

Introduction

Each year the friends and members of St. James Presbyterian Church rouse themselves out of the short days of dark winter quietude and put together a wonderful and amazing collection of writings for consideration and reflection during the Lenten Season. We wait until after Christmas so we are taking each season in it's own time, but that seems to mean that it really comes together at the last minute. I wish you could sit with me as I collect the e-mail missives and watch the pages come together. There are all of these different voices that I am eager to hear, and that I welcome to the book (both in paper and on-line). Unfortunately, there are always a few people who miss the deadline. I apologize to you for not making the process fit your lives better. My only advice is to write one now, and I'll save it for next year. Thanks to all the friends and members who took part, first in the writing and now in the reading. Thanks to Natasha for her work formatting and printing the book.

However you use these pages, it is the hope that they will fill your soul with love and energy for the celebration of Easter and times ahead. Many blessings, Carla Shafer, Editor chuckanutsandstone@gmail.com

Wednesday,
February 25, 2009

“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you--- you of little faith.”—Luke 12:28

In these troubling economic times at the start of the twenty first century, believers in Christ may well want to turn to the “Good News” Gospel of Luke for inspiration. Consider Chapter 12, starting at verse 22 reading through verse 34. Under the title “Do Not Worry” Luke’s Gospel tells about God’s instructions to his disciples concerning economic matters such food and clothing needs.

God describes how the Ravens in the air and the Flowers of the fields, like Lilies, are clothed with blossoms and the Ravens with fine feathers. Also he tells us about how God’s abundance feeds them.

So, God’s clear instructions amount to this; do not worry, do not be afraid, because it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Strive for his Kingdom, and the things that sustain life will be given to you as well. And finally remember “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jack Drury

Gracious God, bless me with strength, courage and patience as I rejoice and wait for the Lord. I observe others around me who patiently wait, in spite of difficulties. Help me to join them in praise, In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Thursday, February 26, 2009

On Fasting

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near--a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"



Friday, February 27, 2009

“If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” -- Romans 8:13

Lent is about dying and death. If we *fast* during Lent, it is about lying down or dying to a particular part of our appetites or habits so that in some small way, we stand in solidarity with Jesus as He makes His final journey to the cross where He lay down His life for us. Lent is about preparing ourselves (body, heart and mind) for that Good Friday and the death of Jesus; but also about preparing ourselves for the new life on Easter Jesus’ death brings us. This death and the life that comes from it are as different from each other as an acorn that must be buried and the glorious oak that is born. Jesus didn’t come to make us better acorns. Jesus came to die so that we might join with Him in that death and enter in to the life that is truly life and so become *oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord.* (Isaiah 61:3)

Paul refers here to our “sinful nature” and “the misdeeds of the body;” that these are the things in us that must die. The sinful nature is all in us that is opposed to the Kingly love and authority of Jesus in our lives, and the misdeeds of the body is all that comes out of that. It is such a deep part of us that Paul calls it is in our “nature” or “flesh.” How do we deal with such a deeply imbedded part of ourselves?

The Rev. Mike Neelley

Gracious God, Help me to open my nature to your light, cleansing waters and healing grace. I am your faithful servant, listening with my whole heart. Amen

February 28, 2009

If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. —Romans 8:13

(Continued from February 26, 2009)

I have often thought that if anything in me is going to change, God is going to have to do it – divine intervention is the only solution! At other times I have thought that if anything in me is to change it is solely up to me by the effort of my will to bring it about – I must grit my teeth and persevere. Paul tells us another way. *By the Spirit* –God is definitely involved; it won’t happen apart from the Spirit at work in us. And we put to death – we have a part to play in cooperation with the Spirit.

None of this is about fear or measuring up or God being angry with us; it’s all about the extravagant life God has for us and removing from us a spiritual cancer that opposes that life. And it is such good news that the Spirit wants to partner with us. So we must ask God’s Holy Spirit for help. Take time to quiet yourself and listen to what God wants to say to you. Write it down so you can reflect on it.

The Rev. Mike Neelley

Holy Spirit, thank You that You are good and You do what is good and that everything You do is to lead me into life. I submit to Your leading. Will You please search me and show me today what needs to die in my way of thinking or acting or believing so that I can enter more fully into the life You have for me? And will You show me what to do with what You show me? I need Your help.



Sunday, March 1, 2009

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" --Matthew 5:13

SEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT SALT

What did Christ mean when he said,
"You are the salt of the earth"?
Had he forgotten about Lot's Wife
turned into a pillar of salt
for looking back? Salt seasons.
Salt preserves. Looked at
through a microscope, salt blossoms
into crystals, gem-like profusions.
Salt stings a wound, though blood
itself is salty. "He had a salty tongue,"
we say of someone who curses.
Of course the sea is salty.
Of course tears are salty.
What do we look back at with longing?
What do we curse?
What do we spice up?
What wounds do we awaken?
When have we tasted blood?
What do we weep for?
What might we preserve?

Bethany Reid

Gracious God, Sometimes the clearest image from Your Word has been understood one way for centuries. I knew that salt was valuable and I could be of value. Help me learn your intention as I discover new ways of being salt...the preserver, the spice, or the sting. Amen.

Monday, March 2, 2009

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

Two of the special blessings of my membership in St. James are the Sunday adult class and the frequent drives from my home in Mount Vernon to Bellingham. Both bring me many “ah-ha” moments. Last year our class had journeyed through the wilderness with Moses and the Israelites. Later in the Fall as I was driving to Bellingham, I drove through a shaded area of highway, rounded a curve into bright sunlight, and there beside the road was a bush with leaves in brilliant shades of gold and orange lighted by the sun – truly a burning bush right in my path! It took me by such surprise that, for the remainder of the drive, I could only marvel at the way God gets our attention through such wonders and beauty in this glorious creation. Such experiences constantly remind me to be alert to seeing God in different ways that help me respond faithfully to God’s grace in my life. Thanks be to God!

Bev Stewart

Gracious God, You have such great ways of getting my attention. In every season something reminds me of how your grace comes alive in me and for me. Amen.

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

“The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”-- Genesis 1.2

Now here are some scary thoughts: “formless voids, darkness and a wind from God sweeping over the face of waters.” How it has all changed. All the awesome possibility of time before the world began to the opening days of springtime in what we call the twenty-first century.

I can hardly think of a time before earth, or the galaxy among galaxies. Like my daughter told me once when she was a child, “Don’t talk about the planets mom, it makes me dizzy.”

It is valuable to think about how the creation story applies to the formation and journey of self. Through the complexity of thought and feeling, we can take the formless void and make it part of our inner selves, or we can wrap ourselves in darkness until every source of happiness and light seems distant beyond our hope of ever reaching it. Other times we would like a great wind, as powerful as we know God to be, to either carry us out of the troubles that surround us, or to blow them all away.

Genesis can be a metaphor for how God creates form in us through the solidness of faith so emptiness disappears. It shows us how darkness becomes bearable because we do not have to endure it alone. Even in the great deep, God is present, and his light will come. The winds are a reminder of the presence of the Holy Spirit sweeping into our fears and troubles and putting things right as we are re-created to trust in God’s power.

Carla Shafer

Creator God, Recreate in me the knowledge that you are with me in all things, and even when I feel distracted, displaced or undone, you give my life its form, light and grace-filled courage. Amen.

Monday, March 4, 2009

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”-- Romans 8:38-39

The apostle Paul writes this while under threat by the Roman Empire, eventually resulting in his death. Throughout the ages, Christians have been comforted and strengthened by these verses of Paul, while enduring suffering, hardship and approaching death.

But is God's love also present when an officer has to push a button to fire a missile into a target, selected by others, such as a school in a Gaza refugee camp, or a mountain village in Afghanistan? A recent letter by an anonymous Israeli officer describes the moral anguish resulting from following the orders. His Government outlawed publication of the names and pictures of the commanding officers.

As, what to me is an expression of God's love, a group of citizens in Bellingham is discussing means of providing sanctuary for some who refuse to kill in an unjust war for which we share responsibility.

Peter van der Veen

Lord, may your love be throughout the world. Enlighten me and others when we have to make ethically difficult decisions, in particular, when it concerns matters of life and death of others, and ourselves. Amen.

Thursday, March 5, 2009

“By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.” --Psalm 104.12

Consider the words of the song "Bendemeer's Stream" by Thomas Moore: "There's a bower of roses by Bendemeer's stream and a nightingale sings 'round it all the day long!" I saw a nightingale in a birch tree by Oslofjord in Norway on May 18, 2008, but she was not in the mood to sing. She just remained silent while she seemed to be busy with building a nest! And yet this was such a peaceful moment in God's beautiful natural creation. This is when it is easy to hear God whispering: "Rejoice for Life is a Miracle!" Even though the HEAD-lines of the human world are dominated by reports of war, natural disasters, food shortages, corporate greed, and communal grief, God's HEART-lines are all about the simple miracles of life that are easy to miss if we only focus on the headlines! Peace!

Bruce Kraig

God of all creation, help me to be as a bird on a new branch in spring, even while the days are still short and there are signs of new life. Heart-lines of your miracles are all around me. Help me to see what is good and to bring peace into the human world. In your name I pray, Amen.



Friday, March 6, 2009

***And God made great whales, and every living reptile, which the waters brought forth according to their kinds, and every creature that flies with wings according to its kind, and God saw that they were good.--
Genesis 1: 21***

What a joy, this morning, to be awakened by the calling of an eagle from our tall fir tree, to move to the window in the bright daylight and see a flock of beautiful white and black bufflehead ducks frolicking at the water's edge and a squirrel greedily hanging from the bird feeder while woodpeckers, bright blue stellar jays and numerous other birds anxiously awaited their turn to feed. Just days ago we watched as a family of otters scurried out of the tall dead grass and made their way into the bay, returning after a refreshing swim. The days are getting longer and warmer. Soon the deer will return with their spotted little ones. The raccoon in the garden shed will emerge with darling roly poly babies. The starlings may again make a nest in the spring wreath on the front door allowing us to peek out the small window and watch the progress until new babies hatch. Maybe this year we will see whales pass. We will walk along the shore spotting bright purple star fish, crab hiding beneath rocks and clams dropped along our path by seagulls flying overhead. God surprises up daily.

Spring is coming! We believe, we trust and we have faith. We see and hear. God has a plan. It is good. The Lord has risen! I will hear and see him through you and I pray, during this Lenten season, He will be seen and heard through me. God has a plan. It is good.

Gretchen Pfueller

God who has planned for every living thing, I pray that you will keep me strong trusting in your presence with the gift of faith that I see in others the good servant that they might see in me. You are ever with me. Amen.

Saturday, March 7, 2009

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. --Nehemiah 9.20

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The book of Nehemiah is not one that we naturally turn to for spiritual encouragement and enlightenment, but it includes a wonderful story about the ancestors of our faith – both the good and the bad. The story takes place as the Jewish people attempt the formidable task of rebuilding the broken walls and burned gates of their beloved city Jerusalem. Nehemiah seems to be the chief engineer on the construction site, but his plans and blueprints for the project have been conceived and developed in constant prayer and confession with his God. Nehemiah was a man of action, but he was also a man of deep faith, a winning combination in my book!

After the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the people assembled to fast and pray for forgiveness of the rebellion of their ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai. In recalling God's care, they remember that God gave His spirit to instruct them and provided manna for their food and water for their thirst. What is most interesting to me is that in remembering the ways that God met their basic needs, they placed His gift of spiritual guidance first -- before food and water. Do we, God's people of today, place the need for God's guidance above our need for water and food? This Lenten season provides an opportunity for a rich renewal of our trust in God. Between the silence of Ash Wednesday and the joyful celebration of Easter, let us seek God's guidance before all else, not just for ourselves, but for St. James as it is transformed during this interim process.

Faye Hill

God of many generations, Help me to be your faithful servant taking your guidance in all that I do. This will renew me in new and wonderful ways. Amen.

Sunday, March 8, 2009

***"If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice."—
Ecclesiastes 9:7***

Why is it that we spend any time worrying and feeling guilty because we haven't done yesterday things that we said we'd do. When we take time off and sometimes are delayed in getting stuff done it is never helpful to feel guilty.

God trusts our promises because we come through for him many times. His forgiveness is greater than our ability to put things off.

We can enjoy our bread and wine with a merry heart, since we've proved before that our faith and our purposefulness can be trusted. And God probably knew that we needed a break.

Peg Wilke

Great God who pays attention to me, let me open my heart so you know me and so I know your enduring love. I am faithful to your commandments and I do the best I can in every situation. You are my guide. Help me always to serve thee, Amen.

Monday, March 9, 2009

“They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” --Psalm 1:3

The Psalmist says this is the way of those who delight in the law of the Lord on which they meditate day and night. It is a beautiful image of the faithful life. How grateful we can be to the psalmists whose words and images inspire, console, nurture, and challenge us when our own words fail us. The few words in this verse speak volumes as we imagine the tree roots going deep into soil for health and strength which produces fruit for our sustenance and leaves to shade us.

It is an ongoing process just as our constant meditation on the law of the Lord leads us to grow deep roots and produce healthy fruit and comforting leaves for the continuing benefit of God’s people. It also is a reminder that it takes time to grow a strong root system before the fruit can grow.

I am thankful for the all those who came before us at St. James who left a strong legacy for us to carry on into the next generation. I’m reminded of the last verses of Psalm 27 – “I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.”

Bev Stewart

God, our Creator and Comforter, Thank you for the words of the Psalms that reassure and direct me to fulfill the hope of previous generations and be reminded to keep the root systems strong for the next generations. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Tuesday, March 10, 2009

On Fasting

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Continues on March 11th)

Dear God, Teach me to be humble yet act with authority in working against injustice. Sometimes our world breaks my heart and I call on, and I trust you to mend it using us all. Amen.

Wednesday, March 11, 2009

On Fasting

Isaiah 58:1-12

Continued from March 10th

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

God of wholeness, illuminate the yoke of oppression from my behaviors. Take away my parched and sinful ways. Show me how to repair and restore past actions to Your Way. I yearn for your help always. Amen.



Thursday, March 12, 2009

“He said to them, ‘Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you,” --Matthew 17:20

“Who plants a seed beneath the sod
And waits to see, believes in God”

So reads a small sign that lives in one of my flower beds. Perhaps not the best theology, but closer to my personal idea of the reach of my faith.

Because, really, thinking a mustard seed (about the size of an “o” on this page) could move something like Mt. Baker is just beyond my imagining.

However, I know when I plant a carrot, beet, lettuce, zucchini or bean seed, God creates the perfect conditions for that seed to grow, thrive and produce. Yes, I help a little bit with watering, weeding, fertilizing and worrying, but it’s mostly God doing the work.

Thus I’ll keep planting seeds, be it in the soil of my gardens, in the brains of my children or in my daily living. I’ll nurture those seeds, knowing God is there with me. And if Mt. Baker starts to move northward, it wasn’t all my fault!

Carolyn Mullen

Lord of all life, help us to grow in faith each day.

Nurture us in Your love ,and bless us with the fruit of Your Spirit. Amen

Friday, March 13, 2009

“Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. “--Psalm 103:1-5

An Ode and Prayer of Thanks

First is praise,
Our hearts to raise.\
Then benefits that Forgive and Heal
and Love and Compassion you know is real.
The satisfaction of Peace and good things
Your youth renewed on eagles wings.
With Prayerful Thanks

Dorothy L. Brown

Dear God, The eagle has both sharp talons and broad wings, help me to pull in that which is sharp and hurtful, help me to stretch my wings across many needs and make me alert to hear you word. In Jesus Name, Amen.

March 14, 2009 Saturday,

And now, O house of Jacob, come, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.-- Isaiah 2:5.

Call me crazy, but I love January. Well, maybe some time around the middle of the month when it becomes obvious that the sun is staying a little longer than it did the day before. The snow reports from Mom and my brother back east can be just awful, but I have winter sun with the spice of drizzle or frost.

Or maybe it's the hellebores and snow drops who care less about the weather and just come out. They remind me that no matter how far I get astray in what God wants me to do with *my* day, I can hope that if I call on Him, I can get myself back on track and into the light of the renewing sun.

Janet Oakley

God of grace and beauty, You are with me in all seasons and I rejoice at the ways you make your presence known. I rejoice in the light. Amen.

Sunday, March 15, 2009

"The Lord resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble." Proverbs 3: 34 (Also found in James 4:6.)

The sentiment of this selection is repeated throughout the Bible. We'd probably prefer that this scripture be aimed at others, rather than at ourselves. I'd rather have it aimed at you, instead of at me! First, let's be clear about our definitions. Proud is a form of the word pride, which is defined as: "An unduly high opinion of oneself, exaggerated self-esteem, conceit, arrogance. Humble means: having or showing a consciousness of one's defects or shortcomings; not proud; modest; unpretentious. Numbers 12:13 tells us that Moses was the most humble man in all the earth. Is that why he was given the gift of seeing God's glory?

When I was a teenager in confirmation class the teacher, one of the church's pastors, met with each student. It was sort of an oral exam, or you could say we were getting better acquainted. In my meeting with him, he asked, "Do I understand what pride is, and if pride was keeping me from making a strong commitment of my life to Jesus." At the time I told him pride was not a problem. The truth was that even then I realized that I already had a double dose of pride and it did get in the way of my ability to live life in obedience to Jesus. No doubt it still does.

The Rev. Jerry Poole

O God, pridefulness comes easily to me. Living in humility comes only with hard work. Let the same mind be in me 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. Teach me humility that I may lead others to Him. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Monday, March 16, 2009

On Fasting

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"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.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"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.

Dear God, Let me witness to your love in the world so that repairs might be made and your presence know. Help me to pray often so you know my heart as you direct the work of my hands. Amen

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.—Luke 20.46:

Thorstein Veblen, in “The Theory of the Leisure Class,” challenged the orthodox economic view that individuals made financial decisions based on rational utility, asserting the elite actually made their decisions to impress by displaying status. He called this Conspicuous Consumption.

In 20th Century suburban culture this was called Keeping Up With the Jones. My boomer generation sought to be Upwardly Mobile and current young adults seek to increase Disposal Income. For more and more people it’s all about impressing others with display. All that matters is what others think about us. How good we are, how important we are, how valuable we are depends entirely on others’ evaluation.

But the corollary is that the role of others in our lives is reduced from people we care about to an audience of whom all we care about is their reviews of our show. It destroys any chance of real, authentic relationships. But even worse, in the end we can lose our very souls as our own authentic true selves dissolve in the phoniness of our conspicuous consumption.

Don’t trust people like this is Jesus’ advice. But hidden in that warning is a deeper call: don’t be people like this.

Miranda Keefe

God, today let me see people not as those I should impress but as those I can love. Let me be one who is not afraid to be authentic and not wary of accepting others whether they can impress me or not. Amen

Wednesday, March 18, 2009

Nicodemus asked, ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to first find out what they are doing, does it?—John 7: 52

I recently found myself in a court room for several days. Fortunately for me, I was a member of the jury, not the person being judged, nor the person making an accusation. It was a fascinating experience to be able to witness -- no, more correctly, I should say “view”, since other people were the actual “witnesses”. The other jurors and I were able to view the legal proceedings from the safety of the Jury Box, having been given the decisive job of listening to both sides very carefully and impartially, weighing the evidence presented to us, and agreeing upon a verdict.

We in America are fortunate to live in a country where we are given our “one day in court” and judged by our peers.

As an aside, I have to tell you that as I explained my impending absence to my class of first-graders, and answered their many questions, I thought I had given them a clear picture of the “trial by jury” system and my role in it. But alas, later in the day one child raised his hand and solemnly asked me if I would tell them what I did that was bad. Okay, back to explaining and answering questions. Then, as the kids were leaving for the day, that same child turned to me and said so sadly, “I hope they don’t put you in jail...”

And then I was gone for an entire week.

Jean Seater

Dear God, Please be with children who have reason to worry about judges and juries at an early age. Help them to know justice that hears first. Help them to know your love, and help me to listen. Take away my need to judge. Let me leave judging to you and your boundless mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Thursday, March 19, 2009

“Blessed also is the eunuch whose hands have done no lawless deed, and who has not devised wicked things against the Lord; for special favor will be shown him for his faithfulness, and a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord.”-- Solomon 3.14

Out in the barn, we castrated lambs so they could be wethers for meat rather than rams to breed the flock. This was a strange practice for a town girl to be involved with, but every spring, in an effort to be a good farmer, out I went to administer to the flock, with the result of happy sheep and a good price for the meat at auction.

In Biblical times castration was practiced on slaves and servants on “special assignment” so to speak. The eunuchs who Jesus speaks about were men castrated so they could be employed as guards in harems or work for royalty without threat of destroying the male line.

Yet, even though social and political custom saw these men as alien, Jesus did not. He bestowed his love.. How amazing is that? He was always telling those around him that favor with the Lord was a matter of faithfulness, and that everyone was included, not just a little, but wholly included. He seems to tell us that the human tendency to see “other” is not God’s tendency. He says that God’s love offers great delight to those who love God. Let us Presbyterians and Christians offer great delight to everyone of faith as fully as we can (including ordination) and let us move forward from there. Are we not God’s people?

Carla Shafer

God of all humanity, help me to be your good and faithful servant. Erase my doubts. Take away manipulative speech. Let me be open to accepting all people as God’s people. Help me to share the comfort and rewards of your love with everyone. Only then will I be able to truly reflect your light in the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Friday, March 20, 2009

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return...”--Luke 6:35a (see also Luke 6:27-28, 32-36 and Matthew 5:43-48)

Loving one’s enemies has to be one of the most challenging things presented to us in the scriptures. It’s easy to love our friends, to love those who love us, to love those who are good to us - but love our enemies? Is it even possible?

I struggled with this as I prepared to preach the Sunday after September 11, 2001, and then again a year later after the first anniversary. The suggested response of many to the attacks of 9/11 was to crush the enemy using whatever violent means necessary. Yet violence never seems to end violence but rather perpetuates it. And I believe that God abhors all violence.

I came to a place of knowing that God’s heart is torn asunder, is broken, when events like this happen. God suffers with the suffering. God’s arms reach out to embrace us all. God’s faithful love will not leave us alone whoever and wherever we are. And I know also that God’s love even embraces the perpetrators of the terror; they also are children of God who God loves and grieves over. I don’t understand love and sorrow that great, but I believe it exists in God’s heart.

The Rev. Karen Summers

O God, fill me to the brim with your love, so that by your grace I may begin to understand how far your love extends. Amen.

Saturday, March 21, 2009

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return...”--Luke 6:35a (see also Luke 6:27-28, 32-36 and Matthew 5:43-48)

(Continued from March 19th)

Is it possible for us to love our enemies, is it possible for us to love the whole mess of humanity as God does? Do we even really believe that God loves “them” as well as “us”? Only God’s love and mercy is possibly that large. Only by God’s love and grace working in me can I even begin to know what it might be to love my enemy.

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman from Holland, who perished at Auschwitz in 1943, had written the following in her journal: “We shan’t get anywhere with hatred. We have so much work to do on ourselves that we shouldn’t be thinking of hating our so-called enemies. Every atom of hate that we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.

Against every new outrage and every fresh horror we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer but we must not succumb.”

The Rev. Karen Summers

O God, fill me to the brim with your love, so that by your grace I may begin to learn to love, moving beyond fear, letting go of hate and anger, however slowly. Amen.

Sunday, March 22, 2009

“Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’”-- John 11: 9-10

The gospel of John records a fascinating history concerning three years of ministry by Jesus as he traveled throughout the Middle East. During this ministry Jesus preached, taught his disciples and performed a series of miracles to demonstrate and inform non-believers that he was the divine Son of God.

One of these miracles concerned a man in the village of Bethany named Lazarus, brother of the sisters, Martha and Mary. The sisters informed Jesus about Lazarus’ illness and asked him to come to Bethany. Upon hearing about Lazarus, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples remembered the last visit by Jesus, who was stoned by the Jews, and said “Are you going there again?” John 11:9-10 records Jesus’ answer to the disciple’s question.

What Jesus meant by his answer was, that if you believe in Him as the Son of God, then you are in the light and you will not stumble. Then Apostle John explained how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus then explained that if they believed in Him, even though they die, they live, in that everyone who lives and believes in Jesus will never die. What a wonderful and powerful thought concerning our personal lives.

Jack Drury

God of grace, you are welcome in my life as I am learning to be part of that faithful group of followers who are moving from darkness to light, from denial to faith, and from death to resurrection. Amen.

Monday, March 23, 2009

***“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people.”—
John 6: 9***

There’s a crazy guy named Columbus wanting the Queen to finance sailing west to go east! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a nut named Galileo who figures he can learn how things work by dropping cannon balls instead of studying Aristotle! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a demented woman named Anthony who says women are equal and should be able to vote! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a lunatic named Goddard who plays with rockets and says we can fly to the moon! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s an obtuse guru who’s certain non-violence can force the British out of India! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a fool named Obama who thinks he can win the Democratic primary and go on and become president! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a kid here with a fishwich and Jesus thinks we can feed thousands with that! Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a Spirit whispering, “If you have the faith of a mustard seed you can move mountains!” Isn’t that absurd?

There’s a Gospel telling us peace and justice aren’t just a dream! Isn’t that absurd?

Miranda Keefe

God, teach me today to believe the absurd. Let me see beyond the narrow frames of complacency. Shake me up with the unconsidered option. Motivate me to be a fool for Christ whose wisdom shatters conventions and creates new possibilities. Amen.

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

“So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.” —John 6:13

Barley Bread ~ Simmer 1 cup pearl barley in 3 cups water for 30 minutes, until it absorbs water and is tender. Let cool until barely warm. Combine 1/2 cup warm water, 1 teaspoon sugar, 1/4 teaspoon ginger, 2 packages yeast and let bubble nicely. In a large bowl stir together 2 c. warm water, 4 Tablespoons sugar, 2 cups flour, add the yeast mixture and beat well. Add 1/2 cup butter and 2 teaspoons salt (or seasoned salt). Add 4 cups flour and slightly warm cooked barley. Put 2 cups flour on the counter, turn out dough and knead vigorously, using more flour to make a fairly stiff dough. Return to the bowl, oil top, cover and let rise in a warm place until double. Turn out knead lightly, divide into equal portions, shape into 5 loaves and place in greased pans. Brush tops with melted butter, let stand until light (but not overlight). Bake in preheated oven to 350 degrees for about 45 minutes. Turn pans on sides to cool a few minutes before removing from pans.

Bread of life, bread of longing, bread of beginning, bread of new grains, sprouts of what is possible, beyond what can be imagined, this is the new piece torn from the whole. Before the boy with his meager lunch, was his parent building the fire and baking the bread? Handing it over and then wondering where he was all afternoon? Hoping he would come home and tell about what was new or different as he tried once again to have his parents believe him. Yes, there was such a man, says the boy, and everyone was filled.

Carla Shafer

God of life, help me to focus on today. Let each morsel of each meal fill me so I understand the simplicity of bread and the completeness of having. Help me to be your servant always, Amen.

 Wednesday,
March 25, 2009

“...and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf;” — Genesis 8:11

In the story of the great flood, In Genesis, Noah sends out the dove twice, to see if the water has subsided after 40 days. The first time, the dove returns to the ark right away, but it is this second time, when the dove returns with an olive branch that they wait only seven more days.

We know that, to feed themselves and to build their nests, doves and other birds carry food and nesting materials in their beaks. And in the springtime, if we remember often enough to look skyward, we will observe birds carrying branches and other things. They can fly across great bodies of water to do this, and build nests in the tops of the tallest trees.

People who have no wings, may envy the bird her freedom, coming and going overhead in the air. But who among you would be willing, like the birds, to give up you hands for two wings, or to carry all of your food and belongings in your mouths and your feet?

Ellen Kramer

God of Wisdom, Thank you for designing me as I am and help me to work in your world with a gentle heart and loving ways to be. I rejoice in the dove who found dry land and continued her life as it had been planned. Amen.

 Thursday, March 26, 2009

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Genesis 18.4:

Abraham is speaking to strangers who have appeared at his tent. In a time when hospitality was of greatest importance, sometimes even guaranteeing one's survival, Abraham offered sustenance and comfort.

We focus a lot on the theme of hospitality these days; about how important it was in days of old. We talk about the people we might be excluding now; those we need to bring into our midst with acceptance and God's love. And then? We proceed as usual. La dee da, buy the groceries. Gotta run. Time for work.

Wait. Was that someone in need standing on the street corner? Someone in distress in need of a prayer or a hug? Am I neglecting to share my bounty, my blessings, my joys with those less fortunate?

The Rev. Tamalyn Kralman

God, even in those desert moments, in which I might feel bereft, alone, helpless, I merely need to look around me to see that I have much to share, so many ways in which to enrich the lives of others. May I be like Abraham and Sarah, perhaps laughing, perhaps ignorant of your presence, and yet willing to lend a helping hand, even to a stranger. Amen.

Friday, March 27, 2008

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”-- Matthew 5: 6

There are things so simple in our faith that we often overlook them. Take the beatitudes. The Blesseds are so simple. Yet we tend to make an extravaganza out of them and forget what they mean. Maybe we see a movie in our heads, with Jesus on the Mount with throngs around Him. The scene obliterates the message.

There are hard facts about life. Some of us may do well. Others may struggle their entire lives. The beatitudes tell us that things are now turned upside down, though for the past two thousand years, people still don't get it. These simple words offer hope for those who feel really beaten down. Especially right now in these hard economic times.

We can hunger and thirst for better times, but Jesus tells us that the material things are not what we should be seeking. It's those who do the right thing in their daily lives who will be filled. Not the CEOs who cheated billions out of people's pockets and lived the high life. Not the ones who worked less and got more because of their position. Those who live morally and honestly will be rewarded in the end. At all levels of life and class.

So simple.

Janet Oakley

Jesus, Give me a simple faith and let me know that you are always with me. Amen.

Saturday, March 28, 2009

Psalm 1:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

I was asked to write about recent travels in Turkey, (five trips in five years) even though our government regularly issues travel warnings against such travel. Sometimes we are asked, “ Why on earth would you want to go to that country -it's a Muslim country- those people don't like us and they are terrorists.” I have tried to explain but it was no use. I leave those conversations very upset!

One of the places we visited one year was the beautiful, but sad, Gallipoli peninsula where the WW1 battlefield is located. As we drove along the shore we came to a cemetery with a large engraved marble plaque which read; **THOSE HEROES THAT SHED THEIR BLOOD AND LOST THEIR LIVES....YOU ARE NOW LYING IN THE SOIL OF A FRIENDLY COUNTRY THEREFORE REST IN PEACE.THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE JOHNNIES AND THE MEHMETS TO US WHERE THEY LIE SIDE BY SIDE HERE IN THIS COUNTRY OF OURS....YOU THE MOTHERS WHO SENT THEIR SONS FROM A FAR AWAY COUNTRIES WIPE AWAY YOUR TEARS: YOUR SONS ARE NOW LYING IN OUR BOSOM AND ARE IN PEACE...THEY HAVE BECOME OUR SONS AS WELL.”1934**

Mustipha Kimal Atitürk

Atitürk was one of the commanders of that battle and went on to become the father of the modern Turkish nation, a secular democracy which is 98% Muslim. Those do not sound like the words of a terrorist to me. We will be leaving for Turkey again shortly. Why you may ask? Because we have found the people of Turkey absolutely delightful and so appreciative of our visits to their country. The Christian history they preserve for us is also just incredible.

Bill Read

God of all peoples, you are with me everywhere I go. Give me understanding and bless the world with peace. Amen.

Sunday, March 29, 2009

"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."-- Jeremiah 31:37

Christ died not only to redeem us from sin, but even more to so thoroughly transform us that someday we will be perfect reflectors of Him and of His holiness! His very character and essence will become a living part of our inner selves! Even now, in this life, the Holy Spirit works to change us more and more into Christ-likeness. Our prayer can be, "Lord Jesus, when people see me, may they see a picture of You." This process continues throughout our life, until someday in Heaven we will be so transformed that we shall be transparent reflectors of Him Who is our Creator, our Savior, and our Sanctifier.

So when you become discouraged with who you are, pause to remember that God loves you so truly and intensely that He is writing His own character within your inner self. He values you so passionately that He is imprinting His very holiness within your heart, soul, and mind. His will, His self, and His law of love will become so deeply a part of your inner being that you will be an untarnished image of the Lord of love for all eternity.

The next time you are down on yourself, remember this: loves me enough to make me beautiful within, as He is beautiful, and He will never give up on me.

The Rev. Gordon Terpstra

Author God, Help me to remember how much You love me. Help me remember that You never become discouraged with me, but are always writing Your holiness into my character. Open me up to this renewed understanding, that I may be undiscouraged and reflect your gifts from within. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Monday, March 30, 2009

"Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully."==Jeremiah 24: 28

Two things happened on the bus ride home today. One man, known among regular passengers for his conciliatory ways and ability to see the best in everyone, told me he had been a Methodist minister in Kansas, but that too many people used Christianity as a way to judge and mistreat others and to just be mean, so he went back to school to become a health care provider.

In the next twenty minutes, the sun, low on the western horizon, broke through the clouds dropping rain to the east and one young man told his girlfriend in the seat beside him, "Look, a rainbow!" while another passenger, also young, explained how water bends light to create the prism of colors in a rainbow.

Each conversation allowed others to say what they knew. They shared their disappointment or delight from their experiences. We are asked to speak the Word of the Lord faithfully. We are expected to be kind and to delight in rainbows as a memory of the covenant God has made with us.

I couldn't contradict the first man and say that Christians have grown non-judgmental and now treat others fairly, but I could remind him that some have learned to let God's word guide them and thus strive to work for justice, peace and love, no matter what.

Carla Shafer

Creator God, Your mysteries surround me and I ask for your forgiveness when I fail to acknowledge your love and speak your words of love, justice and peace. Help me to be faithful. Amen.

Tuesday, March 31, 2009

“His parents said this because they were afraid ...for anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.... “He is of age; ask him.” John 9:22

Just before this passage of scripture, a beggar blind from birth has been cured by Jesus, on the Sabbath! The formerly blind man is so miraculously changed that his neighbors wonder if he is indeed the same man – though he looks like him. The Pharisees talk to him and to his parents, not to find the truth of the miracle but to find evidence against Jesus.

Having just seen “The Slumdog Millionaire” it is clear to me that this man and his parents are dealing with willfully blind authority. They are pawns to the Powerful who move to sustain their worldview. The son, whose blindness is cured, has the courage to testify to those unbelievers and eventually accept Jesus as the Messiah. His parents are not so brave – perhaps their comfort in life has been the synagogue. Now their son’s cure has threatened their good standing in that sanctuary.

Our Adult Class has been viewing portions of a film where Christian families deal with their own reactions to learning a family member is homosexual. In some cases the crisis involves making a choice between their family member and their church. In all cases, it takes a while to absorb and accept the consequences of this big change in perceived reality. The parents in our scripture lesson may not have been brave enough to take a stand for Jesus, but they did not contradict their son. They let him speak for himself: “I was blind and now I see!” It would be interesting to know the rest of the story – did the Synagogue excommunicate them? Or did they become Christians out of the testimony of their son?

Sally Albers

God, You lead me through my fears and love me all the way. Give me the courage of sight. Amen

Wednesday, April 1, 2009

“Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?” Malachi 2.10

As I was deciding which passage to chose to reflect upon, I saw this passage and thought “that will be a quick one – just thoughts about being nice and kind to our fellow human beings...” Perhaps I had God watching over my shoulder because as I read through the complete Book of Malachi (all of two pages) multiple times, I realized that the message of Malachi includes “don’t just take the easy route”. The Lord of Hosts expects us to persevere and be steadfast especially when we weary of following rules or don’t understand his rules. I find it difficult to relate word for word all of the Book of Malachi to our present world, but if one reads the whole book, the messages from God appear. God, through Malachi, begins Chapter 1 by saying “I have loved you” which should be the primary goal of how we live in faith with God and one another.

Linda Landis

*God of the Ages, Lord of Hosts, You help me to be faithful to the love you give and you show me how to give love all around, even when it might be difficult or easy. This is a blessing in my life.
Amen.*

Thursday, April 2, 2009

"...and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth."—Genesis 8.7

The Paul family totem

Crow picked in the wooden ear
of bear. Cedar mites pried loose,
eaten, a gossip of bugs
and spiders.

Crows fly to old mountains
seek out mid elevation
old growth hemlocks on
high ground -- forage in
rotting crannies and from that
prospect view the countryside.

Later, returning to the wooden ear
they report some changes.

Carla Shafer

God of Abraham and of traditions not yet known, I have a few changes to report, some good, some bad. In either case, I depend on you to help me be your voice for humanity, justice and love. Amen.

Friday, April 3, 2009

And "to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength," and "to love one's neighbor as oneself," – this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices."-- Mark 12:33

"To love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength," and to love one's neighbor as oneself," is to be alive, awake and responsive - moment by moment- to the sound, smell, voice, touch of Jesus. There is nothing we have to do to earn His love; his death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice. Our "sacrifice" during the Lenten season is a movement toward intimacy, moving deeper into the love Jesus already has for us.

What if our practice in Lent created space to make ourselves more open to what Jesus already wants to give us, so our sacrifice is to remove things that clutter and close us off to being alive, awake and responsive? Think of things that close you off to intimacy – busyness, fear, striving, aloofness, etc. What would it look like to fast from fear? What if every time you felt afraid you turned to Jesus and asked Him to show you His love – and waited to see, hear or feel? What if you removed some busyness from your schedule and did something that gave you joy or rest as a gift of love from Jesus?

Susan Neelley

God of Love, Help me create a space to be more open to what Jesus already wants to give, so through sacrifice I can remove things that clutter and close me off to being alive, awake and responsive. Amen.



Saturday, April 4, 2009

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. --Matthew 5: 4

My references tell me that this was based on Isaiah 57:18 and 61:1, and they are about those who mourn not as much for earthly sorrow as deep regret for all sin and shortcomings. Those who thus sorrow are assured of God's gift of comfort and salvation.

While I would not want to question the wisdom of the experts I believe that surely there is comfort for those of us who mourn for earthly sorrows as well. There certainly was national mourning for earthly sorrows in 1864 and 1964 as the nation experienced the assassination of Lincoln and Kennedy. The nation in both cases was in need of comforting.

On a more personal basis I think back to 1997 and my own sense of loss times three. My father died in February of that year, my mother passed away in June, and my 22 year old step-grandson was killed in an automobile accident in July. I was truly in need of comfort. I tried to hide in my work. Keeping busy kept me from thinking about the loss I felt, but it did not give me comfort.

As I reflect back on that year, I understand that any one of those losses could have been dealt with without devastating impact but the cumulative impact of the three piled one on top of the other was almost too much to cope with. It was only after I sought comfort in prayer that I finally worked my way through the grief after more than a year of sorrow. "Those who mourn will be comforted."

Gary Culbertson

O God, You lighten my load of earthly sorrows as I turn to you and pray. As I open myself to my feelings about what weighs heavy in my life, I find your peace. Thank you for your gift of sharing what is hard, so I feel your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." --Matthew 5: 5

When I wonder who is meek in the world today I think of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama living in exile in Dharamsala in northern India. According to my 1943 map of the world Tibet was much larger than I ever realized: 1400 miles long and 800 miles wide! When the Red Chinese first invaded in 1950 they allowed the Dalai Lama to stay in Tibet until 1959. For fifty years since that time, he and other Tibetan exiles have patiently prayed and waited for freedom, either independence or autonomy.

Tibet will probably remain part of China throughout this century, and yet I believe the Dalai Lama, born Tenzin Gyatso in 1935, has already "inherited" the Earth! He inherited a warm and bright smile and a heart blessed with compassion that keeps him kind and meek no matter what happens. And he has inherited all the love and respect of the world's people just by being meek and humble in spite of fifty years in exile!

Bruce Kraig

Brother Christ, Through you, the Dalai Lama and others who are meek, I begin to understand what it takes to keep faithful to God's purposes. Grant me the grace of the Holy Spirit in every corner of my life and with the people of Tibet and China letting political differences fade away. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Monday, April 6, 2009

“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. I Corinthians 12: 4-7

Isn't it helpful to know that God has given each of us our own special gifts? It's the spirit of God working in us that helps us as the tasks he's given especially to each of us. So we have our own tasks. It's up to us to do them our way, without comparing to others. We are expected to enjoy and share our own special gifts with others who are doing the same thing in their own way.

Peg Wilke

Gracious God, Help me to know my gifts and to appreciate all that I can do. You are with me always and what I accomplish is according to your will. Amen.

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

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

BLESSED BY GOD'S LOVE

Claude and I were privileged to visit the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy last September. This cherished saint embodied every aspect of the beatitudes during his life of service to God, giving up even the clothes on his back to show mercy to God's people. What if we took this Lenten time to ask God to help us become poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, and advocates for peace and righteousness? If we wish our world to be transformed, then we need to begin with ourselves in small yet significant ways. How can we make that leap of faith and devotion to God?

It is said of St. Francis not merely that he prayed, but that he became a prayer. His actions were in response to the Eternal Love in his life. We tend to think that our lives are far more complex in our time, that we have too many demands on our shoulders to live in the simple way of St. Francis. Perhaps that is the very reason that we need to ask God to help us embody the beatitude qualities of life that Jesus taught His disciples. In so doing, we may find our energy restored and our perspectives radically transformed.

Faye Hill

Creator God, Create in me a new understanding where I can become poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, and an advocate for peace and righteousness. Give me a faithful witness to your presence in my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

...and they (sound wisdom and prudence) will be light for your soul and adornment for your neck. --Proverbs 3:22

Verse 21 begins a section entitled "The True Security," describing the benefits of using sound wisdom and prudence. It provides a clear call to live intentionally with one's "accumulated learning, ability to discern inner qualities and relationships, ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason" (Webster's on "wisdom" and "prudence.") Reading this entire section will be very helpful for your understanding.

Paul's letters give us abundant examples and instructions for living in this intentional way. One example is from Philippians 4:8: "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."

Bev Stewart

Gracious God, Make it my intention to be honorable and just, true and pure. Let me be pleasing to you and worthy of your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009

"All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world and I am coming to you, Holy Parent, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one."—John 17: 10-11

One of the biggest shocks for me when I became a parent was hearing me give reassurance to my children, when I was frightened myself. It hadn't occurred to me that my parent's bravery might have been a lot of bravado. But perhaps it was. Reassurance sometimes boiled down to telling my children, "I really don't know what is going to happen next, but I do know that whatever it is, we'll see it through together and I'll be here for you."

The disciples are Christ's children, and here he is reassuring them that they are ready to move forward in his absence. Jesus does this by making a statement about how the human experience, joined with his life and the grace and will of God, creates a connectivity between people that sustains them.

The church of St. James has the capacity to offer connections among members in ways that we have yet to explore. We have the capacity to be of service on the Southside, in Bellingham and in the world because, like the disciples, Jesus' life and God's grace are what holds us together. And with that power as our source, we can probably step up our ability to reassure in difficult times

Of course, we have to lose our selfish ways, let things change from how they were ten, twenty or forty years ago as we apply the strange new principles that Jesus taught.

Carla Shafer

God of grace and reassurance, help me to look for new ways to set my self aside and work for the benefit of others. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Good Friday, April 10, 2009

They also gave him a piece of fig cake and two clusters of raisins. When he had eaten, his spirit revived; for he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights. —1 Samuel 30.12

He'd been enslaved, made to serve one of the Amalekites. He got sick and was abandoned. His weakness and fear growing. Then along came David and his army. Imagine the man's terror. He knows what the Amalekites have done. They've kidnapped this army's women, children, flocks. The army wants vengeance. Their blood lust is palpable. And he's in their path.

But when he's discovered and taken to their king, he's given food, water. Is salvation to be his? Ah, good King David.

Good King David had a motive. He wanted information. He wanted his wives and (other!) property back. Only after he has promised the slave that he will not kill him or return him to his master does the slave tell him he will lead them to the Amalekites. Good King David. One of God's heroes. So guided by his anger that even a slave questions his act of kindness.

The Rev. Tamalyn Kralman

God, look deep within me. See the reason behind my actions. Fill me with purity of heart. Truly, fill me with your love so that I will reach out, act, and love others as you have loved me. Amen.

April 11, 2009 Saturday,

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ~ Romans 8:6

As I first read this verse and surrounding verses, it appears that Paul is differentiating between two sorts of people: those who live to the flesh and those according to the Spirit of God. I just need to be in the group that their mind on the Spirit. Okay, clear and simple. However, digging a little deeper, maybe it's not so simple. I am reminded of a favorite (author unknown).

A grandfather is speaking to his grandson, "A fight is going on inside of me," he said to the boy, "a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil and ugly. He is anger, envy, war, greed, self pity, guilt, resentment, lies, selfishness and arrogance.

"The other wolf is beautiful and good: He is friendly, joyful, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, justice, fairness, generosity, compassion, gratitude and vision.

"That same fight is going on inside of you."

The grandson paused, then cried out, "Grandfather, who will win?"

The elder replied, "The wolf that you feed."

So it seems for me, two mindsets referred to in this Bible verse, BOTH in me. I must make a choice everyday, sometimes many times day, to set my mind on the Spirit, to always strive to be better, that I am human and perfection is Christ's alone.

Barb Kilpatrick

All Powerful Lord, Please provide to me the strength and courage to feed the Good Wolf. Amen.

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

“These (signs) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing, you may have life in his name.” — John 20:31

If you have read the whole gospel of John, I ask: “Was John successful? Are you persuaded? Why? Or why not? Are you still leaning one way or the other? Are you persuaded by the sermons and speeches that Jesus gives? By the signs and wonders he performs? By the way people respond when they encounter in these pages? By His character? His humility? His authority?

Since I have been offered the honor of writing the Easter message, I must say that I am persuaded by all of the above and more. I’m persuaded by how the various parts of the Bible fit together into a cohesive whole; the Word of God in the words of men and women. By the gospel written by the lives of the saints, past and present. By the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. If you are also persuaded and are ready to commit your life to Him: then tell someone. Ask to be baptized, if you have not already done so. Get busy with the next matter, which is the adventure of walking with Jesus, day by day. That will also involve sharing this good news with others, (Matt 28: 16-20).

If you are not yet persuaded, then keep asking questions. Keep up a dialog with the Bible and with Christians, to find out more about this Jesus who makes such audacious claims. Keep clearly in mind what prevents you from being persuaded. In prayer ask Jesus to connect with you.

Rev. Jerry Poole

Holy God, on this Easter Sunday I am (or learning to be) persuaded that Jesus is the Messiah, who died and rose again because of his great love for all, and bring a prayer of thanks. I accept this gift gratefully. You know I can't pay for it. Now teach me how to walk this life with You. In the name of the Risen Christ, Amen.