could use Christ's calming presence?

September 5
Resilient Foundations

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock."
Matthew 7:24-25

Many years ago, we had a sunroom built onto the south side of our home. The contractor dug a trench four feet deep and 18" wide, below what were to become the outside walls of the room, in order to pour the concrete foundation. The foundation on which the room was to be built had to extend below the "frost line," which in this part of the country is considered to be about three feet down. The frost line is the point below which the ground is not expected to freeze, even in the coldest of winters. It is important to have a foundation below the frost line to prevent it being heaved out of the ground, or shifted within the ground, as the freezing and thawing of winter and spring cause the ground and all within it to move. If a foundation heaves, the house may fall. For large buildings, foundations go much deeper than the frost line. Large drills dig down to "bed-rock," a relatively unchanging and solid shelf of rock, so the weight of the building is supported by concrete pillars standing on something even more solid and less likely to shift.

In today's Bible passage, Jesus tells the story of a wise man who built his house on rock. A few verses later he contrasts that with a foolish man who built his house on sand. When the winds and rains came the foolish man's house fell, while the wise man's house stood strong. Of course, Jesus is alluding to the foundations of our lives. What does it mean to have a deep, strong foundation? Certainly, it means having a faith and a sense of self-worth that goes deeper than the heaving – the difficulties and challenges – that occurs over the course of a lifetime. We all know people without roots, or without a deep enough foundation to stand strong against the storms of life. We also know people who suffer tremendous difficulties yet remain strong. Their foundations are deeply established on something solid and unchanging.

People talk about the foundation laid for them by parents or other mentors. Principles, values, faith and sense of worth stronger and more resilient than the ups and downs and ins and outs of our day-to-day existence. That makes a strong foundation for life. We try to instill it in our children, foster it in our friends and family, and strengthen it through our church. A life shaken to its core does not need to fall, if its foundation goes deep enough.

Journaling focus: How strong are the foundations of my life.

September 6
The Kiss of Death

"Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.' But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.'" Mark 14: 39-40

Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion, is kissed by Judas. It was a sign to the Temple guards that identified Jesus, whom they would drag away to trial. Conflicted Peter is trying to be invisible outside the Temple, wanting to monitor the events without being identified as one of Jesus' followers. He is recognized by others in the area and three times denies knowing Jesus; just as Jesus told him he would do. His denial was like a little white lie that suddenly takes on a life of its own. His first denial was matter-of-fact, but by the third one he was cursing and swearing an oath. Sometimes, when a lie is not accepted, there is a desire to repeat the lie in vulgar or extreme ways, as if that would make it sound more believable.

I remember being told it is always best to tell the truth, especially if you have a poor memory. In Peter's case it wasn't just a matter of getting caught in a lie. It was a matter of being victimized by a frenzied, unruly crowd seeking bloody action in the dizzying night. I picture the scene resembling ravenous sharks smelling blood in the water. Peter, tired and confused and seeing the central focus of his life treated as a common criminal, reacts in a manner consistent with most of us mortals, that of self-preservation. History is full of people who have found themselves on the wrong side of right by refusing to challenge the crowd in the interest of personal well-being. The people of Nazi Germany come to mind. There is Peter. And there, too, am I.

I know there have been many times in my life when someone in my presence has been treated unfairly, and I ignored opportunities to stand up for or to stand beside them. Likewise, I cannot count the number of times I've stood by silently as others around me have spoken words diametrically opposed to what I know and believe. I might as well have shouted, *"I don't know this man!"* Fortunately, Peter's experience reminds us we are loved and understood, in spite of our weakness. God's love does not condemn us, but hopefully will inspire us to right action.

Journaling focus: How can I make myself more resilient against societal forces that pull me away from what I believe?

September 7
Intruder

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. James 2:14-17

A gift of grace is something positive received that is not earned or deserved. I often consider God's grace to be like something nice I do for another who cannot respond in kind. Certainly, there are aspects of God's grace that fall into that category, such as salvation. There are, however, gifts and graces from God that may not be so free. In his devotional, *Seize the Day,* Dr. Charles Ringma writes: "Grace always calls us to a response. God's action toward us is never meant to leave us as we are, but is a challenge to move us forward. Grace is thus never a convenient gift, but a disturbing intruder."[59]

I love the life God has granted me. I am comfortable and relatively secure, certainly more so than most others in this world. I am not motivated to change my life, even for the better, if it means risking my comfort and security. While I try to give God credit for my many blessings, is that enough? The writer of James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." In other words, people of faith cannot retain their blessings by hoarding them. I am reminded of the lyrics of an old folk song: "Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more!" Gifts of grace are meant to change us and move us forward. When we commit to making the lives of others better, our own lives also improve because our gifts multiply by being shared.

Certainly, we have the free will to determine the purposes for which we will share what we are given. Indeed, we have a responsibility to pass along our gifts in intentional and responsible ways. But our gifts are to be used for purposes beyond our own selfish desires. In that respect, as Dr. Ringma writes, gifts of grace may not be such a convenient gift after all, but a "disturbing intruder." They are like doors inviting us out of our comforts and into new experiences in community with others. Acknowledging and being thankful for our gifts of grace is important, not because we hope to be loved more, which is not possible, but so that love and grace can flow through us to others. Like a faucet that must be left open for water to flow, grace is made new by flowing through us. Our cup remains full, even as the waters of love and life flow to others.

Journaling focus: How can I become a better conduit for God's love and blessings?

September 8
Plagued by Pixies

The next day…the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day…"
Matthew 27:62-64a

I played in rock bands as a teenager. Without getting too deep into electrical jargon, my band days taught painful lessons about *polarity pixies*. These mysterious, mischievous, and invisible creatures doled out electrical shocks, apparently whenever we did not pay appropriate homage to the electricity Gods. Trust me, nothing spells shame and humiliation like catching the eye of a cute female in the audience, only to be reduced to tears by a mini lightning-bolt arcing between the microphone and your lips. To say the least, it is a painfully shocking experience.

For leaders of the first century Temple, nothing spelled shame and humiliation like Jesus. Because they refused to believe the possibility of his Lordship, they continually put themselves in situations where they ended up looking shockingly petty and incompetent. They, like most Jews, were expecting a Messiah but could not accept that it might be someone with his peasant background, simple lifestyle and suspect social status. This unwillingness to believe led to a series of confounding miscalculations, all of which put them on the shameful, humiliating side of reality; as if they were plagued by pixies.

In today's scripture, the Temple leaders tried to insure no tricks would be played by Jesus' disciples. They feared the disciples would steal the dead body from the tomb to make it look as if Jesus had risen from the dead, as he said he would do. So they went to Pilate, the Roman governor, and requested the tomb be guarded until the third day to prevent such shenanigans. Pilate granted their wish, but on the third day the tomb was empty, anyway.

In spite of their efforts to keep Jesus dead in his grave, on that morning the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive. This must have been the ultimate shame for the religious elite because they couldn't get the upper hand, even after they'd had him crucified. Of course those who believe know God will not be cornered, tricked, outsmarted or defeated. Denying God's reality doesn't change our life experience, it only makes it more confounding. The Temple leaders' denial of Christ's deity could not keep Jesus dead in the tomb. Still today, that empty tomb signifies his Lordship and our salvation.

Journaling focus: What is one instance of shame or humiliation that helped open my eyes to a higher truth?

September 9
Rules of Forgiveness

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Colossians 3:12-14

There is a bit of folk wisdom that I do not care for. It goes like this: "It is easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission." Perhaps the reason I am not fond of this philosophy is that I usually hear it from an employee or child after they have done something I wish they had discussed with me first. I believe forgiveness is appropriate for anyone who is sorry for what they have done. If one continues to do something they know is not right because it is hurtful to another, however, it is difficult to believe they are truly sorry for it. Perhaps they are not sorry for what they did, but only regret they were caught. Of course, there are other times when forgiving someone is in our best interest, even if the other person is not seeking our forgiveness. Our anger over the transgressions of others is bad for our health.

`The comedian Emo Phillips said, "I asked God for a bike, but I know God doesn't work that way. So I stole a bike and asked for forgiveness."[60] While I agree that God willingly and repeatedly grants forgiveness, I also believe there are expectations attached to forgiveness. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul advises us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. He also says to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient in our dealings with others.

Repentance, literally meaning to turn around, is a common expectation for forgiveness. When we repent of our sin, we acknowledge a need to change something within, and so we seek to turn around. Confession of our sins is another expectation for forgiveness. When we confess, we accept responsibility for our actions. If there are rules of forgiveness, they likely include accepting responsibility for our actions and being willing to change.

Paul, however, sums up forgiveness in a word: love. In typical Paul-style, he uses many words to get to the point, but love is clearly there. Our

need to forgive or to be forgiven always occurs in relationship to another – to God, to a family member, to a friend or co-worker. If we love that person, or at least if we value the relationship, we will not intentionally do them harm. When we say or do something harmful, we want to make it right. Thus, we seek forgiveness out of love. Likewise, we are more likely to grant forgiveness when we have been wronged if we love another or value our relationship with them. The rule of forgiveness, then, is actually very simple: love one another.

Journaling focus: Who do I need to forgive in my life today? How can I best go about it?

September 10
Do Not Be Afraid

He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Mark 4:40

When we are afraid it is often because we have lost a sense of control, we are in an unfamiliar situation, or darkness has made our surroundings strange and threatening. We can be frightened because we feel our life, or the life of a loved one is in danger. Fear is a common reaction whenever something out of our comfort zone is occurring. On the one hand, we are told to *fear* God, as in Leviticus 19:14, and on the other hand, sprinkled throughout scripture, is the directive not to fear God's messengers.

Biblical encounters with a divine being – God, Jesus, or an angel – are often preceded with the directive to have no fear. For example, in Genesis 15:1, God visits Abraham in a dream and says, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield." In Matthew 1:20, an angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." In Luke 1:13, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." In Luke 1:30, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." It is as if the message is, "Do not allow your fear to prevent you from receiving a message from God."

About 25 times in the four Gospels, Jesus says not to be afraid or not to fear. In today's passage from Mark, the disciples are on a boat crossing the sea. Jesus is asleep when a strong storm hits and threatens to sink the ship. The disciples are in fear of their lives when they wake up

Jesus. He calms the sea with a word and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" What is so interesting about this story is the connection Jesus draws between fear and faith. Is Jesus suggesting that a person with sufficient faith should have no fear?

The night before Jesus was crucified, as he prayed, he asked, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me…" (Luke 22:42). Was that an expression of fear? Personally, I think there is an important distinction to draw between fear and dread. The human part of Jesus dreaded the pain, suffering, and humiliation that was before him in a similar way to how we might dread an upcoming Calculus final or a course of chemotherapy. The divine part of Jesus knew there was a greater purpose for his suffering, and so he relented, "…yet, not my will but yours be done."

I suspect the type of fear Jesus warns against is the type that manifests as *worry*. We fear many things because we suspect they may negatively impact our current or future state of being. Of course, the vast majority of what we worry about does not happen. Invariably, the outcomes of that which does happen are seldom as disastrous as our worry leads us to believe. Worry reveals a significant lack of trust in God's care and hinders our ability to be fully present to whatever is going on.

Anyone who has believed in the goodness of God over a significant period knows that faith does not prevent tragic things from happening. Certainly, there are events and circumstances on earth where fear is a rational reaction. Our faith, however, can help put our suffering into a meaningful context. God does not promise bad things will not happen, only that we will not have to carry the burden alone. In addition, God assures us that, over time, *all* things work together for good (Romans 8:28) in ways we simply cannot imagine. God always transforms suffering into blessing, whether in this life or the next.

In Luke 12:22, Jesus is explicit: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear." We are in good, albeit invisible hands worthy of our trust. Fear of God, as in an *awe-inspired reverence* for God's incomprehensible presence, is good. Worry and speculation about future possibilities reveals a faith deficit and only saps our strength. God may be speaking to us through our fear-inducing events, but succumbing to our fear will inhibit our ability to receive God's message. Why are we so afraid? Have we still no faith?

Journaling focus: What is an area of my life today that could use an infusion of faith?

September 11
Failing Successfully

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. Matthew 19:30

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Matthew 19:24

Jesus makes a number of difficult and paradoxical pronouncements throughout his ministry. He tells us the poor in spirit, meek, and persecuted will be blessed. Can you imagine a parent wanting their child to grow up poor and meek? Blessed, yes. Persecuted? No way. Can you imagine a coach encouraging a prospective athlete to come in last, or a business professor teaching the benefits of poverty? By today's standards of success, the Bible can seem a formula for failure.

The *Paschal Mystery* is the mystery of the Lamb, the Lamb being Jesus. It refers to the truths of Jesus that are not widely understood, and the New Testament is full of them. Fr. Richard Rohr sums up the Paschal Mystery by saying that the way up is the way down. Paradoxical truths are perhaps not as hard to understand as they are to accept. It is risky to pattern a life after them, especially for those to whom earthly success is important. In just about every country and age, except my own, I am a rich and successful man. Therefore, the passage from Matthew 19, about the difficulty for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, seems particularly harsh. After all, I am a good person. I am active in my church. I study the Bible, and I pray daily. I have worked long and hard for my success. Why would the kingdom of God be difficult for me to enter?

The Paschal Mystery is mysterious because spiritual success and material success are often confused, different, and sometimes mutually exclusive. Fear of failure prevents us from stretching ourselves to new heights, both spiritually and materially. In our culture, the poor are considered deprived, perhaps even failures by some standards. In Jesus-speak, those who desire material wealth beyond their need are poor and have failed. But think about this: No one appreciates success more than one who has repeatedly failed. Those who have not failed may take their success for granted. No one appreciates the grace of forgiveness more than one who has sinned horribly. No one appreciates health like one who has been ill. The challenge, then, is remaining mindful of the source and scope of our blessings. We find the kingdom of God by entirely relying on God for our

life and sustenance, and by being grateful for what we receive. We need not fear failing as we strive to deepen our spirituality. Failure is not a permanent state, but it can become an entrance into a deeper relationship with God. Indeed, the way up, many times, is down.

Journaling focus: When have I failed at something? In what ways did I grow from the experience?

September 12
No Pain, No Gain

"He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'" Mark 8:34-35

Election years are difficult for me. I quickly grow weary of the rhetoric and promises. Too often the candidates make me feel like a kid on Santa's lap: *"And what do you want from your government this year, little boy?"* Remembering John F. Kennedy, I do not want to know what my country can do for me; I want to know what is best for my country. I long for a candidate to give it to me straight. Tell me what needs to be done and then just do it. The first presidential election I was engaged in had an independent candidate named John Anderson. What I remember about him was his promise of hardship, that our nation was in trouble and we would all have to tighten our belts and pull together in order to right the ship. Needless to say, John Anderson did not get elected President.

If there were elections for Savior of the world, I doubt Jesus would get elected, either. What serious candidate would tell me to deny myself and take up my cross? Lose my life in order to save it – are you kidding me? What kind of a confidence-building message is that? It is certainly no way to get elected. But, of course, Jesus wasn't running for office. And the job of Savior is not an elected position.

Jesus' words can be difficult and confusing because he often speaks of spiritual realities as if they were familiar, day-to-day realities. He sought to help us understand the vastness of the greater life around and beyond us, but he utilized familiar examples from his own daily experiences. We simply cannot grasp the life Jesus calls us to while we hold tightly to our earth-bound existence. We have to be willing to let go. We are given the free choice to hold onto our earthly life, at least until it ends. Or, we can reach

for the eternal part of our lives and pass through death as if passing through a curtain from one room to another. When seen only through our earthly eyes, following Jesus may be fraught with pain and denial and hardship. But when seen in its true spiritual context, we take our place as a vital part of a life so much larger and so much more beautiful, and a love so pure and deep that we simply cannot fathom the majesty. I believe that is the life Jesus calls us to, even while we live on earth. But we must reach for something larger and unseen. And we must let go of what is seen and familiar. And we must have faith that when we reach, his hand will be there to pull us through.

Journaling focus: What is one part of my life in which I am overly materially focused?

September 13
Do You Get It?

"It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!'"
Mark 15: 25, 29-30

Two thousand years ago, people didn't get it. They observed Jesus, dying on the cross, and said, "If you're so great, save yourself!" If he were truly the Messiah, he would come down from the cross so everyone could see and believe. Priests and scribes mocked him and said if he saved others he should save himself. But he didn't save himself. He didn't pounce, super-hero-like from the cross to the ground. He just hung there and died. Luke (23:34) even records Jesus saying from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Two thousand years ago, people just didn't get it.

Two thousand years later…do we get it? I confess: I don't always get it, at least not intellectually. What more could Jesus hope to accomplish by dying such an awful, shameful death than by continuing to live a full life of teaching and healing others? How much more quickly and effectively would the Gospel have spread if Jesus carried it himself beyond the Jordan River valley? Where was the glory in dying young and humiliated on a cross?

Many Christians believe Jesus had to die such an awful death because he assumed the punishment for the sins of the world, which would

necessarily be awful beyond description. Jesus knew if he left any of that punishment behind, left any sins unpunished, we would not be seen righteous in the eyes of God and there would be no eternal life with our Maker. Other Christians believe that, as witnesses to Christ's suffering, we are made more humane. Having seen how miserably we are capable of treating others, we are inspired to fight suffering and injustice. Still others draw strength and comfort knowing how Jesus suffered, making their own suffering more tolerable. Jesus walked a painful path before us to help show that we, too, will get through our pain.

Many of us speak with familiarity and emotion about the crucifixion, but do we really 'get it?' Do we really understand why this God-human was destined to be utterly destroyed by the world he came to save? My brain may not get it; but my heart recognizes this holy and suffering servant who traded his life for the betterment of mine. My soul rejoices in a love so pure; and 'getting it' pales in comparison to receiving it.

Journaling focus: What lesson does Jesus' crucifixion hold for me?

September 14
What Time is it?

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.
Mark 13:32-33

Before I retired, each morning I would think, "It is time to start getting ready for work." What I meant was that it was about *time* to get ready for work. Confusing? Yes, the English language is full of words, like *time*, with multiple meanings. At this time of day, it was time to begin getting ready for work.

There are at least two Greek words that describe time. The first, *chronos,* refers to the actual time, such as "It is now 7:00 AM." The second, *kairos,* expresses a less specific aspect of time, sometimes referring to a stage of life. "It is time to write my will," is an example. Expressing our final wishes in a will is not an *urgent* task for most of us but completing it before we pass from this life is important. Beginning a writing task is not an urgent matter most of the time, but it is important to begin early enough that I have time to properly think through the project before it is due.

From a whole-life perspective, what time is it for you? The context

for today's Bible passage from Mark relates to the second coming of Christ, or perhaps to the time of our physical death. There is much disagreement about the nature of that appearance, but one thing is clear: No one knows the time. Therefore, the time to prepare is always *now*. We are not guaranteed another moment of physical embodiment beyond the current one. There are experiences, learning opportunities, accomplishments, and relationships that each of us is specifically gifted for. While I believe our life's work continues beyond death, there is much to be done while we are physically manifested.

Journaling focus: What unfinished tasks need my attention today?

September 15
Do You Want to be Made Well?

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" John 5:5-6

In today's Bible verse, Jesus is passing by a series of pools near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. There was a belief that when the water stirred, the first person into the pool would be healed. People with various afflictions surrounded the pools. One man had been there many years but had no one to help him into the water at its stirring, and so he remained on the sideline, unhealed. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" At first glance, this question is a head-scratcher. The Bible tells us he had been ill for thirty-eight years. Why would he not want to be healed?

As a college student, I worked at a nursery that occasionally hired people just released from prison as laborers. One man, Harold, was in his fifties and seemed like a gentle, good-natured soul. After a couple of weeks, Harold stopped coming to work. I was shocked to find out he had borrowed a gun, held up a liquor store, and returned to prison. Never mind that the gun was not loaded and that he waited outside the store for the police to pick him up. Apparently, Harold did not want his freedom if it meant hard, physical labor and low wages in return for a meager existence. While I could not fathom why anyone would willingly go back to prison, he must have felt life was better there. Sometimes, we gain comfort from what is familiar. Some people, like Harold, may not have the support system required to transition to a better life.

There are numerous examples of people working hard to maintain a status quo that is neither helpful nor forward moving, let alone one that reaches a fraction of what is possible for them. For example, our political system is dominated by two parties seemingly more interested in preserving the issues that define them than in finding solutions for those issues. I suppose the fear is that without abortion, taxes, immigration, a border wall, or the myriad of perpetual issues that divide us, politicians would have no purpose. They might lose not only their identity, but also their jobs.

While that may sound ludicrous, I do not believe it is far from the truth. In fact, my guess is that most of us hold onto certain traits because they have become part of our identity, no matter how painful or limiting those traits might be. Our desire for uniqueness is so strong, we may hold onto whatever sets us apart, ridiculous or not. In this context, Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" is not a crazy question at all. There are many reasons why we may *not* want to be made well. More generally, what is it that we *really* want? Do we want to hold onto our afflictions? Do we prefer imprisonment to freedom? Are we afraid that letting go of a toxic identity will leave us in anonymity?

I associate these questions with those who have yet to find their identity in the family of God. We have a perfectly unique, never-to-be-duplicated identity at our core, just as we are, without any of our imprisoning afflictions. In fact, the more we hold onto unhealthy, but defining qualities, the more deeply our true self is hidden. On the other hand, the freer we become, the more our true self shines through. Contrary to how it may sound, we do not lose anything worth keeping as our true self emerges; rather, we become more like the person we always imagined ourselves to be – secure, helpful, loving, and loved.

When Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well," he may really be asking, "Do you want to be made *whole?"* Is not wholeness at the heart of every longing? I think we fear wholeness because we feel safe with what is familiar. We fear change. Wholeness cannot assure a comfortable, predictable life, but wholeness does assure inclusion into what is. Do we *want* to be made well? Are we ready for Christ to transform us into the image of God we were created to manifest? If we wish to reach for our potential, we must risk what is comfortable and familiar and, like the man beside the pool, make a conscious choice to be made well.

Journaling focus: What traits do I hold to that may once have been important but are not valuable anymore?

September 16
By Bread Alone

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Luke 4:1-4

Accounts of the temptation of Jesus are recorded in Matthew (4:1-11), Mark (1:12-13), and Luke (4:1-13). After Jesus had been baptized by John, he went into the wilderness for 40 days. Matthew and Luke record that Jesus was fasting during that time. The devil met Jesus there and issued three temptations when Jesus was at his weakest from the extended fast. The first challenge was to turn a stone into bread. The second was to receive authority over all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshiping the devil. Finally, Jesus was encouraged to throw himself onto the rocks from the pinnacle of the Temple, knowing that God would protect him. Jesus refused each of the temptations, left the wilderness, and began his public ministry.

Whether one reads this account as a factual or a metaphorical account is beyond the purpose of this reflection. What I address here is how the temptations of Jesus are about the use of personal *power,* and how these are temptations we too face, in endless variations, throughout our lives. If the life of Jesus is the standard for our life, we have much to learn from how he used, and refused to use, the power at his disposal.

Although scripture does not give a reason for the fast, it seems safe to assume it was a part of Jesus' preparation for his ministry. The first challenge, which has to do with giving up too soon, was to use his power to turn a stone into bread and end his fast. On the one hand, if I were hungry and had such power, it would be difficult not to use it in that way. Unfortunately, that would betray his purpose for fasting and nullify the benefits from the difficulties he had already endured. Jesus' response is "One does not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4).

The second temptation was to betray his lineage, as revealed by God at his baptism ("You are my son, the Beloved"). By reflecting anything less than the Father, Jesus could not fulfill his purpose of making God known to us. We are frequently encouraged to settle for something less than what we strive for, and we are given the power to settle through our free will. It is not that God will no longer love us if we settle for less, it is that we will disappoint ourselves for giving in, as well as failing to accomplish that which we set out to achieve. Jesus' response is "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Luke 4:8).

The third temptation was to do damage to his physical body on the assumption God would keep him safe. After all, God had a huge purpose for Jesus in the world. We know God takes us where we are, in whatever shape we are in, and uses us for purposes beyond our comprehension. Even if angels did not save Jesus from the rocks below, surely God would find a way to use him. This temptation was about showing how low we can sink and still have God lift us up. Jesus' response is "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4:13).

It is in our most vulnerable moments when we are tempted to use whatever means are available to ease our suffering, regardless of whether we believe we are tempted by the devil, by human nature, or our own personal weakness. The end does not justify the means when it comes to personal holiness. Patience, trust, and faith are required. The way out is by going *through* the difficulty, not by taking shortcuts around it. Inevitably, at some point or points in our lives, we will find ourselves in a metaphorical wilderness, hungry, alone, and tempted. In our weakest moments, it is helpful to remember how Jesus handled temptation: by persisting after our prayerfully-determined aims, by being as faithful to God as God is to us, and by treating our bodies as God's temple. God's strength manifests in our weakness.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I use the power available to me for the greater good? For selfish purposes?

September 17
Unpleasant Odors

"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." Ephesians 5:8-11

One late spring afternoon following the last college final of the semester, I headed to southern Missouri for a camping trip with friends. It was very dark when we arrived, and I didn't have a flashlight. I could see the dim lights of the restrooms some distance away and started walking towards them. About halfway there I met someone with a flashlight heading back to the camping area. As the arc of light illuminated the area around us I discovered we were surrounded by skunks. If not for the light I might

never have known how close I was to an unpleasant encounter.

Many times in life I've been very near "unpleasant surprises" without being aware, until something happened to shed light on the situation. Often the perspective gained from the passage of time provided the clarifying light. And sometimes I find I have unintentionally made things unpleasant for others; but until someone illuminates the fruits of my behavior, I continue unaware.

When we trust that following Jesus as the illuminator of our lives, light begins to shine on everything we think, say and do. And some of those things look and smell differently when exposed to the Light. Just believing in God puts life in a different perspective because we've already made the leap of relying on a being that cannot be seen or scientifically proven to exist. So we've gone beyond the sensual world into the extra-sensual world. When seen through the eyes of faith, the world looks different. We begin to see actions we thought were acceptable and fun, say gossiping, are actually very harmful. We may discover we're surrounded by 'skunky' situations that look good at first, but eventually turn rancid.

Today is a good time to look at our lives through the illuminating power of faith. We can reflect on our words, thoughts and actions in light of scripture; or as Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." And no, I did not get sprayed by the skunks that night. Once I saw what was surrounding me, I changed my direction. If it looks like a skunk and smells like a skunk, it's probably a skunk…

Journaling focus: When have I found myself surrounded by skunks?

September 18
Obedient Service

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? Romans 6:16

Faith without works is not faith at all, but a simple lack of obedience to God.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer[61]

Slavery has a long and horrendous shadow. Although legalized slavery ended in the United States 150+ years ago, traces of its 400 year history of oppression linger. Even today, we know of entire groups of

people enslaved to others. Human trafficking is rampant still today. Slavery is about property and property rights. When someone is a slave, another person owns him or her, as one owns a piece of property. Presumably, the owner of property can do whatever the owner wants with his or her possession, without regard to the impact on the possession itself. A slave's sole directive is to obey their master.

One of the recurring realities referenced in Scripture has to do with slaves and their masters. Some interpret these references to imply that God approves of slavery. I do not believe that is the case. Slavery was, and continues to be, a sad reality. That slaves and masters are referenced in the Bible is no more affirming than the references to kings and tyrants – they were common elements of the landscape of the times.

Slavery is evil when one is enslaved to another of the same nature, particularly when the master does not have the best interest of the servant at heart. In a sense, employees are slaves to their bosses, in that they are expected to be obedient to the mandates of the boss. The fact that an employee can walk away from an oppressive employer, however, makes that relationship significantly different. The concept of slavery takes on a completely different nature when one willingly becomes a slave to a superior being, such as becoming a slave to God. Paul tells the Romans that we are slaves to whomever we obey.

Jesus was a slave to God, obedient even to death on a cross. Although that act of service brought new life to us, the act itself was one of obedience to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologist of the last century, wrote that true faith *requires* acts of service because faith calls us to obedience to God, and God calls us to acts of service. A vibrant faith leads us to willingly enslave ourselves to God. Service is not something we do for the less fortunate because they are less fortunate, but something we do out of obedience to our master. The foundational questions are: Who is your master? and Whom do you serve?

Journaling focus: In what ways do I feel enslaved to another? In what ways might another feel enslaved to me?

September 19
Preparing for Death

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." John 14:27

There is something special about relationships with those to whom we are intimately intertwined. Usually there is something especially good, although in some sad circumstances, especially bad. Whether it is a parent, spouse, sibling, child or a BFF, interactions with those we are tied to have a quality not found in more casual relationships. I remember well the love-hate relationship with my siblings. I was the oldest and had to put up with many years of immaturity and interference from my sister and two brothers. Sometimes, I longed to trade places with friends who seemed to have a calmer home life. But then there were the many good times and the shared history that bound my family together. Today, I wouldn't trade those relationships and memories for anything or anyone.

In today's Bible passage, Jesus knows his days on earth are nearing their end. He has built close relationships with his followers that will make his parting even tougher, both for them and for him. The final days of his ministry were filled with preparations for the lives continuing on earth beyond his, including preparations and instructions for us today. Some of his words are not unlike those we might hear from a loved one near death, "Do not let your hearts be troubled…" Sometimes, one who is near death understands that their passing represents a new beginning for them, but are also keenly aware of the pain and grief they will leave behind. When we have a shared history, parting is never easy. And the longer and more intimate the history, the harder the parting.

Shared history and intimate weavings create the beautiful tapestry of shared life. It gives to us in ways the rest of the world and more casual relationships cannot give. That is the type of relationship Jesus invites us to—with him, and with each other.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to make an important relationship more intimate.

September 20
Taming an Ego

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
Ephesians 4:22-24

There is an obstacle between spiritual enlightenment and me. It is not a wall I can tear down, nor is it a body of water I can swim across. This impediment is not an intellectual puzzle I can solve by logic. My nemesis is closer than my next breath. It is the *me* I most closely identify with – my ego. My ego has evolved over the course of my life under the influence of my family, friends, and experiences. Actually, an ego is not a bad thing to have. In fact, it is necessary to develop a strong sense of who we are as individuals. All of us are endowed by our Creator with specific gifts and talents to be used in service to others. We need to know what those are, and our egos shout out our uniqueness.

Consider that *I* or *me* appear twelve times in the last paragraph alone. Most of us believe the universe revolves around us from a very early age. Our experiences often seem to confirm it, too. Unfortunately, that perception is wrong, or at least it is a misleading truth. We are *all* special and unique persons created in the image of God. One can say that when everyone is special, no one is special. When we seek our uniqueness apart from others, we risk becoming narcissistic, selfish, and wretched beings. When we find our distinctive niche alongside others, our value is defined as part of a larger body, as we were created.

My epiphany about ego as a stumbling block to a fuller life occurred sometime after my 30th birthday. I grew weary of my self-styled life, and my existence lacked the joy of rich fellowship and unity with others. I had a modest following as a solo musician – something that not only defined me, but also consumed my weekends. I also had a group of friends I enjoyed being with. Of course, the times they typically gathered were over the weekends when I was away, performing in clubs.

As I learned to wrestle my ego's grip from my life, I married, had children, and invested more heavily in my web of close and dear friends. Years ago, I would have considered my life today as indistinguishable from the masses. I was wrong, however. I make music with others, now, instead of by myself, and the music, like my life, is exponentially richer. An ego becomes an impediment when we do not balance it with a social life. As Christians, we believe the body of Christ is *us* – all of us working together – not *me,* standing apart. I have discovered I am the best version of myself in fellowship with others. Taming a strong ego is hard work. For me, the optimal solution has been in finding my special place *within*, not outside of the others in my life.

Journaling focus: In what ways does my ego inhibit my spiritual growth?

September 21
Delicate Honesty

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
Ephesians 4:25,29

Many years ago, I served as the interim director of a hospital department while recruiting took place for a permanent candidate to fill the position. One of the key supervisors in the department resigned during my tenure. Although I did not encourage her resignation, I believed the new director would have an easier time establishing him or herself without this particular supervisor in place. After she announced her resignation, a hospital executive came into my office, accused me of intentionally driving this supervisor out of the organization, and clearly let me know his opinion that I was setting the hospital back many years by my reckless actions. This exchange bothered me, as the executive was one I held in high regard. While I appreciated his direct honesty, his assessment of the situation was entirely incorrect, and his harsh approach to sharing his opinion negatively affected our relationship for many years thereafter.

In her book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg writes, "Communication works best when we combine appropriateness with authenticity, finding that sweet spot where opinions are not brutally honest but delicately honest."[62] In my work example above, the executive was authentic – he was truly frustrated and concerned with the departure of the supervisor, but he was not appropriate – he did not take the time to learn the facts prior to leveling such sharp criticism. He was honest, but in a brutal, and uncharacteristic manner.

Clearly, being truthful is important. Paul tells the people of the church in Ephesus to "speak the truth to our neighbors" because we are all interconnected. He goes on to instruct that we only say "what is useful for building up, as there is need." That sounds like a warning against idle or hurtful talk. Finally, he writes that our words should "give grace to those who hear." Those communication standards are much higher than most of us observe in our day-to-day speech. Repeating Sheryl Sandberg's point, communication is most effective when we are both appropriate and authentic. Personally, I am much less careful about my words at home than at work. I probably have my priorities reversed. While it is important to tend to what we say wherever we are and whomever we are with, the impact of words magnifies around those we love. Being delicately honest is difficult, but it is a key to being an effective communicator, as well as being a loving companion.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a time when someone was neither appropriate nor authentic with you. How was the relationship impacted?

September 22
Won't You Be My Neighbor?

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second (command) is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.
Mark 12:30-31

Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun, like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.
Fred Rogers[63]

My children were not among the tens of thousands of children who watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on a regular basis. The show, however, was a regular feature on television for 33 years. At the beginning of each episode, Mr. Rogers would sing the song, "Won't You be My Neighbor?" as he came through his front door. He would put on his cardigan sweater, and then sit down to put on his sneakers. After he was comfortable, he began an informal visit with his (mostly) young audience. Fred Rogers – both in character and in real life – preached love, acceptance, and gentle living. He received training as a Presbyterian minister, so his focus on virtues, values, and the respectful treatment of others are not surprising.

In one of his simple and profound writings, quoted above, Mister Rogers stresses the importance of recognizing that love requires *action.* Too often, we relegate love to romantic or sappy emotions and while those are important expressions of love, they are not necessarily love's highest expression. Jesus, too, focused on the *act* of loving, saying we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. To love, both God and our neighbors as ourselves, is the greatest of all the Biblical commandments.

During times of graduations, imagine a commencement address given by Jesus or by Mister Rogers. There would be no shallow platitudes such as, "Be all that you can be," or "Go forth and prosper," or "Seize the day!" There would be no cheerleader-like chants and no sports metaphors.

Equally absent would be tired clichés and forgettable advice. I believe a graduation speech given by Jesus or Mister Rogers would be straightforward. The focus would be on relationships, with God and with others, and the words would be about love. The words of love would be couched in caring for and about others, being a good neighbor, particularly to those less fortunate than we are. There would be no flowery descriptions of dreamy, fairy-tale futures. There would, however, be direct instruction for a focused present and a moment-by-moment, single-minded call to action.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to express my love for another?

September 23
Speaking in Tongues

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Acts 2:1-4

Pentecost, usually celebrated in the late spring or early summer, is considered the birthday of the church. It is a very un-Methodist-like event, or so it seems to me. Speaking in tongues is not a practice any good Methodist I know dabbles in. Many of us picture speaking in tongues based on what we've seen on TV. A televangelist lays hands on someone and they fall to the floor and begin mumbling words in some language unrecognizable to most of us. Not what most Methodists want to see in their aisles.

I did have an opportunity to witness a speaking-in-tongues event once; one of a religious nature. It wasn't particularly weird at all, except that I could not understand what was being said. As a devotion before the meal one person spoke in another tongue, then an interpretation was given. It was not too different from saying a prayer before a meal, except it wasn't exactly a prayer and it wasn't in English. Other than that, it was similar.

When my children were in high school, my family had an experience of speaking-in-tongues in our home when we welcomed an exchange student from Ukraine for the school year. Her native language was Russian, although she could speak several languages, including English.

When Julia would find another person who spoke Russian, it was a cause for celebration! She took such joy in being able to communicate easily in her native tongue, without having to interpret from English to Russian in her head, and then back from Russian to English in order to visit with someone.

I think our experience of tongues with Julia may be more similar to what the disciples and others experienced on the day of Pentecost than what we see on TV. People were amazed to hear others speaking in their native tongues, and they could understand in ways they had never been able to understand before. Lines of communication were opened that had been limited or closed prior to Pentecost. It was like the Holy Spirit's version of instantaneous language-learning software – the original Rosetta Stone, if you will. Our experience with Julia's native "tongue" was not weird at all, it was just different. And maybe not so un-Methodist after all.

Journaling focus: Recall a relationship where communication was difficult. How did that impact the relationship?

September 24
The Truth about the Truth

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."
John 8:31-32

When I first learned the truth about fertilizer, I was aghast. How could something so good and necessary for healthy plants come from such nasty raw materials? As our home was being built, I watched as the exposed lumber, nails, pipes, and wires were covered over, the dirt and debris removed, and a beautiful home took shape from a messy, ugly worksite. In Government class, my instructor taught, "If you love breakfast and you love your country, never watch sausage or laws being made." Having had the opportunity to witness the law-making process, I agree – it can be downright ugly!

We discover truth not as a destination, but over the course of a journey. Parts of most worthwhile journeys are tough, and sometimes extremely unpleasant. Just because we know the truth, and just because knowing the truth sets us free does not mean knowing the truth makes our lives easier. In order to get beyond whatever holds us in bondage, however,

we must understand and acknowledge the truth or the reality of the situation. Only then can we begin to effectively deal with it and move on. Only then are we free.

Robert Greenleaf, in his booklet *The Servant as Leader,* writes: "Awareness is not a giver of solace – it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener."[64] Awareness is not a freeing experience. It is, however, a necessary part of our growth as Christians. When we know the truth about our world, we can no longer *not* act. We cannot pretend not to see the desperate circumstances of some of our brothers and sisters.

Journaling focus: What is something beautiful in my life that required a less than beautiful process for completion.

September 25
Feed My Sheep

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."
John 21:17

For me, today's reading is one of the more touching passages in the Bible, occurring after Jesus has been crucified, buried, and resurrected. He meets the disciples on the banks of the Sea of Galilee and makes them breakfast. Jesus turns to (Simon) Peter, his most passionate and zealous follower, and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep." This exchange repeats itself three times, in slightly different form, with Jesus asking Peter if he loves him, Peter affirming that he does, and Jesus telling him first to feed his *lambs*, then to *tend* his sheep, and finally to feed his *sheep*. Jesus closes the conversation by repeating the words he had first spoken to his disciples three years earlier, "Follow me."

The need to repeat *three times* his instruction to care for his sheep indicates the importance of the directive. The emphasis could not have been accidental. It was as if Jesus were saying, "If you forget everything else I say or do, at least remember this, 'Care for my family.'" It is obvious that Jesus is not referring to livestock, but to his followers – those he had taught, fed, and healed during his earthly ministry. He knows he will not be physically present to care for his people any longer. He needs his followers to take care of each other and to continue the work he began. It does not

require much of a leap in understanding to know Jesus was talking to us. This instruction, from 2000 years ago, was also given for us, today.

There are subtle, but important distinctions in Jesus' responses to Peter's assurances about loving him: "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep,", and "Feed my sheep." First is the distinction between *feeding* and *tending;* second is the difference between *lambs* and *sheep*. The latter is the most obvious, since lambs are baby sheep. Lambs are cute, playful, and lovable, not unlike human children. They are often easier to care for and about than many of their adult counterparts. There is an innocence to a lamb that brings out our protective and nurturing instincts. Biblical authors name Jesus as the *Lamb of God,* referring to his untarnished purity and meaning he was unbound by earthly entanglements. In numerous places, Jesus tells us to become like, as well as to take care of the little children. In his telling of Peter to feed his lambs, Jesus is reminding the disciples of the importance of caring for the poor, lowly, and weak, regardless of their age.

The second distinction is between *feeding* and *tending*. Feeding his sheep has the obvious connotation of making sure the physically hungry have something to eat. Indeed, we cannot turn our attention toward anything but our next meal when we are hungry, nor can we expect others to understand words of wisdom on an empty stomach. Jesus' stories about feeding the crowds are a reference to the need to attend to physical needs. There is another type of hunger, however, which is spiritual in nature. We are also hungry for the unconditional love of God. When Jesus says in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," he is not referring to food or drink called righteous. Rather, he is referring to an internal hunger, a personal desire to know and do what is right. He says those with such a hunger will be filled, meaning that type of hunger will be satisfied. To tend has a slightly broader meaning than just feeding, which includes protecting, nurturing, and creating a safe place for growth and development.

Finally, the message is for *all* of his disciples, even though his words were directed to Peter. Although Peter became the head of what would become the Christian church, there was no expectation for Peter to do this alone. The entire community of believers was to care for Jesus' flock, including caring for each other. That community extends through space and time to include us today. This final instruction of Jesus to us, repeated three times for emphasis and inarguably tied to our love for him, is to feed his sheep.

Journaling focus: Who might I consider to be Jesus' flock today?

September 26
(Holy) Ghost Busters

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." John 14:25-26

Few concepts are more difficult for me to grasp than that of the Holy Ghost, also called the Holy Spirit. Actually, the Trinity is more baffling, but the Holy Ghost is an inseparable part of that confusion, so I tend to lump that triumvirate into one contiguous mass of puzzlement. Ghosts and spirits are, by nature, mysterious, so confusion is to be expected. Fear too, perhaps.

I am not a ghost buster, Holy or not. But I have pondered the role of the Holy Spirit, as described in scripture, as well as its presence and influence in my life. Still, my understanding is limited, at best. A few verses prior to today's passage from John 14, Jesus is talking to his disciples about what is going to happen to them after he dies. He is going away and, for a time, will not be with them; but the Father will send the Holy Ghost, also called the Spirit of truth, to live in those who believe in and continue to follow Jesus. In his desire to comfort his confused disciples, he may have confounded them further. I would be more than a little weirded-out if someone I loved deeply and had given my life to told me he or she was going to die and send a ghost to live with me!

The Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – is said to be three persons, or aspects of the same God, who is One. They are different ways in which God manifests. The Father represents God outside of us; the Son, God beside us; and the Spirit is God within us. In the creation story, God the Father manifests and communes directly with Adam and Eve. Later, God manifests to Moses and others as a voice through inanimate objects. With the birth of Jesus, God the Son manifests as a human being. Since Jesus' death, God the Holy Spirit manifests within us. The Holy Spirit is not part of us, per se, but a separate and distinct presence within and available to us. As we seek guidance or when we pray or when we sit in silence to feel God's presence, God manifests as the Holy Spirit. There are many times in life I have known and felt that distinct and real presence. It is actually ghost-like: surreal, ethereal. It is comforting when I'm centered but unnerving when I'm not. It can send chills up my spine. When I am quiet enough to listen and learn, it teaches, comforts and reassures. Just as Jesus said it would do. The Holy Ghost is how God manifests to us in our time, nearer than the air we breathe. It is how we know God as a real and living presence with us. And that is a ghost I can live with.

Journaling focus: How have I experienced the unique persons of God in my life?

September 27
Graduation: Death and Resurrection

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Luke 24:36-37

When my son moved out of his fraternity house, after four years at the University of Kansas, after completing the many celebrations, and after the honors and congratulatory hugs, he knew it was time to move on. When I asked this ever-optimistic young man about it, he declared it was a sad day. He said goodbye to the Beta house and to the 22 members of his pledge class. While he will undoubtedly see both again, it will not be the same. He was ready to move on, but there was a somber sense of nostalgia that lingered, as is often the case whenever we move from one phase of life to another.

We are not always ready for the graduations of our lives. Some just happen in the normal course of living. Some are expected, while others catch us unprepared. College, for my son, was a four-year immersive experience. That was the way it was planned, and that was the way it happened. He did not necessarily seek a life change, nor did he seek to avoid it. The change just happened, and the end came quickly enough that perhaps it caught him off guard. Many milestones in our lives are that way: marriages, job changes, health challenges, the losses of loved ones. Ready or not, we "die" to one phase of life and are born into another – like Jesus, we are resurrected into a new version of our world.

Starting over can be exciting and it can be hard, both at the same time. I remember the transition from elementary to middle school: transitioning from being one of the biggest, smartest, and most in-control in the school to being one of the smallest, dumbest, and least in-control, at least that was how it felt. When our surroundings change there will be a degree of discomfort. Moving on due to a graduation of some sort, however, should also involve moving up. We find ourselves in a new situation, but with the knowledge and experience gained from the past. We are changed, and we will never be the same.

It is interesting how Jesus, following his crucifixion and resurrection, appeared to his disciples a number of times and was usually

not recognized. It was Jesus, but it was the *resurrected* Jesus – the graduated Jesus, if you will. I imagine it was similar to seeing a friend one has not seen for many years. We must look twice and consider carefully to remember who this is and in what context we knew them. The person has changed, although vestiges of their past remain. We are products of our many graduations. Life moves on and invites us to do the same. Death and rebirth are the cycles of life, as inescapable as the cycles of day and night, winter and summer. It is life, and though sometimes sad, life is good.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I miss from a past version of myself?

September 28
The Fingerprint of God

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this! In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. Job 12:7-10

The Old Testament book of Job begins with a conversation between God and the devil. They are observing Job, a prosperous man who, according to God, would remain faithful through any difficulty. The devil claims that if Job were stripped of his family and possessions, his faith would soon leave him. God agrees to put Job to the test. All of Job's children, his crops and animals, his health, and all of his wealth are taken from him – all with the approval of God. Interestingly, Job's faith does not waiver, but he does get extremely angry with God. In today's Bible passage, Job claims that all of creation knows who caused his calamity because God's fingerprints were all over it. Much of the book consists of discourses between a livid, desperate Job and his friends, and between Job and God. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes:

> *The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love.*[65]

Job's reactions are interesting to me, as he falls into deep despair. He is in agonizing physical and emotional pain and begs for relief, but he never loses faith. His misfortune occurs over an extended period, with calamity

piled upon calamity, each as bad as or worse than the previous one. Yet, he continues to believe God is in control. I fear I would abandon my faith in God under a fraction of the weight of Job's condition.

We seem to have evolved a belief that only what we perceive as *good* is of God. The bad in our lives comes from something or someone else – an evil power, greedy humans, or the presence of sin. It seems to me if God is in control of *anything* in our lives, God must be in control of *everything* in our lives. That God sometimes appears to intervene in the apparent course of our lives is clear to me. How, when, and for what purposes God choses to intervene is a mystery. It seems arrogant on my part to assume God only intervenes in ways I will consider good. Who am I to judge what is good in God's eyes? For me, at least, every challenging event in my life has led to an unexpected blessing. Even the animals, plants, birds, and fish declare God's fingerprint on *all* of creation. Perhaps we are the ones most challenged to see it.

Journaling focus: What blessings grew out of a difficult period of my life?

September 29
Poor Stewardship

Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. Ezekiel 34:2a-4

I have found myself in positions of stewardship since 6th grade, when I was the Chief Crossing Guard for my school. My responsibility was to assign a trained crossing guard to each intersection around the school before and after classes. In the days before paid, adult crossing guards, the 6th grade class shepherded the younger children safely across the streets. Being appointed the *Chief* crossing guard was an honor of sorts, I suppose, but it seemed a lot of responsibility at the time.

A shepherd stewards the sheep in his or her care, leading them to food and water, keeping them safe from predators, healing their wounds, and reuniting them with the flock when they wander away. Near the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Peter that those who love him (Jesus) will feed his sheep. Good stewards take their responsibility seriously, understanding it to be a holy calling. There are numerous examples of solid,

sacrificial stewards in our history: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Florence Nightingale to name a few. They used the power, authority, gifts, and talents available to them for a higher purpose – lifting others up – and not allowing the allure of personal gain to deflect them from their calling.

The writer of the book of Ezekiel proclaimed God's judgment on the poor stewards of his day, calling them shepherds who used their sheep for personal gain. These were harsh words directed at the behavior of the unethical "shepherds." Although I know there are excellent and faithful stewards in our world today, it seems the poor stewards, the ones who steal from their charges, are more likely to be glorified. News stories abound about greed in the C-Suites and Boardrooms of corporations, as well as in schools and other non-profits. Many people consider an honest politician to be an oxymoron. Ministers and Elders of churches too often treat themselves as being among the needy in their care. Is this type of behavior the norm today? I do not believe it is. My point, however, is that the examples of stewardship we are most likely to find in the news are examples of poor stewardship. God calls us to be faithful stewards, using the resources available to us for the care of those in need. As in Ezekiel's day, we are to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, and lead the strays back into the family.

Journaling focus: In what way can I begin to become a better steward today?

September 30
Woe to Me

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Luke 6:24-25.

Based on today's scripture reading, I have much woe coming my way. Compared to most people on this planet I am rich, I am well-fed, and I laugh a lot. Whoa! Woe to me? These lines come from a section in the Gospel of Luke which is similar to the Beatitudes, found in the Gospel of Matthew. It makes it sound as if God wants us to be poor, hungry and sad. That doesn't sound like the loving creator I believe God to be.

It is not that God wants us to be poor, hungry and sad. But God wants us to understand that the source of our life does not spring from

bank accounts, pantries, or happiness. The balance of these types of items was zero at our birth, and they will be zero when we die. In between, they increase and they decrease. An undeniable reality of life on earth is there is never enough money to be assured of always having enough for any circumstance. Ditto for food and happiness. Like the seasons, they come and go and come and go. If that is where we look for security, we will feel secure one day and insecure the next.

Those of us who have been around the block a time or two understand there are times of plenty and want, of fullness and hunger, of happiness and sadness. None are permanent. Still, God remains, steadfast and present. If we are to live joyful and fulfilling lives, they must be built on that which does not wax and wane. They must be built on something eternal, something unchanging, something unearthly. Something like the grace of God. When our lives are built on a solid foundation, we are less likely to be shaken by the storms that occur in every life.

Journaling focus: What is one impermanent foundation I have built my life upon?

October 1
Developing Talents

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."
Matthew 25: 29

Today's passage comes at the conclusion of Jesus' parable of the talents. I remember wondering, as a younger person, what this parable implied about justice. The story is about a man going on a journey, entrusting his property to others in his absence. To one servant he gives five talents, to another two, and to another he gives one. Upon his return, the person entrusted with the five talents had used them to earn an additional five talents. The person given two talents had also doubled his original allotment. But the person given only one talent had done nothing with it and only had the original talent to show for his stewardship. The master praised the first two for using their talents wisely and increasing them, but criticized the last for wasting his, calling him a 'wicked and lazy slave' and takes his one talent away and gives it to the one with the greatest abundance.

Where is the justice for the person who was given only one talent?

I have watched people throughout my life with many more blessings than I have – more money, more athletic ability, better looks, greater intelligence – and I wonder what I could accomplish had I only been blessed like these others. Had I been given five talents at birth, how might I have multiplied them over the course of my life?

Which, of course, misses the point entirely. Even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, it is not our grass. It is not the grass we were given, not our grass to tend, not the grass we will be held to account for. While we cannot know why some people are blessed with much and others little, we are responsible for identifying the gifts and talents we have and putting them to the best use we can in as many areas of need we can. A careful reading of today's verse shows that to all those who *have*, more will be given. We all have been given *something*. How we use that which we have will determine our abundance. Our gifts are not meant to be trophies for display, but tools to be used for good. The parable of the talents, ultimately, is about stewardship and accountability.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I multiply one or more of the talents I have been given?

October 2
The Rat Race

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

With apologies to self-respecting rats everywhere, we humans often refer to life, particularly our work lives, as a *rat race*. I suspect the term is intended to represent a large group of self-absorbed, desperate beings doing whatever they can to survive, often at the expense of each other. I imagine a group of starving rats fighting over meager scraps of garbage on the subway tracks of New York City. Many of us spend the majority of our waking hours trying to *get ahead* in life, in whatever way we define *ahead*. Unfortunately, for too many of us, getting ahead in life means getting more *stuff* than our friends and neighbors, a goal we can never achieve. Lily Tomlin is credited with saying, "The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."[66]

A cancer of discontent eats at us from the inside. The *stuff* of the earth, like cars, nice homes, guitars, clothes, flowerbeds, is seductive. Someone at work upgrades to the latest smartphone, and we believe we must upgrade ours, too. Someone else shows pictures of their tropical vacation, and we charge our way to a similar trip. *Keeping up with the Joneses* is one way we express this obsession with laying claim to as much of the earth as our desperate attempts allow. We focus on what we lack, instead of the abundance we already have. One problem with comparing ourselves to others is that the comparison is not with one other person or family, but a conglomerate of persons and families. It will always appear we are significantly lacking, when we compare our abundance to the combined abundance of many.

Jesus warns us, in the Gospel of Matthew, against storing up treasures of the earth, those things that can be stolen or that wear out over time. Our hearts reside with what we treasure. When our hearts are invested in that which does not last, our hearts will be broken over and over again. Like a cancer spreading within, we simply cannot out-buy our desire for more stuff. Learning to be content with what we have requires a significant change of heart and mind. We can be happy with another's nice, new car without feeling the need to buy one for ourselves. When we believe we will be happy with one more possession, we fall into the trap of consumerism, that happiness and things are directly related. The truth is that more stuff never brings more than transitory happiness. True and lasting happiness is a product of gratitude and contentment.

Journaling focus: What is an area of my life in need of more gratitude and contentment?

October 3
The "I" in Faith

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs on your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Luke 12:6-7

A common motivational saying is, "There is no "I" in team." The thought conveys that the performance of the team is more important than the performance of any individual team member. Sometimes, what one must do to make his or her team successful is not that which will bring the

most glory to the individual. Likewise, one of the most common setbacks for team success occurs when individuals perform in selfish ways that hurt the team. We say, "He (or she) is not a team player."

Having faith, however, is not a team sport. Rather, having faith is an individual decision. While people often give credit to others for instilling a strong faith in them, faith can only take hold when a person makes a personal decision to believe. For example, I could easily say my faith was handed down to me from my grandparents and through my parents. Although my parents and grandparents were people of strong faith, my decision to believe, to develop a faith of my own, had to be mine. Furniture, property, pictures, life stories, and life lessons can be passed from generation to generation. Examples of lives of strong faith can serve as models, but for me to be faithful, *I* must *decide* to have faith.

What, exactly, does it mean to have faith? Among the dictionary definitions are "confidence or trust in a person or thing" and "belief that is not based on proof." For me, faith is a decision to believe there are forces at work that I cannot see, touch, hear, smell, or fully understand. For example, I do not understand electricity, but I use and rely on it all day, every day. I do not understand how the earth remains in its orbit around the sun, but every morning I have faith that the sun will rise. Having faith in a person or thing means we do not have to micromanage, or otherwise be in charge of or worry about them. We trust their functional design or their good intentions or their competence, and we rely on them. Our faith instills confidence in their dependability.

Because faith is an individual decision, we can choose to have faith in different things and/or people, not all of which will be beneficial to us. Having faith establishes a connection that empowers both ends, meaning both the believer and the believed in. Once we believe in a benevolent God, we acknowledge and empower our connection with God and begin to see evidence of God working in our lives. Until, however, we establish that connection, develop that faith, we cannot see the evidence. If we chose to believe life is a random series of unrelated events, however, we establish a bias that will find evidence for our faith in the chaotic nature of life. The choice is ours. And our choices impact how we experience life. Faith is not just about church, but about life.

Journaling focus: What areas of my life could use more faith and fewer attempts at control?

October 4
It's Only Weird if it Doesn't Work

"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." Ecclesiastes 1:9

Occasionally, sporting event commercials show displays of the odd superstitions of fans. On one I saw recently, a group of fans line up the labels of their beer bottles at a key moment in the game. On another commercial, a young man claims his "lucky" seat for the game. Some fans refrain from washing their favorite jersey as long as their team continues to win. The key line of the commercial is *"It's only weird if it doesn't work."*

Recently I visited with a friend about religion. He expressed doubt that he could ever accept certain religious beliefs. Our conversation led to a discussion about Christianity. Those unfamiliar with Christian beliefs and traditions must look with skepticism on some of our beliefs and practices. We pray to an unseen God. We celebrate that a baby was born to a virgin mother to save the world. We hold up the martyr's death and resurrection of Jesus. We worship a God who chose to come to earth as a homeless wanderer to associate with sinners. Much of what we accept as Christians must seem very strange to non-Christians. How many people turn away because a well-intentioned Christian spoke "Christian-*ese*" to someone who did not grow up with it? Can we expect a seeker to be comfortable with the way-to-life-in-Christ we have spent years coming to know? I was raised a Christian and have heard the stories and practiced the traditions since I was born.

Even so, I understand how some of my core beliefs may seem as weird to an outsider as the importance of watching a football game from my lucky chair, wearing a dirty jersey with the label of my favorite beverage facing the television. Much as I long to have others experience the life-changing love and grace of Jesus Christ, I know that sort of relationship takes time to develop. I know if I am to lead another to a relationship with Christ, I must be understanding. Further, I must live a life they will want to emulate. Finally, I know Christ must be *experienced* to become real. Just as we cannot experience love or beauty through the words of others, so we cannot talk others into a relationship with Jesus. The superstitious among us should be prepared to defend the positive impact of our rituals on the outcome of a game. Likewise, Christians should be prepared to defend the positive impact of their beliefs; to be able to articulate the hope and freedom we find in Christ. Jesus calls us to be different, but not necessarily weird.

Journaling focus: What religious beliefs and practices are difficult for me to accept?

October 5
Rejoice and Be Glad

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. Matthew 5:12a

Today's Bible passage comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. This is the longest of Jesus' discourses recorded in the Gospels. The initial part of this sermon is referred to as the *Beatitudes* (Matthew 5:3-12), or the *Be*-attitudes, which provide a distinctively Jesus-way of processing our life experiences.

The summarizing point of the Beatitudes is "Rejoice and be glad." Although one can say I am pulling this quote out of its context (rejoicing when others persecute us, for example), I believe it is a reasonable conclusion to all of the statements preceding it. It puts the teachings into a greater context, giving them a worthy purpose. They tell us that life is good, regardless of occasional evidence to the contrary. Outside of this context, the statements can seem nonsensical.

Each of the nine Beatitudes follows an *if-then* type of format, i.e., if *this,* then *that.* More specifically, Jesus says, "Blessed are (the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc.), for (theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, etc.). So, a situation is named, and its accompanying blessing follows in a concluding statement. The ultimate conclusion, as revealed in today's scripture, is to "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." A condensed version of the same teaching is found in Luke 6:23, where Jesus says, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." Most of the situations named are not at all what we would consider worthy of leaping for joy, nor does our world encourage or reward them. This lack of short-term gain is how we intuit that Jesus is referring to a different depth of reward than any immediate response we may or may not receive. More accurately, Jesus is referring to a gain that we cannot realize when we remain on the surface of our lives. There are hidden blessings for going deep into the experience of any given moment. As long as we skim obliviously along from moment to moment, we cannot experience the depth and the beauty that lies beneath. It is under the surface of our moments that the blessings of the Beatitudes are found.

When Jesus says, "…your reward is great in heaven," I do not believe he is referring to a post-death existence. Most of us have developed a limited understanding of *heaven* as an eternal paradise available to those who have been good enough in this life to warrant such eternal bliss when this life comes to an end. While I do not deny that such may be our experience after death, I do not believe that is the heaven to which Jesus refers. Rather, he is talking about a state of being, or a level of

consciousness available to us in the here and now. This is the state Jesus calls heaven, where we can be one with Jesus, and through Jesus be one with the Father.

With this as context, we can begin to understand the Beatitudes as lessons from Jesus about attitudes for *being,* for diving beneath the surface of our life experience, and for harmonizing our lives into unity with God. Being poor in spirit, merciful, and pure in heart become key to our ability to find the heart-space where we can meet Jesus in the here and now, regardless of where or how we are. Sometimes, the behaviors and events least praised and admired by those around us are the very ways most conducive to experiencing heaven on earth. Whether we suffer, mourn, or are without the advantages others seem to have over us, we can *rejoice and be glad,* knowing that our *disadvantaged-ness* holds the key to the kingdom of heaven. Life is good, *even now*.

Journaling focus: Recall a situation that seemed negative at the time but turned out to be a blessing.

October 6
Inefficient Farming

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."
2 Corinthians 6:6-7

In the Old Testament, farmers were told not to harvest all the grain in their fields. They were to leave the grain at the edges of their fields, as well as that which fell to the ground during the process of reaping. This was so there would be grain available to those less fortunate, particularly the widows and orphans. The farmer harvested most of the crop, but always left a significant portion for others. It was the law, but it was also the right and compassionate thing to do.

Today, this practice would be considered inefficient farming. For one thing, few of us would glean a field for grain left behind. And fewer of us would know what to do with the grain we so gleaned. But the principle is sound: *we have what we have because God has provided.* Most of us know people who have more than we do, and we also know people with less, a lot less. Honestly, most of us have much more than we need. There is always *something* to share. Most of us don't even have to make much of a sacrifice

to meaningfully share our abundance. Sharing our gifts is an investment in something greater than us. It is sowing for a different kind of harvest.

How much of our harvest do we sow only for ourselves? Most of us don't measure our wealth by the amount of grain in the barn. It is by our checking account balance. I confess, too much of what goes into my checking account goes out for me and my desires. Too often, I glean to the edges of my field, without weighing the measure of my need against the needs of others; and without weighing the benefits to me of sharing.

Our abundance is not just in material wealth, but also in other areas of our lives. How many of us leave time in a day for something other than pressing demands? Could we leave a little time at the edges for the enrichment of others? Or for investing in our well-being in ways our normal workload does not allow? Exercise, study, meditation, prayer, or service to others are among the countless possibilities. It is a matter of reaping what we sow, and thoughtfully portioning out the harvest we receive. Some must go for the needs of the day; but there is always something left for others. God provides more than enough.

Journaling focus: What is one area of my life where I am overly stingy?

October 7
Inspired, Not Dictated

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

There were school subjects for which I took notes as if I were taking dictation. I tried to write down, word for word, exactly what I heard. That is a good strategy when the lesson is a clear-cut, right-or-wrong type of subject. The Ten Commandments are an example of such from Scripture. That we are not to kill, steal, or covet are relatively direct instructions. Other school subjects and teachings, however, are more conceptual, intended to stimulate thought. They do not provide specific directions to follow. Rather, they encourage student's to find their own direction. They encourage exploration of where that thought trail leads and what it means. Notes taken from those classes might include general ideas or emotional reactions that sprang from the lecture or discussion, and the notes form a type of mental map, categorizing or describing the territory.

Timothy, a companion to Paul, writes, "All scripture is inspired by God." My study Bible says the word translated "inspired" is the same word used in Genesis 2:7, in which God *breathes* life into the first human. There is no translation that interprets this passage to say God *dictated* Scripture, at least not that I am aware of. The distinction is important. Had God dictated Scripture, we would read it differently than we would a God-*inspired* writing. God *breathed life* into Scripture. As such, that Christians tend to differ on how literally Scripture should be interpreted is understandable. Interestingly, Jesus chose to teach with parables. Those parables were not specific instructions and often required significant reflection to uncover their relevance to life's situations.

Many of the books of the Bible were written well after the events they record, making them retrospective interpretations from authors who were not actually present for the subject of their writing. They received inspiration from the parables of Jesus and the life he had lived. Many of the stories were handed down via an oral tradition from preceding generations of believers. Interestingly, the words attributed to Jesus often tend to be more reflective than instructive. Jesus' words in particular were thought-producers as opposed to strict recipes for righteous living.

I believe God intended for us to contemplate Scripture, and in that contemplation to be drawn closer to God. I find passages such as the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John fascinating. They can be read many times and inspire new and wonderful insights with each reading. It is through careful reflection, both alone and with other seekers after truth, that Scripture comes alive for "teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness." As we read and reflect on Scripture, we must ask whether a passage is best applied literally, or whether it requires contemplation and reflection. Finding truth in Scripture is not a destination, but a journey, and the truths we discover will change throughout our lives.

Journaling focus: What is one passage of scripture I should spend time reflecting upon today?

October 8
Selective Understanding

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young – let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. Proverbs 1:2-5

I once heard a young mother describe a concern that her 3-year-old son could not hear. She had his hearing tested, only to find he could hear perfectly well. She discovered, much to her chagrin, that he was simply ignoring her. A friend of mine who, like me, has been married for many years, jokingly says that husbands selectively lose the ability to hear sounds in the frequency range of their wife's voice. Likewise, I have heard husbands complain that when they try to tell something to their wives, the words go in one hear, pick up speed, and go out the other.

Today's reflection, however, is not about selective hearing, but about selective understanding. It is very common for two people to hear or read the exact same words and come away with two very different understandings. For example, several years ago, I published a reflection and received a kind response from a reader, as follows: "I was reminded today is a beautiful gift, and I am the one who determines whether it is a good day or bad day. I've reset and plan to have a blessed day." I thought, "How wonderful;" but nowhere in the words I had written did I say anything about our choice in determining whether a day is good or whether it is bad. Somewhere in the intersection of my words and her life experience, an unintended understanding was born that was a blessing to her.

Selective understanding is an amazing gift of grace, for it allows us to receive divine insights tailored specifically to our needs at any given moment in time. The receiving of such an understanding has less to do with the actual written or spoken words and more to do with our willingness to be receptive. I have long known that the words I write often mean different things to different people. It is a humbling experience to hear from a reader about what something I wrote meant to them, knowing their understanding came from a source well beyond my words. I find Scripture is ripe for multiple and selective understandings. When the words and stories that have meant so much to so many for so long are meditated upon by those seeking wisdom, insightful understandings may occur. Hearts can be mended, relationships healed, and lives redeemed. We must first, however, be receptive to the blessing and be willing to hear in a way that does not always anchor us to traditional interpretations or understandings.

Journaling focus: Reflect on a book, story, or experience that meant something entirely different to you than for others.

October 9
Grace in an Awkward World

"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." John 1:16-17

Coaches of struggling sports teams often lament the need for players to get back to the basics of the sport. Athletes learn the fundamentals of the game, often at an early age, prior to developing the advanced skills that allow them to perform at a high level. Unfortunately, when they ignore the fundamentals, the effectiveness of their skills deteriorates rapidly. In such cases, players must return to the foundational skills needed for the game. Once they have solidified the basics, their advanced skills help them to excel.

In the science of Physics there is a concept called *entropy*. It refers to the likelihood of a controlled system falling into disorder or chaos after the removal of its controls. Examples of entropy abound in our world. If I were to stop mowing my grass, my yard would turn into a prairie. After a few months, trees would begin to grow. Within a few years, my yard would resemble a young forest. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with a forest, except that my wife and I want a yard around our home. Entropy manifests when I try to have a yard in an area that naturally tends to grow a forest. To maintain a yard, I must obey the fundamentals of lawn care, the most basic of which is regular mowing.

Our spirituality often requires a return to the basics of faith, too. It is easy to become distracted from the fundamental faith practices of reflection, prayer, and meditating on scripture. My personal entropy leads me to the television set or other distractions, while leading me away from faith-strengthening practices. Centering myself in my faith requires regular attention. I must often force myself to spend time in prayer, scripture, and reflection. I must consciously turn away from other attractive entertainments in order to remain spiritually grounded. While entertainment has its place, my ability to enjoy such distractions increases when my spiritual center is intact, as does my ability to handle challenging moments. Like the athlete getting back to the basics of his or her sport, we need a strong grounding in the basics of faith in order to excel.

We live in an awkward world. Our lives do not often go the way we want or need without guidance and conscious effort. It is when we are close to our spiritual center that we find grace in the awkward moments. Keeping ourselves close to God and grounded in solid faith practices helps us find the grace, often hidden, in everyday moments.

Journaling focus: What of my daily activities could use a renewed focus on the basics?

October 10
The Poor in Spirit

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3

The first of Jesus' Beatitudes says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. As he so often does, Jesus mixes metaphors in a way that some will reject as nonsense. For others, it is an invitation to explore the teaching in a deeper, more deliberate way. The images of *poor* and *kingdom* seem a poor match for each other. Those who are poor are those who have little or nothing. Images of kingdoms, however, call to mind abundance and access to things considered good and beautiful, like a large castle, an extended estate, servants, vineyards, and lavish banquets. Kingdom images often also include excesses, like gluttony, lust, and all sorts of abuses of power and privilege, of lives built on the backs of the poor and oppressed.

Although the text refers to the poor in *spirit,* I think the lot of the poor was intentionally used by Jesus as an example. Poor people, by definition, do not have a lot of extra *things*. I often see homeless people with (presumably) everything they own in a paper sack. Some barely squeak by with life's necessities, while others require assistance to live at even a marginally life-sustaining level. They are burdened by what they lack. The non-poor among us, on the other hand, are prone to become burdened by our excesses. I suspect what Jesus means when he refers to the *poor in spirit* are those with an *unencumbered* spirit. These are people who can move between places and life situations with ease because most of what they need is contained within their being. Their faith assures them of provision for their needs, and they trust that those needs will be met as they arise. This requires a level of faith I do not possess, but I understand how freeing it would be. For most of us, seeking a *less* encumbered life would be a reasonable and helpful beginning.

Those who have done mission work in third world countries have witnessed first-hand the unencumbered spirits and inherent joy of those who are poor in spirit. If the electricity goes out, the internet is down, the car stops running, one's computer crashes – none of these first-world catastrophes impact their lives at all. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have directed his followers to work with and live among the poor of their time. The purpose was not, however, to help the poor folks so much as it was to allow the poor folks to help change his followers. I went on a mission trip to New Orleans three years after Hurricane Katrina decimated the area, and we were told to make sure we did not focus so much on the work that we did not spend significant time with the residents. In my arrogance, I assumed the goal was for us to serve as emotional, as well as physical

support to them. In retrospect, I realize the goal of spending time with these folks was so they could change and help *me*. We people of privilege have much to learn about attaining the freedom to experience joy in the moment, which is the key to the kingdom of heaven. Our encumbered lives pull us out of our moments back into the past or forward into an uncertain future.

I do not want to be overly negative about the blessings of privilege. It is not that our stuff is evil, as much as it is that our *attachment* to our stuff stands between us and the experience of the presence of God. Many people misquote 1 Timothy 6:10 as, "Money is the root of all evil." The passage actually says, "…the *love* of (i.e., attachment to) money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." So it is with our possessions – when they possess us, when they become the central objects of our desire instead of tools for our use, when we become dependent upon them, they stand as a barrier between us and the gates to the kingdom of heaven.

Far from a call to vagrancy and homelessness, Jesus' invitation is to let go of our earthly attachments and dependencies, which is an altogether different kind of poverty. Blessed is the unencumbered spirit…for he/she will freely enter the kingdom of heaven while yet on earth.

Journaling focus: What encumbrances stand between me and the presence of God?

October 11
End-Time Signs

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken…Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21:25-26,28

Prophesies about the end-times confuse me. They remind me of reading a horoscope in the newspaper, in that they are often so general that it matters little whether you read your own or someone else's. The chances are it will look pretty accurate, at least in retrospect…even if it takes a little creative interpretation. I do not know how to read the signs of the sun, moon and stars. I've met intelligent people who seem to know something about how the heavenly movements and relationships reflect events on

earth, but the science seems a little squishy to me. I have yet to meet anyone with a very successful or consistent track record in predicting future events.

Prophesies of the end-times are not particularly helpful to those of us who doubt the abilities of those who read the signs. Luke's prophesy speaks of "distress among nations," confusion and people fainting "from fear and foreboding." I remember a time when I believed I would not live to see my thirtieth birthday. The Cold War with the Soviet Union was in full swing and my reading of the signs of the times was that the world would end in nuclear holocaust sooner rather than later. I was wrong. Although I did not see it, there was a movie titled *2012*, the premise of which was that since the Mayan calendar ended in 2012, the world would end with it. It may or may not have made for good cinema, but it was poor reading of the signs of the times.

The end-times prophesies often share a common and relevant theme, however. It goes like this: Strange things will happen and then everything will be okay. So, even if we don't know *when* strange things are going to happen, or just how strange things will get, we do know at some point they will end and everything will be fine. Maybe I don't need to read the signs, I just need to be faithful. Imagine that.

Journaling focus: Reflect on an imagined catastrophe in your life that never actually happened.

October 12
Puppy Love

He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 18:2-3

I remember an afternoon spent in the kingdom of heaven. Our friends had two, nine-week old Great Pyrenees puppies, and we were invited over to share their company. What do puppies have to do with the kingdom of heaven? Quite a lot, I believe. Although there are no references in the Bible to puppies, Jesus refers to children many times in the Gospels, and often in the context of how we need to become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, the parallel I am drawing is between puppies and children, in that both have simpler, more inclusive concepts of love that they express with greater enthusiasm than their adult counterparts

do. To the extent I am correct, we may need to become like puppies to enter the kingdom of heaven. In the presence of these adorable little fur balls, I felt heaven had come to earth.

Although they had never seen or smelled us before, these puppies greeted us with their entire being. We were loved and accepted from the instant they saw us coming. Their enthusiasm and longing for our presence was palpable, as they jumped, licked, wagged, and pawed with everything they had. There was no inhibition on their part, just pure joy in their fellowship with us. They did not care about the color of our skin, how we were dressed, the sins of our past, our religious affiliation, or our sexual orientation. They were simply thrilled that we chose to spend time with them. And isn't that what God wants from us? Pure, uninhibited longing to be in God's presence? Why would God's joy in such a reaction from us be any less than our joy in the reaction of these pups? Donny Osmond recorded an earworm of a song in the 1970's called, "Puppy Love."

> *And they called it puppy love, oh, I guess they'll never know,*
> *How a young heart really feels, and why I love her so.*[67]

How does a "young heart really feel"? Do we remember? Those of us seeking to enter the kingdom of heaven, whether during or after the present life, might want to spend time remembering. It is easy to forget the pure and innocent love and trust our hearts once had. According to Jesus, we should find our way back to that sort of love. How can we restore that uninhibited, unconditional, overly excitable puppy love? By stripping away the judgmental, biased, exclusive, and hard-hearted assessments we too quickly place upon others. Once gone, our hearts fill with the simple love and joy of children and puppies.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to begin expressing a more childlike version of love?

October 13
Ebbs and Flows

Then I got up and walked in the field, giving great glory and praise to the Most High for the wonders that he does from time to time, and because he governs the times and whatever things come to pass in their seasons. 2 Esdras 13:57-58

My home state of Kansas is in the middle of what has historically been considered *Tornado Alley*. Tornado watches and warnings are as much a fixture of spring here as are Robin songs and Redbuds. Like most self-respecting, life-long Kansans, when the sirens wail, I am more likely to be outside looking for the tornado than in the basement hiding from it. In recent years, however, Tornado Alley seems to have significantly shifted, much to the chagrin of our mostly basement-less neighbors to the south and east.

Unfortunately, Kansans have now learned the meaning of a *Polar Vortex*, where bitterly cold Artic air pushes farther south than it used to and stays for an extended visit. In the Midwest, we normally take the ebbs and flows of the weather in stride. We say the ever-changing seasons keep us healthy *(cough, cough, sneeze, sneeze)*. We accept the alternating cold and hot temperatures like coastal dwellers accept low and high tides. We observe the patterns of Nature's rhythms – some as predictable as the moon's phases, others seemingly random – and we endure. In the grip of a Polar Vortex, I often wonder how far south I would have to travel to get out of the bitterly cold air.

Everything around us is constantly changing, but most humans insist on staying put and complain of being victimized by the conditions around them. Some mobile beings react to the natural ebbs and flows of nature by fleeing, while others go into hibernation. Not us Kansans, however. We stand, firmly planted, trying desperately and vainly not to change.

Perhaps nature's ebbs and flows mirror our spiritual and emotional lives. Different environmental forces come and go, washing over us like the current of a river, before rushing on to points downstream. Boulders residing in midstream wear down over time, and so do we. Like the sedentary beings many of us are, we stand firm in the stream, fighting the natural tendency to float with it.

I am not suggesting we should roam like wandering nomads at the first sign of difficulty. Perhaps we could become a little less rigid, however, a little less proud, and a little more flexible. Perhaps instead of standing stubbornly in the muck of our own biases, we could move a little to the left or to the right in order to ebb and flow with the times, as well as to restore a sense of harmony – harmony within our being, with our environment, and harmony with each other. In life, as in music, harmony is beautiful when done well.

Journaling focus: What is a challenge in my life that could benefit from more harmony?

October 14
Small Gods

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, not repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." Psalm 103:8-12

When my daughter was young, she and I had a ritual at bedtime. It involved me showing how much I loved her. I would begin by holding my thumb and forefinger about an inch apart asking, "Do I love you *this* much?" She would say, "No, daddy, you love me more than that." The exercise would continue through several iterations, until I would have my hands spread as far apart as they would go, and I would ask, "Do I love you *this* much?" She would giggle and respond, "Yes, daddy, *that* is how much you love me!" My daughter would not settle for anything less than the maximum amount of love her father could give. No child should have to settle for less.

Some people and churches seem to believe in a very small God. A church in the town I grew up in was obsessed with homosexuality. Their entire ministry revolved around what they believed to be God's hatred of gays. There was no love or grace in their message. Their small group of members, largely from one family, managed to garner national attention to their vulgar and offensive ministry. Whoever their God was, I do not believe in that God.

I am aware of other churches who believe only a handful of God's people will enter the kingdom of heaven when they die. Their requirements to be among the elect vary between churches, but their God only accepts certain people. I know some passages in the Bible imply only a few go to heaven. However, taken in the context of the Bible as a whole, and Jesus' ministry of love and grace for all, I believe those passages are wrongly interpreted. I do not believe in their God of limited acceptance, either.

When God came to earth as a human, in the person of Jesus, God chose to associate with sinners and to criticize the church leaders who tried to preach a God of limited blessings. Jesus devoted his ministry to the lost and broken, he taught the seekers and doubters, and he forgave the sins of all who asked. Jesus manifested an enormous God, one with enough love for all of us. God is our heavenly parent, and we need a God who loves us more than we will ever need. *That* is the God I believe in. The others are too small.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I made my concept of God too small?

October 15
Say What?

"Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake."
Amos 5:18-19

One of my brothers and I used to enjoy teasing the youngest son of one of our cousins. Frankie would display false bravado about his basketball skills until the two of us would take him on, two adult men against a child. As soon as he turned his attention to the brother with the ball it would go to the other brother. He simply did not have enough hands and feet to cover the various ways we could attack his over-matched defense. "Who's the star basketball player now?" we would taunt. You are probably thinking, "That's not fair!" And by human standards, you would be right. As Frankie grew taller and stronger, he continued to challenge us to a little one on two, but as my brother and I aged, we also grew wiser and avoided a rematch that could ruin our unbeaten record.

Why would Frankie continue to desire a game where the odds were stacked so heavily against him? In a similar way, today's Bible passage from the prophet Amos asks the question why we would desire the day of the Lord. According to Amos, the odds are stacked heavily against us. That day will bring darkness, not light. He describes a nightmarish scenario where we flee from a lion only to run into a bear. Or, in our fleeing, stop to rest against a wall where we are bitten by a snake. We simply cannot defend against all the threats our lives may bring. And why is that? I suspect it has to do with our sin. Facing the Lord may reveal the pervasiveness of our failings and we will be left defenseless, like the young Frankie trying to defend against two grown men. We cannot ignore the consequences of our sin, at least not alone, because whatever behaviors are sown must be reaped. We can, however, accept and face up to our sin and allow it to pass.

Fortunately for us, Jesus came to earth to walk with us and atone for our sin so we need not be fearful. God's unfailing love for us, manifested in Jesus Christ, bore the weight of our sin, was crucified on the cross and was buried in the tomb. We no longer need to carry that weight because it has been removed from us in the sight of God. Through Christ, God has taken our side in this life. Fortunately for my brother and me, God does not take sides in basketball.

Journaling focus: When have I persisted despite poor odds?

October 16
Those Who Mourn

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Matthew 5:4

Today's scripture seems almost too obvious to warrant serious consideration, that those who mourn will be comforted. If it were so obvious, why would Jesus bother to say it? Perhaps the answer, as is so often the case, is that the truth in the statement is deeper than it appears. For one thing, one does not have to look far to find people who mourn who are not being comforted. After my father died, I mourned (poorly) for years. Yes, there were many who stepped up to comfort me, but what about the sleepless nights, the dreams, and the times I simply wanted to share something with my dad? He never met my wife or my children. He was not present to congratulate me on graduations or other achievements. Where is the comfort when one heart mourns for another and there is no one near to ease the burden?

Interestingly, mourning manifests from different causes. We most often think of mourning from the loss of a loved one by death or other separation. Mourning can also occur from life-altering events over which we have no control. In addition, mourning can result from regret over past behavior, although this type of grief is often pushed beneath our conscious awareness. In the book *God For Us*, Catherine LaCugna offers several fascinating insights into suffering. She writes, "There is something light in mourning – or at least something lightening – precisely because there is something *true* in mourning. To mourn the consequences of sin is, oddly, to edge very close to joy, because any encounter with the truth, even the truth of sin, has some hint of the lightened joy that comes when we allow ourselves to see things not as we wish they were, but as they really are; and a hint of joy that will come when sin is no more." [68] When our mourning stems from past behaviors, it can weigh heavily on us in a way that we know we are carrying a heavy burden, but we cannot consciously pinpoint the source of the load.

The larger point is that proper mourning is important to our well-being and wholeness. When we are not allowed, by ourselves or others, to fully mourn our losses and regrets adequately, we find ourselves living in an ambiguous shadow of gloom. Being sad is an emotion and is not the same as mourning. True mourning names and exposes the source, the pain, and the way forward. It reaches deep within to bring everything associated with the pain into conscious awareness where it can be acknowledged and, eventually, healed. When done properly and patiently, mourning is transformative. Clearly, professional assistance is often required.

One reason we tend to rush through our mourning is the sense of vulnerability and insecurity it brings. To acknowledge our weakness from and powerlessness over life's circumstances, or even over our own behavior, forces us to rearrange our understanding of life. That same vulnerability, however, is what opens us to comfort, rebirth, and resurrection. Thus, the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." The fact is that we cannot be truly comforted until we have actually *mourned*. Further, mourning is not a one-time event, but a process that takes however long it takes – weeks, months, or years.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann, writes about our nearly pathological resistance to acknowledging or even discussing the certitude of death, our own or that of those we love. In reference to this Beatitude, he says, "Only those who embrace the reality of death will receive new life. Implicit in (Jesus') statement is that those who do not mourn will not be comforted and those who do not face the endings will not receive the beginnings." [69]

Hidden within our mourning is new life, a fresh beginning, just as the freshness of spring lies hidden within the desolation of winter. There is no way to get to spring, however, except by going through winter. Not only will those who truly mourn be comforted, they will be blessed by the process.

Journaling focus: What event(s) in my life have I not successfully mourned?

October 17
Blessed are the Meek

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

Among the modern-day synonyms for *meek* are timid, docile, passive, spineless, resigned, and weak. I suspect the definition of meekness has softened from what it meant in Jesus' day, and here is why: One of Jesus' most frequent instructions was to follow him, presumably even in his meekness. I find no evidence that any of these terms describe Jesus or his nature. Rather, he was assertive, courageous, persistent, and action oriented. Therefore, as we read this Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," I think we must look to a more reflective meaning for meekness.

A more accurate, contemporary translation might be to say blessed are the *non-violent*. Jesus passionately challenged injustice, illness, ignorance, and poverty wherever and whenever he found them, but he did so in a non-violent manner. There were a number of non-violent activists from the last century who modeled Jesus' brand of meekness, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. None stood idly by in the face of injustice, but they steadfastly refused to answer violence with violence. The inconvenient truth is that Jesus did not allow his followers to react with violence at his arrest (Matthew 26:51), nor did he raise a finger to avoid his own violent death. There is a price to pay for a non-violent commitment, often a painful and fatal price.

Violence is never isolated. It is a reaction to a perceived threat and, as a reaction, *violence is always a choice we make*. In other words, we *choose* whether to respond in a violent manner to a situation. We deceive ourselves to think violence is always physical, however. Emotional cruelty, verbal abuse, and economic injustice are much more common and can wound more deeply. Violence in our culture extends beyond gun control debates, abortion, the death penalty, bullying, and military invasions of sovereign nations. Violent reactions, personally and collectively, reflect our insecurities and subconscious motivations. When we value others in terms of their usefulness for our own interests, we misuse whatever power we have over them to our advantage and at their expense. We see this manifest in rape and other types of sexual exploitation. The reach is broader than that, however. When we believe the rest of creation exists only for our benefit, we cause environmental destruction. Further, when we judge others as of no value to us, as wrong or insignificant, we ignore the higher truth that every person is a child of and loved by God every bit as much as we are. When we see our world and everything in it as our playground, as something for our personal exploitation, or even when we expect that others should think and act as we do, we box ourselves into a very small, incomplete world. Such a limited domain can only be forcibly and temporarily sustained by violence because it is completely contrary to how the world was designed to naturally function.

Far from a cry to timidity, Jesus calls us to courageous and active resistance to the violence of our day, to find creative solutions that do not perpetuate cycles of violence. Such solutions respect and honor life where and as we find it, while also not allowing one immature life to run roughshod over another. Admittedly, it is not an easy undertaking. Jesus' message is clear, however. In Matthew 5:38-39, he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Jesus modeled a higher level of response, one that is non-vengeful and non-violent.

There is always a moment immediately following a threatening event when we can consciously choose our reaction. Sometimes it is best to hold the tension for a time, acknowledging it for what it is and identifying the part of us that is threatened by it. This allows the tension to become a source of internal healing instead of a trigger for another round of violence. As we learn to respond in non-violent ways to the world around us, as we learn Jesus' brand of meekness, we find our lives and the lives of those around us increasingly blessed in innumerable ways. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the good things of the earth, which ultimately exist in a web of beautifully diverse, interdependent relationships.

Journaling focus: What circumstances in my life trigger me to consider violent reactions?

October 18
Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Matthew 5:6

I wish to reflect on three parts of today's passage. First, what does it mean to *hunger and thirst* for something? Second, what is *righteousness?* Finally, in what way and with what is one *filled?*

When I think of hungering or thirsting for something, I picture a desire so strong that everything else fades to the background. It is said that you cannot teach a hungry child because all he or she can think about is food. Indeed, many schools have breakfast and lunch programs to help assure that hunger is not an impediment to learning. The point is that when we hunger and thirst for something, the desire is *all-consuming.* In Revelation 3:15, the message to the church in Laodicea is: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." I read this as a message about doing what we do with *passion* and not settling for half-hearted efforts. As an even-tempered person, I worry that I too often react in lukewarm ways to the life around me.

It is perhaps overly obvious to say that righteousness is about doing what is right. What is right, however, is often subjective and differs among persons, cultures, and times. Some consider a law-abiding citizen to be righteous, which is probably true as long as the law is righteous. Martin Luther King, Jr., was jailed many times for protesting unrighteous laws. Yet,

history has not judged him as an unrighteous man. We could say a righteous person is one who follows the mandates of scripture. While I find the Bible useful for spiritual discernment and growth, I find it much less helpful as a rule book. Indeed, Jesus frequently criticized the literalist religious authorities of his day for applying scripture by its letter but ignoring its intent. It is far more fruitful, in my opinion, to strive to live as Jesus lived than to remold the laws and customs from thousands of years ago into something applicable today.

Based on my understanding of Jesus' life, what Jesus refers to as righteousness is what we call *social justice* today. In fact, I think we can reasonably translate this Beatitude as "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*." Jesus displayed a laser-like focus on the poor, sick, and disenfranchised of society. For much of my life, it has been difficult to recognize my responsibility for issues of injustice. Should I feel guilty because I was born white and male in a resource-rich, first-world nation? I have had a paying job every day of my life since I was 14. I inherited little or nothing from family and have worked and paid for everything I have. One can say I earned and deserve my life.

This is a tricky topic because yes, of course, pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps would certainly count for something, if it were ever true. Being honest, however, every move up the social ladder for me has come because someone I knew, often a family acquaintance, opened a door for me to enter through. Consistently throughout my life, I have had opportunities presented that may not have been offered if not for the color of my skin, my country of origin, or the connections I had. What this has to do with justice is the realization that I am not a self-made person – not even close. Everything I have is a gift. A hunger and thirst for righteous on my part might begin with a passionate commitment to open doors and give a hand up to others who have not had the same opportunities.

The last part of this Beatitude is that we will be filled. We might better understand Jesus' meaning by reversing it – that we will no longer be empty. When we are on the upper rungs of the social ladder, we often possess an abundance of *stuff,* but we may be void of the love and fulfillment that genuine relationships bring. Our stuff distracts us from what is most important in life. Whenever we choose objects over others, our life experience becomes shallow, unstable, and empty. Perhaps a better contemporary translation would be to say, "Blessed are those who work passionately on matters of justice, for they will live full and contented lives."

Journaling focus: What do I hunger and thirst for?

October 19
Destructive Wealth

"But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil…" 1 Timothy 6:9-10a

Well, I am glad I am not rich enough to fall into the temptations and traps described in today's scripture reading! *Those* people, at least those who get caught, end up in jail. They are publicly disgraced, their greedy sins plastered all over the news. They get exactly what they deserve. Wow, what a relief to not be *that* rich!

Actually, though, Paul doesn't make a distinction between levels of richness. He is referring to a state of mind more than the state of our checkbook. It is those who *want* to be rich who fall into temptation, not just those who are already rich. And it is the *love* of money, not the possession of money that is the root of all kinds of evil. So, let me get this straight: I can actually be poor, or something less than rich, and still be plunged into ruin and destruction if my desire for more is not controlled? I think that's exactly the truth the passage reveals. It is our unrestrained desires that doom us; it is our lack of contentment with what we already possess that is the issue, not simply what we possess. How we manage our desires matters.

The verse before this one says, *"…there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment..."* There's the 'c' word – contentment, being satisfied with what we have already received. The passage continues, *"…for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these."* Somehow, I doubt many of us today will find contentment with just food and clothing, but can we find contentment with something less than we already have? Can we find joy in sharing more and hoarding less? Can we help ease someone else's suffering by sharing a portion of our excess? We certainly can't take it with us…

Journaling focus: In what parts of my life am I vulnerable to discontent?

October 20
Dashboard Jesus

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.
2 Corinthians 9:8

Years ago, I was listening to the NPR radio call-in show, *Car Talk,* when someone asked a question about his dashboard Jesus. "Should my dashboard Jesus be facing out," he asked, "so it blesses the road in front of my car, or should it face into the car, blessing my passengers and me." The question was intended to illicit a comical response from the show hosts, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, and they did not disappoint. They concluded that the dashboard Jesus should face into the car, blessing its driver, because attempting to bless the road ahead and everyone on it is simply too much to ask from a single, plastic, dashboard Jesus.

This is not an attempt to make light of the icons some people use as reminders of a divine presence in their lives. Similar to having a Velvet Elvis hanging on your wall, art and spiritual significance are largely individual matters. Whether it is a pocket cross, a patron saint, a necklace, or a dashboard Jesus, anything that reminds us that Jesus journeys with us is probably okay. Behind the comedy of the radio show, however, is an interesting dilemma. Assuming a dashboard Jesus actually does provide blessings, should those blessings go out to others, or should the blessings be directed toward the possessor of the Jesus. Here are my thoughts:

Being an introvert, I would likely point my Jesus inward; not because I am selfish, but because I am not terribly comfortable overtly evangelizing others. I fear I might offend someone by directing my icon in his or her direction, thereby forcing blessings on a potentially unwilling recipient. An extrovert, however, might well direct the blessings outward, less afraid of creating offense, but assuming any blessings obtained from their dashboard Jesus will be even better when shared with others.

I do not find direct scriptural guidance regarding the proper placement for a dashboard Jesus. There are, however, many references to sharing our abundance with others. My suggestion is to put your dashboard Jesus on a swivel. Point it in towards you when you need a blessing and point it out to others when your cup is full.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I focus more on having others bless me than on being a blessing to others?

October 21
The Trouble with Church

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead." Revelation 3:1

I have issues with the church, not only the church I am a member of, but other individual churches, as well as with the church as a whole. Granted, if the church is the *body* of Christ on earth, it has a high standard to attain. Regardless, I find how far and how often the church falls short of its reason for existence troubling. Some churches have charismatic preachers, with congregations who attend more to be entertained by the delivery of the sermon than to be enlightened by the content of the message. Churches are always asking for money, but many churches divert so much money to facilities and staff they have little left over for missions. Some churches are not welcoming of newcomers, and others offer few opportunities for individuals to become a part of small groups for study and fellowship. I know of churches that routinely allow their children and youth to be loud and disrespectful. Like more than a few other charities, some churches seem to focus more on their own survival than on their stated purpose for existing.

Yes, I have serious issues with today's church. I have concluded that the trouble with the church, both individually and collectively, is that it does not always serve as I believe it should. I want my church to be informative, engaging, and spiritually enlightening. I want to hear sermons that confirm my understanding of God and the world, and I want to hear the types of music I most enjoy. And I want the songs to be done well. I have passed along many great ideas to the pastor and others, only a handful of which have ever been implemented. I want to be involved in my church, but on my own terms; so, I want to help with activities that are fun and that fit my schedule and that are done with people I enjoy. The trouble with church is just that: *me*, and what *I* want.

Obviously, the church does not exist solely for my purposes, so I should expect there will be times it leaves me feeling irritated, unappreciated, and even angry. Church often frustrates my desires – which is exactly the point! The church does not exist for me, except to draw me closer to God. The church is a community of believers seeking to do God's will *in community*. If my life were perfectly in tune with the will of God, there would be no personal need for church or spiritual disciplines. Therefore, there is tension between what I want, what I need, and what the church provides and asks of me.

My wife and I were married in the church. Many of our closest

friends are members of our church. It is our church family that reaches out to us in our times of greatest need with help and support. It is in church we have said our final goodbyes to loved ones. Our church sheltered and nourished our children. The church is not about me, but about us. I guess the trouble with church is not about the church at all, it is the trouble with me.

Journaling focus: In what ways has the church disappointed me?

October 22
Contemplating Oz

"Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Ephesians 6:23

"Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore!" Dorothy Gale

There was a once-a-year event when I was a child that was not to be missed. It was the annual showing of *The Wizard of Oz*.[70] In the days before VCR, DVD, and Video On Demand, movies that were no longer in theatres could only be seen on television. My family planned our schedule around the showing of *The Wizard of Oz* so as not to miss it. I have vivid memories of Dorothy on her colorless Kansas farm, living with her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. I cowered in fear of the Wicked Witch and her flying monkeys. The Wizard's voice was haunting, echoing through his chambers, and sounded like power personified.

The Wizard of Oz, filmed in 1939, remains popular many decades later. I believe the movie has an appeal that extends beyond a well-told story. Specifically, it contains archetypal elements that connect deep within our being. Some say Dorothy represents humankind and the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tinman symbolize the plant, animal, and mineral worlds. Others see the film as a classic *good vs. evil* drama, as Dorothy and her companions seek to outwit the more powerful Wicked Witch. Still others frame the story as a class struggle, where the working poor, like the Gales, battle against the rich, like Miss Gulch.

For me, *The Wizard of Oz* is a story of community. Dorothy, caught in a storm, finds herself in a different world. We are familiar with those types of storms. A home burns to the ground; a loved one passes away; the doctor calls and wants to discuss our test results – as soon as possible. All

of a sudden, we are not in Kansas anymore. We find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. This new land resembles the old in some respects, but it is uncomfortably foreign. Like Dorothy, we begin an unexpected and unplanned journey feeling confused, alone, and frightened. We discover the only way out of the storm is to go through it. On her way through, Dorothy finds a community to help her get back home. Like Dorothy, we need a community to help us through our storms. We need the gifts and graces of friends and family to help meet the challenges of each next step. The Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion provide crucial elements of community for Dorothy, in spite of their individual shortcomings. Her community carries her back; changed from the journey, but home at last. After all, there is no place like home.

Journaling focus: Reflect on an experience of community during a difficult time in your life.

October 23
Contemplating Oz: If I Only Had a Brain

"O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it." Proverbs 8:5

"Oh, I'm a failure because I haven't got a brain." The Scarecrow

Dorothy and Toto are traveling the yellow brick road when they come to an intersection. As they contemplate the best road to take, a scarecrow hanging in a field suggests one route, and then another. He cannot make up his mind which road is best. Dorothy tells him that is not helpful. The scarecrow replies, *"That's the trouble: I can't make up my mind. I haven't got a brain."* Of course, the scarecrow's dilemma is not that he lacks a brain. His problem is a lack of confidence in the brain he has. He feels poorly equipped to deal with the challenges of life. When decision-time arrives, he cannot decide whether to go right or left. Many of us have a similar problem. We have trouble making decisions and sometimes attribute our indecisiveness to a lack of intelligence.

I am fortunate to know many intelligent people, only some of whom have college degrees. We all know people who are *very* smart about some things, and unbelievably dumb about other things. IQ tests, college entrance exams, and advanced degrees reflect certain capacities to learn, but do they equate to *intelligence?* Obviously, they do not. Intelligence is situational. The mental skills required to navigate the various challenges of

life are different, based on the challenge at hand. Not everyone receives every type of mental ability. Mathematics comes easily to some and is the worst nightmare for others. Personally, I have very little understanding of mechanical creations like cars and motors. I have done many dumb things trying to fix a mower or work on my car. However, it is not because I lack a brain. I lack certain types of intelligence and need the help of others.

The writer of Proverbs says that those who lack intelligence should *acquire* it. We can acquire intelligence by learning more. We can also acquire intelligence by *borrowing* it from others, like when we ask for help. The Wizard assures the Scarecrow others have no more brains than he has. Indeed, the Scarecrow is arguably the most creative and resourceful thinker in Dorothy's group. They are part of a community with diverse talents and intelligences. Their community works together to overcome the various forms of wickedness the witch puts before them. When we become active in a church or other organized group of people, we join a community. We no longer need to face our challenges alone. Where we are dumb, others will be smart. Dorothy's community did not let wickedness stand between her and home. Together, in community, we meet every challenge more capably.

Journaling focus: What challenge in your life required a community to resolve?

October 24
Contemplating Oz: Judging a Heart

"If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor." Deuteronomy 15:7

"Just because I'm presumin' that I could be kind and human, if I only had a heart."
The Tinman

Dorothy and the Scarecrow are on their way to the Emerald City when they come across a rusted man made of tin. Once they get his jaws and joints oiled, they find out he, like they, believes he is lacking something crucial. He has no heart. The Tin man is convinced he could be kind, loving and sentimental if he only had a heart. Of course, the Tin man is arguably the most kind and sentimental of anyone in Dorothy's community, with or without a heart. Even so, he feels he cannot be complete without one.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Jewish people receive instruction in how to live a life of obedience to God. That instruction includes guidance on how to treat each other. They are not to be *hard-hearted* with a neighbor in need. The writing goes on to say they are to share from their abundance with their fellow comrades in need. Jesus, in the New Testament, repeats the very same sentiment when he commands us to love one another. We cannot be loving and hard-hearted at the same time. Unlike some of the early Jews, the Tinman *wants* to love others, but feels incapable of doing so. It is easy to become hard-hearted toward others, even with that big red muscle pumping faithfully in our chest. We convince ourselves that because we have worked for what we have, others should also do the same. We assume someone else will meet a need we ignore. Perhaps most commonly, we become so consumed by our daily lives we leave no time to notice or attend to the needs of others. However, the command to love others was second in importance only to loving God, at least according to Jesus. As Christians, we are called to have a heart for God, and to have a heart for others.

As the Wizard awards the Tinman a heart he says, "And remember, my sentimental friend, that a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others." What must we do to earn the love of others? We first love them by providing time, attention, and giving freely of ourselves and our resources according to their need. The Tinman shows his love through selfless acts for his community. We need not worry how our hearts will be judged if we do the same.

Journaling focus: What do I fear I lack that keeps me from being a more complete person?

October 25
Contemplating Oz: Fear and Courage

"Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed; for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the Lord is finished." 1 Chronicles 28:20b-21

"Courage is being afraid but going on anyhow." Dan Rather[71]

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz,* Dorothy and her companions are walking through a dark forest when confronted by a lion. The lion acts

brave until Dorothy stands up to him, slapping him across the nose. Then the lion reveals his true nature: he is a coward. He tearfully says, "I haven't any courage at all. I even scare myself." Like the Scarecrow and Tinman, what he actually lacks is confidence in the abilities he already possesses. Near the end of the movie, the Wizard gives the lion a metal for courage and says, "As for you, my fine friend, you're a victim of disorganized thinking. You are under the delusion that simply because you run away from danger you have no courage. You are confusing courage with wisdom."

King David spent his years on the throne reuniting the people of Israel. The crowning achievement of his time as king was to be the building of the Temple, a permanent home for the worship of God. However, God tells David he will not be allowed to build the Temple because the reuniting of the people came at a violent price in blood and treasure. David's son, Solomon, would build the Temple. Solomon, who is considered the wisest and wealthiest of all the Jewish kings, was just a boy when tasked to build the Temple. He was awed by the daunting load placed on his shoulders and, no doubt, feared the consequences of failure. Before he died, David told Solomon to "Be strong and of good courage, and act." Indeed, courage manifests in action.

There are times we must act despite our fear. It is in our acts that our courage, or lack thereof, becomes apparent. Being courageous does not mean we act foolishly. It means we have a worthy goal that justifies the risk of taking action. The Cowardly Lion did not lose his fear in search of his courage. He found a higher purpose that motivated him to act in spite of his fear. In his community, and on behalf of his companions, he was able to act in ways unimaginable to him before. He drew strength from the needs of his community, uncovering his courage in the process. Many things cause fear in our lives. Fear can paralyze us into inaction, thereby perpetuating our fear and cowardice. However, when we find a higher purpose, something worthy of bold action, our fears recede into the background.

Journaling focus: When have I been able to act despite being afraid?

October 26
Contemplating Oz: An Accidental Calling

"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us…" Romans 12:6a

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" The Wizard of Oz

I volunteered to coach my son's first soccer team. He and his friends were about six years old and needed a coach. Unfortunately, I knew next to nothing about the game. I did not know the rules, the skills, or team strategies. Honestly, I did not even like soccer at the time. How was I to mold this group of kids into a soccer team? My only redeeming quality was that I loved watching them play.

The man who became the Wizard of Oz did not intend to become a wizard at all. He was flying in his hot air balloon, became lost, and landed in Oz. The people of the land, awed to see him arriving from the sky, crowned him Wizard. He did not know any more about being a wizard than I knew about coaching soccer. Dorothy first discovered the fraud and said, "Oh, you're a very bad man!" The Wizard replied, "Oh no, my dear, I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard." I know the feeling. I was a very good man and a very good father. I was just a very bad soccer coach.

But was the Wizard really a bad wizard? Was I really a bad soccer coach? Although the Wizard could not magically fill the needs of Dorothy and her companions, he was wise enough to recognize they were all misguided about their individual shortcomings. The Scarecrow did not need a brain; he needed recognition of his existing ability to think. The Wizard provided that. The Tinman did not need a heart. He needed acknowledgement of the loving, caring being he already was. The Wizard provided that. The Cowardly Lion did not need courage. He needed to learn that being afraid of danger does not make one a coward. The Wizard taught him that. My son and his friends did not need to become professional soccer players. They needed an adult to organize their play, protect them from undue harm, and allow them a healthy outlet for their joy and energy. Maybe I was not such a bad soccer coach after all.

We find ourselves in uncomfortable roles, sometimes, whether we feel qualified for them or not. When a community has a need, an expert is not always available or necessary. A new perspective or new energy may meet the need. Someone who provides time and attention can work miracles in those cases. We do not need to be a good Wizard or a good soccer coach to be a good person. Sometimes we simply need to be present.

Journaling focus: When have I filled roles that I may not have felt qualified for?

October 27
Contemplating Oz: There is No Place Like Home

"And Jesus said to them, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'" Matthew 8:20

"Oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home!" Dorothy Gale

Following a hit to the head with a window sent flying by a Kansas twister, Dorothy Gale leaves her dreary Kansas farm and finds herself in Oz. The Land of Oz is beautiful, colorful, and mysterious. It is home to munchkins and roads of yellow brick. There are good witches and bad witches. There are horses of a different color and forests full of lions and tigers and bears. Oh my! Dorothy meets a few good and faithful friends in Oz, yet all she can think about is that she wants to go home. For Dorothy, home was her familiar, if drab Kansas farm.

I am a homeboy. Although I enjoy working and traveling, my heart never strays far from home. I am always happy to see our house at the end of the gravel drive, regardless of whether I have been away for a week or an hour. Even if the yard needs mowing and the trim needs painting, it is home and it is where I long to be. Home is comfortable and familiar. It is where I feel loved and accepted, despite my faults and frailties. Early in the movie, Dorothy runs away from home believing her family does not understand her. She wants to see new lands and meet new people. Once in Oz, a new land with new people, she wants to return home.

There are many ways to view home. For some it is the physical structure in which they eat and sleep. For others it is the company of those who love and accept them. For a soul, home is its earthly body, at least for a time. In spite of their different natures, all earthly homes are temporary. Houses crumble from age, burn to the ground, or blow away in tornadoes. Our bodies weaken and die. In today's scripture passage, Jesus claims he has no earthly home. He tells his followers they must leave behind everything that is comfortable and familiar. That is not a comfortable thought for a homebody like me. However, Jesus does not call us to homelessness or friendlessness. Rather, he calls us to a new home and a new community, an eternal home known as the kingdom of God. Just as we cannot live in two structures at the same time, we cannot simultaneously be home on earth and home with God. Home is where the heart is and God desires that part of us. Dorothy could not be home in Kansas and home in Oz, she had to make a choice. Jesus calls us to make a choice, too.

Journaling focus: What makes me feel at home?

October 28
First Fruits

"Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."
Proverbs 3: 9-10

Did you hear the one about the preacher who was asked how he decided the amount to give from his paycheck to the Lord's work? The preacher had two guidelines. First, his offerings were always from the first fruits of his labors. Second, he offered the Lord as much as the Lord wanted. His process was to convert each paycheck to cash and immediately throw it all into the air. Whatever the Lord caught belonged to the Lord, whatever the Lord let fall to the ground was his.

Giving of our *first* fruits is not an ambiguous directive. It is difficult to wordsmith it into something that doesn't actually mean *first.* Oh sure, I have tried. But I struggle with the thought of giving away the *first* portion of whatever I earn. I am much more comfortable making sure the bills are paid and the cars are full of gas and the refrigerator is stocked before fulfilling my pledge to support my church or other worthwhile causes. I can easily justify this because (1) if I don't fulfill my pledge to the church someone else will pick up the slack, and (2) if I pay the church first and need the money later in the month it is awkward to ask for my money back. I know I am not alone in my reasoning.

Of course, we know the church depends on our offerings every bit as much as we depend on our paychecks. If my employer were to withhold part of my check for fear the company might need it later I would scream, "But I *need* that money. I depend on it!" Why would I expect it to be any different with my church? Too often we treat our pledge to the church, or our commitments to other charitable organizations, as optional, something easily skipped when the money is gone. After all, our intentions were good.

But today's scripture tells us to give our *first* fruits. We receive, then we *give,* then we *trust* there will be enough remaining. We cannot be blessed by our own stinginess, only by God's generous provision. When our month outlasts our money, we should find other ways to make ends meet.

Journaling focus: Where is one area where I may be too stingy with my resources?

October 29
Strength

Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.
1 Peter 4:11

My father received a book from his home church when he joined the military during World War II. The book contains devotions for each day of the year written by the pastors of churches throughout the United States. Harold Cooke Phillips, from the First Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote the devotion for September 29, titled *The Strong Soldier*. In part, Reverend Phillips wrote:

> *There are two types of strength. There is the strength of the wind that sways the mighty oak, and there is the strength of the oak that withstands the power of the wind. There is the strength of the locomotive that pulls the heavy train across the bridge, and there is the strength of the bridge that holds up the weight of the train. One is active strength, the other is passive strength; one is the power to keep going, the other is the power to keep still; one is the strength by which we overcome, the other is the strength by which we endure.*

Different situations in life call for different types of strength. Sometimes, our best option is to suffer through a situation with all the patient endurance we can muster. For time-bound suffering – cancer treatments, broken relationships, and grief – healing requires the passage of time, and no amount of active strength is going to hasten the process. Other times we must supply the power to actively move something out of our lives. Often, both types of strength are required at different stages of a life situation.

There are those who confuse the power of endurance with weakness. They feel the need to always be proactive, to fight fire with fire, to enter the fray with every ounce of force they possess. Certainly, some situations call for that sort of determination. Other times, however, such raw and blind power leaves a path of utter destruction in its wake with little to show for the devastation. A bull in a china closet comes to mind.

The author of today's Bible reading says, "…whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies." Some days we need to be the train, other days the bridge; one day the wind, the next day the oak. Our challenge is to discern the type of strength required for a given situation and know that God will supply the strength needed.

Journaling focus: Am I more comfortable with active or passive strength?

October 30
Handling Rattlesnakes

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial. 1 Corinthians 6:1a

Once upon a time, a man climbed to the top of a tall mountain. As he was admiring the view in the cold, thin air, he noticed a rattlesnake shivering at his feet. The snake said, "Please, sir, carry me back down the mountain with you. I am cold-blooded and cannot move to go down myself. I will die if you leave me here." The man replied, "You are a rattlesnake. If I carry you, you will bite me and I will die." The rattlesnake responded, "No, I will be grateful to you for saving my life, and I will not bite you. When we get to the bottom, I will go away in peace." The man thought about it for a time, reached down for the snake, placed it inside his jacket, and started down the mountain. Upon arriving at the bottom, he reached inside his coat for the snake, and the snake bit him. Through his pain the man cried out, "You promised you would not bite me! I saved your life, so now you take mine?" The snake replied as it slithered away, "Well, you knew I was a rattlesnake when you picked me up."

Snake handling, as a demonstration of faith, dates back for centuries. In 2014, Pentecostal pastor Jamie Coots died of – you guessed it – a bite from a rattlesnake he was handling as part of a worship service. It is one thing to believe God will be with us as we go through our lives, but it is an entirely different matter to believe God will protect us from all of our precarious choices. I have no doubt God has my spirit safely in hand; but I am somewhat less assured of God's protection over my earthly body, particularly when I use my God-given free will to take perilous chances.

Obviously, everyone makes bad decisions at times. We all have different levels of risk tolerance, and most of us engage in a number of activities that may have negative consequences. Heck, getting out of bed in the morning has some risk, as does staying in bed. We weigh our risk-tolerance against our need for a new experience, or a familiar experience, or to attempt to avoid an undesirable experience. In fact, we all have rattlesnakes of some sort we choose to live with, like risky hobbies, abusive relationships, substance abuse, driving too fast. Sometimes we believe we have no better options, and that is where our lack of faith plays a key role. We grab whatever our familiar *rattlesnake* is and hold on for fear of the alternative, knowing the snake we hold can kill us.

The fact is that we always have options. We can exercise our free will in different ways and with many different levels of risk. The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, noted that all things were permissible for him, meaning nothing he did would separate him from God. But not all things were beneficial to him. In a similar way, when Jesus was tempted by

the devil, as recorded in Matthew 4, he was told to throw himself off a cliff because God would surely save him. Jesus' response was that we are not to put our God to tests like that. If it was true for Jesus, how much more true is it for us today? We are to live our lives in a joyful balance between adventure and common sense. I do not believe God intends our final words on earth to be, "Watch this!"

Journaling focus: In what ways do I tend to be overly risky? Too cautious?

October 31
Poor Decisions

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
Romans 8:26, 28

I first saw the message on a billboard. It read: "Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is you're stupid and make bad decisions." While the word *stupid* is harsh, I laughed at the message, at least until I began thinking more deeply about it. How many times do I attribute the consequences of my behavior to others or to circumstance, instead of accepting responsibility for my own lack of foresight or intellectual lapses? Bad luck? Someone else's incompetence? Sometimes these may be plausible excuses, but my ego generally does not deal maturely with my shortcomings, and so it seeks a scapegoat, even a self-denigrating scapegoat. Surely, *I* did not bring this onto myself. Could I be *that* dumb? Yet, I cannot count the times poorly chosen or unfortunate words have escaped from my mouth, or I have acted in ways I later regretted. Yes, everything happens for a reason, and sometimes that reason is my stupidity.

Stupidity and bad decision-making can be used as excuses, however, and reasons for not being fully present to and accountable for an unfortunate situation. Hiding behind these self-deprecating masks can be a defense mechanism. Surely no one will criticize me if I confess to being *stupid,* will they? People don't kick a dead horse, do they? Surely, they will seek to lift me up, praise and flatter me by professing how *intelligent* I am. If I plead *nolo contendre* by reason of my own ignorance, others will pity me and let me off the hook.

The truth is that we all make poor decisions and suffer lapses in judgement. Just because we act in stupid ways, at times, does not make us

stupid; it makes us human. The sin is not in making poor decisions but in how we react to the poor decisions we make. We can easily make situations worse if we do not accept responsibility, apologize as appropriate, and make a sincere effort to atone for our mistakes.

Certainly, we should take care not to confuse stupidity with being unworthy of love and acceptance. Just because we make a bad decision does not disqualify us from receiving the love of God and others. We are children, in God's eyes, and children make childish mistakes. God's forgiveness is given more readily than is usually true with others or ourselves. Sometimes the best we can do is to own up to the sometimes unpleasant consequences of our humanity, forgiving ourselves and forgiving others.

Journaling focus: What poor decision have I made that was difficult to accept responsibility for.

November 1
Keeping the Faith

"As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness…" 2 Timothy 4:6-8a

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul is likely near death, saying he is 'being poured out as a libation' (offering or sacrifice). He claims to have 'fought the good fight' and 'finished the race' and 'kept the faith.' I do not know a lot about Paul's life, but I know he was sick and in prison for at least a portion of his latter years. He endured whatever suffering and hardship he encountered and kept his faith, in spite of the difficulty.

Lately, I've done a lot of reflecting on the life of my mother and this scripture makes me think of her. Her father, whom she adored, died when she was a teenager. She lived through the Great Depression. She dealt with significant and recurring episodes of mental illness on the part of her husband and one of my brothers. My father died young and unexpectedly, leaving her to raise four children between the ages of five and fourteen. She died at 82, and few people live to that age without facing significant hardships and losses. Yet, she endured and kept her faith to the end.

She suffered a stroke one July day from which she would not recover. She was not able to communicate effectively after the stroke, but on one of her last days I was praying a long, rambling prayer with her. I was

thanking God for her life growing up in a small, Kansas town, and for her sisters and brother and mother and father and her children and grandchildren and named many of the blessings and difficulties she had endured. And she broke in to say, "Yes, thank you, God! Thank you, God! Thank you, God!" Had I been in the condition her stroke left her, I might have been talking to God, but probably not in a thankful way.

My mother fought the good fight, she finished the race and kept the faith. I have no doubt there was a crown of righteousness awaiting her on the other side. Do we face our hardships with the boldness and endurance of Paul, or of mom?

Journaling focus: In what ways can I increase my resilience to the challenges in my life?

November 2
The You God Sees

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:13-14a

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them only a little lower than the angels. Hebrews 2:6b-7a

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Genesis 1:26a

One of today's great tragedies is the lack of an accurate and reliable self-image. The increasing numbers of human beings who are uncertain about their standing as a family member, co-worker, life-partner, friend, and – most heart breaking of all – as a child of God, is troubling. Poor self-esteem, along with a self-image that rises and falls as far and as fast as a roller coaster, is at the root of many of today's problems. We do violence to others and ourselves when we do not honor and acknowledge our inherent worth.

The problems of poor self-image are most pervasive in women – especially with teenage girls – but both genders and all ages fall prey to unrealistic, societal expectations. In a TED Talk, Meaghan Ramsey discussed why thinking you are ugly is bad for you.[72] She explained that about 10,000 people per month Google the phrase, "Am I ugly?" It is truly heart breaking, and she mentioned research indicating that uncertainty about one's image negatively affects test scores, initiative, and relationships.

How have we descended into such an uncertain and inaccurate identity crisis?

The Bible is very clear about our image: *fearfully and wonderfully made; a little lower than the angels; made in the image of God.* Unfortunately, the voice of scripture cannot easily drown out the unrelenting images on television, the constant pressures of social media, or the intense scrutiny of a typical schoolyard. The Information Age brings much that is good for society, but it also peppers us with a constant barrage of misinformation about how we should look, act, speak, and perform. We never know who actually sets those unrealistic standards, but we do know – most of us, anyway – that they are unattainable, unsustainable, and unhealthy. Still, we persist in our belief that we must mimic these airbrushed, carefully scripted, heavily edited, and overly sexualized images in order to be successful, to be loved, or to be worthy. Ms. Ramsey tells the story of a teenage girl who recorded and posted a video, asking, "Am I pretty?" Predictably, she received thousands of replies, many of which were vulgar, hurtful, and blatantly untrue.

How can we stop looking to social media, television, and movies for validation of our self-worth and begin looking to those who love us most, including God? A solid church is a good place to begin. Supportive youth gatherings, covenant fellowship, and support groups help us understand that we are not the only ones who struggle with seeming imperfection. Retaining a healthy outlook about our appearance has everything to do with whose standards we use to judge ourselves. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Who answers that question for you?

Journaling focus: How do I feel about my self-worth? What does my self-image tell me about myself?

November 3
Image and Likeness

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good. Genesis 1:26a, 31a

In an old issue of the comic strip, *Family Circus*, middle brother, Jeffy, draws a picture of his older brother, Billy. Billy says, "Hey, I don't look like that!" Jeffy replies, "Maybe you don't know what you really look like." I believe this cute illustration captures a key issue behind many of our

problems: *We do not know what we really look like.* More accurately, we have forgotten in whose image we were created.

An *image* is an identical counterpart produced by a reflection. A *likeness*, on the other hand, is a representation or a semblance of something – not identical, but similar. In the cartoon, Jeffy is creating a *likeness*, but Billy expects an *image.*

Each of us shares a common image, that of God, but we manifest individually as God's likeness. Collectively, we display an infinite variety of God's hues, shapes, and characteristics. When we look in the mirror, however, we see only an imperfect likeness. Many of us are unhappy with that likeness because we believe we are too short or too fat, our hair is too thin or too grey, our clothes don't fit quite right, or our shoes don't match our purse. Something important is always missing, misshapen, or mismatched. And something is always wrong because what we see in the mirror is a reflection of God's *likeness* – a representation of one aspect of God – and not the entire *image* we so desire to reflect. Our divine image becomes hidden beneath our likeness to the point where it is easy to forget the image from which we originated. We are conditioned to only see the likeness and not the image, thus becoming obsessed with our appearance instead of our essence.

Our divine image is always there, however. We see the image of God in another when we look deeply into their eyes, or when we catch them uninhibitedly *being* their most beautiful and pure self (think *child-like*). The moments may be rare, but they are there for the seeking. Likewise, we display God's image when we let go of our concerns about how others see us, or what others expect from us – when we know we are good enough as we are, where we are – good enough to be loved and valued by God. When we dance like no one is watching, or sing like no one is listening, we do so from a place of ultimate freedom. In that place of unconditional love, we are free to realign our likeness into something more consistent with our image, something that will touch others at a soul-level. As we better reflect God's image, we are better able to positively impact our world.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I reflect God's likeness? God's image?

November 4
Third Things

All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all… Ecclesiastes 9:1-2

A typical western way to handle a problem is to face it head-on. Identify where the issue is and tackle it. Find out who is at fault and confront them. Discover the failing part and replace it. Seek out the weakest link and get rid of it. We are instructed to have courage in facing problems, and courage is born of and manifests in action. The proactive Golden Rule of the day is to do unto others *before* they do unto you, or so it sometimes seems.

Certainly, there are times when it is best to confront an issue directly and immediately – when a young child is running toward a busy intersection, for example. There are other times – arguably, the majority of the time – when a problem is not nearly as urgent as our emotions make us believe. Sometimes, a direct confrontation does more harm than good. Confrontation usually results in defensiveness, and when one or more people become defensive, effective problem solving becomes more difficult. For males, in particular, face-to-face confrontations are especially threatening. One technique to help minimize the threat is to initiate the discussion while driving in a car, for example, when both persons are facing forward and not at each other.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*,[73] Parker Palmer discusses utilizing *third things* as a way to arrive at difficult truths. He writes, "If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached 'on the slant.' Soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly." While Palmer is writing primarily about drawing out truth internally, the principle is equally true in interpersonal interaction. Sometimes we are better off to seek our peace with another *on the slant,* or indirectly.

Utilizing third things in potentially emotionally charged situations is a strategic way to utilize a neutral thing or environment to help arrive at a mutually beneficial solution. Most of us learn best when we discover truth on our own, as opposed to being told. By using third things, you and I may both find our own truths, although my truth may manifest differently than yours, even when it reveals itself from the same source. None of us has the right to name another person's truth; but none of us who loves another will deprive them of finding their truth in ways most effective for them.

The use of power and authority is common in confrontation, but these are not necessarily the most effective tools to influence another, particularly when the desire is for a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship. Gentler and less threatening ways to handle difficult issues are often found in third things, deflecting attention or blame away from individuals and creating an environment where creative solutions can arise. If, as the writer of Ecclesiastes hints, everything we confront is vanity, then *how* we handle our confrontations is of equal or greater importance than the

actual solutions we generate.

Journaling focus: How might I find a third thing to help resolve a difficult challenge with another?

November 5
The River, a Sugar Maple, and Jesus

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
Revelation 22:2

The image of time as a river is powerful for me. A river, like time, flows in one direction and is always on the move. Sometimes the surface is rough and choppy, other times it is smooth as glass, not unlike the way we experience our time on earth. The river eventually flows to the sea, where the water is reabsorbed into the atmosphere to fall as rain across the land, replenishing the rivers. And on and on it flows.

The season of autumn also reminds me of the passage of time. As leaves that were bright green only days ago turn red, orange, and yellow, and then fall to the ground, I am reminded that everything we know as life goes through its seasons and eventually dies. Certain life forms go out in a blaze of glory, like the leaves of the sugar maple in my backyard. They refuse to pass without creating a scene. Its river of time flows from the soil into its roots, through its truck, and into its leaves each year. Another river carries the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere through its leaves, converting it to sugars, then down into its roots to be stored as food for next season's glorious resurrection. And on and on life goes.

The amazing circle of life is always on the move. Jesus modeled this cycle for us. He lived, he died, and he was resurrected. *There is nothing to fear in death*, he tells us. *Look and see; I was dead, and yet I live!* It is the same message as the river, as the sugar maple, and of all creation. We live, we die, and we live again. Our deaths are simply transitions from one stage of life to another. Eventually, our physical death does come, and we cannot know what lies beyond. We can know, however, that there is more life. That is the message of Jesus, and the river, and the sugar maple.

Whether we view the passage of time as a river, a tree, or a Savior, life is passing through and from us. And as time passes by, we are

transformed – older, wiser, more physically frail perhaps, but always reborn into a new being. The river flows. The sugar maple grows. Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus lives again. True then, true now, true forever.

Journaling focus: In what ways have I experienced the cycle of birth, death, and resurrection in my life?

November 6
Words and Meditations

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." Psalm 19:14

I am often careless about the words I say. There are times I wonder what I was thinking to have said what I said. The fact is I was not thinking enough. Part of my problem is I like to be witty. A thought will spring into my head; it will seem clever, and out of my mouth it goes. Once I saw a demonstration where a child squeezed a tube of toothpaste onto a plate. Then he was told to put the toothpaste back into the tube, which of course, was impossible. The lesson was that our words are like the toothpaste. They come out much easier than they go back in. Indeed, we need to be careful not just in the words we utter, but also in the ways we choose to say them.

At times it seems words come into my head uninvited. It is as if someone whispers words into my ear and they come out of my mouth. Of course, that is not what happens. Our words are a product of our meditations. How we view people and interpret the events around us produce the words we say. At least for me, there is a nearly continuous dialogue running in my head. Sometimes that dialogue is meaningful and analytical. Other times it is simply nonsense. I am fully capable of working myself into an emotional frenzy, stemming from an internal dialogue having no basis in reality. Sometimes I will project negative qualities onto others that simply are not factual. When my internal dialogue begins with false or hurtful assumptions, the conclusions I draw will be equally false and hurtful. A computer acronym comes to mind: *GIGO*. It stands for: Garbage In, Garbage Out.

Psalm 19 contains a prayer I should repeat remember daily. If my words are not acceptable to God should I say them to another person? Even more fundamental, the Psalm encourages us to examine the meditations of our hearts. If our internal dialogue, our meditation, is not

pleasing to God, should we allow it to fester? Stopping and/or controlling the meditations of our hearts is not easy. It requires the conscious focusing of our attention in specific directions. It is similar to when we visit with others. We cannot learn if we do all the talking. We need to listen to learn. Psalm 46:10 says, *"Be still, and know that I am God!"* When our internal dialogue runs rampant and uncontrolled, we cannot listen to or learn from God or anyone else. However, when the meditations of our hearts are pleasing to God, we need not worry about the words coming from our mouths.

Journaling focus: What can I do when my internal dialogue runs out of control?

November 7
Less Human

Terrors frighten them on every side, and chase them at their heels. Their strength is consumed by hunger, and calamity is ready for their stumbling. Surely such are the dwellings of the ungodly, such is the place of those who do not know God.
Job 18:11-12, 21

I once heard a radio interview with a Syrian refugee. He had been displaced from his home and life by the intense violence and unrest there. In describing the desperate state of his homeland and fellow Syrians he said, *"Nothing makes you less human than being hungry."* My life is so sheltered and blessed compared to the lives of so many that it is difficult to imagine being that ravenous. I recall Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which illustrates how we cannot strive for higher, *more human* traits when our most basic needs are left wanting. When a person has no sense of security – no food, roof over their head, or basic space of their own – they cannot worry about how their words or actions will impact others, and so they may act in ways *less human*. Fundamental needs must be met before other more human traits can manifest.

It is difficult for those of us in first world countries to imagine such a degree of desperation. Typically, when we say we are *starving* it means we have not eaten for several hours, not that we have not eaten in days, or that we have not eaten adequately – ever. When we say we need *space*, we do not mean we need protection from the elements or criminals as much as we need a break from the abundance of people and material goods around us. I recall the secured fortresses around many living spaces in Honduras and

understand them to be the result of their desperate need for safety. It seemed to me, at first glance, there were many needs the money could be better spent meeting than on personal security, but basic needs always come first.

We all hunger for different things in our lives and some of our desires cause us to be less human in the way we treat others. Obviously, not all of us hunger for things as basic as food and safety. Rampant gang violence, civil wars, and other acts of lethal violence seem to occur mostly in poor countries and in the poorest sections of first world countries. Perhaps the conditions that result in the widespread loss of innocent human lives continue because the basic needs of the perpetrators are not being met, and so they act in ways we consider less human. The finger of judgement I point at these wrongdoers, however, ultimately points back at me. What am I doing to assist with the basic needs of people less fortunate than I am? What am I doing to feed the hungry, care for the homeless, and protect the vulnerable? If I am honest with myself, I am doing far too little. The Job passage used for today's scripture implies these are the conditions of the "ungodly" or of "those who do not know God." Perhaps we can best help them know God by finding ways to feed them.

Journaling focus: When have I been treated as less than human? What might the needs have been of the person treating me in that way?

November 8
Throwing Stones

"…they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law of Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. Now what do you say?' When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'" John 8:5,7

I believe it was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Everett, who taught me not to point at others. She illustrated how each time I pointed a finger at another, three fingers pointed back at me. The point was to use care when accusing others of wrongdoing. All of us make mistakes and do things we should not do. Jesus made the same point several times in his ministry. In Matthew 7:3 he said, *"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?'* Likewise, in Luke 6:37, Jesus said, *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be*

condemned…"

The Gospel of John tells the story of a woman caught in the act of adultery. A group drags the woman to Jesus. They remind him the Law of Moses commands she be stoned. Jesus neither denies nor confirms that she deserves death for her sin. Instead, he reminds the crowd of their own shortcomings by inviting those without sin to throw the first stone. He knows everyone in the crowd has sinned. No one dared throw the first stone at the woman. To do so would imply he or she had never sinned, an admission of impossible piety. As the crowd disperses, Jesus asks who has condemned her. She replies, *"No one, sir."* Jesus responds, *"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin, again."*

This story is intriguing in a couple of ways. First, Jesus shrewdly warns the crowd about judging others. He does so in a way that does not condone the woman's sin. Rather, he reminds the crowd of their own sinful nature. We are often too quick to condemn others. Second, while Jesus forgives the woman of her sin, he also tells her not to sin again. In that sense, her forgiveness was not free. She was told to alter her lifestyle so she would not continue to sin. In order for forgiveness to result in positive change, we must *repent* of our sin. Repentance requires (1) acknowledging we have sinned, and (2) turning away from that sinful behavior. Forgiveness is not a *get-out-of-jail-free* card allowing us to freely judge others or to continue in our unhealthy behaviors. Mrs. Everett and Jesus remind us that one finger pointed at another leaves three pointing back at us.

Journaling focus: When have I been spared a punishment that I probably deserved?

November 9
Blessed are the Merciful

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Matthew 5:7

As with a number of the other Beatitudes, today's message seems almost too trivial for serious discussion: that those who show mercy will receive mercy in return. It is another illustration of the law of sowing and reaping, so common in Jesus' teachings. We reap what we sow. In the current example, when we plant mercy, we harvest mercy.

Mercy and justice are often used interchangeably. There is a familiar fable that goes "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." The fable distinguishes

between short term assistance and long term sustenance. Many people consider mercy as addressing an immediate need and justice as targeting longer-term solutions that reduce the immediate needs for mercy. Ultimately, both are important, but the way we approach needs for mercy is different than how we address issues of justice.

The oft-missed starting point for consideration in being merciful is identifying what a person actually needs. Unfortunately, many of us feel better equipped than we actually are to determine the true needs of another. Until we have established some sort of a relationship with the person, we cannot know. If a person is hungry, a meal may be sufficient. If they are hungry *and* diabetic, however, taking them to Dairy Queen may not be a merciful solution. If they are hungry and homeless, a meal and shelter for the night will be required. If they are lonely, a merciful person will offer company. The point is that we cannot show deep mercy to another without first becoming vulnerable enough to join them in their moment. Love always precedes knowledge. In other words, true acts of mercy go beyond handing money to a homeless person on the street and certainly deeper than donating money to a charity via payroll deduction, not that those types of mercy are not important, too. Acknowledging and assisting with one's immediate need is one thing; acknowledging and knowing them as a unique person of value, as a child of God, is quite another. Yet, honoring and bestowing dignity on another, regardless of their current circumstance, is foundational to showing mercy. This requires more than money. It requires time and attention, and often is what is most needed. Sometimes, it is all that is needed.

A couple of chapters beyond today's Beatitude in the book of Matthew, Jesus gives us the Golden Rule, which could as easily be named the Rule of Mercy: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). When I am in need, help me where I actually hurt, not where you assume I hurt. Knowing a person well enough to know their need is a mark of love and often leads to the realization that their need is my need, too. True mercy grows out of love and relationship and requires an interpersonal connection to first be established. Ultimately, acts of mercy are exercises in self-awareness and, thus, can be unintentionally self-serving. It is God in us reaching out to God in another, becoming one in our mutual need. As such, mercy is not for the faint of heart. If we cannot see God in another, however, how will we ever recognize God in ourselves?

Clearly, mercy requires a heart for others. The most important mercy-skill, however, may be the ability to genuinely listen to another, preferably without interruption. Being heard has become a rare experience because listening has become a lost art. Certainly, we should still give money to help meet needs (see Matthew 5:42), but to become truly merciful beings, we need to ask questions and listen carefully to the responses. We

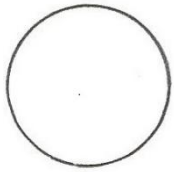
must not only become advocates *for* others, but also advocates *with* others, standing side by side with them in their suffering. In today's Beatitude, Jesus promises that in the end, lives that are characterized by a deep and sincere commitment to mercy will attract mercy back to themselves like a magnet.

Journaling focus: Who is a person in my life that I can show mercy to today? How?

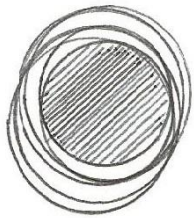
November 10
Shifting Realities

As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. Luke 8:27

Suicide rates have been increasing at alarming rates over the past few years. I am not a mental health professional, but both my father and one of my brothers struggled with mental illness – specifically, bipolar disorder. What follows is an image that is helpful for me in contemplating this perplexing disease.

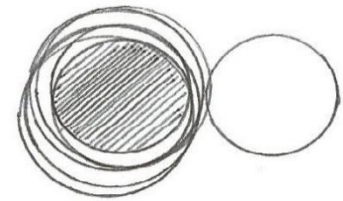


This circle represents my reality. Everything that is *real* to me exists within this circle. While I know there is much that exists outside of my circle, it is not part of my reality because I either cannot perceive it or I cannot understand it. The infinite range of colors of the light spectrum my eyes cannot detect is an example of a reality I cannot perceive. Similarly, I cannot understand nuclear physics – I do not have the mental capacity or training to grasp the concepts and allow them to exist in my circle of reality.



Here is a view of reality within a community. Everyone's circles are different – some larger, some smaller. The shaded area represents the shared reality of the community, or that which everyone agrees to be *real*. Most people have areas that are either not perceived or not understood by others in the community and, thus, are not real to everyone, but there is a significant amount of shared reality.

The causes of mania and depression are not well understood. Brain chemistry certainly plays a part. Stress and self-image, alcohol and drug abuse can also contribute; but something triggers a shift in a person's circle of reality away from that of others. When mental illness strikes, my illustration looks like this:



A person whose circle of reality once fit with that of their peers' shifts, and the circles of reality no longer intersect, or only partially intersect. We often label this type of episode as psychotic. Paranoia and unclear thinking are common, as are hearing voices no one else hears and seeing visions invisible to others. Actions and thoughts are difficult to understand or explain because they come from a reality we do not perceive. What a person experiences in this state is not real to the rest of us. They may not run around naked and live among the tombs, as did the man with the demons described in today's passage from Luke, but their reality has definitively shifted. Unfortunately, it can be challenging to recognize anything is significantly wrong until the person's circle of reality has shifted far enough to make them nearly impossible to reach. Severe abuse of self or others may result, even from those who are typically loving and gentle.

Sadly, I do not have wise counsel for how to deal with mental illness. When we suspect someone is experiencing a mental shift, it is sometimes helpful to do what we do with others when they suffer – keep in touch, ask questions, encourage them to seek help, follow up, and reassure them. Perhaps our love and attention can help draw a shifting circle of reality back into our shared realm, although professional assistance is usually required. Sadly, we cannot bring everyone back; but we can maintain tight communities, like churches and support groups, where those who are suffering can feel welcomed, safe, loved, and accepted.

Journaling focus: Reflect on an incidence of mental illness with yourself, a family member, or a friend.

November 11
An Unencumbered Spirit

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3

When our children were young, we had an above ground swimming pool installed in our backyard. I built a wooden deck around the pool, and we had many years of summer fun with family and friends. Youth group gatherings, family reunions, and other times of fellowship occurred in and around that pool. However, our children grew up and left for college. At that point, there was only one regular swimmer: me. While I enjoyed the pool on hot days, it required regular allotments of time, energy, and money to maintain. What was once a hub for fun and fellowship for many became an encumbrance on my life. We decided to give the pool and deck away to another family to enjoy as their children grew.

Removing the pool and deck left a large open space in our yard. I had grand visions of retaining walls, a fishpond, a waterfall, and a fire pit to fill the space. My wife had a more practical vision: grass. My vision, while potentially beautiful, would have required regular allotments of time and money to maintain. My wife's vision provided a simpler and less encumbering beauty. For me, this experience illuminates today's passage from Matthew. It is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. To be *poor in spirit* is not a well-understood trait today. We equate being poor with lacking things of importance. However, when we understand how some possessions come to possess us, being poor takes on a different character. Did losing my pool make me *poor*? Hardly, even though it was a thing of value I no longer possess. In truth, it was no longer blessing our family, and so it became a burden. The net result of becoming *poorer* by giving away our pool was to become freer. In my haste to fill the empty space in our yard, I nearly substituted one encumbrance for another. At least in this case, simpler (or poorer) is better because it frees resources and energy for new sorts of blessings.

I am amazed at the joyous, high-energy worship of some believers, particularly in third-world countries. They praise with a freedom of spirit and emotion that seems out of proportion to their blessings. Yet, I wonder if their unfettered worship is the product of an unencumbered spirit. Most of us are rich with *stuff*, only a portion of which actually blesses us. Our possessions bind us in ways that leave that little energy for other purposes; like worship, thanksgiving and praise. Perhaps our mostly subdued worship is due to worshippers with heavily encumbered spirits. Jesus said the poor in spirit will receive the kingdom of heaven. That tells me there are unseen riches in being poor.

Journaling focus: In what ways do some of my possessions encumber me?

November 12
A Good and Faithful Servant

"But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'" Mark 9:34-35

In writing this reflection, I wanted to try to model what it is to be a good and faithful servant. I contemplated what I could say that might be relevant to *you*. I prayed for God's guidance, asking what God would have me say to *you*. I have read and reread scripture searching for something useful I could glean from it for *you*. Finally, I tried to sit in silence and listen for God's guidance of my words – all for *you*. Isn't that what being a servant is about – *me*, doing something for *you*?

So, I sat in semi-silence listening for something for *you* and what did I hear? I heard *me* talking to *myself* about things *I* want to do for *me!* Even now *I am* thinking how yummy one of the cookies my wife just made would taste for *me*. This is not what I had in mind, but it is exactly what makes me such a poor servant. Every time I try to focus on serving *you*, I end up pondering what's in it for *me*! Lame? Yes, but too true. And yet, that is exactly what Jesus' twelve disciples, those specifically chosen to carry his gospel to all peoples and all nations for all time were doing. They, in his presence, were arguing over which of them was the greatest. Me! No, me! *No, it's ME!!!*

What makes being a good servant so difficult for so many of us? It's *me*! I would love to help serve the poor in our community on Sundays after church, but then *I* would miss the football game at noon. I know how much a phone call or note would mean to a number of my aging relatives, but between work and kids and the yard and all the *me*-items in life, *I* find it difficult to do anything for *you*. And yet, if the disciples found a servant-attitude so difficult, why should it be any different for us? It requires constant doses of will, grace, humility, and persistence.

Journaling focus: What challenges do I experience in trying to serve others?

November 13
When God Answers

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
Ecclesiastes 3:10-11

A businessman, late for an important meeting, could not find a parking place. Finally, in desperation, he cried out to God: "If you'll help me find a parking place, I will start going to church again." Immediately, a car exited in front of him. While pulling into the now open space the man said, "Never mind. I found one!"

What is our response when God answers prayer? Honestly, I think most of us are reluctant to believe God answers prayer because it is safer to believe things happen randomly. Who am I that God would bless my life? We are more likely to note when God does *not* answer prayer, at least not in the way or the time we wished. Even the most optimistic of us find it easier to believe the unfortunate occurrences in life are more the "norm" than are the good things. It is as if we believe the good in life is an anomaly that will be paid for with bad. It is a self-fulfilling prophesy that seems to prove its own truth. In his book *Immortal Diamond*,[74] Fr. Richard Rohr writes, "Humans find it easier to gather their energy around death, pain, and problems than around joy…It is joy that we hold lightly and victimhood that we grab onto." Why would that be true? Why do I focus on the weeds in my flowerbeds instead of the brilliant colors shining out through the weeds?

Why am I surprised when good things happen to me? Why would I question whether the hand of God is at work in my life? As a father, it is expected that I care for my children in good ways. Why would I expect less from God? If we are children of God, as the Bible says, why would we receive anything short of extraordinary blessings from God?

We cheat ourselves by not stopping to enjoy a beautiful sunset or by marveling at the dahlias peeking out through the crabgrass. We do others and ourselves a disservice by submitting to pessimism, under the guise of "realism," expecting the worst. We are to be co-creators of beauty, not prognosticators of doom. Sometimes, we must force ourselves to find the blessings of every moment, believing they are there. Where we focus our attention is a choice we make. The writer of Ecclesiastes follows today's scripture by saying, "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live." These are still solid words to guide our days, thousands of years after they were written. God has made everything suitable for its time. Looking for a blessing in life? Look closer –

blessings are all around us, all of the time.

Journaling focus: What aspect of my life could I view more positively?

November 14
A Silent God

O God, do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! Psalm 83:1

I grew up in church, attending nearly every Sunday with my family. It was an expectation that I accepted, although church was never particularly meaningful to me. I assumed God's presence and goodness, although I never really felt or experienced it. I listened to stories of God appearing to folks in the Bible as a burning bush or in a cloud of fire. In Bible times, God spoke through dramatic visions and booming voices. The stories left no doubt of God's presence. I, however, never saw or heard anything of the sort. If God was present with me, I assumed God was a silent God.

One Friday evening in December of my fourteenth year, my father and I were sitting in the car in front of our home visiting about Christmas. He told me of the painting he bought to surprise my mother. He talked about his work, and I told him about school. Early the next morning, my father lay dying on our bathroom floor from a brain aneurysm. Bible stories made clear that God was always present in challenging times, and my times were challenging. Even so, God's silence was deafening. Not long after my father's death, I stopped attending church. I did not stop believing there was a God, however, I just no longer believed in the God I had been taught about in church.

Hindsight has always been a good teacher for me. As I ponder the events of my earlier days, clarity often comes that was not present at the time. In the years following the passing of my father, I could not hear God because I was listening for a supernatural voice, or perhaps seeking something as dramatic as a burning bush or a pillar of cloud. I now know I could not find God because I was looking in the wrong places. God came to me many times through those difficult years, and I ignored God's voice and care because it was too ordinary and too simple. For example, my best friend seldom left my side during the toughest days, not because he had words of wisdom to share, but because he did not want me to suffer alone.

In retrospect, it is clear that God was not silent. God was always

present. I was simply not able to recognize God working through my friends and family and surroundings. Their love and attention carried me through my darkest days, despite my feeling that I shouldered the burden alone. I wonder how many God-inspired acts of kindness and compassion I missed because I was waiting for something dramatic. No, we do not worship a silent God. We worship a God who often speaks and acts through very human channels and in very human ways. In a touch, a hug, or a kind note. Like a baby born in a manger, or the son of a humble carpenter, sometimes God chooses to manifest in simple ways through very ordinary folks.

Journaling focus: When did I last overlook or ignore God's presence in another person?

November 15
A Harvest of Righteousness

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. James 3:16-18

I used to keep a sign on the bulletin board above my computer screen at work. It read:

Before you speak, THINK
T Is it True?
H Is it Helpful?
I Is it Inspiring?
N Is it Necessary?
K Is it Kind?

The intent of the acronym was to remind me to think through my words before they left my mouth. Of course, for this to work I had to remember to think *before* I spoke, something that continues to challenge me. But when I did, this formula was helpful in considering what I should say and what was best left unsaid, or at least rephrased.

The writer of James, in today's Bible passage, gives us a helpful and timeless formula. It is a formula to distinguish wisdom from above from the types of wisdom rooted in envy and selfish ambition. As humans we

have the unique ability to imagine the likely outcomes of our actions prior to actually taking them, not unlike our ability to think through the impact of our words prior to saying them. We can recognize wisdom from above because it leads to something pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and is without partiality or hypocrisy. Words of wisdom from above yield love. Such wisdom brings a harvest of righteousness.

Journaling focus: How might my communications change if I followed this formula?

November 16
The Weight of Success

"Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." 1 Timothy 6:6-9

A time in my life when I felt most free and content was in the months preceding my marriage. No, this is not some "A-bachelor-is-a-man-who-never-makes-the-same-mistake-once" type of joke. I sold my home in the country and needed a place to live until we took possession of our first home in Lawrence, Kansas. I found a studio apartment one block from my workplace. I put all of my *stuff*, except the barest essentials, into storage and lived in a single room, walked to and from work, and never once made a trip to the storage locker for things I needed or missed. My sense of freedom had nothing to do with my bachelorhood; it had to do with my freedom from the weight of my *stuff!*

Once I had a house again, the stuff came out of storage and, combined with my wife's, occupied space and multiplied many times over. Don't get me wrong. Almost everything in our home has or had a purpose, and *might* have a purpose again, someday. Everything has memories attached. It is important in its own way. But everything also has an on-going cost attached to it. Every item we possess requires space and resources, cleaning and attention. We trade bits of our freedom for every material thing in our possession. It always lays a claim on us; it places a weight upon us that prevents utilizing those spaces and resources for other possibilities. It binds us in subtle, but real ways.

It is an interesting commentary that one of the fastest growing businesses of the past several decades has been the building and renting of storage space. Most of us simply have too much stuff and for any number of reasons, cannot seem to part with it. My wife and I have a nice, large house and a five-acre yard that now has only two occupants. We must decide whether we will continue to heat, air condition, maintain, and clean the excess space and accompanying possessions, or whether we will simplify and move into something more in line with our actual needs for shelter. When we give up resource-intense possessions, we free up space for personal spiritual growth, service to others, and a host of other godly possibilities. In the process we may even regain a measure of freedom and contentment.

Journaling focus: Which of my possessions are possessing me?

November 17
The Pure in Heart

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Matthew 5:8

Today's Beatitude raises two questions for me: What does it mean to be pure in heart, and what does it mean to see God? Is it even possible to become pure enough in heart to be able to see God in this life? Certainly, my early training in Christianity led me to believe that could not be the case. The problem was sin, and sin was so deeply engrained into my human condition that seeing God was out of the question. While I no longer believe this, at least not as I was taught, the roots of my early education still run deep in the subconscious recesses of my being and occasionally sprout little demons that whisper in my ear, "You will never be good enough…"

My initial question about what purity of heart refers to raises two questions of its own: What is purity, and what is heart? Purity is probably obvious – untainted, in a natural or original state, and virginal come to mind. The heart has a literal meaning, i.e., the organ that pumps blood, as well as a number of figurative meanings, including love, emotion, and the center of our being. Assuming Jesus is speaking of the heart in a figurative sense, purity of heart refers to a state where the essence of our being is restored to its original state, which for me means when it is consciously in a state of union with God. While I consider the separateness we experience as humans as an illusion, I confess it becomes a powerful, entrenched illusion

long before we reach adolescence. This sense of separation, of being on our own and alone, is the foundational source of our earthly encumbrances and the foundational source of our *impurity*.

I suspect what Jesus refers to as purity of heart is what we might call an *unencumbered heart* – a heart free of earthly attachments and worries. Living a life separate from God and others leaves us insecure and grasping onto *things* to define us and give us worth and meaning. Granted, obtaining freedom from such attachments is completely contrary to how we learn to live our lives on earth. Yet, how can we expect God-in-us to shine through when we are so heavily cloaked in the stuff of our material existence? An onion is often used to illustrate the peeling off of outer layers in order to reach the center. Perhaps we must peel away the years of accumulation of attachments, self-doubts, and insecurities in order to reach our pure center – the pure heart of our being. And like peeling an onion, it can cause a lot of weeping.

In the Old Testament, the belief was that to see God would result in death. In Exodus 33:20, God tells Moses, "No one shall see me and live." Even John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God." Yet, Jesus says the pure in heart will see God. This Beatitude seems to contradict other teachings and long-held traditions of scripture. In my opinion, our sense of separateness constricts our vision to where we cannot see God's presence in our lives, and it makes our existence too small for God to manifest freely through. This sense of separation shapes our biases and prejudices and leads us to judge others in hurtful and unhelpful ways. In our attempts to improve our own self-image and sense of belonging, we often do so by tearing down others: "At least I'm not as fat as *him*," or "I would never gossip like *her,"* or "We would never raise our children like *they* do." We pit ourselves against others and, in the process, widen the perceived separation between them and us. Ultimately, we feel even more alone and isolated. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that leads to an encumbered heart that has little chance of experiencing God's love and acceptance, at least not until everything earthly is stripped away from us at our death.

One who is truly pure in heart is able to see as God sees. And what God sees, looking out through us, is a creation that God pronounced *very good*. God sees through our human imperfections and inconsistencies to the center of our being, which forever remains undefiled, pure, and beautiful. When we learn to see that pure essence in others, we attain the purity in heart to see God – in the faces and forms of those around us.

Journaling focus: What is one way I can become more pure in heart today?

November 18
Filling Space

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... Philippians 2:5-7a

I often contemplate space – not the space of the universe, but the space in my life – or, more accurately, the lack thereof. I consider myself a busy person, but my busy-ness is largely illusionary. When something comes along that I find desirable, I have no trouble finding time for it. Often, those desirable things are sporting events – Royal's games, Jayhawk basketball, Chief's football – hardly world-changing priorities. I fill the space in my life with all sorts of distractions – television, social media, and don't get me started on the limitless and time-sucking distractions awaiting on my smart phone. In reality, I often find myself filling space by *killing time,* fully understanding that to be a form of murder. Time lost cannot be reclaimed any more than a homicide victim can be brought back to life.

In the Preface to his book *Immortal Diamond*, Fr. Richard Rohr writes, "The goodness of God fills all the gaps of the universe, without discrimination or preference."[75] As I contemplate God filling the gaps of the universe, I realize that my obsession with filling the gaps in my life are preventing God from filling that space with grace. Why do I fear free time and open space? Do I fear what God will fill that space with if I do not keep myself occupied with lesser activities? Clearly, if God is to enter my life in any sort of meaningful way, there must be room for that entry.

Physicists tell us the universe, including the "solid" matter of the earth, is mostly space, within which occurs the interplay of mass and energy. In 1905, Albert Einstein published his *Special Theory of Relativity*, expressed in the equation $E = mc^2$, and defining the relationship between mass and energy. Mass, it has been said, is just energy that has been tightly compressed. In what may be a giant leap of simplistic reasoning, one could say that what we perceive as solid matter, such as our bodies, is compressed energy, with latent energy filling the spaces in between bodies. Before I put anyone into a catatonic state of scientific indifference, let us substitute the word *energy* with the word *spirit,* as in the Spirit of God. What if our *solid* experience is just a condensed manifestation of the energy we call the Holy Spirit? Pervading the space between the solid objects in our world is Spirit, or in scientific terms, energy. This seems consistent with both science and theology. Spirit/energy fills all the gaps with possibility and potential.

Rohr goes on to say, "*Grace is not something God gives, grace is who God* is." To experience that grace, we must allow ourselves the space for the Spirit to compress, or manifest in us.

Journaling focus: In what ways do I fill my empty space and free time?

November 19
Blessed are the Peacemakers

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Matthew 5:9

When I think of a peacemaker, I think of someone with a gift for easing tension, for working through differences, and for finding a way to bring together people with diverse beliefs and goals. When I was a young adult, there was much talk about the United States achieving *peace through strength*. This meant that we would maintain a military force strong enough that no one would dare disturb the peace sufficiently to provoke us to action against them for that nation would face certain annihilation. I wondered then, and I wonder today: Is that really *peace*? It is fear-based compliance, which seems to me like a very shallow and tenuous peace. Underneath, the weaker party is forever scheming ways to attain their purposes without overly provoking the more powerful party. This type of peace leads to subversion, hatred, and jealousy as people devise subtle ways to rebel and undermine the other. I think that sort of peace through strength is illustrated by the compliant housewife who outwardly puts up with her abusive husband, but *only* because of and for as long as it seems to be the best option available to her. Behind the placid face brews hatred and prayers for how she might free herself from the oppression one day. Somehow, I doubt this is the sort of peace to which Jesus refers.

In his book *A Brief History of Everything*,[76] Ken Wilber describes the concept of *transcend and include,* which refers to stages of growth and development. For the atom to join a molecule, it must transcend its atomic state and join other atoms to form a molecule. It still retains its being as an atom, however, only in a larger and more integrated context. The same is true of our cells. In order to grow into a higher order of existence, a cell must join together with other cells under a common purpose to form organs and organisms. Each cell continues to exist, both as an individual and as part of a larger community. What does this have to do with peace? When people, corporations, or nations clash, each side is locked in its own small, exclusive reality, refusing to accept the legitimacy of their opponent's small, exclusive reality. In the cellular example, one cell refuses to join with another cell in order to participate in and create a higher being that

transcends yet includes both cells. When this happens, a battle ensues – physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual – until one side beats the other into submission. And our world calls that peace. Peace, however, is much more than the absence of overt violence.

The only lasting and true peace must be inclusive of what is important to all sides. What is always required is a transformation to a higher, more inclusive state of being. Some authors refer to it as a *third way*. This way to peace requires each side to expand the range of solutions they are willing to consider enough to reassess their own position, while opening themselves to the position of the other. With persistence and patience, a third way emerges that allows both sides to retain what is truly important to them – traditions, cultures, languages – but they do so in a mutually beneficial, respectful, and transcendent way. This is the peace of Christ, who stood at the crossroads of human nature and spirit, of government and religion, of heaven and earth, and held himself there as an inclusive uniter. It was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross; it was his love for all sides. Whether the divisive issue is national borders, homophobia, racial or social injustice, Christ stands in the gap between the sides, holding the tension, and lovingly welcoming *everyone* to the table.

Those who follow the unifying example of Christ, then, are the peacemakers. They are the ones who stand in the gap between warring factions and, often at their own peril, work to expand the vision and experience of *both* sides so everyone can co-exist. Peacemakers are never exclusive but always inclusive of all people and views. This is why they are called *children of God*. They do exactly what Jesus came to earth to do – to make God known to us through a peace demonstrated by an unfailing love for and acceptance of *all*.

Journaling focus: What is one action I can take today to become a more effective peacemaker?

November 20
Those Persecuted for Righteousness

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
Matthew 5:10-12

Persecution takes many forms, none of them pleasant. Sometimes it is physical, as in a beating, lynching, or other act of violence. Other times, persecution is emotional, such as being devalued, made to feel insignificant, or misunderstood. Persecution can also be social, as in bullying, gossiping, or otherwise isolating someone from a group. Although we all suffer, not all suffering is persecution. Much of what we suffer from cannot be controlled. For example, if we are genetically predisposed to cancer or heart disease, we may suffer a serious physical ailment in spite of how well we attend to our health. Persecution can occur from things we have little control over. Particularly in bullying, someone may be persecuted because of the way they look. Perhaps a speech impediment or birthmark brings the unwelcome and hurtful ridicule of others. On the other hand, there were kids from my school days who seemed to invite persecution for no obvious reason. They seemed to annoy others for the sole purpose of getting attention, even when the attention they received was negative. Regardless of the cause or motivation, persecution is painful.

Jesus refers to a specific type of persecution in this passage, however; one that is consciously chosen. This is a persecution brought about by the overt practice of one's sincerely held beliefs. In Jesus' words, it is being "persecuted for righteousness sake," meaning suffering condemnation for what one believes is right and just. In a sense, this type of suffering is self-inflicted, for if one backed away from their expressed beliefs, at least in theory, the persecutors would stop persecuting. This suffering is consciously chosen in service of advocating for a position that is not in line with those in power. The act of speaking truth to power is an example, standing up to those in authority to point out injustice or the unethical use of authority. This type of invitation to suffering requires a dedication to a cause or a position that overrides one's concern for one's own safety and comfort. It is entirely selfless and can be dangerous.

It is wholly consistent with Jesus' teachings and life that we would be encouraged to stand up for the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, and the sick. And when our dedication to these groups comes at a personal cost to us, when our actions on their behalf causes us to suffer persecution, Jesus assures us of our reward. In this case, our reward is the kingdom of heaven. As I have expressed elsewhere, receiving the kingdom of heaven may or may not be an after-death experience. I believe Jesus refers to a state of being *here and now*, so the obvious question is this: If persecution is so unpleasant, what sort of compensating reward could override the pain?

This question cannot be answered in the same way we answer most questions because, as is typical of spiritual mysteries, words cannot adequately explain the reality. The kingdom of heaven is a real and present reality (for example, see Matthew 4:17), but we cannot experience it at the same level of consciousness where most of us live our lives. In our everyday

reality, doing something that invites persecution is disagreeable, at best. We must experience life at a level deep enough to get below the unpleasantness at the surface, however, to the forces at work at a more foundational level. At this level it is clear that we *must* serve the disenfranchised in order to serve Christ. If we are persecuted as a result, so be it. In other words, when all we experience is pain from our acts of righteousness, we are likely not present to the state of conscious reality in which Christ exists and works in and on our world. Underneath our surface-level suffering is rejoicing and gladness because the righteous are working *with* God. God is working *through* the righteous to put the world on a more just and honorable path, making all things new.

Journaling focus: When has looking deeper into an issue provided a different perspective for me?

November 21
First, Be Reconciled

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

We live in increasingly *angry* times, or so it seems to me. Perhaps our expectations of ourselves and others have been set so high that it is impossible for them to be met. In an age of photo-shopped images and unreal *reality* TV, perfection has seemingly become the new normal. No one measures up to that standard and many of us resent the self-imposed expectation that we could or should. On the rare occasions when I watch the news, I see stories of anger manifesting in families, schools, and workplaces. Whether we are stuck in traffic, annoyed by political commentary, or offended by the thoughtless actions of another, we are quick to become angry and slow to forgive. In many ways our self-righteous anger has morphed into the lifeblood of our society. If we are not angry about something, it seems we are not alive to the moment.

I am not implying there is nothing *worthy* of our anger. Hunger, homelessness, poverty, child and spousal abuse, injustice and oppression in their many manifestations, all should fill us with fury, and *a commitment to action*. My point is not that we should never be angry, but that it is not helpful to respond to anger with more anger. Becoming angry is a hollow, unhealthy emotion if it goes no further than being an emotion. When we sit in our easy chair, point our finger at the television and scream, *"Someone*

should do something about that!" we are correct. Someone *should* do something about it. Unfortunately, we miss the point whenever we think the someone who should do something is someone else.

Where we stray from Jesus' teachings about anger is when we demand retribution or retaliation when confronted with injustice or inconsiderate behavior. Jesus did not preach retribution or retaliation; Jesus taught *reconciliation,* and the difference is profound. Anger separates us from others and tells us, in essence, that we are better, more righteous, or more Christian than they. Jesus encourages *unity* with others, honoring and respecting the diverse ways in which each person manifests God's presence in the world. This is especially true in our churches, where Jesus tells us to *first* be reconciled to our brothers and sisters *before* we offer our gifts at the altar. Anyone preaching hatred, intolerance, punishment, retribution, or retaliation from the pulpit is, in my opinion, not faithfully relaying the message of Christ. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven times." In a word, *always*.

Anger is a gift from God intended to motivate us to action, not a sword to divide us one from another. It is the energy and passion that empowers our words and actions. We do well to remember, however, that that which upsets us is almost always a reflection of some deeply repressed dissatisfaction within our own being. Therefore, humility is a wise companion to anger.

In the 1970's movie *Network*,[77] a former news anchor played by Peter Finch goes into an on-air rant, encouraging people to stick their head out the window and yell, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" The movie pans to scenes throughout the country where people yell, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore." Being mad is neither the problem nor the solution, however. The problem comes when we focus outside of ourselves first, blaming and demanding change from others, before assessing our internal motivations and responsibilities. Yes, we should be mad as hell; and yes, we should do something about it. This is *our* world – yours and mine – and it is *our* responsibility to make it better for *everyone*. Our righteous anger can help motivate us to do so, but meaningful change begins within.

Once we have lovingly reconciled with our brothers and sisters – and our spouses, parents, children, co-workers, neighbors, strangers-on-the-street, immigrants, and those of different ethnicities and orientations – *then* can we lay our offerings at the altar in peace.

Journaling focus: Who should I seek to reconcile with today?

November 22
Thanksgiving Reflections

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
Psalm 95:2-3

In the Christian calendar, Thanksgiving ends the year. It is a day of appreciation for the blessings of the season. The first Thanksgiving occurred in 1621 between the pilgrims and Native Americans. It was officially proclaimed a national holiday by George Washington in 1789, designated "as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God."

It is important to formally express our appreciation for the blessings of the past year prior to beginning a new one. The season of Advent begins the Christian year. The act of reflecting on our blessings reminds us of the law of sowing and reaping. First and foremost, God watches over and blesses us on an on-going basis, although that blessing is often unnoticed and taken for granted. Second, what we harvest at Thanksgiving is a direct result of what we sowed the past spring. This is a time to reflect on the nature and bounty of our harvest even as we prepare to sow for the year to come.

That Thanksgiving has become a time of overeating and football is a perversion of its original purpose, which was to praise and give thanks to a generous and faithful God. It is appropriate to begin a series of meditations on Christmas with an acknowledgement of Thanksgiving. As our calendar year winds down, it is natural to reflect on what worked well these past months and what we wish to do differently in the future.

I realize that Thanksgiving only occurs on November 22 about once every 7 years, so it is likely that you are reading this a day or more before Thanksgiving. It is never too early, however, to be thankful or to give. I encourage you to begin this season of Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, New Year's, and Epiphany today.

Journaling focus: What has worked well for me this past year? What do I need to adjust for next year?

November 23
A Season of Receiving

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

There is a direct relationship between what we give and what we receive. Farmers and gardeners know this principle well. If we do not plant in the spring, we do not harvest in the fall. The lessons of sowing and reaping are less obvious to us today, since few of us grow our own food. However, not too many generations ago, inadequate attention to spring planting could result in starvation the following winter. Demonstrations of sowing and reaping are all around us, as decisions of the past manifest their consequences today. We have sayings that express this truth: "The chickens come home to roost." "We get what we deserve." "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Even so, the time that passes between cause (planting) and effect (harvesting) makes the relationship between sowing and reaping cloudy and easily overlooked.

Paul addresses the concept of sowing and reaping in today's scripture passage, noting you must sow in abundance to reap in abundance. Additionally, those who receive in abundance are expected to share abundantly. If we believe this only applies to crops, we miss the point in a serious way. We sow many types of seeds throughout our lives – seeds of kindness, hard work, love, and generosity. So, if during this time of Thanksgiving we are not receiving the kind of life we most desire – whether it is marked by kindness, love, or material goods – maybe we should take a hard look at what we have sown. The writer of the book of Acts attributes Jesus as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35b). Perhaps we could also say, "It is required *first* to give in order to receive." Obviously, there are those in life circumstances who need assistance in sowing, and that is where and why the rest of us must share our abundance. Ultimately, our bounty does not belong to us anyway, but to God.

Finally, in the words of the great prophets of the last century – Lennon and McCartney, "…and in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love you make."[78] I pray you will share the abundance of a bountiful harvest during this season, which is the *giving* part of Thanksgiving.

Journaling focus: What seeds have I sown that caused me to reap what I did not enjoy?

November 24
Gratitude and Happiness

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." Colossians 3:14-15

My Grandma Hildenbrand was a grateful person. She appreciated the good in everyone. I do not recall gossip, pessimism, or foul language ever crossing her lips. I actually felt guilty, because the person she saw in me was far superior to the person I believed myself to be. She unfailingly praised and encouraged me. She was grateful to God for *me,* her first grandchild. Being positive and thankful was a way of life for my grandmother.

There was a popular TED Talk by Shawn Achor titled, *The Happy Secret to Better Work*.[79] He is a proponent of *Positive Psychology,* which suggests *how* we view our world largely shapes our experience of what happens to us. A focus of the talk is to encourage listeners to untie happiness from success. Our definitions of success are constantly changing and seldom reached. Therefore, if we believe we must be successful to be happy, we will never be happy. Even when we reach a long worked-for goal, our definition for success will likely shift long before we reach the goal. Mr. Achor has a formula for creating positive change in our lives. The first step is to identify three new things to be grateful for, every day, for twenty-one consecutive days. While success and happiness may not be related, *gratitude* and happiness certainly are.

Thanksgiving is a time of gratitude. It occurs in the late fall to acknowledge the blessings of the year. While it has become an exercise in over-indulgence, the foundation of the day is rooted in thankfulness. Many of us gather with family and friends, share a meal or two, and enjoy fellowship with each other. Life is good. In spite of the many tragedies and challenges sprinkled throughout her life, my grandmother was thankful. We should be, too.

Being intentionally thankful is a wise choice. A grateful heart is not only pleasing to and helpful for others; expressing appreciation is a biblical charge, as in today's passage from Colossians. Perhaps most importantly, there is a selfish reason to be grateful – it is good for us! When we observe our life through a lens of gratitude, we find many reasons for hope and optimism. We become happier people. Until we acknowledge the reasons we have for thankfulness, we cannot understand how truly blessed we are.

Journaling focus: What three things am I grateful for today?

November 25
Appreciation and Obedience

"…My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant…" Luke 1:46b-48a

These words are the beginning of a passage called, *The Magnificat*, found in Luke 1:46-55. It is Mary's song of praise as she reflects on being chosen to carry and give birth to Jesus. She is staying with her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also feeling favored by God as she is pregnant with the child to become John the Baptist. It is a beautiful, joyful passage that has been set to music by many composers.

There is nothing in scripture to hint that Mary is anything but a typical teenage girl for her time. Aside from birthing Jesus, she performs no miracles or healings. She does not challenge the religious or political authorities. She weeps, like any mother would, at the crucifixion of her son. Yet, two thousand years later, she is held in only slightly lower esteem than Jesus, worshipped as a Saint by many denominations.

However, there are notable characteristics of Mary worth contemplating. The first is implied in the passage above: *humble appreciation*. She confesses her unworthiness to be favored by God in this manner, yet she rejoices that she has been so favored. The second is *faithful obedience*. We find this in Luke 1:26, where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her she will birth the Son of God. Her response, in verse 38, is *"Here am I, servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."*

Humble appreciation and faithful obedience are how Christmas began, two thousand years ago. It is a good way to begin the Christmas season still today. Thanksgiving is a time for humble appreciation. Although the spirit of Thanksgiving, today, is often overwhelmed by gluttony and football, we do well to pause and take note of our blessings.

We also do well to follow Mary's lead of faithful obedience. Mary was a regular teenage girl, looking forward to a regular life with a regular husband, in a regular home in a regular town. Until Gabriel appears to tell her that her life was about to become anything but regular. Where is God leading us this Christmas season? Keeping our eyes and ears, our hearts and spirits open to God's nudging will help us answer that question. How do we respond when we find our lives becoming something other than what we expected? Mary's response was one of humble appreciation and faithful obedience. Perhaps through these traits we, too, will become favored participants in this same story, as it continues to be written in our lives.

Journaling focus: How do I respond when my life becomes difficult?

November 26
Advent

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year. It is a time of preparation. More specifically, it is a time of expectant waiting and preparing for the birth of Jesus. However, as the beginning of a new year for the church, it is also a time of planning for the year to come.

Technically, Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas Day. Each of the four Sundays in Advent has a specific theme. The actual themes vary slightly between church denominations, but my church celebrates Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Advent, as the beginning of the church year, always comes after Thanksgiving, the end of the previous church year.

Advent is a time to prepare for rebirth, a time of beginning again. We not only prepare for the Christmas celebration, but more importantly for the birth of the Christ-child within our lives. As such, it is a time for making room. Anytime we add something new to our lives we must first consider where it will fit. Sometimes we must get rid of something old or no longer used in order to make room. Sometimes we must let go of something we have held onto long past its usefulness. Often, we recognize that the things we cling most tightly to prevent us from moving forward – past hurts, painful memories, clothes that no longer fit.

In order to allow the Christ-child to be born within us, we must make room for the new life to occur. We would never consider adding another child to our home without first considering how we will feed, nurture, shelter, and provide the love and attention required for another family member. We must do the same with Jesus or he will become like another forgotten Christmas toy, relegated to a shelf somewhere, ignored and buried under other stuff.

Journaling focus: What can I get rid of in my life to make room for the new birth promised by Christmas?

November 27
Uncovering Hope

Hope is always forward-looking. Faith looks beyond the current circumstances. To be hopeful and to be faithful are related. If our vision of the future is not based in hope for better days and grounded by faith in a loving God, our future will look frightening and dismal.

The Advent theme of Hope recognizes the hope we have in the birth of Jesus. Although the actual birth occurred two thousand years ago, we celebrate the birth annually to remind ourselves of the hope it brings. Jesus, born in abysmal conditions, grew up to become the Christ of God, the Son in the Trinity, the perfect embodiment of the spirit in human form. The Old Testament prophets told of a coming Messiah who would free people from their chains. Based on the prophesies, people waited and looked to the future with hope. We do the same in this season. We hope for a rebirth of Christ in our lives at Christmas, and we believe that rebirth will increase our faith and guide us to bless others, even as we are blessed in our daily lives.

The hope of Advent is forward-looking. Emmanuel means *God is with us*. It does not mean that God will do everything for us. It does not mean nothing unpleasant will happen to us. Rather, it means that together *with God,* all things are possible. We must do our part, alongside of God. Advent should not be a time of things being done *to* us, but of us doing things *with* God and with each other. We celebrate the rebirth of God into our lives, and we look forward *with hope* for the opportunities of beginning again.

Journaling focus: For what do I hope in this season of Advent?

November 28
Accepting Our Role

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" Matthew 1:19-21

I imagine Joseph as a humble, hard-working man, quietly trying to build a good and righteous life for himself. I suspect he was a good citizen, a good husband and father, in keeping with the traditions and expectations of the time. He spent time in the Temple and tried to apply what he learned to his daily life as best he could.

How do I know all this? I do not. There is very little written about the earthly father of Jesus, but what is written paints a picture consistent with the above description. The fact that he finds his fiancé pregnant, not

by him, and still intends to dismiss her quietly rather than make a public spectacle of her, indicates a quiet and humble man. The fact that he had the above encounter in a dream with an angel and chose to obey seems to describe someone faithful, discerning, and obedient. I doubt he aspired to raise divinity, but when called by the angel of God to do so, he obeyed.

Joseph had a role to play, if one with few speaking or memorable parts. Most of the glory would go to the child and the mother, but someone needed to support to the family. Someone had to shepherd the mother and child into Egypt to flee from Herod. Jesus would need a male figure to teach him a trade and model what it meant to be a man in first century Judea. Joseph is seldom mentioned as part of the story of Christ, and never after Jesus is twelve. Was Joseph even alive for the crucifixion? Alas, we cannot know.

There are undoubtedly many unsung heroes, unnamed people who played various and important roles in the growth and development of Jesus. We see the same thing happening in our churches and communities with people who work behind the scenes and receive little or no recognition. What gets done, gets done because faithful people see a need and step in to do what they are tasked and gifted to do. It has always been that way. It always will be that way. Joseph receives three brief mentions for what was certainly a difficult, heart-rending, and life-consuming role. Should we expect more for our faithful service? As we prepare in this season of waiting, let us contemplate our role in the coming year.

Journaling focus: What mostly-anonymous roles am I gifted and willing to serve?

November 29
Joy and Happiness

"Rejoice always…give thanks in all circumstances..." 1 Thessalonians 5:16, 18
"We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness…"
the Declaration of Independence of the USA

Given the choice, do we prefer joy or happiness? The Declaration of Independence identifies *the pursuit of happiness* as an inalienable right granted by our Creator. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians exhorts the early Christians to be *joyful* in all circumstances. In advertising, we hear much more about happiness than joy. Could that which makes us happy be

more desirable than that which makes us joyful? It is an interesting question. To understand happiness is to understand the emotion of the moment. In general, happiness is circumstantial; that is, we can be happy one moment and unhappy the next. Our environment affects our level of happiness: nice weather, thoughtful gifts, and being treated well by others helps us to feel happy. Thus, advertisers believe convincing consumers their product will bring happiness is more effective than convincing consumers a product will bring them joy. Understanding what makes a person happy is often an easier task than understanding the causes of joy, which requires a deeper dive into one's personal philosophy of life.

Where happiness is an emotion, joy is a state of being. To be joyful is to be hopeful and optimistic. Joy is faith-based. It requires faith that no matter how bad our circumstances seem, our circumstances will improve. We may not know how or when improvements will occur, but we believe they will. Joy looks forward with hope, beyond the challenges of the moment. In so doing, it allows us to let go of anxiety about the future so we can more acutely focus on the issues of the moment. While joy originates in faith and hope, joy results in contentment. We do not need whatever might make us happy in any given moment, especially if it might cost us joy in the future. Our hope assures us of blessings to come, even as we give thanks for the blessings of the past.

Personally, if I cannot have both joy and happiness, I will choose joy. Indeed, one can argue that happiness is a natural byproduct of joy. Unfortunately, happiness does not always result in joy. There is a permanence to joy not present in happiness alone. Joy transcends momentary circumstances and makes a forward-looking hope possible. For Christians, our joy grows from the knowledge that we are loved and redeemed by a God who chose to come to earth as a baby, to grow, and walk among us. The birth of the Christ-child is our reason for hope.

Journaling focus: What in my life makes me happy? What brings me joy?

November 30
Faith and Hope

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." Hebrews 11:1-2

Faith is a challenging concept. It is a cornerstone of our Christian belief, and it can lead us to ask and face challenging questions. Sometimes we feel damned if we have faith, and equally damned if we do not. For example, does having faith conflict with taking action? Does a faithful parent trust God to protect their young child from the hot stove? Where is the line drawn between having faith and taking charge? Clearly, there is a line, but its location can be murky. Certainly, most parents will intervene between a child and a hot stove; but the same parent will *hope,* in faith, for God to protect their teenager while driving to and from school.

One time a physician told me that, at some point, we have to "let the Good Lord run His course." It felt like a platitude. He was referring to the limited medical choices available when someone is very ill and likely near death. What choices are most reflective of our faith? Certainly, we hope for the best, but we must also be realistic. Our decisions have consequences, but we cannot be certain of those consequences when the decisions are made. Faith questions are difficult; otherwise they would not require faith.

Most Christians have faith that there is a God, that Jesus lived and died to save us, and that there is a Holy Spirit present with us today. We cannot see any of these spiritual realities, except by faith. Jesus told his followers if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains. Mustard seeds are *tiny!* Does that mean the non-mountain-movers among us have a microscopic faith? Paul wrote in his letter to the Hebrews, *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for…"* We hope for better days in our darkest times; and our faith assures us that better days will come.

Obviously, faith and hope are closely related. Our *faith* tells us there is a God watching over us. We *hope* that God has our best interests in mind. In the darkest days of winter, a reason for hope is born. It is the birth of a baby; a baby born to save us from our sins of separation. A baby born to lead us to a fuller life.

Journaling focus: What types of things do I accept on faith?

December 1
Dreaming Large

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."
Romans 8:24-25

Advent is a time of preparation. If we presume that our spiritual preparations for Christmas are limited to the gift-buying, candy-making, home decorating, party-attending frenzy typically associated with Christmas preparations, we miss the mark entirely. Advent is a time to prepare ourselves, spiritually, for the (re)birth of Christ into our lives. It involves a tremendous gift, but not one we can buy in any store at any price. The gift will not be advertised in any newspaper or flyer, nor are there long lines in which to wait to receive it. The gift simply comes to all who earnestly seek, desire, and acknowledge it. Yet it is not *given to* us as much as *born into* us, to live with and as us for all our days.

Like most gifts, the gift of Christ can lose its luster, its newness, and its appeal if we allow that to happen. Day to day life enters in and time with the gift of Christ in our lives becomes less of a priority. We may drift away to a point where Emmanuel becomes something we think about on occasional Sunday mornings. However, that is far from the purpose of having a divine presence participating in everything we are and do. Having Jesus born into our lives is to be like growing another limb. We no longer come to church to be reminded of Christ, we come to church because our constant relationship with Christ draws us toward others in similar relationships. Our relationship draws us to places where Christ is celebrated. Praise is best when shared. While Christmas is, at its heart, a celebration of the birth of Jesus into our world, Advent is a time to prepare for the birth of Jesus into our lives. This is not a corporate birth into the generic life of the human world. It is a very personal, very intrusive birth into each individual life who desires and is willing to accept it.

So, as we dream of Christmas this season, we should dedicate significant time to plan for our relationship with the Holy One of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, remember that we are saved in hope; not hope in what we can see, but in what is unseen. So, do not be afraid to dream large about this gift. Dream, and then wait with patience, expectancy, and hope.

Journaling focus: In what ways are my dreams about Christ in my life too small?

December 2
A Worthwhile Wait

"He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord…'" John 1:23

It was my last business trip of the year. Everything went according to schedule, until my phone rang at 5:20 on the morning I was to return home. A computerized voice said my flights had been cancelled and asked if I would accept rebooking for the following day. I said, "No," and was told to hold for the next available agent. An hour later, a nice woman made flight arrangements that would get me home on the same day, albeit 12 hours later than I had planned. I arrived at the airport long before my new flight was to depart and was told, "All passengers bound for Dallas, please wait in this line for the next available agent. Your flights have been cancelled." That wait was another hour, but the agent assured me my flights had not been cancelled, only delayed a couple hours. Again, the wait was worthwhile because I would get home later that day. I got to my gate several hours before the new departure time and waited. Several hours later, my flights were cancelled after all. I returned to the ticket counter for rebooking. Another line and another long wait, and I was booked onto the same flights I had been offered at 5:20 that morning, returning me home the next day. It was a lot of waiting for one day, with very little progress towards home to show for it.

Advent is a time of waiting. Advent is a time of preparation. In truth, it is a time to prepare while we wait. Christmas does not arrive until December 25, regardless of how early we begin our preparations. On my business trip, I was not going to get home on my planned day, regardless of how long I waited or how diligently I prepared. It would happen in its time. Whether our Advent journey is worthwhile depends on what we do as we are waiting. John the Baptist, whose ministry preceded that of Jesus, proclaimed, "Prepare the way!" He preached the need to prepare ourselves for Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, while we wait.

The season of Advent invites us to reevaluate Jesus' place in our lives. It is a time to reflect on the areas needing a Savior's help and guidance. Yet, holiday parties, gift buying, decorating, and other activities that leave little time for serious reflection will quickly consume this time of preparation and waiting if we do not manage our priorities carefully. We do well to make time to reflect and prepare as we wait. Otherwise, Advent will become a wasted opportunity to draw closer to God, and Christmas will just be another holiday.

Journaling focus: What can I do to better prepare for Christ's coming while I wait?

December 3
Good News?

"John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the throng of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Luke 3:16-18

Probably every athlete in every sport goes through some sort of preseason training – a time of preparing, physically and mentally, for the actual season. Often it begins with extended and painful workouts, unusual practice hours, and a grueling schedule. This *boot camp* is intended to break old habits and mold the athlete into a new being, one in game-shape, whatever that means for their particular sport. John the Baptist was like an Advent coach. His job was to prepare the people for the coming of Christ. The writer of the gospel of Luke claims *"…he proclaimed the good news to the people."* When I think of good news, I think of something happy and pleasant. However, what we read hardly sounds like fun. It sounds more like a drill sergeant in basic training screaming that we will be rising every morning at 4:00 am and running five miles uphill in the rain before breakfast.

John says Christ will baptize us with fire, separating the wheat from the chaff, the latter of which will be burned with unquenchable fire. The visual he was using, though strange today, was probably familiar and powerful at the time. When wheat was harvested, before it could be made into bread, the non-wheat debris had to be separated out. That which was not wheat was burned, leaving only the useful portion of the harvest.

The alchemists of old purified gold and precious metals by burning away the impurities. Metaphorically speaking, this is what is done to an impure spirit – the impurities are burned away, leaving something cleaner, purer, and more useful to the creator's purposes. When we accept Jesus into our lives, we begin a journey of change. When we surrender lordship over our lives to Jesus, we allow the less-useful, sinful parts of our lives to fall away. We do this so our spirit will draw closer to that of the pure and perfect Christ, even though the burning away of our impurities is often painful. This baptism by fire is the only way to get from where we are into the presence of the One we seek. It requires relationship. Advent is a period of training and preparation. The Christ-child is coming. Are you ready?

Journaling focus: What needs to be burned out of my life to make room for Jesus?

December 4
Uncovering Peace

The theme for the second week of Advent is *Peace.* As is commonly known, peace is not a singular concept, but has several applications, all of which are important in preparing for the birth of Jesus. One aspect of peace commonly discussed in this season is world peace. We recall the story of the British and German soldiers on a Christmas morning during World War I of taking time out from their battle to sing Christmas Carols together and share rations. Unfortunately, they resumed shooting at each other the next day, so it was a short and imperfect peace.

Closer to home for many of us is peace in our families. The Christmas season is fraught with family gatherings, some of which last beyond everyone's comfort level. Particularly for families who do not gather often, memories of how annoying certain relatives can be sometimes fade, at least until they walk through the door. Even so, we attempt to make amends and keep peace in the family.

For me, the most challenging application of peace in this season, and arguably the most important, is internal peace. Finding time to remain centered, keeping balance through a hectic time of the year is difficult. It is, however, the secret to maintaining a focus on the purpose of the season, which is the rebirth of the Christ child within.

Peace in our families and peace in our world begin with individual, inner peace. We cannot create a peaceful environment when tension is boiling from within.

Journaling focus: With whom in my life should I seek to make peace this Christmas season?

December 5
A Different Peace

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."
Matthew 10:34-36

"For a child has been born for us…and he is named…Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

Most years, my favorite part of Christmas is very late on Christmas Eve. Once the stores have closed, travelers have arrived at their destinations, and the worship services are over, my world becomes quiet. Everything seems to be in its proper place. Strands of *Silent Night* linger in the air, and the world feels at peace. Unfortunately, the world is never at peace. There is turmoil across the planet and across the street. For too many, there is unrest across the room. Isaiah refers to Jesus as the Prince of Peace; yet in Matthew 10, Jesus claims not to have come to bring peace, but division: father against son, daughter against mother, nation against nation. How do we reconcile the Prince of Peace described in Isaiah with the person of Jesus in Matthew? I believe the answer lies in our understanding of peace. Jesus invites us into a different kind of peace.

In war, peace comes when one side surrenders to the other. In business, peace often comes through negotiation, where competing sides find a resolution that includes elements of importance to both. In families, peace may come by surrender or negotiation. The peace of Jesus requires both. As individuals, we surrender to the positional and divine authority of Jesus. Referring to Jesus as *Lord* is an expression of our submission. As a community of believers, peace will come through a negotiation that respects, values, and includes the diversity of all of creation. All are created in the image of God, so none can be left behind.

In a war-like surrender, one side is beaten into submission. As individuals, we submit, or surrender to Jesus' terms. Indeed, sometimes the consequences of a disobedient life beats us into submission. Truly, the battle we wage is not *against* Jesus, but against our misunderstanding of or blatant disregard of his teachings. We cannot know peace without being in harmony with Christ. However, true peace goes well beyond the individual. Jesus' words are a call to war – a war on injustice, exclusion, and suffering. We have the resources to eliminate much of what keeps our fellow man in bondage and our world from peace. But do we have the will to so designate those resources? Until we exercise that will, we will not find peace. True peace cannot come to any, until it comes to all. Until we follow Jesus' command to love one another, Jesus' words will divide us like a sword, and there will be no silent night.

Journaling focus: In what situations do I find myself surrendering? In what situations do I seek to negotiate?

December 6
Unity and Peace

"He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace." Ephesians 2:15

"His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. Isaiah 9:7a

When God sent Jesus into the world, the tangled web of commandments and laws put into place over many previous generations were replaced as the preconditions to salvation. The many commandments were rolled into one: Follow Jesus. It sounds simple, does it not? Prior to Jesus there were two general categories of humanity: those who followed the laws of the Old Testament and were saved, and those who did not and were not. According to the writer of Ephesians, Jesus was to unite the two into himself, making peace.

If the Bible tells when this peace will be attained, I have missed it. I look at our world and see increasingly worse division. I see strong and deepening divisions along racial, cultural, ethnic, political, and religious lines. The various branches of the Protestant church sometimes seem to preach different Gospels. Even within Protestant denominations, some churches hardly seem to believe in the same God. Within my own denomination, the United Methodist Church, there is wide variation in the teachings making it seem hardly United. When I hear Christian preachers speak about what is required of a follower of Jesus with absolute certainty, I wonder, *"How do they know?"* What am I missing that makes others so certain?

Unity and peace. They have a utopian ring. They are Biblical concepts, but are they meant for the earth? If so, when and where can we expect to experience them? They certainly are not present in the halls of Congress. They are also lacking in the pews of many churches. It does not seem we will ever experience unity or peace in our world, at least not anytime soon. Perhaps unity and peace are internal. Maybe we must look within, rather than without, in order to find them.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to increase my internal sense of peace?

December 7
Peace on Earth?

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'" Luke 2:13-14

One of the traditional images of Christmas is that of Peace. We sing, *"Sleep in heavenly peace."* Banners proclaim, *"Peace on Earth!"* In Isaiah 9:6, the coming Jesus is named the Prince of Peace. Christians have been celebrating this Prince of Peace for two thousand years; so, where is the peace? Across the globe there are civil wars, genocide, infanticide, and ethnic cleansing. In our cities, assaults and murders are far too common. The Middle East, the birthplace of three of the world's major religions, is a perennial hotbed of violence and war. Physical violence and peace cannot coexist. Peace also cannot coexist with emotional violence or abuse. So I ask again, where is the peace we read about at Christmas?

If peace is the absence of violence, peace on earth may not be possible. Everything in our world is temporal and constantly changing. Nothing of the earth was created to last. Everything forms, exists for a time, and then changes into something else. Our souls clothe themselves in materials of the earth at birth and leave them behind at death. Violence is largely, if not entirely, a manifestation of want – want of property, want of power, want of attention, want of security. Indeed, violence is often an outgrowth of insecurity; and insecurity runs wild in unstable environments, like earth. In contrast, the peace of Christ is an internal peace, providing stability and certainty in an unstable and uncertain world. When we find the peace of Christ, the peace that passes all understanding, we take that peace wherever we go and into whatever circumstances we find ourselves. From that holy center within – where Creator and creation meet -- peace radiates outward, helping to bring a measure of peace to our surroundings. Like a candle spreading its light in the darkness, so peace calms volatility. True peace will draw others to itself.

Peace on earth begins within each of us. Internal peace is bestowed through the favor of God. The favor of God is gained through a relationship with God. Although that relationship is up to each individual to cultivate and awaken to, a good church can help.

Journaling focus: What activities help me to find a peaceful, grounded center during this season?

December 8
Where is the Peace?

"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

Every year is the same. Well before Thanksgiving, I vow to begin my Christmas shopping early and finish before the crowds swell. Even so, every year I find myself still shopping in the hours before Christmas, still addressing cards, and still behind on other preparations. This season of joy, new birth, family, and fellowship becomes a nightmare of crowded check-out lines, cranky shoppers, and looming deadlines. It is a frantic mess. When I hear Jesus referred to as the "Prince of Peace," I want to laugh. This celebration of his birth is anything but peaceful.

How has Christmas, the celebration, strayed so far from its origins? Did not the angels sing of "Peace on Earth" in Bethlehem 2000 years ago? Was that peace intended to apply to our inner cities? To the Middle East? To the stomach of a starving child? Perhaps it is helpful to consider where peace is not. Wherever violence, chronic need, fear, and uncertainty exist, there is no peace. The least peaceful times in my life have been characterized by fear, uncertainty, anger, and loss of control; times when it is difficult to maintain enough focus for even the simplest of prayers. In the disorganized havoc of such times God is certainly present, but mostly imperceptible to me. In fact, the manger scene in which Jesus was born could not have been the peaceful scene we now romanticize it to be. However, God was there; and God is here today.

We have the free will to turn to and acknowledge God's presence, or not. For me, I must quiet my mind to experience God. There I find peace, even in the midst of fear and uncertainty. Most years I find that peace, if only for a moment, after the last Christmas Eve service has concluded and my world grows blessedly quiet. When I am centered enough to experience the presence of God, there is no fear or uncertainty or need. There is only God, and that is sufficient. In those quiet times of holy peace, the child is born again. Certainly, the challenges on earth will not have the final word. My teacher and mentor, Fr. Richard Rohr, says, "The worst thing is never the last thing." If only within, and if only for a moment, and if only for me, there is peace on earth. It is not a matter of whether the Prince of Peace comes, but whether we will be in a frame of mind to receive him.

Journaling focus: Where do I find my greatest sources of fear and uncertainty this season?

December 9
Higher Truth and Endless Peace

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Councilor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace…
Isaiah 9:6-7a

The theme for the 2nd week of Advent is Peace, and my former profession left me doing a lot of thinking about peace. I was involved in a number of national discussions relating to my profession, and the debates were not always civil. In fact, some of the comments become downright personal and nasty. It is in this context of disagreement that I contemplate peace.

In my opinion, for peace to exist between two or more people (or countries), there must first be a foundation of mutual respect, as well as an acknowledgement that all points of view have value. I do *not* have to agree with someone to co-exist peacefully with them. I do not even have to *like* them. I do have to accept and respect their right to believe as they do, however. It is clear to me that our core differences are exposed by what we cannot discuss civilly. Peace cannot be present when one or both sides are defensive. We become defensive when we feel threatened. As long as another person's point of view on a particular topic threatens me, we will be unable to have a peaceful or productive discussion on the topic. When defensiveness enters a conversation, minds slam shut. When minds slam shut, there can be no *dialogue*, because true dialogue requires giving and receiving. Closed minds cannot receive.

An open mind is willing to hear and consider alternate points of view. It is open to the possibility of being changed. Open minds create opportunities to discover *higher truths*. A higher truth is one that encompasses both original points of view, but goes farther than either goes alone. It does not lessen the value of the individual thoughts, but it includes and then moves beyond them. This higher truth, once reached, is not threatening to either party since it includes what was important to both. Higher truths allow for civil interaction between people and countries. Only by doing the work to discover higher truths will we know peace in our lives or world.

Jesus modeled higher truths throughout his ministry. He accepted his followers as they were and sought to raise them up to his level. Consider the woman caught in the act of adultery, who was about to be stoned to death (John 8). Jesus invited those without sin to cast the first stone. No stones were thrown. He pointed out the higher truth that *all* are sinners.

Jesus intentionally sought out those that society rejected in order to bring them into his circle of life. The prophet Isaiah wrote about the authority of Jesus hundreds of years prior to Jesus' birth, describing how his authority would grow continually and bring endless peace. We cannot imagine this type of peace in our deeply divided world. We can, however, follow the example of Jesus and seek higher truths that accept others where they are and lead us all to a higher, more peaceful co-existence.

Journaling focus: What topics or issues am I most likely to become defensive about? What do I find so threatening about them?

December 10
A United Vision

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6

The vision recorded in today's reading from Isaiah must have seemed as far-fetched to the people of that era as it does today. In today's parlance, we might say, "What was he smoking?" Isaiah prophesied that the prey and the predator would live together in peace. As if that was not hard enough to believe, he went on to say a little child would lead them.

The vision is one of true peace, where all beings live without fear. Given the world we live in today, it seems an impossible achievement. We seem naturally to focus on our differences, and much of what makes us different or unique is also that which threatens others. Nations send soldiers to kill and to die to preserve their uniqueness. Individuals ostracize and criticize to emphasize the failings of another. Is it all necessary?

Not according to Isaiah, who expressed a united vision. When all are accepted, none are rejected. When there is enough food, there is no reason for anyone to kill in order to eat. When we recognize and value others as beloved children of God, just as ourselves, there is no reason to attack or try to harm them. It is a child's vision in an adult world – and in this case, the child is wiser than the adult.

Adults are protective by nature – protective of their property, protective of their honor, and protective of what they believe to be right. Protectionism is a natural reaction, but it is a defensive posture that makes us see everything and everyone as a potential threat. Who and what, exactly,

is threatening us? Most of our fears are creations of our imaginations. Does respecting the rights of others who hold diverse views from our own threaten our way of life? I do not believe it does. In Isaiah's vision, we all take a deep breath, relax, and realize our fears are mostly imaginary. World peace begins with individual, internal peace. Finding peace within starts with a realistic view of where our security comes from. It does not come from a large bank account, a steady job, or a tall fence around our home or nation. It comes from a strong faith – a child-like faith – that we are loved, valued, and protected by an all-powerful God.

Journaling focus: Who and what am I threatened by?

December 11
Uncovering Joy

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." Luke 2:10

The theme for the third week of Advent is *Joy*. Joy is often confused with its attractive but less mature sibling, happiness. The difference between joy and happiness is significant, however. Joy is the more dependable trait, and while it is inclusive of happiness, joy goes beyond simply being happy.

Happiness is largely an emotion, while joy is an underlying orientation to life. Happiness can wax and wane throughout and during our days, but true joy remains constant. The happy person is subject to undue influence from others and their environment. The joyful person finds a blessing in every experience.

It is interesting to compare joy and happiness in religious and secular contexts. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America says, in part: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of *Happiness*" (emphasis added). The Founding Fathers of the United States declared the pursuit of happiness to be a right for everyone that has been granted by God. In Luke 2:10, the angel of the Lord says, "I am bringing you good news of great *joy* for all the people." From a secular standpoint, the pursuit of happiness is a right all people have that governments should

not impede. From a religious standpoint, the birth of Jesus was news of great joy for everyone. Happiness can be pursued; joy is a gift for those who accept the good news of Jesus Christ. Both are important and impart blessings on our lives.

Journaling focus: What are the main sources of joy in my life?

December 12
Joy and Awe

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Luke 2:8-9

One of the counterintuitive directives of the Bible, at least to me, is to *fear* the Lord. It is difficult to be afraid of the God who created me, loves me, and looks out for my best interests. However, the Hebrew word for *fear* can also be translated as *awe*. That we are to hold God in *awe* makes more sense to me. Holding someone or something in awe respects the mystery, power, and reverence of their or its nature. Awe is the natural reaction bestowed on that which is immensely greater or more powerful than anything we know.

Even so, fear and awe are closely related. That which I hold in awe could, presumably, squelch me like a bug if it so desired. So, if I am uncomfortable saying I *fear* God, it is only because I trust God's motives regarding me. However, I also reluctantly understand God's love can lead me into fearful situations. In the *Narnia* series of books by C.S. Lewis the character representing Jesus is an untamed lion named Aslan. The stories are peppered with instances where Aslan both terrifies with his fierceness yet comforts with his compassion and wisdom. Aslan's goodness is a given, but no one is ever completely comfortable in his presence. There is a simultaneous sense of being drawn to, yet remaining distant from. It is awesome, but it is also frightening.

One night in the fields near Bethlehem a group of shepherds were fulfilling their duty of guarding sheep. These shepherds were not wimps. They had to fend off all manner of vicious predators seeking a lamb chop snack. This group of tough, hardened shepherds saw an angel of the Lord, and they were terrified. Not just uncomfortable; not a little scared. They were *terrified!*

Has God's entry into our lives lost its terror? As we prepare for Emmanuel, God with us, has the season become so commonplace as to have lost its *awe*? If so, we need to reflect on the true nature of the season: incomprehensible love, redemption, new birth, and grace. These are not minor miracles. These are gifts from a power beyond comprehension. A power that can only be held in *awe*; and worshipped. Terror is also a reasonable option.

Journaling focus: Reflect on an experience that was awe-inspiring for you.

December 13
The Roots of Joy

"When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." Luke 2:17-18

Happy Holidays! Merry Christmas! We want those we love to be happy at Christmas, and there is nothing wrong with wanting happiness, right? I devote a good deal of effort seeking happiness. Yet, nothing in the Christmas story speaks of happiness. In fact, the first Christmas probably was not a happy time at all. Mary and Joseph made the long, difficult journey to Bethlehem, only to be unable to find a place to stay. They were forced to find shelter with farm animals, likely in a dark, smelly, and chilly cave. In that harshest of places, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Indeed, Christmas today is anything but a happy time for many. Too many people are without homes, shelter, or enough food. Too many people are lonely or ill. There are always victims of violence or addictions, as well as family and friends who are victimized by them. Many of us succumb to the over-the-top expectations of the commercialized mega-event we have allowed Christmas to become.

Although the Christmas story does not speak of happiness, it does speak of "great joy." Should we be wishing each other joy for Christmas instead of happiness? I believe we should; and here is why: joy has roots. When the presents have been opened; when the food has been consumed; when family and friends have vacated the premises; when unrealistic expectations have gone unmet (again), happiness dissipates.

Those seeking joy this holiday season will have to work to find it. Like so many things worth having, joy cannot be purchased in a store nor obtained by cooking through the night. It is not found at the best Christmas

parties or by having our homes decorated just right. Joy will not be found under the Christmas tree. Finding joy requires a completely different focus of effort and expenditure of resources. The roots of joy are in faith, and we must plant ourselves deeply in a life unseen to allow joy to grow and prosper. Joy grows as we weather the ups and downs of life through time and still proclaim life as amazingly good, albeit sometimes unpleasant.

So yes, I wish you the Joy of Christmas. Do not, however, be too quick to thank me. Finding joy requires the carving out of a significant amount of time in order to reflect upon the true essence of the season. Expect to miss much of what Christmas has become, in return for gaining a new appreciation for what Christmas truly is. Expect a Savior and, over time, expect a lasting joy that no earthly distraction can diminish.

Journaling focus: How do I differentiate between happiness and joy?

December 14
The Favor of God

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.'" Luke 1:46-48a

When I was in college, I worked at a nursery in Topeka, Kansas. The nursery was located near the highway exit one would take when driving to the Governor's mansion. Then President Gerald Ford was coming to visit our Governor at the mansion and several of us were lined up along the split-rail fence, looking out some distance across 6th street to catch a glimpse of the President's motorcade as it exited off the Interstate. We heard the sirens approaching and soon realized the motorcade was not on the Interstate. It was on our street, barely 20 feet from where we were standing! Of course, they passed by very quickly and the windows of the President's limousine were tinted, but I am certain the President waved at me – not my co-workers, but *me!* I felt I had been acknowledged by greatness – not because Ford was a great President, but because the person of the President of the United States had looked with favor on me.

Today's scripture from Luke is the beginning of a passage referred to as the *Magnificat.* It is Mary's response to the news of being chosen to carry, birth, and raise the Messiah. It is one of the most beautiful and lyrical passages in the Bible. It is the song of a regular, ordinary person being chosen for something unfathomably special. Her joy overflows as she

expresses amazement that of all the people in the world, God favored her. She contrasts the greatness of God with the lowliness of her status in her world. However, there is no ego or pride in her song; only humbleness and honor.

There is joy in being chosen, in being recognized, in being favored. Most of us, most of the time, lead mostly routine lives. Then something special happens: an angel of the Lord appears, the President waves, or a child jumps into our lap and says, *"I love you, Daddy!"* In that moment, we know we are not lowly at all – we are favored! We are treasured and loved and special beyond belief! We have been chosen! During this season of Advent, remember the Christ-child comes for you. *"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you* (yes, you!) *good news of great joy for all the people: to you* (yes, you!) *is born this day in the city of David a Savior…"* You have been chosen. You, too, have received favor from God – known, loved, and treasured as you are, where you are, who you are. It is a gift. It is grace. It is Love. This Christmas, prepare and commit to receive it.

Journaling focus: What is one way in which God has favored me?

December 15
How the Christ Stole Grinchmas

"He puzzled and puzzled till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. Maybe Christmas, he thought... doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps... means a little bit more! And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say - that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day. And then - the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!" Excerpt from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*[80]

I need to buy gifts, but the stores are crowded. I need to write and send Christmas cards, but time is short. I need to send packages to loved ones far away, but have you seen the lines at the Post Office? Christmas is only days away. How can I possibly be ready in time? I imagine all the people I am about to disappoint, including myself. The expectations are simply too high. It is enough to make one's heart shrink three sizes. It is enough to make a person *Grinch*-like.

In the Dr. Seuss book-made-movie, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* the Grinch looks down with scorn on the people of Whoville as they prepare for Christmas. He sees the joy of family gatherings, and he scowls

at the festive preparations. He hears the voices singing their traditional songs. He smells the wonderful foods being prepared for the feast. He senses the excitement building, with the presents and decorated trees and lights. However, the Grinch is on the outside looking down on the celebration. There is no joy, no fellowship, and no love on the outside. The Grinch devises a plan to steal Christmas from the people of Whoville. He sneaks into town while they are at church and takes all the presents, food, and decorations, and watches to see the misery he has created. Of course, there is no misery in Whoville, because Christmas is not about the presents, food, and decorations. Christmas comes without all the fluff, and the Grinch learns the true meaning of Christmas is in relationships, and in the birth of a Savior.

It is easy to focus on the wrong things in this season. When we do, we risk turning Christmas into *Grinchmas*. We find ourselves on the outside looking in, jealously, at those who successfully internalize the joy of the season. When we find ourselves in Grinchmas, we feel alone, stressed, and bitter. Jesus Christ, the reason for the season, wants to steal that from us; and he will, if we let him. However, we must first let go of the stress and latch on to the joy. Christ will do the rest.

Journaling focus: What are the biggest sources of stress for me in this Christmas season?

December 16
Glorious Joy

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:8

The theme for the third week of Advent is Joy. When I think of joy, I think of my grandma Hildenbrand. Grandma had the most challenging life of anyone I have known – and she was the most joyful person I knew. Her mother died when grandma was a teenager, leaving her as the mother figure to her four younger siblings. Two of her five children preceded her in death. She lived through the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and two world wars. She was a hard-working farmwife and mother. Every challenge seemingly strengthened her faith, as I never knew it to waiver. She loved her family and made certain they had everything they needed, accompanied by a seemingly endless supply of love and encouragement.

With me, grandma always looked beyond my shortcomings. She never saw me as I was, but as the person I was capable of becoming. One of the strongest motivations in my life has been striving to become the person she gave me credit for being. Her joy in her first grandchild, me, took on extraordinary proportions, and I still feel her influence, decades after her passing. The ability for grandma to see and bring out the best in others was a manifestation of her joy in life. And her joy was the unshakable outcome of her faith.

It is easy to confuse joy with happiness. Certainly, being happy is a good and worthwhile feeling, but happiness is a cheap and transient imitation of joy. A joyful person possesses something deep inside that radiates delight, apart from the circumstances of the moment. A person who treats us poorly can leave us unhappy, but they cannot take our joy without our permission. Some people make others unhappy for the sake of perpetuating their own happiness, but a joyful person spreads their joy to others. There are circumstances where only so many people will be happy with a decision or a situation. Joy, however, multiplies when shared because joy perpetuates in abundance. That is how grandma was able to see the best in me – she always saw the best in life. Her delight in me (and in her other grandchildren) was such a central part of her being that it could not be shaken by my occasional bad decision or unkind word.

The writer of the book of 1 Peter describes an "indescribable and glorious joy" that is the "outcome" of our faith. Indeed, if we have a strong faith in a loving, protecting, and faithful God who will never leave or forsake us, what could possibly steal our joy? Will we have difficult, unhappy days? Certainly so, but we need not lose our joy in life, nor our confidence that all things will work together for good in the end. Even in the hustle and bustle of the pre-Christmas season, joy lies in wait, just beneath the commotion.

Journaling focus: Who believed in me when I found it difficult to believe in myself?

December 17
Making Room

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Luke 2:6-7

I am told one of the major growth industries in the United States is in storage. It seems many of us have no place for all of our stuff. As a nation, we spend billions of dollars each year renting space for our things, and the construction of storage units continues unabated.

For many of us the story of the birth of Christ is so familiar we miss its raw brutality. We think of the stable with cuddly lambs and tame donkeys and we think, "Ah, how quaint!" We see a baby wrapped in clean, soft cloth, lying in a manger of fresh hay and think, "Isn't that nice!" We imagine how romantic it was; perhaps, there was no room at the inn so our Lord could be born in an ecologically diverse environment.

However, the reality of the stable was very different. It is likely that the manger was a dark, dank cave that smelled like an unventilated feedlot. It was almost certainly noisy, dirty, crowded, and disgusting. If there was fresh hay in the manger it certainly would have been claimed by one of the animals long before Jesus was born. Although I do not know for certain, I suspect the words *manger* and *mange* come from the same root.

At Advent, we are invited to consider how we would react if a very pregnant Mary and Joseph, claiming to carry Divinity – a peasant family from far away – knocked on our door tonight. Would we make room for them? Would we even say, "Oh, you can stay in our garage! There's no heat, and the concrete floor will be hard and cold, and watch out for the oil spills from the cars; but at least you'll be out of the elements!" Would we say there is no room at our inn? Perhaps we would offer them our storage unit where they could stay with the rest of our extra and inconvenient stuff.

Relationships require time, attention, and space. If we want to cultivate a closer relationship with Christ, we must arrange our lives to make accommodation. There is no better time to begin than Christmas. The baby will be looking for a room soon.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to help make room for the Christ-child?

December 18
Uncovering Love

Love is patient; love is kind. 1 Corinthians 13:4

The theme for the final week of Advent is *Love*. We have a tendency to romanticize love. Romantic love, however, is only one type of love and, arguably, the most intense but least stable type of love. Our

misunderstanding comes from confusing love, the emotion, with love, the action. Love in action has little to do with romance but everything to do with the object of our love. Romantic love focuses on how another makes us feel. Love in action focuses on the needs of the other. Love in action feeds, clothes, cares for, heals, and does what is required for another person in need. Romantic love is characterized by liking the other person and enjoying being around them. Love in action has less to do with whether or not we like another person. It has to do with another person having a need and our commitment to meet that need. Love in action is outwardly focused.

Love can be ugly, difficult, relentless, and unpleasant – ask anyone who has been married for many decades. The difference in what defines love for newly committed relationships and love for couples who have weathered illness, sorrow, and hardship together is astronomical. I remember a cynical saying from long ago: "When two people become one, the result is two half-people." That may be true when partners are not fully committed to each other. In a committed relationship, however, the two become one in a way that neither partner can determine where their interests end and the other's interests begin. They become one life.

The story of the birth of love – the Christmas story – is not romantic. It involves a long and difficult journey, a stay in a barn, and a fleeing from their homeland. Love is not intended to be easy, but true love is always worthwhile. For all its difficulty, however, love pays great dividends to both the giver and receiver. The characteristics of love that we learn from the Christmas story are faithfulness, patience, and persistence in the face of every difficulty.

Journaling focus: When in my life has loving action required patience and persistence.

December 19
Proclamations of the Past

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn…" Isaiah 61:1-2

When I consider what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Christ, I am led to what it means to love God and others. Indeed, Jesus told his disciples the most important commandment was to love God, followed

closely by loving our neighbor as our self. That leads me to consider the different forms love takes. Certainly, that does not mean we should love all those living in close proximity to us in a romantic way, as we would a spouse or intimate partner. Nor does it mean we are to love them as we would an infant, being available 24/7 for their every need. On the other hand, it cannot mean loving inanimately, as we might love a book, a landscape, or a television show.

Nevertheless, love takes many forms, and we do ourselves and others a disservice by confusing love with lust, infatuation, or other fleeting emotions. Christian love requires sacrifice and focused attention over time. Everyone in our lives has needs for attention, recognition, and company. If we love them as we should, we will sacrifice some of our time and resources to help meet their needs. Obviously, during times of acute and critical needs, our love focuses us on them even more.

Today's scripture reading is part of a song from Old Testament. It tells us to "bring good news to the oppressed," to "bind up the brokenhearted," to "proclaim liberty to the captives," and to "comfort all who mourn." These are solid instructions for loving our neighbors. Such love is made possible because the spirit of the Lord is upon the one who loves. Certainly, the spirit of the Lord is upon us today, too, encouraging and pleading for us to love one another as Christ loved us.

During this season of Advent, as we prepare again for the birth of Love, will we commit to opening our eyes to the needs around us? Yes, it may seem overwhelming. Yes, we may feel inadequate to the task. Yes, we may internalize some of the pain and suffering of others. However, that is the nature of the love to which we are called. We give as we are able, and we receive as we could never imagine.

Journaling focus: What needs do I see around me that I could influence in a positive way?

December 20
An Inclusive Love

"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John 1:3-5

The first eighteen verses of the first chapter of John, sometimes referred to as *The Prologue,* make up my favorite passage in the entire Bible.

It tells the creation story; it tells about the birth and life of Jesus; it tells of God's longing to be in relationship with us, all in four paragraphs. It is written in a mystical, cryptic style that is unlike the remainder of this mostly straight-forward Gospel. I can read and reread it and come away with new insights or understandings each time.

John writes, *"All things came into being through him..."* God is the source of our being. Our souls leave a fellowship with God to come to earth for a time. When that time is over, our souls return to God. In the meantime, we only know God as this mysterious, hidden, confounding being that, for all our efforts, we cannot bring to a comfortable level of familiarity. The essence of the Spirit cannot be seen, heard, or touched by our earthly senses. Even so, by faithful observation and pensive reflection, and sometimes by dumb luck, we recognize there is more to life than our senses detect. In fact, there is a whole lot more. We often find ourselves longing for more than our earthly lives provide, although we cannot always put our finger on what it is that we lack.

The theme of the fourth Sunday of Advent is Love. We all need love, be it romantic love, the love of friends and family, or the acceptance of those important to us. The love we crave on earth is likely a manifestation of our desire to be reunited with the God who, although ever-present, resides just beyond our conscious grasp. If lust seeks to satisfy earthly desires, Love seeks more—something inclusive of our earthly state, but with deeper roots. Real Love is animated by the Spirit, meaning it is brought to Life. The Christmas story tells how Jesus was conceived by the uniting of the God's Spirit and the body of Mary. Heaven and earth came together to form something more than either alone could produce. Jesus walked the earth, fully Spirit and fully human. Could that be the Love we seek, Love that manifests in both heaven and earth? When the Spirit animates us, our lives become a Light to others. The darkness, evil, ignorance, violence, and illness of this earth cannot overcome the Light of that kind of Love.

Journaling focus: What do I long for in this season?

December 21
God's Favor

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.'" Luke 1:46-48a

Today's passage from Luke is the beginning of one of the most widely read scripture passages during the Christmas season. The complete refrain (Luke 1:46-55) is referred to as *Mary's Song of Praise,* or *The Magnificat.* It is Mary's response to learning she is carrying the Son of God, the Messiah. God will come to earth through Mary. Being young, unmarried, and pregnant would not have been good news to most women of her era. However, the angel Gabriel assured Mary she had been *chosen* to birth God's son. The news fills her with joy, despite the challenges it will present. She accepts the news as a sign of God's favor.

Mary's place in history was secured by being the earthly mother of Jesus. Even so, God's favor falls on us today. When God chose to take on human flesh and walk among us, that adventure began as a baby, born of a human mother. It was a physical birth, the same way the rest of us begin our earthly journeys. While Jesus' birth through Mary was physical, Jesus' birth in us is spiritual. God reaches out to us in Spirit; and when we reach back, Christ is born in us. We reach back to God by accepting the gift of Jesus and dedicating our life to his work and purposes. Emmanuel, the true gift of Christmas, is God with us. Once God is with us, God can work in and through us. The gift of Emmanuel is given freely to all who will accept it. However, those of us who receive must then decide what to do with the gift. If we hide it away, only to be brought out on special occasions, it will wither and fail to thrive. God's holy presence in us is to be shared and allowed to become an inseparable part of our daily experience. One of the most effective ways God works on earth is through the hands and hearts of God's people. God's favor is given to us, and we respond to God's favor by passing the blessing it brings on to others.

The essence of Emmanuel is love. Love manifests in relationships. Through the birth of Jesus, God chose to be in relationship, physically, with the people of the time. Today, God chooses to be in relationship with us spiritually. God reaches to us; but until we reach back and accept God's invitation, there can be no relationship. At that point, we begin to know, recognize, and respond to God's favor. Otherwise, God's favor is like a radio wave being transmitted but not received. God speaks but is not heard.

Journaling focus: In what ways can I reach back to God today in response to God's reaching to me?

December 22
Immaculate Perception

"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great…'" Luke 1:31-32a

Each of the four themes of Advent has one or more cheap and all-too-common imitation. For Hope, the cheap imitation is wishing. For Peace, it is a silence that appears quiet on the surface, but churns below. Joy is often confused with happiness, and Love with lust.

Mary was impregnated, not by man, but by the Holy Spirit, so the conception of Jesus was pure and sinless. He was fully human, yet more than human. While some argue the details of the birth of Christ, let us consider the recorded description of the conception of Jesus. What distinguishes love from lust, or hope from wishing, or joy from happiness? I suggest it involves impregnation by Spirit. Earthly bodies are created from materials of the earth; but they cannot be animated, or brought to life without Spirit. Lust is something of the earth longing for something else of the earth. Love will not settle for the temporary satisfactions of lust because true love is conceived and animated by the Spirit. Love demands more. It demands the uniting of the physical *and* spiritual. Hope, Peace, Joy and Love prosper where earth and Spirit unite, as they came together in the birth and life of Jesus.

That which is spiritually conceived requires time and attention to grow and develop, just like a new-born child. All things worth treasuring are impregnated by the Spirit; things like Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. The shortcoming of things of the earth is they will forever be things of the earth. When they are animated by Spirit they take on the characteristics of the eternal. In order for us to recognize that which is animated by the Spirit requires Immaculate Perception. It is how we distinguish between the real deal and the cheap imitation. When we know, invite, and celebrate the Spirit impregnating our lives, our everyday experiences become deeper and richer. When we allow the Spirit to enter and animate our lives, as did a humble, teenage girl centuries ago, the earthly unites with the divine within us. With Mary we say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Journaling focus: In what ways can I invite the Spirit to impregnate my activities today?

December 23
Relentless Love

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me. Revelation 3:20-21

"Knock, knock."
"Who's there?"
"Doris."
"Doris who?"
"Doris locked, that's why I'm knocking!"

Love is the theme for the fourth week of Advent. This is no ordinary sort of love, however. It is not an emotional, touchy-feely, teenage-crush sort of love. The true love of Christmas has nothing to do with lights and trees, with presents and parties, or with friends and family, wonderful as they are. If these types of things and activities dominate our Christmas preparations and celebration, we will almost certainly miss the very personal and relentless nature of Christmas love.

This baby-in-the-manger, whose birth we celebrate in two days, requires more than the obligatory *oohs and ahs* we typically shower on new babies. This is not a baby we greet briefly at church before heading home for lunch. It is not a grandchild we enjoy for a few hours or days at a time. This baby needs a place to stay. We sing about the misfortune of having no room at the Inn for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. We lament that Jesus' life began in a feeding trough for cattle, donkeys, and sheep. Although we sometimes romanticize the manger scene, there can be no doubt it was a smelly, dark, dungeon of a place. The baby Jesus, however, finds his *forever* home in us. What sort of home have we prepared?

There is a portrait hanging in many churches of Jesus standing at a door, knocking. The door has no outside handle, so Jesus can only enter if the person behind the door opens it for him. It is a visual portrayal of Revelation 3:20: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking." He assures us that if we open the door and let him in, he will abide with us. Jesus will not enter, however, without a willing invitation.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. While we wait, we can prepare for the birth of the child. Is there room in my life for the Christ child this Christmas? Be assured, if we do not make room for the baby this year, Christmas will come and go, as it always does. We, however, will miss the relentless love the child brings.

Journaling focus: What is one thing I can do today to allow more of Jesus into my life?

December 24
A Long, Long Road

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.
Luke 2:1,4

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles. On foot, for a healthy person keeping a steady pace, the journey would likely require two days. Joseph, however, had a very pregnant wife traveling with him. As such, the journey probably required at least 4 days, if not a week or more. Traveling through the hills and on the rough roads would be a grueling, exhausting experience. To complete the journey in a reasonable time, however, would require a relentless focus on the end goal – in this case, Bethlehem.

As we seek to be reborn with Christ, our process of rebirth will take us through hills and valleys, times of doubt, times of joy, and times of sorrow. Like Joseph and Mary, completing the journey requires a relentless focus on the end goal. Unlike Joseph and Mary, our end goal is not a specific place. How do we know when we have arrived? How do we know we are still on the correct road? How do we even know where to begin? Answers to questions like these are only discerned through prayer and faith, for there are no cookbook-like instructions for rebirth.

On this Christmas Eve, I invite you to contemplate the journey ahead. Mary and Joseph's road was a physical one to Bethlehem. Ours is an internal, spiritual journey to the Christ. Unlike Mary and Joseph, we cannot know how much farther we must travel. Regardless, it is not a destination we are likely to fully arrive at on this side of the grave. We can bring ourselves closer to it, however, and may even catch glimpses of it on our way.

Journaling focus: Reflect on your spiritual journey to Christ. What has been most difficult?

December 25
The Morning of Christmas

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us. Matthew 1:23

'Twas the morning of Christmas, when Love came to earth,
By way of a tiny and humble child's birth;
His parents had traveled so far from their home,
For the census decreed by Augustus, in Rome.

Arriving in Bethlehem, with no place to stay,
The new baby slept in a manger of hay;
With cattle and donkeys and sheep at his side,
This animal stable was home, for a time.

Angels announced the birth on that night,
To seekers and shepherds and sinners alike;
"All glory to God!" the heavenly host chimed,
"And peace on the earth to all of mankind."

Beneath a bright star, the news was proclaimed,
Of God come to earth in the form of this babe;
A child who would grow and remake us anew,
And cover the sins of me and of you.

On the morning of Christmas, the Prince of Peace came,
To reconcile souls with their Maker, again;
God with us, Emmanuel, forever to dwell,
On the morning of Christmas, and all year as well!

Journaling focus: What is Merry about this Christmas day for you?

December 26
The 12 Days of Christmas

The 12 days of Christmas consist of the days between Christmas, December 25, and Epiphany, January 6. While most frequently associated with the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas,* the days mark the time between the traditionally recognized day of Jesus' birth and the traditionally recognized day of the coming of the Three Wise Men. The arrival of the wise men signifies the revelation that the child was the incarnation of God.

Different cultures place varying degrees of emphasis on the 12 days of Christmas. In the West, the 12 days pass mostly unnoticed, with Epiphany occurring as hardly a blip on anyone's radar. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are the times of celebration, after which New Year's Eve commands the remaining attention. In other religious cultures, however, Christmas Day is a relatively minor holiday, and Epiphany is celebrated as the big day of the season. In other places, presents are not given at Christmas, but on each of the 12 days of Christmas.

One could assume that in cultures that place more emphasis on Epiphany than Christmas that the 12 days of Christmas are similar to Advent for those in the West – a time of preparation for the big celebration. In the following meditations, I attempt to place the 12 days in the context of their place between Christmas and Epiphany. They fill the time between the birth and the revelation, not unlike the time between our acceptance of Jesus' lordship over us and the time that lordship manifests as something substantive in our everyday lives.

Journaling focus: In what ways does Jesus' lordship over my life manifest tangibly?

December 27
The Baby Comes Home

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1

The image of the baby being born to or in us is a powerful picture. Those of us who are parents know the magnitude of the commitment required to raise children. The commitment to accept the gift of the Savior child is no different. Children have different needs as they grow, and we must respond differently as Christ grows within us.

Obviously, a baby needs regular feedings with age-appropriate food. Diapers need changing, and young ones require a lot of sleep. They must be carried wherever they go, along with diaper bags, car seats, and a host of other necessities. As they become mobile they require constant monitoring to protect them from the many dangers that lurk for one with no understanding of such things.

For a baby to truly grow and thrive, however, more than food and basic need-meeting are required. Babies need attention. They need lots of one-on-one time with one or both parents in order to socialize properly. Positive attention for a baby lays the foundation for its self-esteem and sense of self-worth as it grows. Babies lacking one-on-one loving attention are likely to grow into fragile adults with unhealthy dependencies on others.

Raising the Christ child within is similar. The early days will require a lot of conscious effort and flexibility on our part to respond appropriately to this needy child. Our efforts are worthwhile, however, because the experience of Christ within is so new and wonderful.

Just like learning about a new baby, we have much to learn as caretakers for the Christ child. The Bible is a good source of information, as is a good, supportive church family Establishing a close relationship with others who are establishing a Christ relationship is helpful as the fellowship will help carry us through the times when we feel inadequate, unworthy, or when we feel like giving up.

Journaling focus: What does it mean to me to be a caretaker of the Christ-child?

December 28
The Baby Grows

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Luke 2:40

As the Christ-child within grows, it starts taking on a life of its own. No longer do we need to give it our constant attention. Our lives have incorporated the child, so we no longer need reminders to contemplate, study, and pray. Attending to the child within has become a part of our routine. With a child, we are constantly using our knowledge of the world to protect the child, while also giving the child more and more freedom as they grow. In this case, we must continue to protect the child from getting lost in or neglected by our daily routine. That is the next stage with the

Christ-child. Once attending to the child has become a part of our daily routine, we can begin interacting with it. While we must remain vigilant to its needs, we no longer need to guide every move. Instead of talking to the child in prayer, we learn to listen to what the child has to say to us.

Ultimately, we are the ones who lack knowledge and perspective. It is Christ who is leading us out of our materially focused world into his spiritual realm, not us teaching Christ to adapt to our world. Even so, for most of us, in order for the change to take root, we must make the required changes intentionally and often slowly. Most of us are not in a position simply to walk away from everything that has made up our lives in the past. We must assess what we should retain from of our old life and what to remove. Once that is clear, we can better plan for how to increase the commitments that will more effectively incorporate Christ into our lives.

In this sense, we find a place for the consuming influence of Christ to grow into our everyday lives. Just as we cannot only care for a child one day per week, we cannot only be Christ-centered on Sundays. Our life in Christ must integrate into each and every activity of each and every day. As we learn to trust that divine presence, we can begin to envision where it will lead us.

Journaling focus: What does it mean for me to interact with the Christ-child?

December 29
The Child Gains Independence

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. Luke 2:41-43, 52

One of the most difficult parts of parenting, at least it was for me, comes when the children reach young adulthood. My children, these amazing creatures who were once completely dependent on me, became creatures independent of me. In order for them to grow into what God created them to be, my control over them had to diminish. They were created for something greater than being my children, and in order to realize their destiny we both had to let go. Fortunately for me, the separation has never been complete, nor will setting the Christ-child free

result in Christ deserting us. It means that for Christ to truly lead and inform us, we must stop superimposing our truths over his.

With the Christ-child, there comes a time when we must give it wings. This means that we trust in its motives enough to give it increasing measures of freedom from our rules and expectations. We have arranged our life around the Christ-child, and now the parent-child role begins to reverse. We become more and more dependent on Christ than what had previously seemed to be the other way around.

In this stage of our spiritual growth, our conscious control of the growth process of Christ within begins to wane. We still need consciously to keep ourselves in rhythm with Christ, but we no longer need to force that rhythm. We may find ourselves being led by Christ without even being aware of it. Just as a child in young adulthood may show how much better they understand some of life's mysteries, so it will be with Christ. Without even noticing the passage of time, we begin to reverse roles – where Christ is taking care of us more frequently – guiding, teaching, explaining.

Journaling focus: How can I better allow Christ to lead and inform me?

December 30
The Christ Leads

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6-7a

The final stage of growth for the Christ-child within is our submission. This is where we finally release all claims to a will or life of our own and allow Christ free reign within us. This type of submission is frightening for most of us as it seems to signify death to the person we have known as us. In a sense, that is exactly the case, although it is our ego – that which separates us from everything else – that must die. Submitting to the superior being of Christ, which unites the physical and spiritual within us, is the only way to fully manifest who we are at our core. We were created in the image of God, and until we allow the image of God to fully materialize within us, we will only be a fraction of who we were created to be. Until we let go of our ego-image, until we recognize our interconnectedness with all that is, we cannot truly become the image of God we were created to be.

At this point, the baby is a baby no longer. It is fully grown within us, but unlike our earthly children, it does not seek to *leave* us, but to *lead* us. A fulfilled life has a well-developed physical *and* spiritual aspect united in a single person. The Christ within is a *uniting* force, not one of separation. Truly, this is where inner peace begins. We understand our interdependence on others. We no longer seek to identify how we are different, but affirm and celebrate how we are connected. Peace comes because we no longer feel the need to compare and contrast. Others in our lives are not threats to our being, but are colors in the rainbow that stretches out before us.

The peace that passes understanding begins within but manifests without. Peace and fear cannot co-exist. Our fears come from mostly imagined threats that someone or something else will denigrate our being. When the identification of our being is rooted deeply in the being of Christ, there can be no threat to it. Therefore, our fears dissolve into nothingness, and there is peace – peace in our hearts, peace in our families and communities, peace in our world.

Journaling focus: What resistances do I face in trying to submit my life to Christ?

December 31
Renewal

"You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness"
Ephesians 4:22-24

I have vivid memories as a child watching the Beatles perform on the Ed Sullivan Show. I was in our living room, sprawled on the floor in front of our grainy, black-and-white TV, mesmerized by this band of rebels from England, their shaggy hair and new brand of music. I watched them play guitars and sing and knew I wanted to do that one day.

As I entered my teen years, the music and lyrics of singers and songwriters like Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, Gordon Lightfoot, Jim Croce, Paul Simon, and others captivated me, and I dreamed of emulating them one day. I obsessed over their songs, playing them repeatedly, listening and studying the nuances, trying desperately to unravel their secrets. I wanted to write and sing songs that moved people the way these artists moved me. It was a driving passion, and it all began in the *conceptualizations of my mind.*

I have never been very successful with New Year's resolutions. Some years I have vowed to lose weight, exercise more, stop complaining, be more attentive to those around me. You name the positive change, and I have probably vowed to make that change and consistently failed. Am I alone? Where do I go wrong? I think today's scripture reading provides a clue.

Paul tells us to be *"renewed in the spirit of (our) minds, and to clothe (ourselves) with the new self…"* Change begins between the ears. It requires a desire strong enough to overcome the comfort and security of remaining the same. My desire to be a singer/songwriter was strong enough to carry me through many years of practice and discouragement. Granted, I never became famous, but I went far enough to know the music-star lifestyle was not one I wanted anyway. I still enjoy the fruits of my musical labors, however. And if my music occasionally moves another, my blessing is doubled. For me, as with Paul, I cannot "put away my former life" until I have a vivid picture in my mind and begin "clothing myself" with the new life I desire.

Journaling focus: What "new life" images do I want to hold for the new year?

Endnotes

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