

A
COMPASSIONATE
LENT

2019



FIRST
METHODIST
CONROE



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Dust

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

One of the first ways I "worked" in the world was actually as a volunteer. Starting in eighth grade, I delivered flowers on Saturdays from 1-5 at Dallas Presbyterian Hospital. A fourteen year old learns a lot about life delivering flowers in a hospital. She learns not everything about having a new baby is pleasant. She discovers folks who are asleep in a hospital should be left that way. She discovers isolation tape is an interesting resource to have. And, she learns that favorite teachers can get sick, very sick and die, even if they tell you that everything is alright and will be okay.

The work was by no means the most physically or mentally challenging thing I have ever done. (I have commuted 120 miles a day to teach 80 children from five different schools, all who were gifted and talented.) However, my time in the hospital at that tender age awoke me to the reality of life, the suffering and strange joy that comes in recognizing your limitations; your lack of control. I had an unusual knowing of my dustness, and I responded on many occasions to the strange situations presented to me with simple silence. After all, how can you respond adequately to the promise of a newborn, or the fear of someone facing a final diagnosis? What words from a child can help?

In retrospect I can see the shaping of the Spirit on my life, the preparation and development of sensitivities that would lead me into this work I do here, with you. Yet, I also recognize I have lost the innocence that demands silence. Anyone who hears "you are dust and to dust you shall return," must first respond in silence. No other response moves you deep enough to accept its truth. No other response moves you into the world awakened.

Silence

Keep the Fire Burning

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. Matthew 25:1-4

Discipleship is an individual decision to participate in a unique way in the world. A way that often pulls like hearted folks together to things in communion with one another, but each person must choose to arrive, and arrive ready. Being ready takes discipline, any Boy Scout can tell you that, but how do you get ready to greet the bridegroom of the kingdom of heaven? You bring oil, you bring energy, you bring confidence, trust and hope.

Confidence that Jesus came to give us an amazing message of grace, almost too good to be true unless you regularly pray and feel the humility and forgiveness that comes from sitting in silence with the Creator of the Universe.

You bring trust that Jesus somehow imparted with his very humanness our ability to engage with the divine. You read, consider, and truly ponder the wonder of Christ's life. You grow to know him and love him through the help of community.

You bring hope no matter how dark the circumstances, because, no matter how ill-equipped your heart, Jesus remains with you, whispering his truth to you just under the turbulence.

A Good Story

But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives and as you, yourself, live, I will not leave you."
2 Kings 2:2b

Old stories often have a pattern, usually, a pattern of three including some repeated words and building tension, with the resolution coming in an easily remembered lesson. Think about the "The Three Little Pigs," "Chicken Little," "Jack in the Beanstalk" to name a few. They all are meant to grab your attention, bring you in as a participant in the story and then give you a message that sticks with you. Such stories are unusual in the Bible, but last week you got to hear one. The repeated elements are important to the story, so the reader, the listener, experiences them over and over.

1. Elijah tries to make Elisha stay behind
2. Elisha refuses, using the phrase you see above.
3. They arrive at a destination.
4. Prophets come out to tell Elisha that Elijah will be taken away by God.
5. Elisha says he knows and that the prophets should keep quiet.

At the end of the story, Elisha has not left and Elijah looks at him and asks what does he want because Elisha can't follow him this last round. And Elisha asks, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." Elijah answers, "You have asked a hard thing, yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." Elisha stays, he sees, and he receives.

As with stories like this, the meanings have various depths and intents. Regardless of their interpretation, they speak to the most basic truths of all of our lives. Each of those five repeated elements contain a message for us. If we can work out what they have to say in our lives, we may be strong enough to see the power of God and indeed receive a double portion of the spirit upon us.

Alternative Culture

So, Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you." Judges 16:6

The hero's fatal flaw makes the best and most memorable story. After all, we often spend our lives attempting to climb various ladders of success, eventually recognizing the great personal cost and incredible responsibility that such an ascent requires. The work reveals our greatest strengths and our most debilitating weaknesses. Every day, we hear and see evidence of how powerful individuals fall, really, quite easily, quite quickly. The writers of Judges knew this truth and shared it honestly, openly that we might learn from such stories and maybe, just maybe, not replicate the hero's foibles.

Who you keep company with makes a difference in how you perceive things. Your social peers often shape your understandings of the world and even your own life. Our culture saturates us with perceptions based on inherent lies. Lies that say we are not enough. Lies that say we deserve better. Lies that say what we want exceeds in importance what we need. Like Samson, if we isolate ourselves, we lose the strength that comes with community.

How wonderful it is to have a gospel that grounds us in the truly important things, to have a Savior that leads us through the lies to a grace-filled life. As the church, we function as an alternative to our common culture. Together we proclaim that in Christ we are all enough. In Christ, we have what we need, and we help those in need. In Christ, we have but one desire, to seek unity with God in all we do.

Pray that we might be bold in befriending those who come to us seeking what Christ has to offer for their lives, knowing that we are called not to judge but to encourage and to witness with honesty and grace.

Paying Attention,

Love

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 fails. I Corinthians 13:4-8a.

Love demands relationship. The very meaning of love requires relationship. Without an other there is no love. This truth may appear quite simplistic, obvious even, but often we operate very much in a manner that overlooks, forgets, or negates an other. Everything about Paul's words requires followers of Christ regard an other in a way that does not require an establishment of status or a placement of worth. Living this way is anything but simplistic. It required great and ongoing dedication.

When Jesus recited the first part of the Shema as the first part of his Great Commandment, he emphasized the importance of starting all relationships first with God. "Love the Lord with all your heart, with all you soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:5) Love, be in relationship with, God. His disciples would have recited this law every morning on waking and every evening before going to sleep. Paul would have as well. It is a humbling commandment. Love the One who created all things, including you. Love the One who knows all things, even those hidden things within you. It is a humbling love.

And it is only out of this love that we can love an other as our self. Only this love awakens us to both the great strengths and the vulnerabilities of everyone pointing us every towards patience, kindness and truth.

May our congregation be bold in its love!

Assurance

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people, Israel." Luke 2:29-32

Assurance. Simeon gave Mary and Joseph assurance that what they thought was happening was real. The human mind finds weak spots in an argument, doubt in a choice, hesitancy in a decision. True, some of us move forward with great audacity, but most want to think things through, feel our way through, not merely jump in.

So far the only beings that have affirmed the story they are supposedly living are angels (highest of high), shepherds (lowest of low) and Elizabeth. Now, as they bring Jesus to be circumcised in the temple, they will be approached by two strangers speaking words that are oddly not strange. Words that say the truth they desperately want and need to hear. Their child is no ordinary child. Their child is destined for a life that will change the world - all of it.

Their faith and the decisions that came out of their faith did not make sense, the facts did not add up, but God provided assurance, so they moved on in obedience.

You may not have literal angels or shepherds showing you the truth, but God will send you those who give you assurance, those whose eyes are open to the Spirit of God. Watch for them in obedience, follow their lead, and you might find that there are those who find assurance in you.

Blessed Assurance

Lent as a Tithe

"Jesus said to them, "Very truly, (Amen, Amen) I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished." John 5:19-20

Have you ever held someone's hand so long, so gently, that you could not discern where your skin ended and the other person's started? It takes some patience, and a willingness to be fully present with the other person without any expectation of their response. You may have to listen to stories you have already heard, or stories so fanciful they could never really happen. Or, hardest of all, you may have to sit and listen to silence. But eventually, the temperatures balance, the heart rates match and skin molds into skin.

I see Jesus being this way toward God, his Father. Jesus, born the light of the world, recognized completely the work God was doing in the world. So much so, that he saw himself as that work. The Gospel of John does not tell the story of the Temptations, however, this wilderness time is what Lent is modeled after precisely because it helped Jesus sit so intimately with the Father that his work became God's. Yes, Jesus was close to the Father from the beginning, but his ministry could not fully begin without this time of silence, fasting and prayer. Can you imagine being so close to God that you can do nothing on your own, but only what God tells you to? That is the difficult teaching of the incarnation and the Trinity. It is also what we are called to emulate.

I realized today that Lent is a tithe of our calendar year. Lent's forty days, is very close to ten percent of 365. Kind of humbling to me as I think about how I have spent Lent so far. I hope I can spend a little more time listening to the old stories, the fanciful stories in the scriptures and the silence that God has given me during this sacred time. May you be still enough to experience the still, small voice that led Jesus so fully.

"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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 3:7-8

Paradoxes

But he (Jesus) was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark 4:38-41

Bodies of water intrigue and delight us. Last summer my family vacationed on a beach, that mysterious place where the massive essence of endless water finally meets an unsurmountable boundary roaring like an animal caged in its effort to push farther inland, a never ending, and eventually lulling sound of potent power. We are drawn to this meeting of earth and water, the second division of God's creation, the first being those brief points between light and dark. Both are filled with a life not found in the absence of division, both draw us in with a beauty contained only in acknowledged paradox.

Jesus existed every moment in this place of meeting and division. His divinity and humanity intermingling with each breath, navigating with each chosen word, action. He calls us to this same exacting place, demanding in its discipline but fulfilling in its experience. He tells us not to be afraid, but what other emotion do we have in the presence of such completeness? How else can we respond to a man that calms the essence of life? What if we answered with love? Love that he had finally found rest, love that he trusted his creation, love that he invited us along for the journey and all that it entails.

Let us all go joyfully to those places of division within us and see the mystery of God's loving presence there.

God's deep and generous Peace,

Rewards

Jesus answered them, "Very truly (Amen, Amen) I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God has set his seal." John 6:27-28

When I was a teacher, I was not above bribing my students. I would bribe them with candy, extra recess time, no homework. But I had to set the parameters of their behavior with extreme care, or the bribes would start becoming expectations and their power would be lost. To keep everyone honest, I would often set up competitions. They sat in groups and I would say that the first group who could get themselves ready for, say, math would earn a point; or whichever group I thought worked most quietly would get a point. There always had to be a point given to the group that didn't complain when I made my subjective decisions. And, of course, I always had to deliver on the promised reward.

Jesus knew this about people too. He saw how easily they could be manipulated by small things. He knew if he fed them dinner, as Jeff said in his sermon, they would probably show up for breakfast too. But he didn't want them to show up for breakfast. He wanted them to show up for eternity. He wanted them to see the greatness of God that outlasts the temporary comforts of a full stomach. So he used our want to point to our greatest need, a life fully aligned with God.

Most of my students realized that the point of coming to school was not to get candy, or have a little extra time in recess. They knew that the rewards only made the hard work of learning and growing a bit more enticing. The rewards we receive following Christ in this life are not why we do the hard work of being His disciple. We can possibly point to them for those who question our devotion, but we also recognize that their presence is only a taste of what God truly wants for us.

What is your motivation?

Community

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life--this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us--we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. I John 1:1-4

When I look at this passage the thing that stands out most to me is the way it is written in first person plural. The words themselves contain such power, such confidence, an individual writing such words would be considered wise, assured, strong--but a group, a community writing such things points to something of a miracle. The passage reveals a common experience and a common result; a revelation that visited more than one with great intensity, great intimacy. The ones who write these words claim to have seen with their own eyes, touched with their own hands and now they declare, as one, a truth that cannot be denied by any one of them. They declare so that the reader, you and I might join in the same experience, and know eternal life with the Father and the Son.

This week I had the honor of hearing from people who could speak with confidence that they had experienced the touch of Christ with their own hands and seen the light of Christ with their own eyes. No, their experiences were not those of the original disciples who were visited by the crucified body of Jesus risen from the dead. Instead, they spoke of reaching out to those who had no food and feeding them. They recounted listening patiently to stories of abandonment, using their knowledge to help. They prayed, they cared, and they loved with the love the Father has given them.

My guess is you have loved with God's love this week too. I pray that your eyes be opened to God's light seeking its way in this world, and that your hands be willing to cooperate with the work that God is in the midst of in the world around you.

Looking for God

Nothing But

Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” And Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me; what have you in the house?” and She said “Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.” 2 Kings 4:1-2

Some of our most creative thinking comes after asking, usually out loud, “What am I going to do with you?” All of us remember this phrase being spoken over us as children. Those of us with children can remember asking this question of ourselves. The phrase comes when the other individual does not want to cooperate with our image of who he or she should be or want them to be. We then begin the process of determining how we can manipulate the variables to get the response we want and alleviate the discomfort being experienced. We can be quite creative in our response. We punish, reward, cajole, argue, and we sometimes get what we want, but the result is rarely long lasting, especially when we are trying to move someone away from who they were intended to be.

Elisha asked another question. “What shall I do for you?” The question is more courageous than merely creative because it holds the identity of the widow intact. The phrase speaks of her worth, and the worth of her children. It speaks of hope and the possibility of help. He then asks, “What do you have?” Elisha’s answer will not be done to her but, instead, with her, using the strengths she already has.

Elisha shows us the power of compassion. More grace filled than simple pity, compassion begins with the inherent worth of the other. Compassion requires us to recognize the image of God, in the other.

When our culture asks us “What are we going to do with these people?” Elisha reminds us to ask, “What do they have to offer?”

What do you have to offer?

Losing Things

So, Jesus told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” Luke 15:3-6

I get a bit crazy when I am looking for something I have lost. The effect is sudden and complete. One minute the universe is on my side, everything sits close enough to its proscribed place. The next, I have toppled completely out of the universe, or at least the well-ordered universe described by physics. Then the search begins. I find many things during such searches. I find manuals for appliances I know longer have. I find paperwork from a decade earlier. I find I have very little need for anything except, of course, the one thing I am looking for. The one thing consuming me.

I am reading a book that asks a really great question about this parable. If I had 100 sheep, would I even miss one? Knowing me, I would not be raising my hand even to the first part of Jesus’ inquiry. I would be the shepherd looking out on a great green hill and see plenty of little white blobs, what’s one more or less. Counting moving targets has never been a strong suit of mine.

Jesus follows this parable with the story of the woman with the 10 drachmas and then the story of the prodigal son. In each story the number of things to keep track of reduces even as their worth increases. We fill our lives with countless things. Each new thing reduces the worth of the rest until we have no way of knowing what is lost because we cannot possibly keep up.

So, are you missing something?

Asking and Receiving

And when he (Bartimaeus) heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." Mark 10:47-51

Jesus seems to have a habit of asking those around him about their needs and their motivations. He, who is supposed to know us so well, does not assume to answer for these folks. Instead, he asks the question, leaving them to answer for themselves. Did he ask the question so the person might weigh the answer a moment, or maybe hear the thoughts reserved in their minds stated into the air? Regardless, of why, the effect of saying them out loud rarely softened their needs or their desires. However, it did allow those around to hear, possibly echoing a hope that they contained within their own lives. Maybe they wanted to see, to have power, to be made well, to feel safe, to know what Jesus' intentions and motivations were.

Healing can only happen when first we first admit our brokenness. As long as we are holding to our personal strengths and wills, we cannot experience the fullness of transformation. We have to be able to admit, out loud, what we most want, revealing as we do, our greatest vulnerabilities. Only then can we experience faith, only then can we see the work of God. You may be thinking, I won't say what I want because I know there is not an answer that will satisfy my longing. I want to be healed. I want my loved one here with me. I want a fair chance in this world. But when we dare to speak these desires out loud before Christ and his community, love becomes evident, healing in all of its guises begins.

What do you need?

Barnabas

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch... The Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. Acts 11:19, 25

A realization came over me as Jeff read the scriptures about Barnabas. Barnabas was one of those folks whose kindness borders on instability, someone who trusts way too much for his or her own good, and sometimes the good of the larger group. Today we might say he lacks boundaries or awareness, but mostly we would question his motives, his intent.

After all, what kind of person would honestly sell a field, something that had been passed down for generations, something that provided security and status and give all the money, all of it, to an unproved religious group of rebellious fishermen? Who would take the mortal enemy of that group, Saul, and bring him before the most powerful of the movement, placing them all in danger? Who would take the man, Saul again, who caused the persecution that sent believers to Antioch into Antioch to preach to the very people he terrified? Who would think these things are good ideas? Who would circle these answers as good possibilities on a group brainstorming chart?

Apparently God would. God can use people who are scary kind, who can see clearly the possibilities of another despite what the world thinks or assumes. Someone whose kindness is colored by grace and wisdom that dives beneath outward appearances and comparative measurements, seeking the imprint of God that lies there hidden, caked in human judgment and fear.

Being scary kind is more delicate than you can imagine, and the possibility of getting hurt is high, but God works in this realm. So then must I.

With kindness.

Come Here

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? But they were silent. Mark 3:1-4

Have you ever had a friend that would not come to church because he or she felt judged or not good enough? Ever had an acquaintance who shied away from any talk of faith because of a perception of deep hypocrisy among believers? From high school on, I have had friends who could not understand my love of the church. Unlike what had been insinuated by some Sunday School lessons I had heard, they were not evil people who did not want to answer to a greater power. (If anything, they held to a higher set of convictions than some of my peers who came to church with me.) However, unlike some of the perceptions my friends had heard in culture regarding judgmental nature of the church, I tried to treat them with an appreciation and care that, hopefully, did not affirm those perceptions.

When Jesus enters the synagogue at Capernaum, a place where Jesus probably frequented prior to his baptism by John the Baptist, there is someone new there, someone obviously different. It is immediately apparent to Jesus that the authorities placed this gentleman in the gathering as a test regarding Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath. As for the gentleman's part, we have no idea whether he came willingly or out of some kind of coercion. Regardless, I have never met someone who appreciates being used for a known or obvious weakness. Knowing this, I believe the greatest thing that Jesus did was call the man to him, to bring him into his proximity, into his presence. Jesus addressed the man before he addressed the authorities. He saw the judgment that the man's presence insinuated, and covered the judgment with his very being before addressing the supposed theological, legal conundrum of the Sabbath. And then Jesus healed him...

Who do you know who needs to hear Jesus say, "Come here?"

Focus

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8

When I think about all the communications that come to me on a daily basis, whether they be through websites, emails, or social media, so little of it is directed to things of this character. The vast majority of my emails consist of ads trying to get me to buy one more thing. True, several of them are fair trade organizations and I can possibly justify that I am helping individuals support families through fair wages, but the majority of them are not. My news feed is definitely not full of pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy news. However, I can't imagine there not being any such news available for print or posting. I greatly limit my social media interactions because I found that what I read there led me to a place where I felt forced to judge others based on very narrow parameters.

The sheer volume of these interactions causes us to question what these characteristics Paul moved the people of Philippi toward even look like in our current world context. I believe that only by removing ourselves from the barrage and spending quiet time with God will we be able to find the discernment that Christ sought and followed. Only through such silence can we know ourselves fully and see others in their fullness.

As we continue to move through Lent, seriously consider how much the Good News of Christ guides your thoughts and your emotions compared to the onslaught of what the world would have you hear.

Let prayer tip the scales toward Jesus.

Promises

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. Ephesians 1:18-19a

I just finished helping my oldest daughter pack up her freshman dorm room and come back home. We had a storage unit in the town where her college is, so we spent the past two days working through the things we packed last fall for her use and all the things that we have sent her throughout the year. We made decisions about what would stay in storage, what would return to her childhood room and what we really didn't need either place. I watched as she struggled between the life she had at school and the life she would face back home. As a mom, I am always vacillating between what I would want for her life and what I know she has to figure out for herself. There comes a point where your example and your words as a parent must fade into the background, so your child can lay some claim to his or her life. By doing so, the parent regains some claim to his or her own life as well. Your relationship changes, taking both of you with it.

My prayer for her, for myself and for any of you who are reading this is Paul's prayer for those who were trying to find their way as faithful believers so long ago in Ephesus.

May our hearts be enlightened to God's hope, riches, and great power, so we might find our true life and live into it as best as we possibly can.

Job

Then Job answered the Lord; "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you.; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:1,5-6

Job has always been one of the books in the Bible that was easier for me to avoid than tackle. The one thing that has given me pause is its age. Job is an incredibly old story seeped in questions that speak as clearly to us as it did in the ancient time of its origin. Why do righteous people experience painful things? Why bother being good if it won't get you anywhere with God? What kind of God allows such horrible things to happen in the world, especially to those who follow most earnestly?

The answer in Job does not provide a clarity that our logical mind appreciates. After all, we were rooting for Job, perfect Job who carefully did everything right and covered all of his bases. We were booing and hissing his friends who claimed he needed to repent; especially since they took so long saying the same thing over and over again. "Of course this is your fault, this is how God works. Repent and get it over with." (Very, very much a paraphrase.)

Job cries out to God, like we do, demanding His presence. Demanding a fair trial where Job can present the facts of his predicament, so God can be proved in the wrong in all of this suffering. But when God does decide to come, he serves up a big slice of humble pie. In essence, we learn that maybe we just can't ever really understand God's ways. Maybe we are to be obedient for God's purposes and not our own. This is not easy teaching. This is "because I said so" teaching, not "I'll give you a cookie" teaching.

The pathway to discipleship is filled with many initial "just because" moments. We may grow into a better understanding eventually, or we may just grow into a greater trust. Either way we grow closer to God, and that gives us hope in the face of suffering, and peace in the face of doubt.

Just Because

Wind

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:2-4

When I was very young, I lived in a place where you could see the wind coming for miles as it picked up dust in its path, hurling it into the air only to have it fall and be picked up again. Some days it came in a wall of grit, and other days it twirled, dancing upon itself until a great cone formed. Those days we would all meet up in the storm cellar just to stay out of the way of that great dance. But here, the dance happens over hundreds of miles and the water table is not conducive to a cellar, so we shelter in place, waiting to see if what we consider ours travels into something someone else considers theirs. And we realize such labels, ours and theirs, are really just insurance taken out on our imaginations. There is really so little we can claim.

Being born again always seemed to be represented as an event that would change a person completely, in an instant. I heard stories to that effect, worrying all the while, that somehow, in my love and dedication to God, I missed the most significant thing; the thing that contained all the assurance and even the grace. I thought on it through college, and part of seminary, and finally, one day, I got a small glimpse of the Kingdom that had always been there, so simple, so complete, so perfect. None of it my own doing. None of it contained in words, words are so small. Just a revelation, of unfathomable, unquenchable love.

The wind of awareness will blow in your life. All you have to do is open your eyes to it. Prayer, scripture, worship, service, fasting, they all hone your eyesight, but not if you go with the intent of finding. If you do that, the means will become the ends and you will get bogged down in the doing. No, you practice the spiritual disciplines recognizing that they orient your soul toward an awareness and a discernment of the dust.

The Spirit is kicking up all around you.

Beloved

"Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!'" Mark 9:7

Every one of us has a weakness, something that causes us to pause when we should act; silence ourselves when we should speak; limit our worthiness when we should recognize how we are cherished. For some the weakness is something that you were taught at a young age, by friends and family that felt that it was good for you to know. For others it was something that the school system discovered and shared with you through teachers, or your classmates brought to your attention during recess. Regardless, your weakness sits within you, real as the gravity that holds you to this earth.

One of my many weaknesses is my desire for others to like me. Now, trust me, I know that can play in my favor by honing my behaviors and giving me an astuteness toward others, but it can also be debilitating in my honest walk with Jesus. I will follow Jesus until a need presents itself or another opinion voices itself. Then, I am meandering down a path of presumed kindness or forced silence, and I have lost sight of the One who loves me in the fullness in which he created me. And I must stop in my tracks, quiet myself, and listen for him. Not so he will like me, but so others might see what I do, I do for him, not for myself.

Sometimes I hear him call me by name, but more often I hear him call for us all, his body, his kingdom, to see what he sees, follow where he goes and be who he is in this world. When we do, we witness the transfiguration in the world and in ourselves.

Listen so you can hear.

Lost

And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." Luke 2:48

These words are the only words of childhood rebellion recorded in the four Gospels found in our Bible. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, manages to get caught up in the teaching of the Temple and lose track of all time and all responsibility. Mary and Joseph, probably traveling separately with family members of their own gender, assumed that Jesus was with the other. Jesus, after all was in the in between point of adolescence. Becoming too old to travel with the children who still needed the comfort and care of their mothers, but also still a bit young to be traveling with the wizened men. So, he goes his own way, and does not go at all.

I have only lost each of my children once. One stayed still when I thought she had gone; the other left when I thought she had stayed still. The first was not bothered at all about her lostness. In fact, she did not feel lost at all. The second still stays close to me in crowds, reliving the sense of panic she felt the day of her lostness. She never wants to feel that way again. Both were exhibiting their independence, but neither was listening to what I had asked of them. Neither was being obedient.

Sometimes we think staying put means we can't get lost. After all, we know where we are. We recognize the geography of the landscape and what it requires of us. Jesus knew the temple well. He knew the arguments that were coming from the great teachers there, but he also needed to know obedience. Unlike Samuel, Jesus did not stay with the priests and teachers. God showed him he needed to go home and learn humility. He learned that staying where he was comfortable, and even appreciated, was not where God was calling him. He learned listening to any voice other than God's will get you lost. He spent his ministry teaching us how to listen for God's voice -- saving us from being lost.

Listen and be found.

Missing

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. 2 Cor. 7:10-11

Repentance does not come easy. Sure, we can say I'm sorry a hundred times a day, but that is not repentance. Repentance, I think, comes from first realizing that you are not at the center of all things, including your own life. You might discover this when your eyes are open to the vastness of the universe, and the minuscule nature of the world, and your life upon it. You might have to admit to it when you consider the incredible intricacy of our physical bodies or even matter itself with all those atoms vibrating within the supposedly solid chair you are sitting in. At some point your mind says, enough, I get that I can't get it all, now what? Now, if you are listening, God says it's okay not to understand. In fact, God says I'm glad you woke up because as small as you are, you are an important part of this whole thing. What you do matters. Your decisions and attitudes make a difference, and not just to yourself.

But then things get a little dicey. What decisions are most important? What attitudes do I need to have, when? In the scripture reading Paul tells the people in Corinth what we are still saying today, follow Jesus, put Jesus first and the rest will fall into place. But following Jesus isn't a one and done thing. Following Jesus is a process, an ongoing life journey that pulls us closer and closer to God. Each step requires us admitting that we don't know the way ourselves and we need something bigger than ourselves to move forward to fullness.

Each step requires repentance.

Loss

And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Luke 12:29-31

Many of you are aware that my father passed away on July 11th and his Memorial Service was August 3rd. His passing was both relief and deep sorrow as so many deaths are. The mourning really began at the point of diagnosis and extends into this moment, even as I write. No doubt its presence will continue into the rest of my life in large and small ways. We all live with such presences. As a pastor, I am blessed with more than most. Almost monthly I am privileged to sit with a family absorbing a loss by remembering the life that has been taken from them. Very few of the dead are remembered for their prestigious power or ability to turn a deal for their own betterment. All are recognized as people who loved. While we so often spend a life trying to be remembered by the world through accomplishments and accolades, the people who carry us most closely are often the very ones we tend to overlook or take for granted.

Jesus demanded we seek God's Kingdom over our own. When we do, we slowly begin to see the individuals around us for who they are in God; brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, mothers and fathers. Then, we are recognized, and, eventually, remembered as people of the Kingdom; people who loved.

May you be known by your love.

Called by Name

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." John 10:1-5

When I was a kid there was a thing where you would go to a t-shirt shop, choose a shirt, then choose an iron on to put on the front of your shirt. We thought it was so cool to be able to design your own shirt, something completely unique to you. You even had the option of putting your name on the back, kind of a way to sign your work of art. I loved my light blue jersey t-shirt with white stripes on the sleeves and a sparkly Class of 86 iron on on the front, complete with my name in white along the back. I wore it ardently through sixth and seventh grades alongside my friends who had equally neat, personalized creations.

Now, we have stickers for the back of our cars that advertise our children's accomplishments all in white so that they stand out against our darkened back car windows, but I would not let my girls put their names on these stickers like other moms would. I realized as a teacher and a school counselor that when you wear your name around, others can call you by that name. Folks you don't know, complete strangers, suddenly had the power that comes from knowing your name. A power that is usually reserved to those who have at least met you, at least taken the time to introduce themselves to you. It is a power that can evoke a level of trust that has not yet been earned.

The Bible speaks often of this power of knowing a name. Jesus knew this understanding all too well. He knew that many people who claimed to know the name of God, used this knowledge to confuse truth, to create turmoil. He knew that the established church and government were desperately trying to give him a name, put him with a group, figure out where he stood. Jesus wanted his followers to know he stood alongside them, knowing them by name, calling them with a familiar voice, guiding them to the places where they would receive all that they needed. He wasn't just calling their name, he was calling their fullness, their completeness in God. He was the way to life and those that listened recognized it.

When you call someone by their name, call them into the fullness of all they can be, all that they are in Christ. Call them knowing they are a child of God, a unique creation, a master piece in the making. Thank God that you have been given the privilege of knowing their name, calling their name, and being in this world alongside them.

May they recognize the power of hope, joy, and love that is hidden in their God-pronounced name, and in yours as well.

A Little Child

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve and he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." Mark 9:33-37

I think the wonder of this passage lies with the fact that Jesus went and found a child to place "in the midst of them." Jesus, a famous healer and infamous rabbi, allowed such a potential distraction to wander about in his company. Such tending belonged to women, and no doubt the child's mother hovered nearby keeping a distant but careful eye on the proceedings and making sure that the rough fishermen and other sundry men did not become too impatient with the little boy's curious explorations. Who knows how long Jesus let this tiny human presence peruse the tight room with all of its interesting people before lifting the child to his lap? Perhaps long enough for every man to have been investigated thoroughly, pulled on, smelled, slobbered on, tasted. Only then does Jesus give them the kicker, receive the child and receive God.

Now, the word receive implies a certain formality. Notice, he does not say tolerate or manage the child. He also does not say worship or dote upon the child. He says receive, as in bring into your presence, experience, welcome and form. When you do this with a child, we bring God into our presence to experience, welcome and be formed by. I can see Jesus saying these words as grubby hands latch onto his beard, little knees jam into his ribs and unsure feet try to find a stable spot on his legs. Find God here, Jesus says, in life's incessant questioning, its insistent curiosity, its demand to love and be loved. Here is where power resides in its fullest, not in schemes, networks or arsenals, but in life lived at its most honest and vulnerable.

There you will find the Kingdom of God.

Patience

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Ephesians 4:26-27

Have you ever had one of those days that seemed controlled by the most selfish of outside influences? You know the day when the cleaners inform you that the clothes you thought would be ready today, actually won't be ready for pickup until tomorrow; the repair person you scheduled to meet you at your house waits until the end of the fourth hour of your four hour time window to say that they will be at your house in forty-five minutes and then has to schedule another appointment with another four hour time window to fix the problem because he doesn't have the right parts; the customer service agent on the phone is clearly going down a prescribed script of statements, attempting to sell you additional services without giving you any information about the service that caused you to call in the first place. Okay, thanks for letting me fume a bit. Momma said that there'd be days like these.

But what is a Christian to do? How are we to behave? As I read over this list of innocuous offenses, I realize that every one of them are centered around things that are not truly necessary to my life. At some point, I bought into the idea of paying someone to iron my husband's shirts, ice cubes that flow freely from my refrigerator door, and television that should instantly give me one hundred options of entertainment. But none of these things is imperative. Not one falls into the category of need. That is humbling as a Christian, but even more humbling is recognizing the people behind all these services are children of God, simply doing the tasks assigned to them while dealing with agitated folks like me.

So, as Christians, we don't give the devil a foothold and try to get some perspective. We treat people with respect. We recognize what is important. We speak the truth in love.

Elijah

So, Elijah set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" he returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant. I Kings 19:19-21

Have you ever met someone like Elijah? Someone who is completely done with his job, and ready to give the responsibility over to someone else, but maybe not all of the authority. The first half of the chapter says clearly Elijah is ready to retire. God tells him okay, but first, go and anoint a couple of guys as kings of particular kingdoms, and then anoint Elisha as your successor. Next thing you know, Elijah has found Elisha (note he has not found or anointed the kings yet) and is trotting alongside him as he is plowing. Elijah throws his cloak over him and keeps on running. There are no introductions, no explanations, just a drive by cloaking which Elijah seems to hope to outrun. But, Elisha somehow knows. Elisha knows, whoever this strange man is and whatever he just did means, nothing will ever be the same again.

We have all experienced a time where in the blink of an eye, normal changes. Such incidences can be positive, but more often than not they are difficult things to digest. They are experiences of intense sacrifice and, way too often, suffering. Still the faithful seek out God and God's purposes. Still the witnesses testify.

Thanks to all who have been witnesses of God's strength and endurance in my life and the lives of so many others.

Old and New

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?-unless, indeed you fail to meet the test. 2 Corinthians 13:5

When I was very young, before I got my third grade Bible, I snuck into my brother's room, which I was prone to do, and got out his Bible. Now, his was a huge thing with large print and even some pictures! I envied it like I envied most of his things. So many things came with being eight years older, fun things, even dangerous things that I was not supposed to touch. But, the Bible was a church thing and church things were good and to be shared. So, I summoned all my strength, pulled it off the shelf, dropped it to the floor, and sat myself down to give it a look. I had just started to read, so my reading looked more like flipping pages and finding familiar words. The other words, I just let be. I saw there was an Old Something that went on forever, and then there was a New Something that happened at the very end of the book. I knew about new things. Those are the things that have just happened, things that weren't there before. Santa brought new things, so did birthdays. Jack had a New Something in his big Bible book. I wondered if other Bibles did.

So, when I was in church the next Sunday, I pulled out the pew Bible to check, and do you know what? There was a New Something in that Bible too. I reached down the pew to get another one and was told that all the Bibles in the pews were exactly the same. So, there were New Somethings in all of the Bible books! When church was over, I went to Sunday School and asked my teacher about it. She told me the New Something was the New Testament, the stories and writings about Jesus. I was shocked, Jesus happened forever ago. Jesus was not new. She tried to explain how the Old Testament was the story of God's relationship with the Jews and the New Testament was the Story of God sending Jesus to have a new, different kind of relationship with everyone. I voiced my concern over people thinking something so old could be called new. The look on her face told me this was another one of those things to just let be.

The story of a Spiritual Life requires many just "let be" moments, times when you are pretty sure someone has a reasonable answer, but strangely, they don't. Instead, they tell us to read this New Something which isn't new at all, pray to God who cannot be seen, worship every Sunday when there are so many other things to do, and take care of one another. When we do, when we do these simple things with all we have, eventually, those "let be" moments start falling into place.

Image

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to every thing that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food, and it was so. God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Genesis 1:27-31

The Old Testament teems with reality, with truth. Heroes exhibit flagrant imperfections. Villains exude a certain understandable innocence. Mistakes replicate over generations even while culture and faith tries to patch up weak spots in our historical fabric. These stories contain our essence, our good, our bad, even our indifference. Reading them straight through generates a frustration true to practically anyone who studies history. "What were they thinking? Couldn't they see where that course of action would take them?" But the answers to these questions are no different for those ancient characters than they are for us. We think we get it. We really do. But all we actually have is our limited understanding in our limited context and, hopefully, a strong desire to do the right thing.

And God can use that. Thanks be to the Creator who audaciously called us good. Our foibles and limitations can be used. Our hard headedness, and hard heartedness can be usurped by a sincere desire to follow not a law, not merely an ideal, but a man, a man who dared call God his Father and invite us to do so as well. I so appreciate the honesty of the Hebrew scriptures for without their vulnerability I could never dare to fully realize my own worth in this great, wondrous story.

So to quote poet Mary Oliver who passed away recently...

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Scripture

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God might be adequate, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I was raised in the church. I got my hard back pew Bible in third grade with my name embossed on the front. Every night I prayed the Lord's Prayer and looked at my Bible with reverence, but rarely did I open it. I heard the stories in church, and when I opened to Genesis to read it, most of the things there seemed familiar, so I didn't see the point in reading it for myself.

Until I went to Baylor. Back in those days (when the dinosaurs roamed the earth as I tell my children) Baylor required a semester in Old Testament and one in New Testament. I was a bit nervous, good Methodist that I was, how the professors who had to sign a statement of belief from the Southern Baptist Convention would go about their work. As it turns out, I fell in love with these books called the Bible. I was mesmerized by the stories and their histories. The way different traditions had been woven together without any apology or needed explanation; the honesty and vulnerability of the words. At no time did my professors use these sacred books to judge or separate. Instead, they simply opened them and let the Holy Spirit show us their profound depth and incredible truth. Oh, and they tested us to make sure we opened them, or at least took notes in class.

To me, the Bible is not an object to be revered. It is a history, a witness to God's desire to be in relationship with us, His creation. I encourage you to take it down off of the shelf and read. Pray for the Spirit's guidance and then read, question, consider. I promise you will see or consider something you have never recognized before; no matter how many times you have read the words.

Motivation

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Nehemiah 2:17-18

What motivates you? What motivates those you admire? What motivates those you follow? What motivates those you care about? I think one of the crazy things I have noticed about motivation is others often can often pinpoint your motivation when maybe you don't know it yourself. You may believe you are working toward a goal for one reason, but those around you can see a different reason, sometimes a very different reason.

Any kind of a new beginning gives us a chance to do a little self-reflecting on what we want to be our motivating influences, what we desire others to see in us. When you describe your ideal self, what words do you use? Kind, strong, thoughtful, caring, forward thinking, a good leader, generous? There are a thousand words that might describe how you see yourself on your best day. But, how do you cultivate those things in your character? How do those ideals play into your everyday decisions?

Nehemiah was an incredible leader. We know he was a strong leader because he was trusted by leaders. However, his actions are not reflective of a desire for personal power or influence. Instead, he placed God above all things and used his strengths to increase God's kingdom.

Take a minute to write your list of motivating influences. Invite God into shaping those strengths for God's work in this world.

Distractions

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 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 1:10-13

We lose so much to our whims, our distractions. Small things, big things, gorillas, they get past us, because we are focused on what seems most important to us at the time, but is often not important at all. How, then, do we figure out what is most important? John tells us that, if we believe in the name of Christ, we become children of God. If we believe that somehow God became flesh, and overcame all of the petty and tempting things of this world, then we can be born of the Spirit. Jesus became of flesh so we could become of spirit, of God.

But, how many actions in our day to day lives give witness to this truth? How many things do you do with the motivation of being a witness to your relationship with God? I ask this because I ask it of myself. Too many times, I act as a reaction to another person, their needs, their requests, their hopes or threats. Too few times do I consider how what I do reflects on God. Our survival instincts won't have it, our pride won't contain it. Yet, our greatest purpose and worth is found in the truth that God has given us through Christ's incarnation.

The Word

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being." John 1:1-3a

When you speak there are a lot of things going on. There is thought. I know sometimes it seems there is not thought, or at least non intelligent thought before opening your mouth, but your body can't make a word without your brain asking it to. So, there is a thought. But before the thought becomes a word, air moves over larynx, vocal cords, tongue, lips and teeth creating sound. Then, of course there is the word itself, the humming, thrumming word, moving through the air hitting the other person's outer ear, working its way inward to the ear drum and the tiny bones adjoined to it, vibrating in just such a way that their brain can make sense of it and begin thinking of what a good response would be, and away we go...

The first chapter of John is one of my favorite scriptures. When Julie Medved, our children's director, asks us to mark our favorite scripture in the Bibles we give to our third graders. I always mark John 1. I find it beautifully poetic, explaining the potentially gratingly difficult with simple words arranged in simple ways, but carrying an exquisitely heavy load. In only three verses, John shows us one way to look at the Trinity. In the beginning was the Word, the thought, the breath and the Word; the Father, the Spirit and the Son. The Word was and still is the conduit of all Creation, God's intentions made physical. Jesus, fully human, was also Christ, fully divine.

John's nativity story is the birth of all Creation, including you. "All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being." Jesus who calls you to abide in him, brought you into being through himself.

Light

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1:5

Light during this time of the year is so sacred. We live at a latitude where we don't experience as much darkness as others north of us. But, we still have the experience of shortened days, colder temperatures, and a feeling of being a bit more isolated than we would in the summer, even with its languishing heat and intense sunshine. We are mammals, warm-bodied, tempered internally at a tropical 98.6 degrees. We can become accustomed to the cold when needed, more easily than we would care to admit, but the first experience of a drop in temperature each year can be painful, especially when coupled with the dark gray of low lying clouds and early sun setting skies.

We crave the light. Light helps us see our plans, our work, and, thereby ourselves, our worth. Yet, not one of us is exempt from periods of darkness, not even those of great faith and belief. However, for those who believe these times become revelatory, if we humble ourselves to invite Christ into the process. Denying or avoiding the presence of occasional darkness only drives you deeper into the challenges that require attention. God wants our darkness, wants to transform its energy in His light.

Keep watch, O Lord, with those who wake or watch or weep tonight, and give You angels and saints charge of those who sleep.

Tend your sick ones, O Lord Christ.

Rest your weary ones,

Bless your dying ones,

Pity your afflicted ones,

Shield your joyous ones, and all for Your love's sake. Amen.

St. Augustine

Fountains of Life

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. On the lips of one who has understanding wisdom is found but a rod is for the back of one who lacks sense. The wise lay up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near." Proverbs 10:11-14

We read these words and we tend to place ourselves in one or the other camp. Either we are righteous or we are evil. I would bet that very few, if any, would place yourself in the evil camp. Although you might consider placing someone else in that camp, at least some of the time, you know, under certain circumstances. And, maybe, just maybe, there might be someone out there who would dare put even you in the evil camp because of a perception they have of you, a clearly inaccurate perception based on some limitation on their part, of course.

We all want to be perceived as righteous, to be known as someone who does the right thing, but doing the right thing is not always the same in everyone's eyes. If we try to be seen as righteous, we end up trying to please those around us, or surrounding ourselves with people who think the same way we do instead of truly living as a righteous person in the eyes of God.

As Christians, we follow Christ. We believe Jesus was the most righteous person to ever exist, and you see where that got him. Being righteous is not about pleasing others, but rather about living the lives we have been given to their fullest. When we live in such a way, our mouths will be fountains of life, we will love without holding onto offenses and we will lay up a deep knowledge of God and ourselves.

Sowing

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. II Cor. 9:6-8

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" Matt. 13:4-9

We follow a God who sows bountifully; a God who already knows our hearts and our willingness to grow, and broadcasts possibilities upon us regardless. He showers us with grace in times of plenty and times of deepest pain, transforming it all into the fullness of life for which we all ache. He sees who will waste his goodness, his grace, and he casts love upon them all the same. He recognizes who will hoard his boundless resources claiming them as their own, fearful that others might take them away, and He makes fools of them, giving those very others his blessings as well. He also sees those who accept his generosity with praises of thanksgiving and joy, and he leads them to join him in giving and in rejoicing in the harvest that comes.

Jesus knew like no other the power of an offering made to God in love and joy. He also knew the difficulty that goes with making an offering in trust. May we have the trust to give with great compassion.

Worship

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." John 4:21-24

I grew up in the church, attending Sunday School every Sunday like clockwork, as regularly as I attended school, hindered only by illness. I went to nursery for a while and then to worship when I was old enough to sit still. In fact, in many ways, worship seemed to be a discipline of sitting still. True, we would sing, and say familiar words together, but, for me, there seemed to be a great deal of simply sitting still. When I moved to Fairfield, I became an acolyte so, although I continued to experience a great deal of sitting, I also got to actively participate in worship. The activity eased the tedium and allowed me to learn about the process of worship, the hows and whys. As a teenager, I sang in the choir, rang bells, preached as a high school senior during Youth Sunday, and basically lived at the church building. But, there was, undoubtedly, a lot of sitting still, even with all of the things I did in worship. So, I learned to endure those still times by taking notes (and, yes, I still take notes, usually about the sermon.)

However, worship is not sitting still. I think sometimes we look at the process with the same eyes we did when we were small. We see the whole thing as something to endure, something that, when good, does something to or for us. But there is an active surrender to it, a letting go of business, an admission to a power greater than ourselves. As Jeff framed it on Sunday, a surrender of our ongoing life, a living sacrifice. When we worship, we lay ourselves before God and ask that our work, our choices, our existence, be an acceptable gift to God. We open our lives to God's very real presence in the Spirit and allow the fullness of God's truth to reign over us with every intention we have at our disposal. And the glory of God holds us and we find comfort and absolution in the stillness, already and always there.

Be still and know...

Compassion

"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." Luke 10:36-37

Have you ever had a time where you saw someone who was going through a difficult time, but you found yourself being unable to feel anything about their situation. When you thought about them, you could find no desire or even need to help. Maybe something in you said, "Maybe they did something to deserve what happened." or even, "I am too busy keeping my own stuff together to worry about someone else's."

As I looked at this scripture this week, I was hit by a realization. Usually, when I choose not to help someone, I immediately justify why I shouldn't, and the justification takes the form of a judgment towards the person in need. "I'm too busy," usually means, "Why don't they do this for themselves." "I don't have the skills to really help," probably means, "How on earth did they get into this much of a mess? Couldn't they see this coming?" Or, "I'm not too sure about this," which could mean "I'm not sure this person wants help or they wouldn't be in such a pickle to begin with." Such thinking might seem to get us off the hook intellectually, but spiritually we just keep digging a deeper hole of sin, of selfishness.

Being willing to enter into someone else's suffering, to show compassion, takes time, energy, and faith. However, if your aim is to live into a life of pursuing Jesus, you will be provoked to compassionate action more than you could have ever anticipated. You will also find an unexpected, paradoxical joy from somehow sharing the burden of another.

Go and love your neighbor as God has loved you!

Suffering

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30

No one likes the idea let alone the reality of suffering. The thought that God through Jesus suffered seems so incredible as to be unbelievable. We rush into Easter saying, "He is risen!" but we don't fully admit that he died. When my oldest daughter was very small, we took her to a Good Friday service. It was held outside and she was almost three, so we figured she could handle it. What we didn't count on was the literalness of her thinking. As the scriptures were read, she asked quiet questions about what they meant and I whispered quick responses. But suddenly, the sound of nails on wood echoed through the air. Sarah, who was on her father's back whispered, "No," and then more urgently, "No," and then she yells, "No, he didn't do anything wrong! Stop! Stop! Don't hurt him! He didn't do anything wrong!" By this point James was wrestling her off his shoulders to the ground where we huddled around her trying to explain it was just pretend remembering. Jesus wasn't really here, wasn't really getting crucified. But even as I said the words I heard their callousness. I recognized the profound truth in Sarah's screams and tears.

She did what no one dared to do the day Jesus was killed, what no one dared to do that Friday night. She spoke the truth with conviction and strength. Unafraid. When we worship Good Friday, we are not just pretend remembering. We are facing the reality of that afternoon when a man was so honest and so intense he could not be held by the culture another moment. He had to be destroyed. We are acknowledging our own reaction to Jesus' honesty and intensity in our lives; our own tendency to look away from his destruction.

Throughout the next day, Sarah asked me over and over, "Is he still dead?" I spent that Saturday explaining that yes we are remembering him being dead, but he is alive now. She had great fun with her mother on Sunday when she asked again, "Is he still dead?" and answered herself, "No, he is alive!"

Examen

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

We have come to the end of the Lenten Season. Many of you have had an incredibly difficult season. I know of many of you who faced the death of someone you love, a diagnosis filled with challenges and pain, a change that challenged you to your core. Yet, here we are, still making sense of life, still putting one foot in front of the other, following the Word that became flesh and lived among us. As I have said here before, I believe that we come face to face with God more during that times in our lives where we feel the intensity of life, whether in great joy and celebration or in great sorrow and loss. We can admit to the greatest of mystery when our brain can't contain the fullness of the moment, when our emotions can't express what we are really experiencing. We can open our hearts to the magnitude of grace and truth.

I invite you into a brief prayer of remembrance for this Lent. It involves what is called an examen, and it has been passed down in different ways in different communities.

1. During Lent when were you closest to God?
2. During Lent when were you furthest from God?
3. During Lent when did you feel/think/believe God's presence most influenced you?