



It was another fabulous Saturday morning when 11 gents gathered together for the monthly LCOC Men's Prayer Breakfast on 11 March 2017. Our tables were dressed in the lovely colors of the Easter season, pink and pastels of green, blue and yellow. Just perfect to take any touch of ornery out of these guys (well, almost). We feasted on a crockpot sausage, egg and potato casserole, as well as a cinnamon roll casserole, grapes, OJ, and coffee. Our chef broke out new recipes to use on this auspicious tasting panel, and it seems the results were favorable. And this group pulls no punches!

With the change in the weather from being in the 60s and 70s to this day's chilly start, with many of us having to break out our stowed winter wear, one gent remarked that this was like August in Minnesota. Another told the group of what he was informed while living in Newport RI that there were only two seasons up there: the 4th of July and winter. One of our distinguished gents was wearing his Walrus style hat (you know, the one that looks like a wedge) and another asked if he actually wore that hat in front of people, to which he replied "Yes, and I wear it behind people too". Speaking of animals, one gent recounted about his younger years when there was a local dog that loved to chase nuns on the street whenever they appeared. Perhaps the pooch mistook them for big penguins. I can remember those penguins chasing me and giving me a good thump while growing up and attending Catholic school, they must have obviously mistaken me for an ornery student.

We were discussing how the stretch of warm weather was playing a game with various plants, flowers and trees. Thinking that Spring had fully sprung, we saw a lot of early buds turn to beautiful blooms. One gent remarked about the bright white blooms of the Bradford Pear trees, and another said that some children referred to them as "throw up trees" because those pretty white blooms also have a fairly nasty smell apparently. Haven't actually smelled one up close, so we'll just have to take his word on that (something else I guess he learned in Minnesota). And lastly, our favorite retired Norwegian pastor regaled us with his memories and tales of Norwegians gathering by the boating docks and singing on the pier as the various ships would pull out for their voyages to America. Then our retired Navy Captain told of the days the crowds would appear on the piers as his Navy ship would return from a period at sea and see the families holding signs like this one particular spouse which read "I could be bowling". Brings a tear to your eye huh!

John K. had our lesson for the day, and he chose to use one of the group lesson guides used from the *LifeGuide Bible Study* series by Stephen and Jacalyn Eyre that focused on the teachings of Matthew chapter 12 about the security of belonging to the King as Jesus handles opposition with wisdom and power. John started out by asking us to share any experiences of leadership where we may have encountered resistance. A number of gents discussed these experiences, especially in light of the challenges we see every day with our local and federal governments where protest and resistance seems to be all we read or hear about. Some gents had early life experiences, others in their workplaces or professions, and we each had our own personal ways to deal with challenges. As a group we pretty much agreed that it is surprising to see any person run for public office given the criticism, contempt, protests and assaults on one's private life, their families and personal values. Seems to be no right answer.

We then took turns reading **Matthew 12** in its entirety. This chapter describes the growing opposition of religious leaders to Jesus, and how He confronts them with the serious consequences of their actions. After we finished, John then asked us a series of questions related to our readings for an open discussion. First he asked us to consider the ways the religious leaders attacked Jesus in verses **1 – 14**, and what was their strategy. Clearly the Pharisees needed to reinforce their understanding of the Law to disprove Jesus as being sent by God. They could not allow Jesus' teachings to demonstrate a greater understanding of the Law to their discredit. We noted the disciples picking grain to eat and Jesus healing a lame man in the temple which the Pharisees said violated the law of the Sabbath. But Jesus countered with examples of David and his men eating consecrated bread out of need and how the priests worked to prepare sacrifices to celebrate the Sabbath. Jesus was trying to get them to understand the "spirit" of the law, and not the "literal" law, and that the Sabbath was set aside to honor God, and actions with which God finds favor were not in violation of any earthly law.

Our next question was on the Pharisees' indirect attack on Jesus by going after the actions of His disciples (collecting and eating the grain). Actually, no law prohibited the plucking of grain in order to eat on the Sabbath. Gleaning handfuls of grain from a neighbor's field to satisfy one's immediate hunger was explicitly permitted (**Deut. 23:25**). What was prohibited was labor for the sake of profit. Thus, a farmer could not harvest for profit on the Sabbath, but an individual could glean enough grain to eat. The lesson here is Jesus was trying to demonstrate that Sabbath laws do not restrict deeds of necessity (verses **3-4**); service to God (verses **5-6**), or acts of mercy (verses **7-8**).

Our next question focused on how similar arguments are used today to discredit Christianity, and most discussion focused on dealing with the "literal" as opposed to "spiritual" meanings and interpretations of our Bible lessons. We talked about how actions and not necessarily beliefs were the subject of criticism. It was funny, but just as we got to discussing "Thou shalt not kill" one of the gents rubbed out a spider that was descending on the group from the ceiling. After we condemned his actions we returned to our studies! We then discussed the irony of the Pharisees plans to trip up Jesus and planning his death while Jesus was healing a lame man on the Sabbath (an act of mercy) in the Temple. They knew Jesus would heal the man on the Sabbath furthering their proof of His failing to follow the law. But Jesus was merely demonstrating that the lessons coming from the Temple should be focused on mercy and not condemnation, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* He then used this example (verses **11 – 12**) to educate the Pharisees: *"He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'"*

We then discussed the Pharisees' continuing assault on Jesus when they challenged if Jesus' power over demons was demonic (verses **22 – 37**). The Pharisees obviously wanted the people to see Jesus as demonic, and thus His teachings would also be evil. They cited Jesus' casting out demons of a possessed man. They asked *"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."* But in verses **25 – 26** we read: *"But Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand'?"* Jesus then said *"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"*. As such the tables were turned and the people were asked to accept the power of the Holy Spirit and reject the evil darkness of the devil.

We reread verses 43 – 45: *"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."* What was Jesus trying to reveal to the Pharisees with this story? Our group saw this as the challenges of rejecting evil, where, as the saying goes, "evil begets evil". Jesus was warning that a person cleansed of demons returns to evil ways, it will be seven times worse than originally experienced. This was his warning to the people of Israel, that is to not reject the message and actions of Jesus that set them spiritually free, that to do so will return them to the darkness they suffered before His coming. As long as we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is hope and not despair.

This was a very enjoyable and enlightening discussion for all, lots of involvement and opportunities to share experiences and thoughts relevant to our readings of the day.

Our next Men's Prayer Breakfast is Saturday, 8 April 2017. Please come and join in the fun and maybe you too can describe for us the smells of your favorite (or least favorite tree) or experiences with dogs or penguins.