



A stewardship resource published by the [Ecumenical Stewardship Center](#)

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All included Bible passages are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.



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CONTRIBUTORS

The Faithful, Hopeful, Loving year-round stewardship resource contributors are thought leaders and practitioners from a variety of faith traditions, which enhances the quality and depth of the resource. While the editing goal is to use the most universally-understood terminology and concepts, you may encounter definitions and ideas that are different than your experience. These often are included at the request of the authors.

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Emphasis Guidance

Let's be totally honest. You have purchased this material to maintain and improve financial giving in your congregation. You want more fiscal resources to maintain and increase the mission and ministry into which God has called your congregation. *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving* can help you with that! But to make good on that promise, follow the design of this emphasis without taking shortcuts. Everything included in this material is proven to work when used as an integrated whole. When you use this resource as specified, you are almost certain to increase both the number of stewardship commitments and the average size of those commitments on Commitment Sunday. We do it this way for a reason, so please trust us.

Faithful, Hopeful, Loving includes three stewardship emphasis timelines:

- a year-round emphasis with resources for twelve Scripture texts;
- a spring emphasis with three Scripture texts;
- a fall emphasis with three Scripture texts.

You will find descriptions of these options—including planning calendars—in the emphasis guidance section. Based on twelve texts from the Revised Common Lectionary Years A and B, the sermon and worship materials provide stewardship focus from the Old and New Testament for all five emphases. Regardless of the emphasis timeline you choose, *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving* invites your congregation to explore multiple facets of faithful generosity.

Our guarantee is that if you plan, pray, and program with these resources as specified, you will see an increase in giving, which will result in your ability to do more for Christ as a faithful agent of the Realm of God.

Blessings!

Emphasis Guidance: The Theme

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is most often associated with weddings, not with stewardship. Why would 1 Corinthians 13:13 be chosen as a stewardship theme text?

While a traditional definition of stewardship is time, talent, and treasure, some thought leaders are encouraging adding temperament to this list. Generosity is indeed a matter of the heart and attitude. A good steward has a faithful, hopeful, and loving heart.

Faithfulness—not size, status, wealth, or heritage—is God’s measurement for Christians and congregations. All of Christ’s disciples and all of Christ’s congregations are called to be faithful to God’s mission and purpose. Generosity is a faithful act of discipleship, wrapped in trust in God and God’s purposes, whether we see them clearly or in a mirror dimly.

Hopefulness is a basic Christian characteristic. Despair and hopelessness can be damaging to congregations and their members. God offers the victory of hope through Christ and the Holy Spirit. To have a future we must live with hope. Generosity is a hopeful act of discipleship, made as a statement that God is still at work in the world, and we partner in these acts of redemption through our generosity.

In verses 4-7, the apostle Paul unpacks love’s characteristics: patience and kindness, and a lack of envy, boasting, arrogance, edginess, resentment, and bullying. Christians and congregations must experience and share love that looks like this. It is not optional: it is imperative. Generosity is a loving response, made in gratitude for God’s love for us, and celebrates a unity in Christ that surpasses the difficulties that seem to work so hard to divide us.

The apostle Paul concludes this chapter by telling us that faith, hope, and love last. During your stewardship emphasis, you will encourage your congregation to support your mission and ministry by sharing their time, their God-given talents, and their financial resources. This is as it should be. But in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that even if we practice generosity that leaves us with nothing and even requires our lives, if those incredible gifts have not been given in the spirit of love, the giver has gained nothing. Make sure you have not only talked about money and the need of the church to receive it, but also invite persons to give faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly.

Emphasis Guidance: Getting the Best Results

Understand this reality: *congregations that engage in a regular and intentional annual stewardship emphasis receive two to three times the resources for ministry operations than those that do not engage in this practice.*

Successful fundraising involves two key factors: relationship and demonstrated success. We would do well to remember this in thinking about how we engage in our annual stewardship emphasis. How well do we know the people who give to us? (Do they know us equally well?) Can we point to how their giving has made a difference either in their lives or in the world around them?

Faithful, Hopeful, Loving makes an important assumption: you will, at some point during the calendar year, present your community of faith with the opportunity to make a commitment of their financial resources to the mission and ministry of your congregation. Whether you take the recommended year-long approach or use the spring or fall emphasis, understand that you will have one moment dedicated to receiving commitment cards on a particular day at a particular time.

Here is another important thing to know: this material follows a proven methodology that gets results. *Do not take shortcuts!* Your best outcomes will occur when you follow *all* the steps.

Overview

- **Ask every member.** Make contact with every person or family in the congregation via multiple communication channels: letters, newsletter articles, bulletin inserts, preaching, teaching, testimony by laypersons, social media, emails, and phone calls. When you arrive at Commitment Sunday, no one will be surprised or caught unaware.
- **Schedule a commitment weekend and corresponding special event.** It may be a dinner, but it can also be a concert, a children's program, a talent show, or some other activity that gets *your* people to attend. If you plan something other than a meal, still consider a dessert or other food/drink celebration connected to the event that will allow you to make phone calls to receive an RSVP. This is very important as it gives you a reason to make personal contact *with everyone* prior to Commitment Sunday. You will take RSVPs during worship ahead of commitment Sunday, but you will also be following up with those who have not made a reservation.

You are not asking them for a commitment card with this call; you are asking for a head count! You are extending an invitation, not expecting a commitment. That changes the tone of the phone conversation and how people feel about making and receiving a call related to the emphasis.

Getting the Best Results – 2

Events that take place during or immediately after worship tend to work best. However, congregations with multiple services find that more difficult to accomplish and often have to improvise. If you are doing something in an off hour away from worship or even away from the church building, be sure to include an opportunity to talk about and receive commitment cards in a way that is not awkward or forced during that event time. A time to receive the cards is important and should not be overlooked. It is also imperative to not make people feel guilty if they have not yet prepared or intend to make a commitment. Encourage, not punish.

- **Make the emphasis your main focus.** The 4-6 weeks leading up to Commitment Sunday are critical. The emphasis should be the main focus around which activity and communication are centered during this time. It requires planning and proper execution from a number of different people or groups working in concert, regardless of the size of your congregation.
- **Use theme materials to make the emphasis visible.** This resource includes supporting interpretive materials that allow you to print what you need, when you need it, including letterhead, giving guides, step charts, commitment cards, promotional posters, and more. *You have full copyright permission for use within your own congregation.*
- **Use a planning calendar.** Three different planning calendars are provided:
 - an eleven-month emphasis that culminates on November 22;
 - a spring emphasis plan with Commitment Sunday on May 3;
 - a fall emphasis with Commitment Sunday on November 22.

These dates may be adjusted to fit your needs. Twelve biblical texts are explored and interpreted. Mix and match them however you wish.

- **Be flexible.** For example, May 3 is only three weeks after Easter (April 12). You may wish to shift your emphasis a week or two if that is a better fit. Do you need an earlier fall date than November 22 to meet your fiscal preparations? This is why looking ahead at the materials now is important. Make the program work for your congregation and your schedule.

The hope is that by the time your congregation arrives at Commitment Sunday, you have been led to a place that allows each person to make a decision about their financial commitment that is challenged by their faith and motivated by joy, not by guilt or obligation. To assist church leadership in making that possible, a number of resources are provided.

Getting the Best Results – 3

- **Considering the Text** is written for the preacher. It contains thoughtful reflections on the Scripture readings and is designed to help move from critical thinking to homiletical possibilities.
- **Study materials** are offered for adult and youth small group and Sunday school class engagement.
- **Children’s sermons** and a full complement of **Worship Resources** are also included.
- Adaptable **Sample Letters** provide invitations that can be personalized for your particular context.
- Guidance for including **Storytellers** enhances and personalizes the emphasis.
- Information on **electronic giving** and **generational** preferences encourages keeping your stewardship practices up to date.
- **Adaptation suggestions for the smaller church** are included.
- **Percentage and step giving charts** provide easy-to-use visuals.

Getting Started

If you find the suggestion of many alternatives for your stewardship emphasis to be a bit overwhelming, take heart! These materials include the time-honored three-week emphasis model. Yes, you can utilize these resources to do things the way you have always done your annual stewardship emphasis! There are many compelling reasons to stay with what is familiar, not the least of which is the constraint of time amid a myriad of demands. So, if you prefer, follow the spring or fall emphasis calendar.

However, if your recent stewardship emphases have seemed stale, predictable, and have failed to yield the kind of results you need to resource your mission and ministry, consider a year-round emphasis. Consider giving your stewardship emphasis more than a quick hit and run at the end of the year. By giving your congregation more time to consider the real choices that the spiritual discipline of generosity demand of us as followers of Jesus Christ, there is a greater chance of changing hearts and minds, and thus changing giving patterns.

The year-round emphasis assumes a fall annual giving emphasis with Commitment Sunday on November 22. It gives you an eleven-month period to lift up the mission and ministry of your church, to hear stories from lay people that bear witness to the authenticity of the biblical text, for the preacher to approach stewardship as a multifaceted topic that speaks to us beyond the church budget, and to undergird the entire process with prayer and gratitude. Rather than a sprint, we invite you to consider the annual emphasis as a steady, well-paced program that covers more ground.

Getting the Best Results – 4

We have a spring emphasis – How does that work? A spring emphasis does not mean that you cannot take the longer approach to the stewardship conversation. It does mean that you will continue that conversation after your Commitment Sunday. The Spring Emphasis uses a three-week format. Then you can pick up the year-round approach that features texts in each of the remaining months of the year. For example, choose a series of texts and plan a Bible study/small group study following Labor Day to keep the conversation alive and well throughout the year.

Regardless of how you structure your emphasis, there are some common elements:

Leadership To achieve success you must have the appropriate leadership. The people you choose to pilot and shepherd the various aspects of this program need to be those who practice generosity, who can follow through with tasks, who are viewed as persons of integrity by your congregation, and who understand that they are a part of a team. This means that you as a pastor or stewardship chair must invite specific people for each position. Do not just settle for who comes forward, who has done it before, or whoever the church constitution and bylaws say should do the work based on the office they hold. Pray about your choices. Ask the best person for the job to consider being involved and give them time to pray about the request before they give you a decision. First and foremost, this is a spiritual issue.

The following positions might comprise an emphasis team: Chair, Communication Coordinator, Event Planner, Calling Team Leader, Education Facilitator, and Mission Interpreter. Depending on the size of your congregation, all the duties for each position may be done either by a single individual, or they can create a team to assist them.

Meetings Your core leadership group should meet at least three times: 1) prior to the start of the emphasis to review the materials, discuss assignments, schedule dates, identify potential leaders to fill specific roles (such as the storytellers), and pray for congregation; 2) during the emphasis to be certain that all responsibilities are being met, coordinate details for Commitment Sunday, answer questions, assist areas that are facing challenges, and pray for the congregation; and 3) post-emphasis to assess its success, follow through with receiving later commitments, celebrate and thank the team for their efforts, and pray for the congregation.

Communication Many specific types of communication should take place during the emphasis. Make sure that calls are made and letters are mailed. Use the social media recommendations to reinforce the message. Yes, it costs money, but this is an investment. And remember, take the time, effort, and expense to make your communication look professional.

Getting the Best Results – 5

Attitude The leadership and the people they invite to participate set the tone for your emphasis. If the atmosphere is one of anxiety or of guilt, then the results will be gifts that are not offered with joy or given with purpose. They will not be as generous as gifts given in an environment of answering a call from God to change the world and/or as an expression of gratitude for all that we have received from a loving God.

Purpose and Vision Keep the focus on ministry and mission, not on balancing the budget or paying the bills. Use a narrative budget *alongside* a line-item budget. The narrative budget is a communications tool for interpreting your vision: telling your story of how God’s story is being told through you. Instead of calling it a narrative budget, you might consider naming it what it really is: a missional budget that shows how your money becomes mission and ministry. The Center for Faith and Giving of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has great resources on this subject at <https://centerforfaithandgiving.org/2016/01/building-a-narrative-budget/>

The generation that was motivated to keep the building open, the staff paid, and the lights on has all but passed. Givers are now much more motivated by what you accomplish with the resources they give you as opposed to supporting the institution or idea of the church. See the section on generational giving for more information.

Celebration and Gratitude Be sure to rejoice about the resources you have received and make certain that at every opportunity people are thanked for the gifts and commitments they have made. This should be ongoing throughout the year, not just at the end of the emphasis.

Include a letter along with quarterly giving statements that inform people about what their giving is accomplishing. Tell them how their generosity is making a difference in the world—even if that world is your own neighborhood. The letter should always start with “Thank you!”

Handwritten notes in response to special gifts provide another way to let people know that their generosity is appreciated. Twitter tweets, Facebook posts, and email can be used to acknowledge a group of people for their service or generosity. Even if pastors don’t know the amounts people give, they can write an email (or better, a handwritten note) that says “*Thank you – while I don’t know the specific amount of your gift, I know that you support the ministry and mission of this congregation. I just want you to know how much I appreciate your investment in the transformational work that God is doing at our church.*” Not a lot of words, but a clear signal to the recipient that their gift is received with gratitude.

A celebration event on, or as close as reasonably possible to, Commitment Sunday is an important feature of your emphasis. If it takes place on the same day as you receive the commitment cards, more people may be present for worship. Logically, that increases your chances of more participants returning cards. It also allows for you to call people in advance of

Commitment Sunday seeking RSVPs without the pressure of attending to submit a card, but as an invitation to the activity/meal.

Getting the Best Results – 6

Whatever activity you choose for your celebration, make sure it is intentional and done well. Be sure to use social media for building anticipation. Celebrate during the event, and when it is over, celebrate some more! Post lots of pictures on the bulletin boards, website, social media apps, and newsletters, so people who missed it will want to attend next year!

Investment Take the time and find the energy to do your emphasis well. Be disciplined and committed to the best possible way that you and your congregation are able. Shortcuts lead to missed opportunities and marginal results. Your emphasis can be fun and should result in a success to celebrate!

And. . .remember to pray. Pray from the time you first review these materials to when you post your last commitment in the financial record. Give thanks to God and believe that God is in the work you are doing. It matters. It can change the world.

Emphasis Guidance: Scripture Texts

This is a simple guide as to how you might utilize all or a portion of the available scripture resources provided in *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving*.

Year-round Emphasis for 2020 (Common Lectionary, Years A/B)

January 26	Matthew 4:12-23	Come and follow me	Faithful
February 9	Isaiah 58:1-9a	Is this not the fast I choose. . .	Loving
March 15	Romans 5:1-11	Our hope does not disappoint us	Hopeful
April 26	Psalms 116:1-4, 12-19	What shall I return to the Lord	Hopeful
May 3	Acts 2:42-47	They held all things in common	Loving
June 7	Genesis 1:1-2, 4a	And God proclaimed it all very good	Loving
July 26	Romans 8:26-29	Nothing can separate us from the love of God	Hopeful
August 30	Romans 12:9-21	Rejoice in hope	Hopeful
September 22	Philippians 2:1-13	For God is at work in you	Loving
October 11	Exodus 36:1-7	More Than Enough	Faithful
November 22	Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep	Faithful
December 13 (year B)	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	They will be called oaks of righteousness	Faithful

Spring Emphasis (you may wish to move the texts for March 15 and April 26 to the two weeks immediately preceding May 3 for concentrated impact)

April 19	Romans 5:1-11
April 26	Romans 8:26-39
+May 3	Acts 2:42-47
+suggested Commitment Sunday	

Additional options for the remainder of the year following a spring emphasis:

June 7	Genesis 1:1-2:4a
July 26	Romans 8:26-39
August 30	Romans 12:9-21
September 27	Philippians 2:1-13
October 11	*Exodus 36:1-7
November 22	Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
December 13	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (begin Year B)

Use the January and February texts as scheduled.

*offered as an alternative to Exodus 32:1-15

Scripture Texts – 2

Fall Emphasis (you may wish to move the September 27 and October 11 texts to November 8 and 15 respectively for concentrated impact)

November 8	Philippians 2:2-13
November 15	*Exodus 36:1-7
November 22	+Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

*offered as an alternative to the Lectionary text of Exodus 32:1-15
+suggested Commitment Sunday

Additional options for 2020 prior to the fall emphasis:

January 26	Matthew 4:12-23
February 9	Isaiah 58:1-9a
March 15	Romans 5:1-11
April 26	Psalms 116:1-4, 12-19
May 3	Acts 2:42-47
June 7	Genesis 1:1-2:4a
July 26	Romans 8:26-39
August 30	Romans 12:9-21
December 13	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Emphasis Guidance: Leadership

Chairperson

- ◇ You are the leader, cheerleader, answer person, schedule keeper, task enforcer/accountability partner, and the face of your congregation's emphasis!
- ◇ You *must* practice generosity within your congregation to lead this effort: your integrity is on the line.
- ◇ Recruit people who understand the importance of generosity, believe in the church's mission, and who are willing to step up to the challenge of this emphasis.
- ◇ Be an encourager.
- ◇ Pray for your team leaders, pastoral staff, and church members during this emphasis that God might raise up a spirited people who understand what God's vision is for your congregation and the generosity required to resource that mission and ministry.
- ◇ Coordinate with your leadership team, schedule meetings, confer about deadlines, and follow-up to be sure tasks have been accomplished.
- ◇ Assist the church staff to be certain they understand their assignments and their deadlines. Be an extra set of hands to help.
- ◇ Solicit support from the congregation's leadership for the emphasis, including requesting that they submit their commitment cards *the week prior* to Commitment Sunday.

Communication Coordinator

- ◇ Supervise Letter communications, including the follow-up letters after the emphasis.
- ◇ Write newsletter articles for each month's theme if using the year-round or hybrid versions of the emphasis. If you are conducting a spring or fall emphasis, be sure something about the emphasis appears the month before it begins and that an encouraging article with detailed information occurs in the month of Commitment Sunday.
- ◇ Write social media posts and invite people to share these through their personal networks. Be sure to look at the information in the Generational Giving section. Social media contacts have not been collected in many churches. Make a game (with rewards) of getting people to share their Twitter handles, Snap Chat address, friending you on Facebook, etc.
- ◇ Create announcements for the bulletin and worship service (i.e., big screen)
- ◇ Coordinate with the Storytellers, making certain they understand their task and assigned dates or recording schedules.
- ◇ Follow up with thank you communications (and gifts, if desired) for the core emphasis leadership and those who were part of the public face of the effort.
- ◇ Make certain that commitment cards are available on Commitment Sunday!

Meal Coordinator/ Event Planner

- ◇ Plan the menu: if you are having an event instead of a dinner, you will still likely want to have refreshments.
- ◇ Design table and/or room decorations.
- ◇ If you are having a meal, arrange for place settings: table coverings, silverware, napkins, cups, and plates (consider not using plastic or Styrofoam materials: since this is a stewardship program, care for the earth should be a consideration. If you must use disposable items, consider compostable materials. Consider establishing a recycling program if you don't already have one.)
- ◇ Recruit set-up team, serving/hospitality team, and clean up team
- ◇ Coordinate food delivery or preparation if it is a part of your event. Consider catering so that persons do not need to be out of the worship space during Commitment Sunday. If you choose to prepare a meal (potluck *not* recommended), keep the menu simple with prepare-ahead types of items.
- ◇ If you are having an event, be sure your entertainment is secured, any contracts are reviewed, costs are approved in advance, and staging needs and performance needs are understood.
- ◇ Provide beverages (tea, iced tea, coffee, milk and or juice, water)
- ◇ Set the deadline for reservation cut-off (plan to feed 10% more than RSVP) and communicate that date with the Calling Team Coordinator.
- ◇ Try to get as many reservations for the event on the two Sundays prior to Commitment Sunday by using a reservation card that can be turned in during worship. Coordinate with your worship leader so this can be announced and so there is time and a method during worship for receiving the cards. This will reduce the number of calls need for RSVPs.

Calling Team Coordinator

- ◇ Recruit calling teams and team leaders. In a church with over 100 members, a team should consist of one leader and up to five members. It is recommended that no team member have more than 10 people to contact. (So, a team leader and a team of five could contact 60 members of the congregation.) Larger congregations may wish to have additional Team Captains to coordinate the training and scheduling of the calling team leaders. The team leaders train the team members and receive their reservations report, passing the numbers to the Team Coordinator (or Team Captains if utilized for the emphasis).
- ◇ Calls are made following the Sunday that is three weeks before Commitment Sunday, and up to the last day of the final week when numbers have to be set for the caterer or meal team, usually 3-5 days prior to Commitment Sunday.
- ◇ Prepare a sample script for your callers. While they should not sound like they are reading from a piece of paper, it is important to be sure that the consistent information is shared with every member.
- ◇ Make certain that your calling team members understand their responsibility: they are simply inviting people to the event/meal and seeking to get an RSVP (commitment) from each church member. If someone resists, they should simply extend the invitation and express their hope that the individual will come. Tell them it is okay if they are uncertain as to their plan as extra meals/refreshments will be available so everyone who wants to can be included.

Sometimes people who have not been well-connected to the congregation or who have other issues with the church or its leadership may wish to take this opportunity to “vent” or share concerns. If the concern is something that requires pastoral care (e.g., a death, illness, marital status change, church affiliation change, job loss, or other life-impacting crisis), the name of the individual and their contact information should be passed on to the pastor immediately, along with any pertinent information that is not breaking a confidence or confidentiality laws. If the individual is simply expressing a concern or a complaint, it is not the calling team member’s job to fix the problem. Politely listen and suggest that the individual contact the proper person or leader and schedule a time to talk with them and address the problem directly and with Christian charity. Always thank the person you have called, regardless of the tenor or tone of the conversation.

Education Facilitator

- ◇ Coordinate with the Pastor, appropriate staff member, or Sunday school chairperson to have classes utilize the material included with the emphasis for studying stewardship and the spiritual discipline of generosity. It would be desirable that the text used in the Sunday school or small group experience is the same one that will be used in worship that week. If your group meets mid-week, you can study the lesson ahead of that Sunday to get people engaged in the topic or you can use it the following week to give people ways to respond to the sermon. You can also group the materials together for a six-week series on stewardship twice during the calendar year. This resource includes resources for children and youth: encourage them to participate in the emphasis, including the events leading to Commitment Sunday.
- ◇ Work with the Communication Coordinator so that an announcement is made in every Sunday school class and/or small group about Commitment Sunday so that at some point during the emphasis everyone is invited to attend.
- ◇ Your denomination may provide stewardship education resources. Check their website or with your denominational leadership for access to these valuable tools.

Mission Interpreter

- ◇ Your task is to help people understand how their money becomes mission and ministry! Consult the Storytellers section for guidance. The Storytellers reinforce the message heard in worship and preaching.
- ◇ Using the available resources at the Center for Faith and Giving website (www.centerforfaithandgiving.org), work with your church staff and Finance Team to develop a narrative budget. A narrative budget does not replace the line-item budget. You need a line-item budget for the financial reporting and management of the congregation. But rather than provide a line-item budget to your general membership (Of course anyone who wants a line-item budget may have one!), use the narrative budget to tell your missional story. This valuable tool helps people understand how their gifts transform into the work of the congregation for the Realm of God. If your church develops a budget for the coming year as a part of its usual practice during the annual stewardship emphasis, then develop your budget and then use the narrative format for congregational presentation of the budget. If the budget is prepared following the emphasis, work with your staff and Finance Ministry to develop a narrative budget to interpret the use of money during the **current** fiscal year. Make this story available to the congregation while they are discerning what their gifts for the coming year might be. If there are future plans being discussed within different ministry teams of the church and they anticipate needing additional resources to do these things, include them as a part of the church's narrative story.
- ◇ Think of ways you can do some stewardship education via fun facts about the congregation's mission and ministry (like a "Did you know?"). This can include both historical mission activities as well as current support. If your congregation is a part of a larger denomination, the odds are you can find information about your church's giving and the work that is being done on your behalf on your denomination's website.
- ◇ Consider who your local mission partners are and see if one or more of them might be good candidates for giving an offering meditation or serving as a witness during the worship hour. Their testimony about how your congregation's gifts empower their ministry and how they are having an impact in your community is a powerful, generosity-enabling word.

Emphasis Guidance: Storytellers

Without attempting to be too dramatic, these folks can make or break the spirit of the entire emphasis. This is to say that not only whom you choose, but how you prepare the people you select is very important.

The purpose of the Storytellers is to give testimony to the power of generosity, the joy of giving, and the difference our giving makes in the world. The testimonies should be short (*not to exceed 4 minutes*), concise, inspirational, and leave the listener wanting to accept the challenge to live more fully into (or to increase their passion for) the area being addressed by the Storyteller.

The Storytellers can come from two places: your congregation and your mission partners. Invite people from your congregation who practice generosity and who can articulate the joy and purpose of giving. Seek people associated with your mission partners who can state clearly how the financial resources that your community of faith provides positively impact individuals or the community at large.

If you have the capability, tell the stories as pre-recorded segments that are shared on the big screen. This provides clarity and time control. If you don't pre-record; be certain that the presenter is well-rehearsed to avoid a second sermon, or worse, a sermon rebuttal!

Giving witness or testimony can occur in several ways: as the offering meditation, early in the service to set the table for the sermon, or as an additional thought after the sermon. They can be shared a week ahead or a week after the corresponding sermon, e.g., "Next week pastor Jane is preaching about..." or, "Last week reverend Bob challenged us to..." This can extend the theme, but if it is not done well, it can cause some confusion. Decide what works best for your context.

It is helpful if the Storyteller can relate to the core theme generated by the text from their own experience rather than having them attempt to recount someone else's story.

Matthew 4:12-23 This text affords several solid choices. You may find someone who has experienced repentance by leaving a less desirable life to one shaped by the gospel, or who has experienced a conversion to generosity from selfishness. Anyone who has practiced faithful discipleship is also a candidate to speak to this text as they can talk about what it means to them to follow Jesus.

Romans 5:1-11 One possibility for this text is to talk about the way your church is a steward of the gospel. What are the ways you share this good news of God's love for all with others? How do you give hope to your community via missions and/or civic support/involvement that proclaim reconciliation and how these ministries reflect the reconciling love of God? Specifically, are you engaged in working for positive relationships with people of different races, cultures, or religious backgrounds from your congregation's own dominant identity?

Storytellers – 2

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19 How has God blessed your congregation or an individual within it with bounty? While financial resources are natural connections, there are many other ways to speak of abundance. How do we respond to such outpourings of Divine grace in our lives? Another way to address this text is to focus on the first four verses that speak to ways in which a community or individual may have felt close to death or defeat and can name how (against all odds!) they came through it by the grace of God. Is not gratitude the proper response? How does such an experience give us hope for the future?

Acts 2:42-47 There is no doubt that when the Holy Spirit shows up, everything is different! The scared apostles locked in an upper room are compelled to go out in public and risk everything to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Further, they are bound into a community that can share the risk so that no one has need, believing that God will provide for them. In essence, they are freed to love one another without reservation, and when they do so, their community of faith grows. In what ways has your congregation or someone within it taken a similar risk and can testify to similar results? An alternative would be to invite a mission partner in to talk how your church's faithful support builds up those in need and by so doing lifts the whole community with them.

Genesis 1:-2:4a This text gives us a different perspective on stewardship. How is your church engaged in projects that are meant to protect the earth that God proclaimed each day to be "good"? Are there ways you are practicing (or encouraging the practice) of ruling in the earth in the same way that God rules in the cosmos—for the benefit of all living things? An alternative is the think about the way that God provides for all of creation so that everything has all that it needs to thrive, not simply survive. Are there ways your congregation is doing ministries that likewise provide for others in your community? It may not just be financial, but it may be something else related to living a whole and complete life such as education, medical support, or some form of public advocacy for those who are overlooked in your community.

Romans 8:26-39 Life is hard! Most every congregation has someone who can testify to what it means to have come through a trial or time of extreme difficulty and to count their faith as what allowed them over come and persevere. What was their hope and how did their trust in God's love see them through? How has their faith been strengthened by your congregation's ministry and sense of community and why is that important? How did this experience motivate them to support the church and its ministry?

Romans 12:9-21 "Contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers." This is a perfect time to name the ways your congregation does exactly this, and how the gifts given by the congregation empower these ministries. But don't just name them—tell transformational stories related to the impact of these actions. How is a life different because of either receiving or offering these practices?

Storytellers – 3

Philippians 2:1-13 “Look not to your interests, but to the interest of others.” Two directions emerge here: 1) What are the ways you build community and belonging? 2) How are you serving others in ways beyond what is only for the benefit of the congregation? Either path will work with the right person delivering the message. A third alternative is to have a person who practices extreme generosity tell about why giving to others is more important than accumulating stuff for yourself.

Exodus 36:1-7 This text presents a subtle challenge. Who among us can imagine standing up before the congregation and saying: “Don’t bring any more offerings, we have too much!”? Yet there are likely ways that you can name (in the same breath as giving thanks) that God has given you exactly what you need for this moment: either in leadership, resources, or skills to do some specific thing God has called you to do. This is a time to celebrate that reality. Our contributors chose this text over the Lectionary reading of the day (Exodus 32) because there are plenty of opportunities to talk about our lack of faith and misdeeds, but seldom do we focus on such extravagant generosity.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Here is a reminder that we are to constantly be evaluating our lives, because God is a God of justice and is concerned about our choices and behaviors. As Lectionary texts near the end of the church year often do, we are being reminded again to consider if we have properly considered the *needs* of the poor ahead of our own *wants*. This is a good time to invite one of your mission partners to share with your congregation that while your efforts are making a difference, there is more yet to be done.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 As the work of Christ is the work of transformation, who in your congregation (or how has your congregation) engaged in the struggle for social and systemic change? How are you “rebuilding” the community in which you serve and how do you tell that story to inspire greater generosity? Does your church, religious community, or denomination have a ministry that points to injustice and invites people to work for the justice that God loves? Tell those stories today.

Emphasis Guidance: Preaching Approaches

This resource provides four approaches for preaching on faith and giving in theologically-reflective ways using passages from the Revised Common Lectionary Year A:

- Twelve sermons in twelve months
- Three sermons in three weeks (spring or fall)
- Three sermons in three weeks + nine sermons in nine months (spring or fall)

Congregations that do not follow the Lectionary can use these passages as starting points for preaching using the following patterns.

Twelve Sermons in Twelve Months

Twelve texts are used for preaching on stewardship about once a month during the course of the year. The selections begin in January and continue through December.

The annual stewardship emphasis is a tradition in many congregations. The congregation sets aside three or four weeks in the spring or fall to focus upon faith and giving. But if such a concentrated focus is the only real discussion of stewardship in the annual life of the community, the congregation can easily get the impression that stewardship and generosity are segments of Christian faith that can be segregated into just three weeks. Since the stewardship emphasis often focuses on underwriting the church budget, the congregation can easily drift into thinking that stewardship is mainly about money. In so doing, congregations can lose consciousness with respect to the comprehensive understanding of stewardship as responding to God's gracious love through the whole of life, as assumed in the best of Christian tradition.

One way to help congregations catch the vision that faith and giving are part of everyday Christian life is to preach on these subjects throughout the year. Here is an imperfect analogy. As a human being, I should eat about 730 cups of fruit a year. If I take in those 730 cups by eating fruit for only three weeks in a year, I would eat 244 cups a week for each of the three weeks. That is not a healthy way to eat. It would mean no fruit for 49 weeks a year. During the three weeks, I might get such an exposure to fruit that it would lose my taste for it. And, eating so much fruit in so short a time could have unfortunate results in my digestive system. A much better approach is to eat two cups of fruit a day.

As a way of providing two cups of stewardship fruit in sermons over time, a preacher might spread out the emphasis on faith and giving to one sermon a month over several months. We speak of Twelve Sermons over Twelve Months as a way of characterizing this approach.

Preaching on generous living over time can have a cumulative effect. It reminds the congregation from month to month that a generous God makes possible—even calls for—generous responses month to month, week to week, day to day, and hour to hour. Having the

Preaching Approaches – 2

right amount of fruit in the human system makes the whole body and mind work well together all the time. We do not take a bite of an apple on Tuesday and think that its healthful properties will continue to nourish us forever. We need bites over the course of the week. Similarly, members of the congregation should not make commitments to the stewardship emphasis and behave as if they are done with stewardship until the same time the following year.

I know several households who decided to develop more healthy lifestyles. They decided to eat more nourishing foods, to exercise, and to make other changes: including in a couple of cases, deciding to give more of themselves to the community. Initially, the changes were sometimes hard to remember. That candy bar cried out from the shelf. It was easier to sleep an extra fifteen minutes than to go for a walk. But over time, the changes became ways of life, so that they almost instinctively reach for healthy foods when they are at the farmer's market or the grocery store. Their bodies became attuned to physical exercise such that they look forward to exercising and they miss it when they do not do it. They feel better. And they are better able to make their optimum contributions to one another and to the wider community.

In a similar way, preaching about faith and giving over time can help a congregation develop a healthy lifestyle in which generosity and stewardship become almost second nature. People can almost instinctively respond to the generosity of God with their own generosity. In addition, they hear texts which call them to steward their money and every aspect of life over which they have management. This gives you the opportunity to talk about holistic nature of stewardship and move it away from simply a code word for money.

In this twelve-month model, a congregation designates a sermon in the series as a Commitment Sunday. Of course, that calls for more preparation than simply passing out the commitment cards on Commitment Sunday. Our resource guides you on how to create the energy and awareness necessary for success if you are using the year-round model. You will still have an event, communicate via letters and social media, and honor the making of a commitment.

Three Sermons in Three Weeks

Some congregations prefer a concentrated emphasis: three sermons in three weeks in the spring, or three sermons in three weeks in the fall. In each case, the final Sunday can be a Commitment Sunday.

The immersive learning experience is a model here. When learning a particular subject matter, students sometimes immerse themselves in a setting in which they focus only on that subject matter. For example, students learning a language sometimes go to a location where they hear and speak the language all the time. A college student learning Spanish might live for a semester with a family in South America.

Preaching Approaches – 3

Similarly, the preacher might help the congregation immerse in a single subject matter for three weeks. As a student comes away from an immersion with a heightened consciousness of the subject matter and how to put it into practice, so the congregation comes away from the immersion into the world of stewardship, generosity, or faith and giving.

Three Sermons in Three Weeks + Nine Sermons in Nine Months

A congregation who is engaged in a spring emphasis can use the January and February texts, then the March (3/15), April (4/26), and May (5/3) texts on April 19, April 26, and May 3. The remaining texts for June to December can be used where they appear in the regular Lectionary reading cycle. This keeps the stewardship conversation alive throughout the year.

For a fall emphasis, follow the eight months of texts for January through August from the year-round emphasis, then launch a three-week emphasis in November using the September (9/27), October (10/11), and November (11/22) texts on 11/8, 11/15, and 11/22 respectively. The December text lets you begin the conversation again.

Emphasis Guidance: Year-Round Emphasis Overview

This Year-Round Emphasis brings a text before the congregation every month between **January** and **December**. The purpose is to keep the stewardship conversation going over a longer period of time so that the congregation can go deeper in its understanding of what biblical stewardship is all about. Your final weeks of the emphasis will be just as busy as the fall or spring emphasis as you prepare to receive people's commitments. However there is only one scheduled sermon during the last four weeks of the emphasis.

This emphasis allows for more detail and attention to be paid to the storytellers, the mission stories, and *why our giving matters* rather than having to make the case for *why we should give*. The difference may appear subtle, but we assure you it is not. By spreading the emphasis over a longer period of time, you also have the ability to be more creative with your messaging style and content. We urge you to look at the materials related to social media for ideas you might be able to employ.

Make sure to create a narrative budget. This presents how money becomes ministry and mission and how the church is faithfully living into its vision. People rarely give to institutions anymore. They want to support things that change lives—theirs and others. A narrative budget takes time to do well. It will not replace the line-item budget. A congregation still needs a line item budget to maintain fiduciary responsibility. If this the first time you are doing a narrative style budget (we prefer to call it a mission and ministry budget), you will still want to have copies of your line item budget available, even though your primary presentation is the narrative. There will be people who do not understand the change and may suspect a lack of transparency if they cannot see costs for program areas they are used to seeing.

Using the emphasis as an educational opportunity is important. There are several ways you can use the small group materials included with this resource. You might choose to offer a 12-week small group study (or two six-week studies, one spring and one fall) around the emphasis theme *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving*. Alternatively, you could offer the materials to a Sunday school class to use on each of the days these texts occur in the Lectionary throughout the year. A third option is to use the materials that correspond to the texts in your emphasis on the weeks when they are the focus of worship. You can offer an online Bible study where participants can access the materials via your website or other direct link and utilize a messaging app to discuss what they have read. Or you might offer a webinar of the materials to expand your reach into the community. You could even offer an online experience and an in-person program.

Key dates for the year-round emphasis follow. Keep in mind that you have the flexibility to change these dates and move the suggested texts to conform to **your** congregation's schedule. Some congregations may find the third week in November too late for a commitment Sunday. Our choice of these dates was determined entirely by where they appear in the established order of the Lectionary. You control the resources: use them when they make the most sense for you. Feel free to choose different texts for different days if that better fits your context. Be

Year-Round Emphasis Overview – 2

imaginative and creative. This model assumes you are using the November 22 date as your commitment Sunday. You can choose any day during the year: simply apply the pre-emphasis calendar six weeks prior to your select day.

What follows are key dates we have highlighted to make your preparations easier. Remember, flexibility is important, and the materials are so designed. Just don't skip any steps!

- 1) Select leadership early, preferably in January so that they can oversee the program all year long. This gives you plenty of time to roll out the emphasis.
- 2) Recruit your first witnesses right away. (Ideally you will be using 12 different people, with the first testimony on **1/26**. This provides time for training for those speaking the remainder of the year. Since recruiting a dozen people in such a short time is difficult, you can recruit for 1/26 and 2/9, then recruit and train the rest in February.)
- 3) Use the summer months to have your elders or other church leadership group pray for every member of your congregation. Then, have them contact *every* member. Indicate that they are praying for them, see if there are special needs and report to the minister for follow-up. Stewardship is a spiritual issue that is also established in the larger context of community. It succeeds best in environments where there is high trust of leadership. Relationships build trust.
- 4) Begin to build your narrative style budget before **September 1**– it will take time! See the [Center for Faith and Giving](#) website for details on how best to create a narrative or “ministry and mission” budget.
- 5) Decide on the type of event (meal or concert/activity) you are using for Commitment Sunday by **8/18**. Be in touch with caterers and/or artists now to secure the date.
- 6) Order devotional guides (if using) by **9/15** for each household.
- 7) Education is a key to success. Use the Small Group resource either in the week ahead of each reading or in Adult Sunday school the assigned day for the text.
- 8) Distribute devotional guides (if using) **10/18 and 10/25**
- 9) Calling Teams should be assigned and trained by **10/15**
- 10) Letter #1 mailed **11/2**
- 11) Letter #2 mailed **11/9** (This will require the assistance of the Financial Secretary or Bookkeeper. Plan ahead, as the target aspect of this letter is important to your success. Don't skip this step. In congregations where confidentiality is a concern, the letters can be given to the person who holds this information to complete and mail.)
- 12) Letter #3 mailed **11/16**
- 13) RSVPs for event due **11/20**
- 14) Commitment Sunday **11/22**
- 15) Letter #4A mailed **11/23**
- 16) Letter #4B mailed **11/30**
- 17) Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors completed by **12/10**

Year-Round Emphasis Planning Calendar

January 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
				Secure witnesses for 1/26 and 2/9		
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
		Recruit Leadership Team for 2020				
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Matthew 4:12-23	27	28	29	30	31	
		Send 2019 year-end giving statements				

February 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9 Isaiah 58:1-9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
		Begin to recruit and train witnesses for the remainder of the year				
23	24	25	26 Ash Wednesday Lent Begins	27	28	29

March 2020

Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fiscal year July 1-June 30? Begin developing your narrative budget in March						
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15 Romans 5:1-11	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

April 2020

Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

			1	2	3	4
5 PALM SUNDAY	6	7	8	9 Holy Thursday	10	11
12 EASTER	13	14	15	16	17	18
Send 1 st quarter statements with a thank you						
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19	27	28	29	30		

May 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1	2
3 Acts 2:42-47	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

May/June 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
31 PENTECOST	1	2	3	4	5	6
7 Genesis 1:-2:4a	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; background-color: #f0d0d0;"> Have you used the bible study materials? Consider a 6-8 week study on stewardship beginning after Labor Day. It could be mid-week or during Sunday school. </div>			

July 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1 Canada Day	2	3	4 Independence Day (USA)
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
			Send 2 nd quarter statements with a thank you letter			
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Romans 8:26-39	27	28	29	30	31	

August 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	Fiscal year January 1 – December 31? Begin to develop your narrative budget in August					1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
	Decide on your event for 11/22					
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

August/September 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
30 Romans 12:9-21	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14 Order devotional guides (if using)	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27 Philippians 2:1-13	28	29	30			

October 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
	Recruit, assign, and train calling teams for event RSVPs if necessary, for your size congregation					
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
			Send 3 rd Quarter giving statements With a thank-you letter!			
11 Exodus 36:1-7	12 Thanksgiving (Canada)	13	14	15	16	17
18 Distribute devotional guides (if using)	19	20	21	22	23	24
25 Distribute devotional guides (if using)	26	27	28	29	30	31

November 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1 All Saints Day	2 Mail Letter #1	3	4	5	6	7
Distribute/receive reservation cards during worship on 11/8 and 11/15						
8	9 Mail Letter #2 (A, B, or C as designated)	10	11	12	13	14
15	16 Mail Letter #3	17	18	19	20 Event Reservations Due	21
Calling for event RSVPs begins						
22 Commitment Sunday Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	23 Mail Letter #4A	24	25	26 Thanksgiving (USA)	27	28
29 Advent Begins	30 Mail Letter #4B					

December 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors who have not made a commitment						
13 Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25 Christmas	26
27	28	29	30	31	Remember to send year-end giving statements with a thank-you by 1/31	

Emphasis Guidance: Spring Emphasis Overview

The spring emphasis assumes a three to four-week intensive focus on stewardship beginning immediately after Easter, concluding on **May 3**. Recruitment of leadership and witnesses becomes your most important task. We assume that not much will happen *publicly* until the third week of April, so it is necessary to get organized prior to **March 1**, as the ideal emphasis has at least six weeks of preparation, planning and execution.

Make sure to create a narrative budget. This presents how money becomes ministry and mission and how the church is faithfully living into its vision. People rarely give to institutions anymore. They want to support things that change lives—theirs and others. A narrative budget takes time to do well. It will not replace the line-item budget. A congregation still needs a line item budget to maintain fiduciary responsibility. If this the first time you are doing a narrative style budget (we prefer to call it a mission and ministry budget), you will still want to have copies of your line item budget available, even though your primary presentation is the narrative. There will be people who do not understand the change and may suspect a lack of transparency if they cannot see costs for program areas they are used to seeing.

Using the emphasis as an educational opportunity is important. There are several ways you can use the small group materials included with this resource. You might choose to offer small group study around the emphasis theme *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving*. Alternatively, you could offer the materials to a Sunday school class. A third option is to use the materials that correspond to the texts in your emphasis on the weeks when they are the focus of worship. You can offer an online Bible study where participants can access the materials via your website or other direct link and utilize a messaging app to discuss what they have read. Or you might offer a webinar of the materials to expand your reach into the community. You could even offer an online experience and an in-person program.

Spring Emphasis Overview – 2

Key Dates for the Spring Emphasis: (Keep in mind that you have the flexibility to change these dates and move the suggested texts to conform to **your** congregation’s schedule.) Our choice of these dates was determined by where the theme texts appear in the established order of the Lectionary. You control the resources: use them when they make the most sense for you. Feel free to choose different texts for different days if that better fits your context. Be imaginative and creative!

- 1) Order devotional guides (if using) for each household by **2/10**
- 2) Select leadership as early as is practical, but no later than **2/15**
- 3) Decide on the type of event you are using for commitment Sunday by **2/18**
- 4) Recruit and train witnesses/testifiers by **2/4**
- 5) Distribute devotional guides to each household **by 3/29**
- 6) Calling Teams should be assigned and trained by **2/29**
- 7) Letter #1 mailed **4/13**
- 8) Receive dinner/event reservations on **4/19** and **4/26**
- 9) Letter #2 (A, B, or C) mailed **4/20** (This will require the assistance of the Financial Secretary or Bookkeeper. Plan ahead, as the target aspect of this letter is important to your success. Don't skip this step. In congregations where confidentiality is a concern, the letters can be given to the person who holds this information to complete and mail.
- 10) Calling Teams Begin **4/27**
- 11) Letter #3 mailed **4/27**
- 12) RSVPs for event due (calling teams complete) **5/1** (earlier if caterer requires number sooner)
- 13) **Commitment Sunday 5/3**
- 14) Letter #4A mailed **5/4**
- 15) Letter #4B mailed **5/11**
- 16) Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors **5/25**

Spring Emphasis Planning Calendar

January 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
				Secure witnesses for 1/26 and 2/9		
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
		Recruit Leadership Team for 2020				
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Matthew 4:12-23	27	28	29	30	31	
		Send 2019 year-end giving statements				

February 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Begin to recruit and train witnesses for the remainder of the year				
9 Isaiah 58:1-9	10	11	12	13	14	15
	Order devotional guides (if using)					
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
	Decide on your event for 5/3					
23	24	25	26 Ash Wednesday Lent Begins	27	28	29
				Recruit, assign, and train calling teams for event RSVPs if necessary, for your size congregation		

March 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fiscal year July 1-June 30? Begin developing your narrative budget in March						
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

April 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5 PALM SUNDAY	6 Send 1 st quarter statements with a thank you letter	7	8	9 Holy Thursday	10	11
12 EASTER	13 Mail Letter #1	14 Distribute/receive reservation cards during worship on 4/19 and 4/26	15	16	17	18
19 Romans 5:1-11	20 Mail Letter #2 (A, B, or C as designated)	21	22	23	24	25
26 PS 116:1-4, 12-19	27 Mail Letter #3 Calling for event RSVPs begins	28	29	30		

May 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1 Event Reservations Due	2
3 Commitment Sunday Acts 2:42-47	4 Mail Letter #4A	5	6	7	8	9
10	11 Mail Letter #4B	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; background-color: #fce4d6;"> Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors who have not made a commitment </div>						

May/June 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
31 PENTECOST	1	2	3	4	5	6
7 Genesis 1:-2:4a	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; background-color: #fce4d6;"> Have you used the bible study materials? Consider a 6-8 week study on stewardship beginning after Labor Day. It could be mid-week or during Sunday school. </div>			

July 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1 Canada Day	2	3	4 Independence Day (USA)
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
			Send 2 nd quarter statements with a thank you letter			
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Romans 8:26-39	27	28	29	30	31	

August 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

August/September 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
30 Romans 12:9-21	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27 Philippians 2:1-13	28	29	30			

October 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11 Exodus 36:1-7	12 Thanksgiving (Canada)	13	14	15 Send 3 rd Quarter giving statements With a thank-you letter!	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

November 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1 All Saints Day	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	23	24	25	26 Thanksgiving (USA)	27	28
29 Advent Begins	30					

December 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13 Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	Remember to send year-end giving statements for 2020 with a thank-you by 1/31	

Emphasis Guidance: Fall Emphasis Overview

This schedule assumes a three-week intensive focus on stewardship beginning in October and culminating on November 22. The usual format suggests two or three sermons prior to Commitment Sunday, with the emphasis coming into focus during worship on those same Sundays. This might include testimonies by lay people (see the Storytellers section), education about stewardship in Sunday school or small groups, letters and other communications encouraging participation, and finally, an act of commitment (offering commitment cards).

The following calendar suggests dates for planning and preparation for the emphasis and it identifies other texts for preaching that occur during the year that have resources within the *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving* materials. You are encouraged you to include at least some of these texts into your preaching schedule. Remember that the Lectionary texts from September (9/27) and October (10/11) are moved to the weeks of 11/8 and 11/15 respectively to create emphasis and momentum for the fall emphasis.

Make sure to create a narrative budget. This presents how money becomes ministry and mission and how the church is faithfully living into its vision. People rarely give to institutions anymore. They want to support things that change lives—theirs and others. A narrative budget takes time to do well. It will not replace the line-item budget. A congregation still needs a line item budget to maintain fiduciary responsibility. If this the first time you are doing a narrative style budget (we prefer to call it a mission and ministry budget), you will still want to have copies of your line item budget available, even though your primary presentation is the narrative. There will be people who do not understand the change and may suspect a lack of transparency if they cannot see costs for program areas they are used to seeing.

Using the emphasis as an educational opportunity is important. There are several ways you can use the small group materials included with this resource. You might choose to offer a 12-week small group study (or two six-week studies, one spring and one fall) around the emphasis theme *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving*. Alternatively, you could offer the materials to a Sunday school class to use on each of the days these texts occur in the Lectionary throughout the year. A third option is to use the materials that correspond to the texts in your emphasis on the weeks when they are the focus of worship. You can offer an online Bible study where participants can access the materials via your website or other direct link and utilize a messaging app to discuss what they have read. Or you might offer a webinar of the materials to expand your reach into the community. You could even offer an online experience and an in-person program.

Fall Emphasis Overview – 2

Key dates for the fall emphasis:

Keep in mind that you have the flexibility to change these dates and move the suggested texts to conform to **your** congregation's schedule. Some congregations may find the third week in November too late for Commitment Sunday. You control the resources: use them when they make the most sense for you.

- 1) Select leadership immediately after **August 1**, if not before.
- 2) Decide on the type of event you are using for commitment Sunday on or before the week of **8/21** (secure caterer and event space and/or entertainment)
- 3) Plan small group or bible study for the fall – begin after **9/8**
Most congregations fail to realize the importance of teaching stewardship concepts and giving people the opportunity to discuss these issues in safe spaces.
- 4) Order devotional guides (if using) by **9/15**
- 5) Recruit and train witnesses/testifiers by **10/1**
- 6) Distribute devotional guides (if using) **10/18 and 10/25**
- 7) Calling Teams should be assigned and trained by **10/30**
- 8) Letter #1 mailed **11/2**
- 9) Letter #2 (A, B, or C) mailed **11/9** (This will require the assistance of the Financial Secretary or Bookkeeper. Plan ahead, as the target aspect of this letter is important to your success. Don't skip this step. In congregations where secrecy is maintained, the letters can be given to the person who holds this information to complete and mail.
- 10) Distribute and collect RSVP cards on **11/8 and 11/15**
- 11) Calling Teams Begin **11/16**
- 12) Letter #3 mailed **11/16**
- 13) RSVPs for event due (calling teams complete) **11/20**
- 14) **Commitment Sunday 11/22**
- 15) Letter #4A mailed **11/23**
- 16) Letter #4B mailed **11/30**
- 17) Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors **12/7**

Fall Emphasis Planning Calendar

January 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
				Secure witnesses for 1/26 and 2/9 If using the hybrid model		
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
		Recruit Leadership Team for 2020				
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Matthew 4:12-23	27	28	29	30	31	
		Send 2019 year-end giving statements				

February 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9 Isaiah 58:1-9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
		Begin to recruit and train witnesses for the remainder of the year if using the hybrid model				
23	24	25	26 Ash Wednesday Lent Begins	27	28	29

March 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15 Romans 5:1-11	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

April 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5 PALM SUNDAY	6	7	8	9 Holy Thursday	10	11
12 EASTER	Send 1 st quarter statements with a thank you		15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 PS 116:1-4, 12-19	27	28	29	30		

May 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5 PALM SUNDAY	6	7	8	9 Holy Thursday	10	11
12 EASTER	13 Send 1 st quarter statements with a thank you	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 PS 116:1-4, 12-19	27	28	29	30		

May/June 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
31 PENTECOST	1	2	3	4	5	6
7 Genesis 1:-2:4a	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	Have you used the bible study materials? Consider a 6-8 week study on stewardship beginning after Labor Day. It could be mid-week or during Sunday school.			

July 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1 Canada Day	2	3	4 Independence Day (USA)
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Send 2 nd quarter statements with a thank you letter						
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26 Romans 8:26-39	27	28	29	30	31	
Fiscal year January 1 – December 31? Begin to develop your narrative budget in August for November presentation.						

August 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
Have you formed your leadership team? Now is the time to recruit and train those involved in the emphasis if you have not already done so.						
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Decide on your event for 11/22						
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

August/September 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
30 Romans 12:9-21	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14 Order devotional guides (if using)	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30 Recruit and train Storytellers			

October 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7 Send 3 rd Quarter giving statements With a thank-you letter!	8	9	10
11	12 Thanksgiving (Canada)	13	14	15	16	17
18 Distribute devotional guides (if using)	19	20	21	22	23	24
25 Distribute devotional guides (if using)	26	27	28	29	30	31

November 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1 All Saints Day	2 Mail Letter #1	3 Distribute/receive reservation cards during worship on 11/8 and 11/15			6	7
8 Philippians 2:1-13	9 Mail Letter #2 (A, B, or C as designated)	10	11	12	13	14
15 Exodus 36:1-7	16 Mail Letter #3	17 Calling for event RSVPs begins		19	20 Event Reservations Due	21
22 Commitment Sunday Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24	23 Mail Letter #4A	24	25	26 Thanksgiving (USA)	27	28
29 Advent Begins	30 Mail Letter #4B					

December 2020

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7 Follow-up calls with key leaders and donors who have not made a commitment		9	10	11	12
13 Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25 Christmas	26
27	28	29	30	31	Remember to send 2020 year-end giving statements with a thank-you by 1/31	

Emphasis Guidance: Adapting for the Small Church

If you are the typical mainline Protestant church in the United States, you likely have fewer than 100 people attending worship each week. That may feel small, but it is still the right size for this emphasis material, though slight modifications may be necessary if your attendance is less than 50. Then minimal adjustment is needed until your attendance is less than 35. So, what are you to do with all of this if your church doesn't even produce a formal budget?

Begin by recognizing that every congregation, regardless of size, will benefit from effective preaching, Bible study, quality worship, and conversations about commitment in general and stewardship in particular. Don't get caught in the trap of believing that the emphasis is only about the budget and meeting expenses. The emphasis is designed to provide for authentic conversation and meaningful engagement with stewardship as a spiritual discipline. Choosing to preach several times during the year about stewardship and offering small group opportunities that build relationships and strengthen understandings is good praxis. Period.

Use the preaching resources – remember that church attendance patterns have changed so that a regular attender's worship presence is now just barely over once a month. Even if you use all 12 texts, it is unlikely that someone will hear a message from this emphasis more than two or three times. Churches with effective stewardship programs preach on stewardship at least three times a year in addition to the annual stewardship emphasis.

If you usually don't have an annual emphasis and the church is not a pledging church, consider selecting a half-dozen texts and explore their meaning with the congregation. Include a Sunday where you can invite a commitment to the church and its ministry. The theme *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving* can serve as channel marker in the deep river of your preaching schedule as a way to alert people that you are continuing to focus on this topic through the year.

The Considering the Text materials are designed to help pastors begin the process of creating a sermon on the biblical passage. They are not pre-produced sermons meant to discount your own insights and homiletical work. Their purpose is to stimulate your imagination and give you the gift of seeing the text from another perspective. If your pastor is bi-vocational, she or he can view Considering the Text as a study partner who has done some preliminary research for you.

Use the worship resources – these are designed to reinforce the major themes of the text and they are meant to make your life easier! The prayers, meditations, hymn suggestions, and ideas for non-traditional worship provide ready-made materials that you don't have to create.

Use the Small Group Resources – It is hard to find a church that is guilty of too much study and reflection, especially about stewardship! The small group resources for youth and adults focus on each of the 12 texts. Use them with an adult Sunday school class on the Sunday you use the text in worship. They can serve as a sermon talk-back curriculum on a weeknight: a bit different from just a small group class, you can focus on specific things raised in the preaching. What did people connect with? What concepts were challenging? If you are not using all the texts for preaching, you still

Adapting for the Small Church – 2

might put together a four, six, nine, or 12-week mid-week study. Preach from some the texts, teach from others. The choices are legion, and they are yours for what works best in your context. Not doing any Sunday School or mid-week study? Now you can give it a try!

Use the Children’s Stories – you may not have many (or any) children in worship, but people worshipping with you may have children or grandchildren. Share the materials with them so they can teach these values to their children’s children (there is something very biblical about that concept!). You also may want to [order](#) and distribute the book *Stu Bear: A Story about Stewardship for Young Children* as an additional children’s story or special gift.

Utilize the Storytellers – There is a tendency to think that in the small church everybody knows everybody’s business. To some extent that is true as these are family like systems in often close-knit communities. However, encounters with God tend to not be the point of conversation in most social settings. You might be surprised what someone will disclose about themselves and their faith when invited to do in a safe setting. In order to not be too surprised, however, we would recommend that you find out what the person plans to say before handing them the microphone on Sunday morning! And, your mission partners are part of the equation as well. Your small church may have sent money or groceries without fail over the last 30 years to the local food bank, and yet may rarely, if ever, have met anyone who received those services. It can be a powerful moment to hear what a difference those gifts have made, and it can inspire to achieve even more.

Have an event – even if you are not receiving financial commitment cards. It is good for the community to gather together, to enjoy a meal, to hear some good music, or to play games in the fellowship hall. The event can serve as a rallying point illustrating that the church still matters as a place of connection and meaningful relationships. If you have something to eat—even desserts and punch—you have the opportunity to ask for an RSVP and to call those who haven’t been at church in a while. You may not need all the letters to assist with this communication, but who doesn’t like to receive a personalized piece of first-class mail in a time of emails and snapchats?

Commitments are not just financial – there are other important resources we commit to the work of the church beyond our money: time, presence, leadership, a willingness to grow and to be accountable in our faith development, and of course serving others. Your denomination or its partners may have materials and you are encouraged to order and use them. [The Giving: Growing Joyful Stewards in Your Congregation magazine](#) is another good resource, as well as Eric Law’s book *Holy Currencies* ([Chalice Press](#)) to further explore other types of commitments and offering them faithfully in service to Christ.

Say thank you! Distributing quarterly reports of giving is imperative. Any time a special gift is offered or a commitment is made or honored, it is more than simple politeness to say thank you. Doing so recognizes that everything given to the church, in whatever form it is offered, is done so voluntarily. Successful fundraisers will tell you: thank 7 different times, 7 different ways. Expressing gratitude to others is also a great way to teach it as a shared value.

Emphasis Guidance: Generational Giving

Congregations that want to really understand who and where the money comes from will perform an analysis of the correlation of ages to annual gifts to better understand the best strategy for communicating with donors. – Bruce Barkhauer

This material is included to give you some perspective about the people who offer financial support in your congregation. These are general descriptions with an honest recognition that there is a range of characteristics within each generational group. The groups themselves are defined differently by different researchers. This document is simply provided to point toward trends across a wide spectrum. Use it to further your understanding about the people who sit in your pews and employ this knowledge as you communicate ideas and appeal for resources.

A number of companies will help you (for a fee) with software and technology to utilize the most recent findings about tailored generational appeals. Many congregations may find these fee-based approaches beyond their financial means, but that does not imply that such services should not be explored.

Four major trends in giving:

1. The move from cash and checks to *electronic methods* as a means of making a donation.
2. The move away from a *sense of duty* to a belief in *making a difference* as a motivation for giving.
3. The move away from *institutional* support to *specific cause* support.
4. The move from *giving through the church* to *giving directly to an agency* and the diversity this shift has created in donor behavior. (Natural impact of shift #3.)

The Generations

Research published in 2018 by The Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact is used for these descriptions of generations and their giving habits in Canada and the US. They classify the generational cohorts as the Civics or Matures (born before 1946), Boomers (born 1947-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), Millennials (born 1981-1995), and Generation Z (born 1996 - present). (Note: this research does not have Canadian giving statistics for Generation Z.)

Generational Giving – 2

Canada

Civics

- 73% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: direct mail & online (85% total and nearly tied: 43% direct mail, 42% online)
- Average giving to all charities is \$944 per year, still more than any other generational cohort
- Average number of charities supported: 5.4, still more than any other generational cohort
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, health, the arts
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 19% of all giving

Due to age and health concerns, many Civics may represent “gifts at risk”, meaning that the expectation of continuing to receive gifts at the current level of their giving may need to be evaluated. This group is more generous than any other group, but they share that generosity across more causes. Also, if your congregation has givers from a wide range of age groups, it may be a false assumption to believe that this is the only group giving at a high level of support. Statistically, while they favor the church, the Civics may not be the only donors that need your attention.

Boomers

- 72% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: online & direct mail (66% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$841 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 4.6
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, health, children
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 41% of all giving

Nearly the same percentage of Boomers and Civics give (72% of Boomers, 73% of Civics), but there are nearly twice as many Boomers (2.6 million) as Civics (6.4 million). The difference in total giving percentages is about the same as the difference in number of people. However, Boomer giving is declining, as their self-reported per capita giving decreased \$100 from 2013 - 2018. Boomers report that they give more online than via direct mail. Your church is missing out if you do not offer a way to accept gifts electronically.

Generational Giving – 3

Generation X

- 66% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: online & direct mail (42% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$654 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 3.4
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, animals, health
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 25% of all giving

In Canada, giving to worship is still the top priority for Gen-Xers. They are far and away more apt to give online (36%), with direct mail, social media, and text giving use all in the single digits. They also name recommendations by family and friends as a strong influencer in their giving (73%), more than any other generation. It is important to remember that Gen-Xers are approaching what have always been prime giving years. Congregations should be creative to find ways to connect to Gen-Xers' preferences and giving processes.

Millennials

- 55% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: online & direct mail (40% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$389 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 3.1
- Top 3 giving priorities: health, animals, worship
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 15% of all giving

While still considered “young people” in many circles, it is important to remember that the oldest Millennials turn 40 in 2020! However, for these emerging mid-life adults, giving to worship is third in their list of priorities, not first like the older cohorts. The overall percentage of their giving has remained flat since 2013. Giving online is by far their preferred way to donate. They are heavy social media users, but only 8% of them give through social media. Finally, remember that most Millennials are at a life stage dominated by career and family priorities, and have inherited a world of economic uncertainty. The current life experiences of most Millennials make a case for congregations to grow stewardship by offering financial education in a spiritual context.

The Bottom Line

What all of this really means is that you have to take the time to tailor your message to each specific audience in your congregation. A simple letter asking for support may only work with a

Generational Giving – 4

percentage of your intended target. It is important to invest the time to send your message in multiple ways to specific groups. You may have to gather information about the people in each of these groups in ways you have never done before. You need social media addresses and cell phone numbers, not just street addresses with proper zip codes. The best way to get help in each of the specific areas may be asking people who are a part of that generation for assistance.

As part of its Giving Behaviour Project, Canada's Rideau Hall Foundation asked Imagine Canada to mine and analyze all publicly available data sources on Canadians' giving habits from 1984 to 2014. Their analysis highlighted that charities are increasingly reliant on fewer donors, as the proportion of Canadian tax filers claiming donations has declined from a peak of almost 30 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2014. Religious organizations continue to receive the largest amount of charitable donations, with two of every five dollars donated being directed to them. They also have the largest donation rate, with 41 percent of donors indicating they make gifts to these types of charities. Even so, because of generational differences, we should no longer expect to generically say "give" and expect that people will. We do need to use the information we have to communicate our message that we can change the world through generosity. Good relationships and the ability to point to achievement continue to matter. Churches that understand that will succeed in securing resources for mission and ministry.

US

Matures

- 78% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: direct mail & online (81% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$1,235 per year, still more than any other cohort
- Average number of charities supported: 6.3, still more than any other cohort
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, local social service, emergency relief
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 20% of all giving

Due to age and health concerns, many Matures may represent "gifts at risk", meaning that the expectation of continuing to receive gifts at the current level of their giving may need to be evaluated. This group is more generous than any other group, but they share that generosity across more causes. Also, if your congregation has givers from a wide range of age groups, it may be a false assumption to believe that this is the only group giving at a high level of support. Statistically, while they favor the church, the Matures may not be the only donors that need your attention.

Generational Giving – 5

Boomers

- 75% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: direct mail & online (62% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$1,061 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 4.2
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, local social service, health
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 41% of all giving

A smaller percentage of Boomers give than Matures, but they still represent the single largest group supporting charitable work. However, as older Boomers are now retiring, their self-reported per capita giving actually decreased slightly in 2018. Among Boomers, the gap between direct mail giving and online giving is widening, with online gaining ground. While online giving growth has been incremental but steady overall, your church is missing out if you do not offer a way to accept gifts electronically.

Generation X

- 55% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: direct mail & online (51% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$921 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 3.8
- Top 3 giving priorities: health, local social service, animal
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 23% of all giving

Sandwiched between the Boomer and Millennial cohorts, Generation X may be the most misunderstood generation in terms of population size and giving potential. There are only about two million less Gen-Xers than Millennials. It is important to remember that Gen-Xers are approaching what have always been prime giving years. Congregations should be creative to find ways to connect Gen-Xers' passions to their missions and ministries.

Generational Giving – 6

Millennials

- 51% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: online & social media (57% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$591 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 3.5
- Top 3 giving priorities: worship, children, local social service
- View giving money as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 14% of all giving

While still considered young people in many circles, it is important to remember that the oldest Millennials turn 40 in 2020! Also contrary to popular belief, not all Millennials are digital natives—meaning, they lived the beginnings of their lives without smart phones and online media such as Facebook and YouTube. Now, however, most are fully engaged in digital life, including with their giving. Unlike the older cohorts, their generation’s top two ways to give are fully digital, and Millennials have the highest percentage of givers via social media. It is also important to note that like the Boomers and Matures, giving to worship is actually their highest giving priority. Finally, remember that most Millennials are at a life stage dominated by career and family priorities, and many are carrying significant debt from higher education expenses because of entering the workforce during the economic downturn from about a decade ago. The current life experiences of most Millennials make a case for congregations to grow stewardship by offering financial education in a spiritual context.

Generation Z

- 44% give to charity
- Top 2 ways to give: online & social media (49% total)
- Average giving to all charities is \$341 per year
- Average number of charities supported: 4.6
- Top 3 giving priorities: children, animals, health
- View volunteering as their greatest form of impact
- Represent 2% of all giving

While the oldest members of Generation Z may be recent college graduates, most are school-age. (Some studies are using 2015 as the end year of this cohort.) Even so, forty-four percent report that they have already given to charity, and the average annual giving is just \$250 less than Millennials. Their generation is the most ethnically diverse in US history, and the [Pew Research Center’s](#) prediction that the now majority-Caucasian population will become a minority in 2050 will happen when this generation is in midlife and most likely in their highest giving years. Even though these shifts may seem distant, churches can work now to become aware of the world of Generation Z, which includes their strong connecting and influential structures through digital means. And, that’s not Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest: the

Generational Giving – 7

[three most popular social media platforms for Generation Z](#) are Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat.

The Bottom Line

What all of this really means is that you have to take the time to tailor your message to each specific audience in your congregation. A simple letter asking for support may only work with a percentage of your intended target. It is important to invest the time to send your message in multiple ways to specific groups. You may have to gather information about the people in each of these groups in ways you have never done before. You need social media addresses and cell phone numbers, not just street addresses with proper zip codes. The best way to get help in each of the specific areas may be asking people who are a part of that generation for assistance.

According to [Giving USA](#), the church and other religious organizations used to be the recipient of roughly 72 percent of all philanthropic dollars in the US. Today, that number is 29 percent. We can no longer say “give” and expect that people will. We do need to use the information we have to communicate our message that we can change the world through generosity. Good relationships and the ability to point to achievement continue to matter. Churches that understand that will succeed in securing resources for mission and ministry.

Emphasis Guidance: Electronic Giving

How simple is it for someone to give to your church or charitable organization? Studies consistently reveal a correlation between ease in giving and the motivation of donors. Making it easy to give is a well-known best practice in annual gift emphasis and even more advanced levels of giving found in the non-profit world. In other words, a potential donor is more likely to give to a charity if a convenient method for contributing is provided. Of course, more important motivators than a simple method of giving exist for the donor. A person's belief in the mission and perception that the organization is changing people's lives greatly outweighs all other motivators. However, if a potential donor is faced with the choice between giving to organizations where other motivating factors might be equal, the donor will favor the one to which it is most convenient to give. It is important for churches to understand that this wisdom applies to them as well.

Our money culture has rather rapidly shifted from physical cash currency to digital currency. We live in an increasingly cashless society, and churches need to respond by including giving opportunities that augment the standard method of receiving cash and checks in the offering plate. Here are some to consider:

EFT/ACH Transfer is the process of electronically transferring funds from an individual's account to the organization's account. The donor completes an authorization form allowing the church to initiate these electronic transfers on a recurring basis. The donor may change the amount and frequency, or discontinue the transfers, at any time. Contributions are received consistently week-to-week, month-to-month. The financial support is not dependent on the contributors' physical presence in church.

Giving with debit and credit cards can be available continuously on your church website and at your place of worship any time your congregation gathers with the use of credit card swipers, chip readers, and terminals. Your webpage can be expanded to include multiple gift levels, recurring gift options, donor designations, automatically generated thank you letters and gift receipts, and other possibilities.

QR (Quick Response) codes provide another opportunity to bring electronic giving into your place of worship. They connect persons to your website's giving page via their smartphones. QR codes are easy to use and are free to create. Visit <http://www.qr-code-generator.com/> to learn more. Prints the code in your bulletin or even project it on your screen if you use one and at any time during worship—or later if they take the bulletin home—persons can simply scan the code and make a gift. It is possible to create multiple QR codes to direct people to funding pages for specific projects or mission.

Your Social media platforms are a straightforward way to encourage those who are visiting with your church electronically to make an online gift. Incorporate invitations to give into your social media communications plan and add reminders to events and stories.

Electronic Giving – 2

Giving apps are available anytime and anywhere on your church members' smart phones. The number of companies that provide them continues to grow, as does their ease and cost of use.

There is a worshipful aspect to giving that should not be ignored. Websites, QR codes, and apps provide the opportunity for persons to give electronically during the worship service. You may also want to provide cards for use during worship that say, "This card represents a gift made electronically for the mission and ministry of the (name of your church)". On the other side, they might contain the annual emphasis theme and artwork for the current fiscal year, or the mission statement or vision of the congregation. These cards are placed in the offering plate in lieu of cash/check/envelope during the offering time. After worship, they can be replaced in the worship space prior to the next scheduled service. When necessary, make new ones. A template is available in the Theme Materials section of this resource. You can produce them on a color copier for minimal cost. Consider sending one with your initial acknowledgment letter when someone begins to use electronic giving.

Some of the above-mentioned giving options will be successful for you, while others may not succeed. Many require a monetary investment, and some have specific requirements that must be met in order to receive the gifts. Yet giving which appeals to the widest range of constituents likely will lead to more contributions, greater participation, richer organizational commitment, and deeper sustainability.

Emphasis Guidance: Letters

The emphases include using four letters. Do not attempt to shave the cost or reduce the time and personnel needed to accomplish this important step by not using all four letters. *Each one is important.* The letters are different in their purpose and function. It is best if they are mailed with first-class postage and that the envelope and letterhead look like the person receiving the mail is worth the effort!

You can send these letters electronically if you have tracking software that allows you to know the number of opens and you are certain you will get a high percentage of reads. If you are unsure, consider using postal mail, and if you prefer, duplicate the effort with email. Remember, two of the letters include forms that you want people to read. For congregations with a large percentage of younger members, email as a supplement to the postal service may work well.

- ◇ **Letter #1** is from the pastor. In the spring or fall versions of the emphasis, it introduces the emphasis, theme, and date for Commitment Sunday. In the longer version of the emphasis, it sets the table for the capstone of the previous months. In either case, it establishes the tone for the emphasis, sets the date for Commitment Sunday in people's minds, and invites them to participate. Therefore, the letter should be positive, clear, and relatively brief. If you are using social media, you can reinforce letter #1 with a post or tweet to save the date with a link on your website to the text of the letter. Remember, those not connected by social media need to receive an actual piece of mail.

- ◇ **Letter #2 (A, B, or C)** is from the emphasis Chair. It is a targeted letter that is tied to the range of giving within the congregation. "One size fits no one" is an old adage that applies to this mailing. Sending a single letter suggesting either "that everyone should tithe" or that "if everyone simply gives \$5 more per week we can underwrite our budget" does not offer a compelling reason to give. If a large percentage of your congregation does not tithe, the request to do so is beyond their current estimate of what they can accomplish. For those who give nothing at all (now almost 25% of the regular attendees in most congregations), this request is simply ignored. Letters that just ask for a fair share from everyone give the false assumption that everyone is capable of the same level of generosity. In reality, \$5 per week is a low threshold for some and a stretch for others. The goal is people to making a response that reflects their level of faith, their investment in the congregation's mission, and their financial capacity.

Three sample letters are included. You may choose to write additional or different letters for your context. For example, you may also want to pay attention to other demographic differences related to age, income, education, or their long-time support of the church.

Letters - 2

Letter 2A thanks those who are practicing generosity at a high level. It assumes their continued support and is meant to affirm their decision to give generously. **Letter 2B** is for the average donor, approximately 60% of the typical congregation. It offers thanks for past support, makes a compelling argument for continuing support, and suggests that this might be a time for an increase. **Letter 2C** is written for those from whom you do not receive regular support. It is designed to encourage the establishment of a giving routine as a spiritual discipline. This letter should be certain to name a specific type of ministry that a regular gift of \$5 per week might underwrite or support. It is honest about giving as a personal choice and urges the reader to make a decision to give to the church over making some other purchase.

Letter 2 (A, B or C) is best sent as a letter using postal mail. It includes a step chart of the congregation's regular weekly gifts in a range determined by your financial leadership. It is meant to encourage every giver to consider taking a step up in their regular giving. This information can remain confidential if your congregation does not disclose giving information to anyone other than the Financial Secretary. In that case, the Financial Secretary prepares the letters using the guidelines and delivers sealed letters to the church office for mailing. If you offer electronic giving, include information about this giving option in this letter.

- ◇ **Letter #3** is from your congregation's leadership team. It is an invitation to the Commitment Sunday event and/or dinner. It is meant to serve as a reminder and to have people think about their gift commitment. It should include the Weekly Giving Guide (percentage of income giving). Any special instructions for the Commitment Sunday should be included. If you are using social media, letter #3 can be replaced with a post or tweet for those for whom you have social media contacts with a link on your website to a downloadable Weekly Giving Guide.
- ◇ **Letter #3A** is for your shut-in members or those who support your congregation and its ministries, but from a distance. You are not expecting them to be physically present, but you hope that they will join the gathered congregation by making a commitment that can be included in the celebration on Commitment Sunday.
- ◇ **Letter #4 (A or B)** is a follow-up, sent after the emphasis has officially ended. This letter comes from the financial secretary or bookkeeper. **Letter 4A** includes a confirmation of the amount of the estimated gift to be given in the coming fiscal year, the way in which the church can expect to receive that gift, and most importantly, a thank you! **Letter 4B** is sent to those who have not made a commitment by the Monday two weeks following Commitment Sunday. This letter works well for email if you prefer.

Letters – 3

Letter #4B can use a social media post with a link on your website to a downloadable commitment card. **Letter #4A** should be sent as a follow-up after a person has responded to either a social media post or traditional mail. Don't forget to send **Letter #4A** once you have received a commitment! You may modify this letter as is appropriate for when it is being sent in relation to Commitment Sunday.

- ◇ The letters are meant to be guides or models that will need a bit of modification so that they truly reflect your congregation. Take the time to do this well. The Pastor may be the appropriate person to help craft these important communications to help inspire generosity and invite people to participate in the fullest possible manner. It is important to name specific ways in which your congregation's offerings become ministry and mission. Check for spelling and grammar errors, as you want this to be high-quality and professional in appearance.
- ◇ Use the name of the addressee when possible. "Dear Bob and Mary" is received differently than "Dear Member"; or "Dear Friend". Again, this takes time, but it is time well invested if the recipient actually reads the letter!
- ◇ Be sure to send the letters out on time! They relate to events that you want to keep in the minds of your parishioners. Send them too late or too soon and you may miss the critical response you are hoping to achieve.

Letter #1

Dear _____

Throughout our faith journey, we are extended several invitations. From the invitation to make our confession of faith to the invitation to care for a sick neighbor, to the invitation to bring food to the next church event, our life in a community of faith is full of invitations.

During this next season (or *throughout this year*), our church community is going to be intentional about how we respond to the variety of invitations we receive and how those invitations spur us along in our faith development.

Jesus invites us to bring all that we are and all that we have when we become a follower, a disciple of Christ. It is a sojourn that is meant both to form us more into the image of Christ through the disciplines of study, worship, prayer, service, and generosity; as well as to strengthen us in becoming powerful agents for the good that God is doing in our world.

When we make an intentional decision about what we bring before Christ, we extend a blessing of health and wholeness to all of creation, because we are certain that this is ultimately what God desires. The world is broken and hurting and we are called to be a movement for wholeness among its many fractured pieces. (*You may choose to use your mission statement or denominational identity statement here, instead of ...The world is broken and hurting...*) We can be agents of grace if we are generous in our response to the invitations that are presented to us.

Our faithful financial stewardship is one way we are invited to respond to Christ's invitation. Our generosity funds the mission and ministry that we are deploying as a sign that God's Realm is among us. On (*emphasis start date*) we will begin an intentional reflection titled *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving (year-round emphasis – We have been considering our theme, Faithful, Hopeful, Loving through much of the year)* as a preparation for determining our investment in the ministry and mission of (*name of congregation*). The time of study and reflection will culminate on Commitment Sunday as part of worship on (*date of Commitment Sunday*) and I hope you will be intentional about responding to this important invitation to be us, not simply to offer your commitment card, but join us for the (*dinner/event*) celebration.

God has done and continues to do remarkable things through us and with us – things that matter in our community! Your prayers and your participation are keys to helping us advance further on the pathway of discipleship. We know that when the early church gathered, they did so with glad and generous hearts and that there was no need among them (Acts 2). We desire such a spirit of true community to be among us. I look forward to considering with you what it means for us to be *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving*, as we seek to be faithful disciples in this place.

Thank you for walking alongside me as a part of (*name of congregation*).

Blessings,
(Pastor's Signature)

Letters - 5

Letter #2A

Dear _____

I want to begin by simply saying thank you. You have responded with generosity to the invitation to bring your best before God. Your leadership in generosity contributes to the long-standing success of our community of faith. Because of your commitment to the ministry of this congregation, we are an ever-increasing effective witness to Jesus Christ. This congregation is grateful for you, and for the example you set for each of us about what it means to respond to God's prompting to be a faithful steward.

I join with you in celebrating the opportunity to give to others with such joy. Being a partner in movements that change the lives of individuals and enrich our community is so satisfying. That is a secret I wish more people could discover for themselves! Our financial gifts do remarkable things when they are transformed into ministry and mission. I am especially proud of *(list a vital ministry here – something that is new or has grown stronger in the last year)*.

Our God is a generous God: a God who has been revealed in Jesus as the one who deeply and passionately loves us. Our God is a God of invitation: who invites us on a faithful path of transformation that changes us, and through us changes the world. We have been invited to consider how we are *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving*, a season of thoughtful study and discernment about how we can bring our best before God.

In the coming weeks, you will hear stories about how we as a congregation are responding to God's invitation to bring our gifts. Each of us will be challenged to take even bolder steps to invest our whole life into becoming the church God is urging and encouraging us to become. I want to invite you to join me *(us, my family)* in our decision to respond to this important invitation with an increase in the amount of our financial gift in the coming year. It is a time of great possibility for our congregation and the future of its mission.

Again, I thank you for your support. Giving in the manner that you do does not simply happen: it is the result of faith, trust, intentional choices, and a life of discipline. We join you in the hope of creating a culture of generosity that touches every person in our church. Giving is where we find the true meaning and purpose for our lives, a discovery you have already made.

Please plan to be with us for Commitment Sunday on _____ *(list date)*. It is an opportunity to respond to this important invitation with our estimates of giving for next year, and we will join together in a church-wide *(dinner/event)* to celebrate the abundance of our God.

Generously,
{Signature of the emphasis chair}
{Official title}

Letters – 6

Letter #2B

Dear _____,

(Name a vital ministry) is just one of the many ways that we invite our community to discover Christ and answer God's call in *(name town)*. The result of this ministry and *(name specifically what the ministry does)* is significant, and you are invited to be a part of something with such a positive impact. *(The letter will be more powerful if you have a personal story from/about someone impacted by your mission as a starting place, but it has to be brief. Be sure you receive their permission if you mention them by name.)*

As you know, this is not the only way that our congregation creatively lives out its ministry and mission. *(List some other ministries/mission efforts here)*. We are transforming lives while we are being transformed by the love of God at the same time. We are discerning what it means to be *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving*, thinking deeply about the invitations that God has placed before us to be generous with all of our resources!

I want to thank you for being a partner in the ministry and mission of *(name of church)*. Your ongoing financial gifts make a difference in the lives of many people and help our church reach them with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In the next few weeks, you will hear more about how we as a congregation are responding to God's invitation to bring our best before God. As you know that will require our investment with both our spiritual and financial gifts. Because you have already responded to this invitation with your generous contribution, you know the difference your gift makes. I invite you to find your place on the enclosed step chart and pray about how God is calling you to answer the challenge to grow. Please join me in taking a step up by increasing your financial gift for the coming year.

Our emphasis theme this year *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving* encourages us to take time to be intentional about the decisions we make with our resources and gifts. God is working through us and the things we do to accomplish positive change in the world. Every time we give that gift becomes ministry and mission.

Make plans now to join us on Commitment Sunday *(Date)* when we will offer our intentions and share together in an all-church *(dinner/event)*.

Again, thank you for your part in the life-changing work of this congregation.

Generously yours,

{Signature of emphasis chair}

{Official title}

(Letter #2B)

Letters - 7

Letter #2C

Dear _____,

Believe it or not, there is more to *(Name of church)* than just what you see on Sunday morning! *(List several mission/ministry activities, including at least one that happens on your property between Sundays.)*

All these things are planned and prepared by leadership and staff who are deeply committed to our becoming who it is God is calling us to be. The ministry and mission of our church take place because of the spiritual and financial gifts our members and friends choose to share. These are the resources that fuel our mission; and yes, it does take money to provide these spiritual things!

Your decision to give a gift is the response to an invitation—a choice—but as a follower of Jesus, it really isn't an option! Based on what we have received, we are encouraged to give: out of thanksgiving for what God has done and as a sign of faithfulness and commitment to be a part of the good things that God is continuing to do in our world. We have the gift of Jesus and we are invited to respond to what God has given us with our own generosity.

When you give, you are making a decision to give something away that you might use for something else. To do that may require choosing to not buy a fancy coffee, or deciding to carry a sack lunch into the office once a week instead of buying lunch. The amount may seem insignificant, but did you know that gift of just \$5 every week can *(list something here that a gift of \$260 can make happen at your church – perhaps half scholarship for young person to go to camp; feed x number of families through the food bank; etc.)*. Your choice matters, your response matters, your gift matters: it matters to you as the giver, and to the church which utilizes it as a resource for mission.

As a congregation, we are entering a time of discerning what we will contribute monetarily in the coming year. The practice of exercising financial stewardship is a spiritual discipline and a way to grow our faith. There is joy in practicing generosity and it begins with a simple step of a commitment to contribute.

My prayer is that I will see you in worship during the remaining weeks of our reflection on what it means to be *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving* that you plan to be present for Commitment Sunday on *(date)*, and that you will join us for the *(dinner/event, time and location)*. Your response to this invitation and the gifts that we all bring will make good things happen. Thank you for being a part of it. The enclosed chart can give you an idea of how others practice generosity and hopefully help you find a comfortable starting place. Challenge yourself to give in a regular and disciplined way. I promise you won't regret it.

We celebrate the way you will respond to God's invitation to give!

Blessings,

{Signature of emphasis chair}

{Name and official title}

Letters – 8

Letter #3

Dear _____,

We hope you are feeling excited about the conclusion of our considering what it means to be *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving* and that you are planning to be with us for worship on *(date)* and for the *(dinner/event – time and location)*. *(Place any instructions for the meal here – or whatever special instructions are necessary for the special event.)*

Our theme for this year has been rich with reminders as to how God has provided for us in rich abundance as a human family and has invited our community to be a part of sharing our blessings with others. Our congregation is committed to putting our faith into action, and this intentional study of how and why we give is one of many opportunities for us to act in accordance with what we believe. Are we willing to allow our financial stewardship to reflect our discipleship? How can we bring our best before God? What shall we bring to serve God and neighbor?

On Commitment Sunday, commitment cards will be made available for us to name our generous intentions of financial support for mission and ministry of our congregation. There will be a designated time in our worship on Commitment Sunday to fill out the cards and bring them forward to be blessed and to have our intentions consecrated. As always, these cards represent our best intentions based on what we know at the present time. They can, at any time, be adjusted, should your circumstances change.

These last few (weeks/months) have been enriching and our worship together has been inspiring. Now the invitation is before us. How we respond and allow God to use us and our resources for the good of the world is up to us.

We remember what is at stake and what the possibilities are. May we respond accordingly, so that as with the early church, as told to us in the book of Acts, “there was not a needy person among them”.

See you Sunday!

(Signed by each member of the leadership team, with their titles underneath the signature)

Letters – 9

Letter #3A

Dear _____,

The grace-filled promise of being **Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving** carries both assurance and responsibility. One of God's assurances is the gift of a community of faith where a sense of belonging makes us a church family. One of our responsibilities is to recognize and respond to the biblical teaching that a portion of the blessings in our lives already are marked as being **Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving**.

Commitment Sunday is the annual event in the life of our congregation that encourages each of us to offer a percentage of the monetary resources entrusted to us by God for the mission and ministry that we share. Please consider prayerfully the opportunity to make a difference through our church.

We wish you could be with us on *(date)* for Consecration Sunday. Since you are a cherished member of our church family, we want to provide the opportunity to support us as we celebrate **Faithful, Hopeful, Loving** and continue our ministry from that day forward. A commitment card and an addressed, stamped envelope are enclosed so that you can share in this special day in the life of our church.

God bless you in this season of Thanksgiving.

Sincerely,

Name

Name

Co-Chairs of Stewardship

Letters – 10

Letter 4A

Dear _____,

Thank you for joining us as we considered what it means to be *Faithful, Hopeful, and Loving*. We are pleased to report that the congregation has responded generously. We are fortunate to have a community of faith that believes in what God is doing here, in this place.

I am writing to confirm your investment in next year's annual operating fund. According to our records, you intend to offer a gift of:

_____ Dollars Per Week

_____ Dollars per Month

_____ Dollars per Year

To be contributed:

___ Weekly

___ Monthly

___ Annually

___ Other _____

We are indeed grateful because your financial support provides the resources to do great things such as (*name a vital ministry*).

If at any time you wish to adjust this estimate, please contact me. We will seek to keep you updated each quarter so that you can be aware of your giving to date and to inform you about the ministry and mission that your gifts are making possible.

With gratitude,

{Financial Secretary signature and title}

Jesus calls us to do the things he did, including living a life of compassion and generosity
Gifts received for our annual operating fund become ministry and mission
Thank you for your partnership in the work God has called us to do together

Letters - 11

Letter 4B

Dear _____,

The last several (*weeks/months*) at church have been simply amazing. What a blessing to hear again about the mission to which we have been called and about how so many have considered how they can bring their very best in the name of Jesus! I hope you have enjoyed the special activities and that you are as convinced as I am that God is at work in our congregation.

I am writing simply to confirm that at this time we have not received a commitment card from you indicating the level of your financial support for the coming year. I have enclosed a card for you so that your commitment will be included in our totals. This information is helpful for our church's financial planning and it helps the congregation know and appreciate the kind of generosity that is present among our members and friends.

While it is not required, an estimate of giving assists us in being fiscally responsible as we make our ministry and mission plans in the year ahead. We do not want to commit to a project that we cannot complete.

If it concerns you to offer a commitment, please know that the church understands. The economic times we live in are still uncertain for some and making a commitment may seem difficult. At the same time, we want you to know that estimates of giving are precisely that—estimates—and they can be adjusted at any time. Whether you choose to submit a card or not, please know that we are grateful for your continuing support.

If you do not plan to financially support the ministry and mission of our church this year or plan to make a significant reduction from previous levels of support, please notify me as soon as possible.

As always, if you have any questions about giving or about how your offerings become ministry, please feel free to contact me.

Blessings,
{Financial Secretary signature and title}

Emphasis Guidance: Website/Social Media Templates

Post 1 –Video Intro

Since (enter founding date), (name of church) has been committed to offering the radical welcome of Jesus Christ. As you will hear in this short video, (name of church) is a place where (enter mission statement). Join us in supporting this wonderful ministry by sharing your resources with extravagant generosity!

Post 2 – Photo Intro

This past (enter date), (name of church) welcomed (describe people in photo). These pictures just tell a part of the story – (tell a fun fact from event). First Christian is a place where (enter mission statement). Join us in supporting wonderful ministries like this with a donation.

Post 3 – Community Connection/Outreach

On (enter date), a wonderful group of the (name of church) community participated (name of community outreach event). Since (founding church date), (name of church) has been dedicated to serving (city name) community. (community organization name) is just one of the many community organizations that we partner with throughout the year to serve our wonderful community. Support our collaborative ministry in the community with a donation.

Giving Tuesday

During the next 24 hours, people around the world will come together to celebrate generosity. Today, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving has become known as #GivingTuesday, and it is a wonderful way to celebrate how our gratitude and giving can make an impact in the world.

Today, we celebrate that (church name) is a place where (enter mission statement)

On this #GivingTuesday, join us in supporting this wonderful community by sharing your resources with extravagant generosity!

Make an impact with your gift today.

(DONATE BUTTON)



Considering the Text

January 26, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23, Come and Follow Me

Theme: Faithful

There is a scene in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* where the main character, Rey, has a dialogue with Maz. Maz tells Rey that the belonging she seeks is not behind her, but lies ahead. The conversation continues with commentary on the Force that surrounds and moves everything, including Rey.

This scene centers on vocation. It is Rey being called, which is the literal meaning of the word. Rey is called to more than what she is and where she is. This is the essence of vocation. It is that which beckons us beyond our current context and status. Vocation says “come,” “go further,” “move deeper,” and “follow the path to possibility.”

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus summons fishermen to rethink their professional standing. First-century fishermen were despised and lowly people. Although they were not at the top of the economic pyramid in the Greco-Roman world, they were not exactly at the bottom, like shepherds. They belonged to a middle poor in that the fishing industry was as ubiquitous as the sea itself. Fishermen could not determine how much they earned, as the Roman political and economic system regulated taxation. Any subsequent remaining profit went to the elite and to those who controlled the fishing process from the top.

Thus, the system in which fishermen operated was not one that allowed for entrepreneurship or capitalism, as in our modern-day thinking. It was a matter of fishing to eat and survive. We know about the middle poor: fast food workers wanting a fair wage, WalMart employees deserving more than just a blue smock, custodial workers and housekeepers doing what they do until they can do better.

In addition, those in the fishing industry depended on others in various professions to supply nets, boats, and other needed materials. Processors, distributors, buyers, and sellers partnered with those whose primary responsibility it was to catch fish. So this was not an individual commercial endeavor. It was one grounded in relationships, akin to present-day unions.

Worth noting is that Jesus uses language connected to the fishermen's present livelihood to help them evaluate future options. He meets the soon-to-be disciples on their own linguistic turf. He does not engage farming codes with fishermen. However, in a play on words Jesus commands them—dares them—to fish for people, not animals. In initiating a change in their lives, Jesus first acknowledges the current status of the men. Where they are now is not discounted for the sake of trying to move to the next level.

Vocation begins with identity certainty. The Creator who fearfully and wonderfully made us knows how to call us in order to remake us. The gifts and graces we currently have are engaged and ultimately reconfigured so that we may respond to the call to come go further, and follow the path of possibility. Identity certainty is not synonymous with stagnation, but it is acknowledgement of who we are and who we need to become in order to serve others. Our idiosyncrasies are fallow ground for looking at ourselves anew and answering the One who beckons us to fish, teach, lead, write, sing, act, do, and be in another way. The almost-yet-disciples are called to redirect their fishing to humankind. Use what you have been doing, so that you may get a do-over and subsequently do something new.

In this text, Jesus not only honors identity certainty through the employment of contextualized professional language, but he also does this in the specific manner in which he summons the fisherman. Verse 19 records Jesus saying to Simon Peter and Andrew, "Follow me." In verse 21 the narrator has Jesus seeing James and John and calling them. Each pair of brothers is subject to a different imperative. Yes, they all know the language of fishing. Yes, they are all subject to a command. Yet, as Simon Peter and Andrew are casting their nets and as James and John are mending nets, the directives to redirect their lives are distinct.

The four men in chapter four are of the same sea, but what is said to them is similar and yet, specific. Simon and Andrew are to follow. James and John are called. The Greek for *follow* is *deute*. It means what it sounds like—duty to follow. Καλέω (kal-eh-o) captures in the Greek the wording for *call*. It is the same Jesus who summons them, but his means for doing so is unique to their respective lives.

We may be called to preach, but the Divine does not summon us all in cookie-cutter fashion. We may be told to follow and to teach without explanation. However, there is no one-size-fits-all model. The Spirit may coerce us to leave the familiar for the unknown. Nonetheless, our stories of such compulsion can be as unique as we are. Just as Simon, Andrew, James, and John were engaged in similar yet different contexts, so does the Creator take our points of intersection and interconnectedness to show us how we must sail uncharted waters.

Faithfulness to the call from the Holy One ought to hinge on the awareness that God calls us to be true to who we are. Yes, vocation and calling require us to grow and mature. Still, the beginning is grounded in what is already there. There is an existential etiology to our being called by the Lord. As God has allowed us to be faithful and true to our identity, out of gratitude

for such we should be faithful and respond to the call to go wider, deeper, higher, and farther. Faithful stewardship is holding in tandem where and who we were when Jesus called with what are called to be here and now. For the One who calls is indeed faithful.

Stewardship as a response to grounding in identity certainty frees the respondent—the one called—to display care for all things. It is treating people and institutions with a sense of historical value and cultural and spiritual purpose. The past informs the present and provides insight for the future.

Finally, this text not only helps us see the significance of identity certainty and the uniqueness of such related callings. Additionally, one cannot discount that Jesus does not call us to face anything to which we cannot relate or handle. This text comes immediately after the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt 4.1-12). His identity as a hungry human being is challenged. Make these stones into bread. Jesus was hungry; we hunger. His identity as God's son is poked. If God loves you, surely the Divine will save you—jump! If God loves us, surely God will catch us when we foolishly fall—fall for the deceiver's shenanigans. So go ahead and take the fatal leap. Jesus' identity as a power-needing ruler is prodded. Worship me and get more. The world offers us the carrot of more and more authority, and more and more people to fawn over us.

Jesus knows what it means to have an identity crisis. Jesus knows what it means to know who you really are. His calling fishermen in the language of fishing in order that they might redirect such fishing is not out of a vocational vacuum. Calling is rooted in our core being. It is out of this center that the streams of faithful stewardship flow.

Yes, Rey; yes, fellow readers; that calling is like a Force—or in our language, the Spirit—that summons us to what lies ahead. It is only in recognizing who we are that we can move forward and remain faithful.

February 9, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Is this not the Fast I Choose

Theme: Loving

The book of Isaiah has always been a great favorite for Christian preachers and interpreters, though not always for the best motivations. It is one of three major prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible: Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the other two. The prophetic words within Isaiah are often quoted by the writers of the New Testament gospels as a way of speaking about the experiences of those who encountered Jesus of Nazareth. This usage has led many Christians to claim that the prophet Isaiah was predicting Jesus. This misinterpretation resulted in centuries of anti-Jewish commentaries, sermons, attitudes, and actions by Christians. Such an approach not only fails to consider the socio-historical contexts represented in Isaiah, but also it robs the texts of their depth of meaning.

For a more faithful exegesis of Isaiah 58, it is important to have an appropriate understanding of the role of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally, prophets have been understood as predicting events in the distant future. They are often equated with fortune tellers. However, this description is not an accurate way of understanding the role of biblical prophets. They were more concerned with the present than with the past. Their interest in what could happen was tied directly to what they thought needed to change in people's behavior.

So what did it mean to be a prophet? They were not predicting the future—rather they were speaking to a concrete historical context. They were often just pointing out the obvious: the enemy is headed our way, and we do not stand a chance of withstanding their onslaught. Prophets provided an understanding of what was occurring or what could occur. They provided a faithful critique of society through a theological lens. A prophet is one who tells the people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. Sometimes this may be the same, but most of the time it isn't. Prophets were not providing a way of avoiding the impending doom. Rather, they understood that if the future unfurled as it seemed it would, and the people were unfaithful, it would seem as if God was punishing them.

The Hebrew Bible prophets were persons who felt deeply the suffering of oppressed people and the anger of God over sin and rebellion. They were frightened by people with power but were more afraid of what would happen to the people if they did not speak, so they proclaimed the message with audacity. Prophets reminded people of their past, so they would know what

God expected and remember what God had done for them and their ancestors. Prophets were also intercessors, taking the concerns of Israel to God and at times even seeking a delay of judgment, imploring God's mercy for the people to give them more time. Prophets reminded the people of who they were, so they would know how to be and to act. They spoke words of comfort to people in pain.

In order to understand these words in Isaiah 58, it is necessary for us to step back and look at the bigger picture surrounding this chapter. The scholarly approach to Isaiah over the last several decades has identified three different voices in the book from three separate historical contexts. Isaiah 1-39 represents the prophecies delivered by Isaiah of Jerusalem during the eighth century BCE, who spoke to the Southern Kingdom of Judah about the need for them to live in right relationship with one another and with God, in light of the threat of foreign enemies. These chapters contain words of judgment tempered with signs of hope. Isaiah 40-55 is connected with Isaiah of the Exile, who offered comfort and hope to those living in exile in Babylon during the sixth century BCE. In Isaiah 56-66, there is another shift in tone, but the purpose of these prophetic words is not as clear-cut as those found in the first two divisions of Isaiah. Some scholars have suggested that this confusion is due to the fact that these chapters do not represent the words of one person but rather are a collection of several voices, usually dated to the post-exilic period, during the fifth or fourth centuries BCE. Within these texts, one can find both words of judgment and of incredible hope.

Today's reading is taken from the third section of the book of Isaiah (56-66). The prophetic voice heard in Isaiah 58 addressed the people who were trying to rebuild Jerusalem (the city walls, temple, and Jewish community) after the Babylonian exile (circa 586-538 BCE). During the years of living as strangers in the strange land of Babylon, the exiles had envisioned restoring the former capital of David's kingdom to the grandeur it enjoyed before the Babylonians had destroyed it in 586 BCE. After suffering the loss of their homeland and their place of worship, and enduring the ridicule of their captors and others who reminded them that they were no longer important to the God of Abraham and Sarah, these returnees believed that their time of hardship had ended. They were confident that they had experienced more than a justifiable punishment at the hand of God. It was their time to shine.

To grasp the original message and power of this prophetic word, we must know a bit about the events taking place during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Upon returning from exile, life was not as easy, or as pleasant, as those who came home had imagined. The crumbling remains of the temple built by King Solomon were a constant reminder of the past horrors suffered at the hands of the Babylonians. Contrary to the exiles' ego-driven imaginations, life had gone on in Jerusalem without them. Those not taken into exile had remained in Judah and had managed to continue working, worshiping, and living, without the leadership of the upper-class Jewish exiles. In fact, some of those who remained in the land had taken over the lands and positions of power, once held by those returnees. To make matters worse, the Babylonians had relocated exiles from other conquered countries to live in Judah. The homeland to which these freed exiles returned hardly resembled the land and life of their memories.

Immediately, conflict arose as the returnees attempted to regain their positions of power, and the people of the land were less than eager to give up their new found independence. Instead of the harmonious vision for the restored Israel proclaimed by Isaiah of the exile, the land of Judah was in turmoil. Jews were struggling against one another, and some were attempting to expel the foreigners from their midst. To the faithful, who witnessed this calamity, the situation must have resembled too closely the conditions of the eighth century, which had led to their destruction as a nation and as a people. Surely this was not what God wanted.

Economically, they were not enjoying the rewards they felt they deserved. Taxes were high and people were overextended in their indebtedness, often having to sell their land and become indentured servants to foreigners who now lived in their land. Even though the people were doing the proper religious rituals which they believed would please God, (v 2) there was no relief from their suffering. They fasted in grand fashion and prayed with great eloquence, but God seemed to ignore them. What more did God want from them? (v 3a)

In response to their frustrations, the people of Judea heard a prophetic voice announce to them that they were a sinful and rebellious lot. (v 1) They had failed to keep covenant with God; they had not followed the commandments and done what was expected of them. The messenger of the Lord informed them that fasting as a way of getting what they wanted from God was not acceptable. (v 4) Putting on sackcloth and lazing about in the name of worship was the last thing God wanted. (v 5) Instead of feeling sorry for themselves and waiting for God to do something, the people needed to do something themselves. They were called to action rather than expecting God's charity. (vv 6-7 & 9-10) They had been reminded a long time ago what the Lord required of them: to make justice happen. (Mi 6:8b)

God had chosen Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be a light unto the nations and a blessing to others. The Torah of Moses had taught them how to live holy lives that would reflect to the rest of the world the nature of the God they worshipped, a God who "executes justice for the oppressed . . . gives food to the hungry. . . sets the prisoners free . . . opens the eyes of the blind. . . lifts up those who are bowed down . . . loves the righteous. . . watches over the strangers . . . (and) upholds the orphan and the widow." (Ps 146:7-9a) Yes, offerings and rituals had their place, but the people had been told by previous prophets that their God was more impressed with how they treated their neighbors and the most vulnerable in their communities—the widow, orphan, and stranger. (e.g., As 5:24) The fast that God desires is not the act of giving up food or anything else. Rather the prophet says that the fast God desires is one of doing, of "freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, clothing the naked, and treating all as part of God's family". (Is 58:6-7) If the people lived in these ways, the blessings that they had prayed for would become a reality.

In the meantime, God was not happy with the people of Judea, and perhaps God was having thoughts of giving up on them or even allowing the community to suffer the consequences of their sin. God decided to send someone to go first, to tell the people what they needed to hear, and to lead them in creating a just society. The prophet was called by God to stand in the breach between God's vision for the world and the people's failure to make that vision a reality, to fill the gap between how life ought to be and its current state. In doing so, the prophet would be laying the foundations for future generations and building paths for life. Once they had repented of their injustice and lack of righteousness and had begun to live as reflections of God's steadfast love, the restored community could then be God's prophetic witness to the others. They, too, could stand in the breach and fill the gap, and build paths of life. (v 12)

These words of Isaiah 58 echo down to us across the centuries; although the culture, language, and millennium of our time are radically different, the message is no less pertinent. We, too, live in a world where the problems seem overwhelming: world hunger, homelessness, epidemics,—and these are just a few of the headlines on the front page. We are distressed by all the problems facing us, and it would be easy to interpret this state of affairs as divine punishment, as some voices have proclaimed, or at least as proof that God no longer cares.

Plenty of good people around the world pray, fast, and give all they can to help the needs of others. Some may want to pray harder or force their spiritual practices and theology on others as a way to illicit God's charity, but that is not the fast God chooses. Some may say we just need to give more money, material goods, or time as a way of easing the suffering in the world. Those are valuable things to do and should not be abandoned, but God calls us to do more. We are expected to step into the breach and make justice happen.

What is charity? What is justice? Those are two words that we often use interchangeably, but they are not synonyms. There is a difference between the two. Donating money, material goods, and time are all very admirable and important things to do, but they are charity. Changing unjust laws and creating safety nets of communal care so that our money, material goods, and time are no longer needed is justice. Charity meets the needs of the oppressed; justice eliminates the need. Justice requires intentional effort and, yes, even risk on our part. It involves providing adequate housing and health care for all, and creating vital support systems for those who too often fall through the cracks. We are responsible for the creation of just societies and just religious communities, in which all persons, regardless of where they live, what language they speak, whom they love, their gender identity, or how they worship are seen as created in the image of God and therefore declared by our Creator as very good! (Gn 1:25)

Where are the gaps between how life ought to be and how life is that we, as individuals and as communities of faith, are called to fill? How can we step into the breach created by systems that allow injustice to flood our communities and world? What are we doing to build paths of life, where the despair of barrenness seems impossible to overcome? This is the faith that God chooses: to be a faithful prophetic presence in the world through our actions for peace, justice, and reconciliation on behalf of the whole creation. Acts of justice not only improve the lives of the oppressed--they make the whole human community healthier. Eliminating the injustice also eliminates the fear that each person has of what could happen to them if they found themselves in similar situations. Sharing power and wealth does not deplete these resources—it actually multiplies them in ways beyond our imaginations. As the prophet reminds us, if we take care of the least of these, then “light shall break forth like the dawn” upon everyone and the community’s “healing shall spring up quickly.” (v 8)

What are the religious rituals that you or your faith community practice on a regular basis? Are these seen as ways of gaining God’s favor? What is the purpose of prayer, or worship? Does worship motivate people to go and do something? If so, what is it that they are inspired to do? How does your congregation engage in creating a just society? How does your congregation stand in the breach and fill the gap? How are you building paths of life?

One way of doing these things is to be faithful stewards of all that we have been given. Generosity is necessary in order for our gaps in society to be filled. It is one way to stand in the breach. Sharing our time, talents, and money empowers all of us to build paths of life. Imagining with the Holy about a future time when humanity will reflect the hospitality of God can inspire us to action, reflecting the divine image that is within each of us.

March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11, Our Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

Theme: Hopeful

Whenever you see the word *therefore*, you should wonder what it is there for. Paul begins chapter five with a conjunctive adverb. It stands in the middle to connect what precedes it with what comes after it. *Therefore* in this text joins the ending of chapter four with the beginning of chapter five. In chapter four Paul records that the faith of all who believe God raised Jesus from the dead is acknowledged; it is reckoned. This faith yields a justification, a being made rightness. This is the end of the chapter, but not Paul's thought. Blame sixteenth-century printer and publisher Robert Stephanus for this textual and grammatical awkwardness. He is primarily credited with dividing New Testament texts into chapters and verses.

Nevertheless, in chapter five there is more commentary to join what Paul started in chapter four. Thus, *therefore*, since we have been right made by what Jesus did on the cross, the believer has peace and access to grace. Yes, we can even boast or brag a little. Such bragging is grounded in a hope of what was and what is to come.

Paul is quite verbose not only in chapter five, but in Romans in general. He is writing to a group of believers he has never met. He did not establish the church at Rome. He really does not know this congregation, and its members do not know him. They have heard of each other. The believers there are more so skeptical of Paul. We all know how hearsay can produce its own narrative. Thus, in this epistle Paul spends much time expounding on his life, his theology, and his intent. He name-drops at the end (Romans 16) to provide some degree of credibility and just in case the Romans need personal references.

Ultimately Paul wants to go to Spain, and he wants the Romans to foot the bill. This is his hope. Yet, before getting to the ask up front, Paul massages his potential benefactors by offering a magnum opus on the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The final work of this apostle does not relish in the specific details of blood, thorns, beatings, betrayal, cross, and grave. Paul's modus operandi proceeds from a "What does this mean?" and "How are we to live?" literary point of entry. He grounds these questions in hope.

What does the life, death, burial and resurrection of the Crucified One mean? It means that our life pivots around hope. People of faith are hopeful because the love that sent Jesus to the cross is that same love that sustains us through our challenges, crosses, difficulties, and distress. Followers of Jesus are hopeful that they will share in the same glory that raised him from a borrowed tomb. It is the same hope that we hold on to in facing social death, spiritual dissonance, economic demise, and cultural disintegration.

Hope means that while suffering, we look forward to relief. Hope means that while trying to endure, we anticipate the end. Hope means that when our character is under assault, we let the pruning do its work and hold to our purpose. As we boast in hope, we do so knowing hope produces suffering, and suffering, endurance; and endurance, character; and character circles back to hope. What does this mean? It means we journey from hope to hope. We move through hope to hope.

Paul's final work also helps the reader to answer another question: "How are we to live?" Paul avers we are to live bragging and boasting. Yes, believers in the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are to walk around "shaking the dirt off their shoulders." (Thank you, hip-hop artist and businessman, Jay-Z.) The Greek word for *boast* is *καυχάομαι* (kow-khah'-om-ah-ee). It literally means "to hold your head up high."

The idea is to live holding one's head up high because of hope. Yet, this existential dwelling is more nuanced. It is not merely hoping in what could be, but it is hope from what has happened. It is retro-hope. When Paul avers that hope does not disappoint (v 5), he is not selling wolf tickets of future possibilities. He says hope does not dispirit based on experience. Because of what God did yesterday, Paul can hold his head up high in anticipation of tomorrow's divine yield. We too can lift our gaze and hold our head up high because of what the Holy One did yesterday is a foretaste of what can be done on tomorrow's tomorrow.

Therefore, Paul through this letter to the church at Rome encourages believers today to live from hope and not live for hope. To live from hope is to thrive knowing that what the Creator did in the past can be subject to an encore in the present and future. To live from hope is to rest in whatever the current conditions may be because past deliverance is subject to duplication here and now. To live from hope simply says, If God did it then, God surely can do it again and again and again. To live from hope is bifocal living—it is seeing near and far, here and there, then and now.

We can boast. We can brag. We can hold our head up high. It is not that we have done anything. It is not because we have saved ourselves. It is not because we have given ourselves access to grace. Neither is it because we are the source of our own peace. We hold our head up high because when we were not strong, when we were on enemy territory, when we missed the mark, God sent Jesus to die for us. In that state of triangulated, hot messiness, God raised Jesus from the dead for us. We hope because of this. We hope from this.

Therefore, our stewardship—what we do with what has been given to us—comes from hope. It has its roots in hope. Our being careful with what the Creator has entrusted to us emanates from this hope. We hold our heads up high to seek power and the Holy Spirit of the One who dares to make us guardians of so much. Therefore, hold on to your hope.

April 26, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, What Shall I Return to the Lord

Theme: Loving

The name of this collection of prayers—Psalms—comes from the Septuagint’s (LXX) Greek title, *psalmoi*, suggesting songs sung with musical instruments for accompaniment. In the Hebrew Bible, the title is *tehillim*, meaning *praises*. The concept that all prayer was a way of praising God is key to understanding the Psalms. Even angry laments are a means of praising the Divine. The Psalter is often referred to as the hymnbook of the second temple, reflecting the belief that the book of Psalms got its final shape in the period of rebuilding the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel (circa 520-515 BCE). However, we are basically ignorant about the date of composition for most of these psalms (except maybe Ps 137, which could not have been written prior to the Babylonian exile, circa 586 BCE). It is possible that some were actually composed in the pre-exilic period of David and Solomon (10th century) or even earlier. In fact, some of these prayers are probably very ancient.

The Psalter is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible because it is the only one that contains nothing but prayers. While other books contain prayers, they are usually set within the context of a narrative. The Psalms is a collection of prayers that must stand on their own, without any supporting story. These prayers represent the entire gamut of human experience, from mountain tops to deep valleys and everything in between. The lack of historical data within the Psalms is part of the power in this collection; they are timeless in speaking of human emotions—both joy and sadness—along with a healthy dose of anger and frustration. We see examples of psalms being reused in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, as in the parallel between 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18.

The Psalms describe Israel’s belief that one should pray with one’s whole self. The faithful must be open to the Holy in their prayers, realizing that every experience is an opportunity to experience the Divine. In the psalms, one seeks to bring one’s heart into congruence with the Divine will. Prayer is not about learning to say the right words nor to use the right name for the Holy; it is not to give an accurate definition of the Divine nature. Rather, prayer is about finding a person’s orientation to the Divine, about finding God in conversation and in all of life’s experiences. Prayer is about remembering one’s past, naming one’s struggles and joys, listening to one’s heart, and voicing one’s heart to the Holy. In the Psalms, we see Israel praying in communal and official settings, as well as in private and less formal ones. There is not a particular time that is appropriate for prayer or worship of God. Every moment could be an opportunity for prayer; one’s life might be lived as a prayer. To worship is to serve God. Thus, living in service to God is worshipping God with one’s whole life.

One of the most well-known and longstanding approaches to studying the book of Psalms is through the exegetical method of Form Criticism. Herman Gunkel is known as the founder of this methodology which seeks to identify oral forms behind the written biblical texts. Gunkel believed that form was an intentional choice by ancient storytellers/singers/authors in order to provide an added impact to their message. These forms or structures would be fairly common within the ancient context and would have been recognizable by the audiences that first heard the words. Gunkel applied this new lens to the study of the 150 psalms, and he identified a variety of Psalm Types that occurred throughout the collection, even outside of the Psalter. The three primary categories that he identified were Praise, Lament, and Thanksgiving. Within these broad categories, he then distinguished five types: Hymns, Community Laments, Individual Laments, Psalms of Thanksgiving, and Royal Psalms. In addition to these major types, Gunkel identified seven minor types: Pilgrimage Songs, Community Psalms of Thanksgiving, Wisdom Psalms, General Liturgies, Prophetic Liturgies, “Torah” Liturgies, & Mixed Types. From Gunkel’s beginnings, other scholars have adapted, expanded, and reinvented his five types. The Lectionary has selected only the beginning and ending of Psalm 116 for this week’s lesson and by doing so has omitted the very heart of this prayer. This commentary will reflect on the entirety of Psalm 116, which is a classic example of a Hymn of Thanksgiving. This type of psalm contains the responses of the psalmist to an experience of God’s salvation. Some scholars believe that a hymn of thanksgiving like Psalm 116 may have been preceded by a lament. This earlier prayer would have cried out to God in hopes of being healed or saved. An important part of a lament is a promise made by the one praying that, if God answers the person’s prayer, they will sing God’s praises to all who will listen. The 19 verses of Psalm 116 may be the fulfillment of that promise.

While in the Masoretic text (the basis for most English translations of the Hebrew Bible -- MT) renders this psalm as 116, the Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible -- LXX) actually lists it as two separate psalms: Psalm 114 (Ps 116:1-9) and Psalm 115 (Ps 116:10-19). This is not the only place in the Psalter that the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts differ in how these prayers should be numbered. The Septuagint combines Psalms 9 and 10 to create Psalm 9, and it combines Psalms 114 and 115 as Psalm 113. Then, the LXX divides Psalm 147 in the MT into Psalm 146 and Psalm 147. Thus, in the LXX all psalms from 10-147 are one number lower than their MT counterparts. The Vulgate used the LXX numbering, thus it was in use for Catholic Bibles. Jewish and Protestant Bibles used the MT numbering.

Psalm 116 is also found among the Egyptian Hallel Psalms, which include Psalms 113-118. These are the psalms that are read during the eighth night of Passover. The first two in the grouping, Psalms 113 and 114, are traditionally read before the meal, and the last four are read after the meal is finished. The word *hallel* has the basic meaning of *praise* in Hebrew. These psalms are recited as praises for the way the Divine rescued their ancestors from bondage in Egypt and as a proclamation that the Holy still desires that all people be free from any form of oppression found today.

The prayer opens with a declaration of the psalmist's love and trust in the Lord (vv 1-2), both of which are grounded in an experience of being heard by the Holy. During a near-death experience (vv 3-4 & 8-11), the psalmist "called on the name of the LORD" (v 4) and was "delivered" from whatever threatened the author's life. (v 8) Psalm 116, though, does more than just testify to this singular experience of being brought back from the "snares of death". (v 3a) The psalmist takes this opportunity to make bold claims about who God is (vv 5-7) and how humans should respond to the gracious acts of the Lord. (vv 12-19)

In verse 5, we find a simple but profound statement about the Divine: "Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful." These adjectives used to describe the Holy (e.g., gracious, righteous, and merciful) echo a credo found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps its most familiar form comes from the story in Exodus of Moses' request to see God. Although he did not get exactly what he wanted, Moses does have a "close encounter" with the Divine. While passing by the beleaguered prophet, the Lord declares these words: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Ex 34:6a) The Exodus text contains more descriptors about the Lord, (vv 6-7) but this is the heart of the credo. Similar statements are found in throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Nm 14:18; Ps 86:5 & 15; Jon 4:2, etc.) No matter what happened in their lives, the Israelites could trust that the Lord would behave in ways consistent with this description of the divine nature.

As the recipient of the Lord's bountiful grace and mercy, the psalmist is moved to show her/his gratitude and considers what might be an appropriate response (v 12). How does one say thank you to the Creator of the Universe? Israel's seemingly complicated system of offerings and sacrifices was created as a way for humans to reconnect with the Divine and the community. There were appropriate offerings for a variety of human experiences, both positive and negative. The psalmist names the traditional religious rituals of drink offerings, (v 13) paying "vows", (vv 14-18) and making a "thanksgiving sacrifice" (v 17) as means for acknowledging her/his utter dependence on God. Having experienced some form of healing, the psalmist would be following the instructions found in Leviticus 7:12 in response to the way God had bestowed grace upon her/him.

In addition, the psalmist promises twice to "call upon the name of the LORD". (vv 13b & 17b) It is difficult to determine exactly what is meant by this statement. It could be a reference to the liturgy that would accompany an offering or a sacrifice, or it may imply an attitude of trust in the LORD, expressed through prayer. Within the context of Psalm 116, the latter may be the most appropriate explanation. After all, it was the experience of God's response to the psalmist's call for help that initiated this hymn of thanksgiving.

What is perhaps more important is the focus on calling up the name of the Holy. The culture of the Ancient Near East during the time periods reflected in the Hebrew Bible, communication was primarily oral. Without written symbols/letters, an oral culture understands the spoken word to have inherent power. Just as the Divine spoke creation into being in the first creation myth, humans' words also had the power to create reality. Within this context, the concept of having someone's name was very important. Knowing a person's name implied a power of the speaker, and this power was multiplied when one considers knowing the name of a god/God. Speaking the Divine name was understood to have the ability to call the Deity into a present situation and thus should not be used lightly (see the third commandment, Ex 20:7). When Moses asked to know the name of the Holy who had commissioned him to be a prophet of liberation, the Divine responds with a riddle, from which tradition claims that the Holy name of the Israel's God was taken: YHWH (translated as "LORD"). Jewish respect for the power in this sacred name caused them to declare it to be unpronounceable. Perhaps the psalmist here is indicating that calling out to the Holy had power to breathe new life into what is described as a hopeless existence.

One of the theological nuggets that Psalm 116 offers us is this idea of being heard by God. Those who have some familiarity with the Hebrew Bible know that God's hearing the cries of those in need is a common theme throughout the religious testimonies of the community that gave us these sacred texts. After Hagar had run away from Sarah's abuse, she stops in the wilderness too exhausted to move forward. When the messenger of the Holy finds her there and offers her a divine covenant, she names the place "God sees" and decides to name her unborn child, "God hears"—Ishmael (Gn 16:7-15). When Hagar and Ishmael are sent away by Abraham, God heard the cries of the boy, Ishmael, and provided a means to a new life for him and his mother (Gn 21:17). The formative story of God's bringing the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt is rooted in this divine act of hearing. Under the growing oppression of the Pharaoh, the people cried out, and "God heard their groaning" (Ex 2:24) and was moved to action. Throughout the Psalter, we hear repeated cries for the Divine to "hear" or "listen" to the voice of the one praying (e.g., 17:1; 27:7; 61:1; etc.), along with claims that God has heard/hears the cries of humanity (e.g., Ps 18:6; 40:1; 66:19; 102:20; etc.). Our God is not a passive and unengaged deity.

While we expect to read in the Bible about miraculous experiences that come from God's hearing those who call upon the name of the Lord, our post-modern, rational twenty-first century minds interpret events differently than our biblical ancestors. If one believes that God does not intervene in human history in the ways described in the Bible, is it possible to speak of being "heard" by God? Have you had the experience of being "heard" by God? What was that like? How did you know that you had been "heard"? Perhaps being "heard" by the Holy comes through other people or through finding a sense of calm in moments of angst. The Psalms teach us that prayer does affect change, and the majority of time the change happens within the one offering the prayer.

It is the psalmist's confidence in being heard by the Holy that moves her/him to generosity and praise. Our faith ancestors proclaimed a God who not only hears the cries of humanity but also sees the things that prevent us from being who the Holy created us to be, and works with us to make a difference. If we also believe in a deity who is not only present with us in times of struggle but also wills for us to be whole again, then how do we respond? Our call is to be agents of change and creators of wholeness. We can do this by the causes we support with our money, time, and talents. If we profess to be on the side of justice and compassion, then we need to put our gifts where our mouths are. We can make a difference, and the surprising result is that we feel richer because of the good works we do. This is what it means to be created in the Divine image.

May 3, 2020

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47, They Held All Things In Common

Theme: Loving

When I was a child, I learned a song in music class at my elementary school. The words are: The more we get together, together, together. The more we get together, the happier we'll be. For your friends are my friends, and my friends are your friends. The more we get together, the happier we'll be.

Acts 2 begins, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." (Acts 2.1) It is Pentecost. It is the fiftieth day after Passover. This marks the commemoration of the delivering, redeeming blood of the lamb on the doors of enslaved Israelites. Pentecost is a harvest and wheat celebration. This Day of the 50th also recalls the moment Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai. The cultural triad of this day centers on covenant importance, historical significance, and agricultural weight.

It is in this *Sitz im Leben*—*setting in life*—that the Holy Spirit comes. Jews from around the world are in Jerusalem. They come with Moses on their mind, honoring the harvest of the Lord's provision and thinking of the blood that saved the bodies of their ancestors. They are together.

In this ripe, rich watershed moment, the Holy Spirit in Acts shows up. The witnesses are together. The Holy Spirit or in Greek *pneuma tau agion*--πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον--ignites and burns on and in everyone—together.

The Holy Spirit enters full force and with force. Tongues of fire cleanse speech and prepare the act of witness. Rushing winds denote urgency and ubiquity. There is the visible, yet inexplicable. It rests on, resides in, and wrestles with over 120 in that room one morning in Jerusalem. What the visual senses witness, the mental faculties cannot expound. Such spiritual gravitas is beyond measure. This is Luke's presentation of the Holy Spirit in Acts. And those who witness it are together.

Verse 44 revisits this concept of community and togetherness: "All who believed were together and had all things in common." (Acts 2:44) Unlike verse two, there is a descriptive qualifying this togetherness. The communal relating is tied to belief. Whereas chapter two suggests that initial fellowship is wedded to geography—they were in one place—the later understanding emanates from theology. Togetherness moves from shared positionality to shared purpose as discovered in shared belief. This shift in togetherness becomes the grounding for stewardship.

Because being together does not simply refer to being one place, but means engaging in similar practices of faith, the believers in Acts teach stewardship. They exhibit what it means not just to care for things, objects or items. Togetherness as a root of stewardship becomes the foundation for demonstrating care of humankind. "They would sell their possessions and goods

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and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts..." (Acts 2:45-46)

Being together and worshiping together compelled the believers to take care of one another. The more they were together, the more they provided for one another. In almost utopian-esque praxis, the biblical text maintains that people did so gladly and with much beneficence. This seeing to and seeing about one another did not occur in a vacuum but had its etiology in presence. The more they were together, the more they broke bread, and the more they made sure everyone had bread.

Acts 2 teaches that stewardship includes not only the care of resources, material ware, and that which is inanimate. Stewardship, yes, means ensuring the preservation of land, sea, earth and sky. This passage reminds us that stewardship is loving each other enough to be in communion with each other. It is to be with persons in prison, siblings at the borders, women making heart-wrenching reproductive decisions and Black boys who just want to be boys. To be really together is to lift a clarion call on behalf of all children who want to go to school and learn and to walk alongside anyone who just wants to be what the Creator has called them to be. To love is to be a good steward. To be a good steward is to stand with, stand for, stand beside, and just be with people wherever they are.

Not only does Acts 2 provide a clinic on the power of presence as stewardship. This word informs our understanding of stewardship as provision. It is loving each other enough to make sure that we all have enough. After worship, the people ate. From the temple, they went to each other's tables. Leaving their sacred gatherings, they gathered around a meal. They did so gladly and with generosity. As the song "Leaning On The Everlasting Arms" says, "What a fellowship, what a joy divine!"

It is not enough to leave our services and drive to the suburbs for a big Sunday dinner. When the homeless eat from garbage cans, when people do not have a roof over their heads, when school becomes a place of a guaranteed meal, when anyone in this world goes hungry, our praise and worship are not enough. Our praise ought to push us to action. Our worship must coerce us to work for justice, to walk for truth, and to march for righteousness.

"Your friends are my friends, and my friends are your friends." The power of the Holy Spirit convicts me to say, "Your pain is my pain, and my pain is your pain. Your hurt is my hurt, and my hurt is your hurt. Your well-being is my well-being, and my well-being is your well-being." In a world that prides itself on individual achievement, personal accomplishment, and pulling one's self up by one's own bootstraps (if you have boots), Acts 2 beckons us to see the power of being together. An African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to far, take someone with you."

June 7, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 4a, And God Proclaimed It All Very Good

Theme: Loving

Before diving into Genesis, it is important to put the book in its canonical context of the Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The word *torah* is often misunderstood to mean “law,” but that is only a partial understanding of what the Torah contains. A more accurate rendering in English would be “teaching or instruction.” The root of the word is the Hebrew word that means to “aim at” as in a target, so one way of understanding Torah is that these are stories and teachings about how humanity “aims” to be in right relationship with the Holy and with all of creation.

The Torah is basically a narrative that moves from the creation of the world to the creation of Israel as a free people to the edge of the Promised Land. Within the narrative, there are some decisive events: the flood; call of Abraham/Sarah; changing of Jacob’s name to Israel; call of Moses, Miriam & Aaron; Exodus; the establishment of the covenant between Israel and YHWH. It begins with a broad view of the relationship between God and all humanity. Then, it focuses in upon a relationship between God and the family of Sarah and Abraham. Again, it broadens its view, as the family grows into a whole people, who are called to be a blessing for the world. The Torah is Ancient Israel’s distinctive record of their understandings of, and experiences with, the God of Creation and of their ancestors. God did not write the words nor did God have final editorial rights; but the text often reflects the Divine presence in the midst of human words, bound by culture and ideologies.

Genesis stands at the beginning of the Torah and of the whole Bible because it is a book about beginnings—from creation of the world to creation of a people. From the chaotic waters of Genesis 1:1 to the flood in Genesis 6-9 to confused languages connected to the Tower of Babylon of Genesis 11, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are best understood as primeval stories that lay the foundation for the rest of the book and of the whole Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1-11 is a document of faith, not a scientific textbook; a book of morality, not cosmology. The primary concern is humanity’s relationship with God, with one another, and with creation. The chapters seek to speak of truths about life rather than facts. They express the fundamental premise of the Israelites: the entire universe is the purposeful creation of one God. The Divine is transcendent, beyond nature, seeking relationship with humanity, and sovereign over all.

The final compilation of the book of Genesis probably took place during the Exile (6th century BCE), but many of the stories contained in the book are much older. Although tradition has held that Moses wrote Genesis, along with Exodus-Deuteronomy, the text does not state this information. In fact, most scholars think that the materials found in Genesis (and the entire Torah) come from a variety of sources that have been edited together to tell the story of how the people of Israel came to be in covenant relationship with God.

Julius Wellhausen developed the “Documentary Hypothesis” of the Torah. Wellhausen built on the ideas of previous biblical interpreters, who challenged the idea that Moses wrote the Torah, and identified what he believed to be four written sources that existed independently and were woven together into the materials in Genesis-Deuteronomy. They were labeled J, E, P, and D. “J” was the “Yahwist” author, using the name YHWH (pronounced ‘adonai and translated “LORD”) for the Divine. The name, “J”, is the result of the German Christian vocalization of the Divine name. “J” was the consummate storyteller, describing the Divine in human terms, portraying humans as having strengths and weaknesses. “E” was the author who used the generic name for God, “Elohim.” For the Elohist, God is omnipresent, omnipotent, and in control. People are not as flawed as in J. Wellhausen believed that both “J” & “E” lived before the Assyrian conquest of Israel (c 722/21 BCE). “J” was composed in Judah (848-722) and “E” in Israel (922-722). “J” and “E” were later combined into one text.

“P” was the Priestly writer, who was concerned with the cult, the Tabernacle, sacrifices, and Levitical duties. “P” was also a genealogist. Wellhausen argued that “P” was probably an Aaronic priest, living sometime between 722 and 609, perhaps during the reign of Hezekiah. “D” was the Deuteronomist, who Wellhausen proposed was living and writing during the time of Josiah. The “D” source believed in an act/consequence view of human behavior. There was also a recognition that someone had to edit these sources together, so the term, “Redactor”, was used for the material that seemed to function as an editorial addition. Although no longer adhered to with great zeal, Julius Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis is still a good way to understand the repetitions and contradictions present in the Torah.

Genesis begins with two creation stories or myths, each offering a different account of how the world came into existence. A myth is often seen as being fiction which is not a reliable source, while a history is non-fiction and considered factual and true. History does use facts, but we must always ask, Who chose which facts to include? Whereas with myth, we know that facts are not of concern, but Truth is. Myths are used by humans to describe the unexplainable. They tell stories that deal with the primary questions that humans have asked for generations. The most profound questions give rise to creation myths: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where does the world come from? Why are we here? Why do we die? Almost all cultures have myths about how it all began. While the geography, theology, and languages are vastly different, the majority of all creation myths share similarities of trying to answer these “why” questions. It should come as no surprise, then, that Israel also had creation myths. What is somewhat surprising is that the final compilers of Genesis decided to include two very different, perhaps even contradictory, creation stories. While the differences between the two can be explained by Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis, that does not provide an explanation for why the editors did not choose to include just one myth. It may be that our faith ancestors were wise enough to put the two myths side by side as a statement that these stories are not meant to be taken literally and to prevent any claim of having the absolute truth.

Genesis 1:1-2:4a is thought to show a priestly influence, due to its orderly structure and concern for details about each thing that is created, along with repetition of key words. The rhythm of these verses suggests that they may have functioned as a liturgical piece in the temple or even during the Babylonian exile, as a reminder that God is ultimately in control of the chaos of life. After each day of creation, the repetition of “there was evening & there was morning the (--) day” provides a wonderful response and makes it easy to hear the words recited as part of a litany. Speech requires exhaling. In this story of creation, the Holy literally breathes everything into existence. That breath of God that we find in verse 2 is imbued into all that is.

There is so much to unpack in this creation myth that not every important element can be addressed here, and it is hard to know where to start. Perhaps it would be best to begin with the first word of the selection, and the first word of the whole canon. Though the most known and traditional rendering of this first word in English is “In the beginning . . .”, this is actually a wrong translation. This opening Hebrew word is *be’reshith*. It is actually two words: a preposition (*be’*) and a noun (*reshith*). In Hebrew, prepositions have a variety of meanings that are often reliant on context. This particular preposition has a range of meanings; including “in, at, with, by.” The noun comes from the Hebrew root that means “first, beginning” and is also related to the word for “head.” When learning biblical Hebrew, one of the first things taught is how to recognize if a noun has a definite article (“the”) attached to it, whether at the beginning of the word or within the preposition attached to the noun.

Returning to our opening word, *be’reshith*, there is no definite article included in the preposition; therefore, the usual translation as “in **the** beginning” is incorrect. There are other possibilities for how to render this compound phrase: “at first,” “when beginning,” “when first,” etc. While this may be seen as a minor textual issue, it is actually a very important indication of how we should read Genesis 1:1-2:4a. Removing the definite article in our translations also removes the temptation to put a specific date on when God began to create. It may be that this word *be’reshith* was a storyteller’s word that indicated what followed was a story and not history, much like our “Once upon a time.”

Another important aspect of the text to notice is what is present when God began to create. Despite the Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo* and its influence, that is not an accurate description for the opening of this creation myth. The text states that the “breath” of God hovered over the waters. It is important to understand that the word *ru’ach*, which is often translated as “spirit” in English Bibles is much better rendered as “breath.” The Israelites did not see the Divine Spirit to be separate from God. Also, the image of this breath hovering over the waters calls to mind the way a mother bird hovers over a nest, when it is filled with her offspring. This is how God hovered over the “nest” of what was to be.

The text also states that the earth was *tohu va'bohu*, which can be translated as “without form and void.” This story begins with a watery chaos; stuff is there but not anything recognizable. It is out of this mess that the Holy calls forth creation, beginning with light and culminating in humanity. God creates by speech, “let there be . . .,” and whatever is spoken becomes a reality. Scattered throughout the “days” of creation are declarations by the Divine that what comes into existence is good, with a final declaration that the Holy looks at the whole of creation and declares it “very good.”

The place of humanity within this created order is somewhat unique, yet also not that different from the stuff of the cosmos. On this sixth day of creation, the Holy says, “Let us make humanity in our image.” The use of plural pronouns has caused many to ponder how that relates to Israel’s monotheism. There are a few suggested explanations: reflection of a time when Israel was polytheistic; balancing of the Hebrew because God, *‘elohim*, is actually a plural noun; a reference to the Divine council (found also in Job & the Psalms); or an invitation by the Divine to all of creation as participants in the creative act. The one interpretation of the plural pronouns that is not possible is that this is some reference to the Trinity. Israel would have never imagined the deity is this way; it is a Greek concept that is not consistent with early Hebrew theology.

The text then claims that God creates male and female in the Divine image at the same time. There is no hierarchy between the sexes. Both are created in the image of God and are to be reflections of the Holy in creation equally. Indicating the unique status of humans is the added responsibilities given to them that are not given to rest of creation. In addition to being told to fill the earth and to eat of any tree/plant, the Creator tells the humans that they are to “have dominion over” (as translated by the NRSV) over the created order. For millennia, humans have taken this verse to mean that we can use and abuse creation as we see fit. However, given the context of this command, such hubris is not the implication. Rather, a better way of translating the verses is “have responsibility over” creation. Even if one were to keep the understanding of ruling, the important aspect to remember is that humans are made in the divine image, so they are expected to “rule” like God. This means not recklessly abusing these subjects but rather to understand that we are responsible for the well-being of all creation.

Thus, humanity is made stewards of all that God has created. We are also expected to continue the creative partnership with the Holy in bringing into reality a healthy and whole creation. This requires that we continually are mindful of our actions and their impact on the rest of creation. We must think about more than just today, or even our lifetime; we must be mindful of how we will leave creation for future generations. Supporting the environment can be demonstrated through giving our talents, money, and time toward efforts that have the best interest of all at heart. This can seem like a tireless job, but the Holy does not expect exhaustion on our part. The very close of the first creation myth is the description of how the Holy took time to rest from the work of creation, and we are also to take a sabbath from our labors. This

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time of rest allows us to reconnect with the Divine and remind us of how we are to be images of God in creation. Such times of rest will restore our energy and feed our creativity to continue the ongoing work of caring for creation.

July 26, 2020

Scripture: Romans 8:26-29, Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of God

Theme: Hopeful

It had happened again. There was another mass shooting in a house of worship. Just when the world had tried to catch its breath from the killing of nine at prayer in Charleston, the slaughter of almost sixty at the Pulse Night Club, the human targeting of concert-goers in Las Vegas, the lives lost while worshipping at the Tree of Life Synagogue, here we were again. A gunman opened fire in Mosque at Christchurch, yes, Christchurch, New Zealand. The demise of our Muslim siblings was recorded on Facebook.

Like our previous response to similar horrific acts, my colleagues at Chicago Theological Seminary held another service of remembrance. Once again candles adorned the chapel, programs lined the seats, and an inexplicable yet palpable grief filled the air. Here we were again.

I was asked to participate in the service, and admit I did so reluctantly. I had no words. I did not want to hear my own voice or any voices. I pined to grieve in silence. However, I realize that this is the enemy's tactic. Isolate yourself. Go inward so you do not have to face, protest, or act against the hate and vitriol.

I did not know what to say. So, I read from the Bible. I offered selections from Romans 8. I began with "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (v.26) I made sure to skip over "all things work together for good" (v.28) and "we are killed and...slaughtered." (v.36) I avoided these verses, not to disrespect the biblical text, but out of respect for the heinous loss of life—again. I found assurance as I hope the attendees did in "nothing shall separate us from the love of God." (v.39) This was my prayer offering at a time when I did not know what to say and when eloquence in prayer failed me.

As a scholar of womanist maternal thought, I am intrigued at Paul's utilization of birthing and maternal language: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (8:22) Counter to previous epistles, here Paul does not couch himself as "mother" nor are the members at Rome his children. Creation in its entirety is the mother. The apostle is numbered among the siblings where Jesus is the "firstborn in the family." (8:29) As this is the one congregation Paul did not establish, he is more cautious and care-filled. His maternal wording wedded to the world reflects this care.

The semantics and syntax within Pauline epistolography shine on the Roman understanding of maternal role and obligation. Paul was an existential product of his imperialistic environment, an environment in which family values were paramount. Paul was a Jew living under Roman imperialism.

The language Paul ascribes to his recipients of the church at Rome becomes a way of endearing himself to them. Both the members and Paul are navigating a new way of believing and praxis. Employing maternal lexicon is one way of demonstrating the depth, challenges, and joys of the endeavor.

It is through a motherly lens that Paul writes as a parent providing comfort to a traumatized child. Whatever the daughter is suffering will not compare to the glory in the end. (v 18) While the son experiences difficulty, the Holy Spirit is interceding and working on his behalf. (v 26) Ultimately no matter how hard it gets for the children, they will still dwell in the unconditional, unfailing love of the Lord. (v 39) Again these references comb through the loins of creation at large and not Paul specifically. He just borrows the analogy to show compassion.

This is what parents do. Mom and Dad give their children handles to hold on to when life seems to be slipping away. These handles are rooted in hope. This is a hope lift. First, it is hope because the Spirit intercedes. (v 27) We do not have to speak for ourselves alone. There is someone making the case for us. There is someone who mediates when we are speechless. We do not have to stand in the gap solo. The Spirit negotiates on our behalf.

Romans helps the reader to see that this is also hope because God intervenes. (v 33) God makes it right. The Divine justifies. Raising Jesus Christ from the claws of the tomb and the reins of the grave, the Creator paid the guilty price to free humankind. Intervention is not rooted in what the government will do. It is not predicated on political action. It is God who comes through and comes to our rescue. It is God who stands between our Pharaoh and Red Sea. It is God who is our fortress, our bulwark, and our buttress. We have hope because we have coverage when the storms of life wreak havoc. God intervenes for us as we are limited in what we can do for ourselves.

Lastly this passage points to hope in that we can encourage ourselves. (vv 37-38) While the Spirit intercedes and speaks for us and as God intervenes and moves in-between for us, we are able to encourage ourselves. We are conquerors. No, we are more than conquerors. Hope says we talk to ourselves even when circumstances want to silence us. Hope says we practice internal communication when the external forces bear down on us. It is from hope that we inspire our person when no one else is available or willing to do so. I must convince me that things will get better. You must convince you that trouble won't last always.

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This is stewardship of self. The Spirit intercedes for me. God intervenes for me. I must inspire and encourage me. The Spirit speaks for you. God shows up for you. You must say something affirmative to yourself. Stewardship of gifts, talents—and yes, our person—is a mandate. The song says, “I say to my soul take courage. The Lord will make a way somehow.”¹

It happened again—another mass shooting. I wanted to say nothing. I longed for silence. Yet, I shared with myself and with those attending the worship service these three things: The Spirit intercedes. God intervenes. We must encourage each other to dwell in God’s love.

¹ “The Lord will make a way somehow” by Hezekiah Walker

August 30, 2020

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21, Rejoice in Hope

Theme: Hopeful

I have always loved Romans 12. It is my call to ministry text. I remember so vividly sitting in Metropolitan Baptist Church (Washington, D.C.) as a senior at Howard University. During worship it hit. The voice. The beckoning. The uneasiness. The call. The sermon text that day was Romans 12:1-2: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.² And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (KJV)

The words that halted me nearing the end of my college days and that continue to pursue me now are "not conformed, but transformed." After his excursus on the salvation of Israel (chapter 11), and before his punting to government authority (chapter 13), Paul pauses to talk about what it means to live in this world and yet not live of the world. Conformation acknowledges that there are practices, standards, and ideas emanating from and reflective of this world. Transformation asseverates the significance of recontextualizing and redirecting what the world offers and models. In the case of this Biblical text such transformation advances and moves beyond worldly presentation for the sake divine reconciliation and social responsibility.

Thus, before outlining the qualities of Christian living and practice in verses 9-21, Paul establishes a context for doing so. The believer must understand that any descriptives or directives have an etiology in "shaping across," "moving beyond" what the world offers. At the root of the word transformation is *metamorphosis*. This means to take what is present and through cyclical production render something new. It is to nuance what is given in order that a novel creation comes into existence.

As Paul is writing to a congregation he did not establish, he does not push throwing out the baby with the bath water. Because he is wooing a people who have questions about his personal background and his theological grounding, the apostle has no desire to ruffle feathers or make any incendiary claims. Therefore, he offers an imperative not to conform. He does not discount current context and setting. Yet, he gives a command to transform. The world is to be made anew using its right here and now cosmological ingredients.

After establishing the milieu for transformation, Paul then provides the praxis for doing so. He gives ways in which believers can spiritually alter this world. In what reads like a parental list of do's and don'ts to children, the writer posits the marks of making the world better through better engagement with people (12.9-21):

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- Let love
- Do not lag
- Rejoice in hope
- Extend hospitality
- Bless; do not curse
- Live in harmony; do not be haughty
- Do not repay
- Never avenge
- Feed
- Give drink
- Do not be overcome, but overcome

It is not coincidental the list begins with love, or in the Greek ἀγάπη, agapē. This is the love beyond human comprehension, but the love that must be the core of human interaction. The life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ hinge upon this unconditional and sometimes unrequited love. Transformation is rooted in and grows out of this love. In order to move beyond the world's norms and move across the world's standards, a love whose etiology is other-worldly should be enacted. We cannot love like the world and expect to change the world. Therefore in listing marks and characteristics for transformation, Paul begins by stating we must transform how we love.

Not only does transformation cause us to rethink how we love, it conscripts to reconsider who we love. We are to “live in harmony with one another...associate with the lowly.” (v 16) Conforming to the world is wanting to be at the head table and waiting to be served. Transformation says let me sit next to the least, last, and left out. Transformation says let me dwell with the prisoners, those at the border, sex workers, and all who do not love like I love. We are to engage our enemies and help meet their needs. No, this is not how the world loves. This, my friends, is how God loves. We feed those we want to see starve to death. (v 20) (I'm just sayin'.) We are to slake the thirst of anyone we really wish would just choke to death. (v 20) Transformations mandate that we ponder who our enemies really are. No, we dare not forget why they hold enemy status. However, to make this world over, to make ourselves anew, we must let Divine love do its work and work out the mess between me and my foe. It is easy to contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality, (v 13) for the most part. Enemy niceness, inimical love is a different matter altogether. Let agape handle it.

Romans 12 does not offer a unicorn-esque view of transformation as stewardship. Before we can care for people and their existential reality, we must examine the world and who we are in this world. The product of such examination ought to be a desire to enhance and improve our personal state so that how we live in this world and how we perceive this world changes. This is transformation. We are not the same. We no longer see the same. We no longer act the same.

In this light, stewardship makes room for such change. Stewardship allows growth and provides space for iterations and organic processes.

Yet, because Paul was not a religious idealist, Romans 12—as do other parts of the epistle—contend that stewardship as transformation is not facile. We will go through the way of suffering. Difficulty will knock on our door. Hardship will hit us in the face. On the contrary, patience is coupled with suffering. (v. 12) A companion of difficulty is endurance. Prayer and hope walk alongside hardship. Paul helps us to see that transformation is not easy, no pie in the sky. It is feet on ground and in the mud and dung.

Still, through God’s love we have hope, and we hope. We hold to this possibility while we also work for possibility. We possess hope while we push ourselves toward what could be. Transformation as stewardship is our not being comfortable with what we see. We journey toward what is invisible. Transformation as stewardship is not complacency with the world’s current offering. We march for justice. We protest with our feet and with our prayers. We hope with our actions against anything that is inhumane and non-life giving or life affirming.

I sat there in the church listening to the voice, nervous that the call to not do the usual, to not conform, had now come to me. Decades after obeying the call, I am still nervous, still listening. I have yet to tune out that which conscripts me to transformation.

September 22, 2020

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13, For God is at Work in You

Theme: Loving

They are fighting at Philippi. Two women, Euodia and Syntyche, are kicking up dust at in this congregation. (4:2) They have been companions of Paul and by his side on many occasions. Whereas they are good at working with Paul, apparently they have a hard time dealing with each other. This is nothing to do with their being women. Is it connected to leadership. Paul is away, and now who is in charge? Such a question is not wedded to sex or gender roles. This conundrum is one indicative of any church, any organization when there is no top at the top of the ladder.

One would think that perchance Paul is being sexist. He posits Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of what it means to be “like-minded.” (2.19-29) The latter has risked his life for Paul. He was so ill that he almost died and has not been able to return to the church at Philippi post his visit with Paul. Timothy, who has been like a son to Paul, is also worthy of commendation. The apostle longs to see him again.

There is much personality at Philippi. The aforementioned dyads of women and men point to this. Paul is imprisoned, and it is these various persons who in their own way are trying to keep the ball rolling. They are trying to be stewards of a congregation when the pastor, the founder is away. I have often wondered what it must be like to lose a pastor either through resignation or death. Paul’s letter to the church provides a window into such. People are needed to care for the daily operations, i.e., Euodias and Syntyches. Someone must keep the pastor informed if she or he is away and stay in touch with the associates (Timothy). Yes, an individual has to be responsible for going outside of the congregation and risking her or himself in order that the message may continue to go forth and the congregation may move forward (Epaphroditus). Keeping congregations together, maintaining unity is an all-hands-on-deck effort. It works if boundaries are honored and roles are acknowledged.

Holding an organization in transition together can be successful if people “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves...and look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” (2.3-4) Stewardship during a crisis in leadership is possible if those who remain operate from a stance of looking out for others first. Such caring for resources, people, and institutions is achievable if our gravitation is toward her, him, them, us, our, and not me, my, or I.

To make his point of generous living and not just generous listening, Paul interjects a hymn. (vv 6-11) Paul was not a song writer or at least there is no record of his giftedness in this area. Scholars maintain that the song included in this chapter was perchance a staple in his community, and this would have been a point of literary connection for persons hearing the letter read. We preachers do it all the time: include a gospel song, hymn or spiritual for theological emphasis or to close or celebrate in the sermon. This artistic inclusion elicits communal memory and collective participation in the homiletical process.

This hymn of *kenosis* or emptying is the bowl out of which Paul serves the meaning of organizational stewardship during leadership turmoil. This concept of stewardship is coalesced in people decentering themselves and leaning towards the care and well-being of others. In this light, the song begins with Christ Jesus. If anyone is a model for thinking of others, it is Jesus. The Bible says he put off his equality with God and became a servant, “δοῦλος.” Thus, those who follow him are called to do the same. Paul is not arguing for slavery, but pushing a positionality that honors dependence on and deference to others for the sake of the greater, common good.

This emptying by Jesus led him to a cross, public shame, and political humiliation: all for the sake of reconciliation. No, Paul is not suggesting a reenactment of what Jesus has also conquered. His point is that the giving of ourselves for each other ought to be so profound that we are willing to sacrifice our own interests and intents for the community. This “mind of Christ” (v 5) does not cater to what we always need and want, but it advances that which belongs to my sister, my brother, and my neighbor for the sake of the whole. One does not neglect personal wholeness; nevertheless, personal posturing is not the driving force.

The melody of this hymn rings of a low Jesus who becomes highly exalted. Actually Jesus becomes exalted again as the song notes he “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” (v 6) This high-low-high journey of Jesus is demonstrative as we consider what it means to guard that which God entrusts to us. Because what we have comes from God (high), to us (low), we give it back to the Creator (high). We do so in order that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (v 9)

Stewardship is not our getting the glory. It is the hope that what we do will point to the Source of all gifts. It is the hope that whatever God entrusts to us will reflect divine grace, love, and mercy. We sing, teach, preach, heal, prophesy, and serve because our mind is God-bent, heaven-bound, and does not cater to our own whims. We lead, organize, administer, and hold safe our sacred organizations and institutions because they are the Body of Christ. Stewardship of such bodies requires that we seek the health of the corporate because it is comprised of individuals who have gifts that must be stewarded and nurtured. Unless the body is whole, the parts tend to suffer and experience atrophy.

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Churches, congregations, organizations, and institutions could be great—if it were not for people. Or at least so I have heard. We are idiosyncratic, and our ways bleed into the places we serve. There is no need to point a shaming figure at Euodia and Syntyche. It is useless to lift Timothy and Epaphroditus over these women. Leading when the leader is absent is not an easy task. Yet, if we strive to be like-minded and not strong-willed, it can be done.

Then, perchance some of the fighting will cease.

October 11, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 36:1-7, More Than Enough

Theme: Faithful

Before diving into Exodus, it is important to put the book in its canonical context of the Torah, which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The word *torah* is often misunderstood to mean “law,” but that is only a partial understanding of what the Torah contains. A more accurate rendering in English would be “teaching or instruction.” The root of the word is the Hebrew word that means to “aim at” as in a target, so one way of understanding Torah is that these are stories and teachings about how humanity “aims” to be in right relationship with the Holy and with all of creation. Within Judaism, *torah* can be used to refer to at least two things: Torah as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and torah as instruction.

The Torah is basically a narrative that moves from the creation of the world to the creation of Israel as a free people to the edge of the Promised Land. Within the narrative, there are some decisive events: the flood, call of Abraham/Sarah, changing of Jacob’s name to Israel; call of Moses/Miriam and Aaron; Exodus; the establishment of the covenant between Israel and YHWH. It begins with a broad view of the relationship between God and all humanity. Then, it focuses in upon a relationship between God and the family of Sarah and Abraham. Again, it broadens its view, as the family grows into a whole people, who are called to be a blessing for the world. The Torah is ancient Israel’s distinctive record of their understandings of, and experiences with, the God of creation and of their ancestors. God did not write the words nor did God have final editorial rights; but the text often reflects the Divine presence in the midst of human words, bound by culture and ideologies.

Exodus, the second book of the Torah, recounts the story of how God’s people were rescued from bondage and led toward a new land, just as God had promised Sarah and Abraham. Exodus teaches us that the good fortunes of an insignificant mixed bunch of people stemmed from the gracious involvement of a powerful and merciful God who worked within history to bring them out of bondage and shape them into a group of covenant people. This is a story of the birth and formation of the covenant between God and people. God is with the people, sees their bondage, wills to deliver them, and offers a future hope. People are called to trust, hope, and believe the mystery that YHWH is a God “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Ex 34:6)

In order to bring about the liberation of these slaves, God called three liberators: Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. Through the actions of these three characters, the people would be led out of bondage and given the opportunity to be in a healthy relationship with the Holy. It is a story of how Israel and the Divine got to know one another, through the experience of the escape from Egypt until the official entering into the covenant with the Holy at Mt. Sinai. The people struggle to trust the One Holy God to keep covenant and to provide for them in the wilderness

of life. At the same time, the Divine has moments of doubt about whether the people are capable of keeping the covenant.

As part of the Torah (first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible), Exodus has been understood as a compilation of different strands of tradition by editors who were seeking to give Israel a sense of identity and to describe the relationship they had with the Holy. The final compilation of the book of Exodus probably took place during the Exile (sixth century BCE), but many of the stories contained in the book are much older. Exodus includes stories of: God's making a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai ("I will be your God and you will be my people"), the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites as they made their way to the Promised Land, and legal materials about how God expected Israel to live in covenant with God and with each other.

Exodus picks up where Genesis ended, a few generations after Joseph and his brothers moved to Egypt. Joseph had saved not only his family from a great famine but also the Egyptians. He gained a place of power and leadership; he was the Pharaoh's right-hand man. By the beginning of Exodus, however, things have changed. The new Pharaoh does not remember Joseph, and the descendants of Sarah and Abraham are now slaves, called "Hebrews" by the Egyptians. By this time, the Hebrews have become numerous. Gone are the days of barren women (e.g., Sarah, Rebekah, & Rachel). Now, they are reproducing like rabbits. Their impressive growth motivates the Pharaoh to seek ways to stop their increasing numbers: from the simplistic notion of working the slaves so hard that they would be too exhausted to do what was necessary to reproduce to a desperate grab for control whereby the Pharaoh ordered the killing of all Hebrew boys. This plan is thwarted by at least five women (i.e., Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Moses' sister, and the Pharaoh's daughter), and the hero of the story, Moses, survives to become a threat to Pharaoh.

While the story of the contest between Israel's God and the Pharaoh is an exciting part of Exodus, the beginnings of Israel's freedom is found after they safely cross the Sea of Reeds. With the hardships of slavery behind them and memories of how God had acted on their behalf, the people begin a pilgrimage toward an unknown future. The wandering in the wilderness was not easy going, and the people often wished for the relative safety of being slaves in Egypt over the anxiety of being on their own for the very first time. It is only through the leadership of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron that the people stay on the journey. The first order of business is for these freed slaves to make a decision of whether they wish to be in covenant relationship with the God who has worked in marvelous ways to secure their liberation. At Mt. Sinai, this covenant is offered first, along with ten commandments that will be the game rules for how Israel can live in right relationship with God, neighbor, and self. Once the people say yes to the covenant, the stakes are higher. Now, they know what is expected of them and can be held responsible for breaking the covenant. Perhaps the most difficult part of this experience is when, concerned by Moses not returning from the mountain, the people pressure Aaron to build them a visible sign of the deity, resulting in the golden calf.

While one might sympathize with the people's angst and desire for certainty, that is not how God sees their behavior. Both Moses and God are enraged by their actions, seeing them as examples of not only idolatry but also a lack of trust in the Holy. The Divine anger burns greatly, leading God to regret the extreme efforts it took to get the Israelites out of Egypt and to consider giving up on them. Only because of Moses' pleading for Divine compassion and forgiveness on behalf of the people, do they survive to see another day.

The relationship between Israel and God was never an easy one. But how many relationships ever are? Given that these stories are Israel's self-portrayal, it is amazing that they have not attempted to clean up the places where the people are shown to be very imperfect, actually very human. The compilers of the Hebrew Bible have painted a picture of a human community struggling to live in right relationship with God, with neighbor, and with self. Sometimes they succeeded, but more often, they failed. Even though they did not deserve God's mercy and steadfast love, God chose to grant them forgiveness over and over, while still holding them accountable for their sins.

Unfortunately, the bad behavior of the Israelites is often all that people remember from the stories in Exodus. This leads many to judge them as just awful examples of humanity; however this is neither a fair judgement nor an accurate one. There is one story that should be told more frequently because it shows the incredible faith and generosity of the Israelites in the wilderness. The problem is that this text does not occur in the Lectionary. The fact that the Lectionary includes the story of the golden calf (Ex 32) but not this story only perpetuates the picture of a rebellious people without showing the other side of the story. Nestled within the story of the construction of the tabernacle we find an example of how the Israelites showed almost too much generosity, if that's even possible.

First, we need to gain an understanding of the creation and function of the tabernacle. As the Israelites made their way through the wilderness, they were guided by the Divine in the form of a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night (Exod 13:21). These were visible reminders of God's presence with them and provided the assurance that there was a method to what seemed like Divine madness. As the journey progressed, and the people spent time in particular places, there arose a need for a more tangible reminder of the Holy and a somewhat official location for worship to take place. To meet this need, the Holy commanded Moses and the Israelites to create a movable shrine called the Tabernacle (*mishkan*). The root of this Hebrew word means "to dwell," and there is a sense within Exodus that the people are to understand the tabernacle as the dwelling place of the Holy. However, since Israel's God did not have a human form, there was no way for the Holy to live anywhere. The tabernacle was a particular place where the people could officially recognize the Divine presence, much like the temple functioned in Jerusalem. The tabernacle is also referred to as the Tent of Meeting in places within Exodus, thus emphasizing that this was not a permanent building.

The design of Tabernacle is described in very vivid details: heavy with gold, precious gems, and other valuable items. (Ex 25-27) Given that the story claims that construction takes place while the people are still wandering in the wilderness, they had to provide all of the material needed for its creation. Different members of the community utilized their talents of sewing and metal-working, among others, to create this sacred space that could be moved from place to place as they made their way to the Promised Land. In other words, it would take the whole people giving of their time, talents, and wealth to make this intricate Divine idea a reality.

After the instructions for the tabernacle and the confirmation of Aaron and his sons as priests, the actual construction begins. The people are instructed to bring their offerings for the Tabernacle as they were able. These gifts included: gold, bronze, silver, linen, dyed yarn, tanned animal hides, and various other materials. The offering invitation, though, is sprinkled with the language of “those who can shall bring.” At this point, we are wondering, How did a ragtag group of recently freed slaves living as nomads have all of these costly items? Obviously, this is not a concern for the storyteller, but in these chapters we might see clues to the actual socio-historical context being of a later, more established Israelite community.

Exodus 36 is in the midst of the construction project. Moses invites the artisans among the Israelites to contribute their abilities for their building of the tabernacle. All who were able responded to the call for labor. Moses then provides them with all the offerings the people had given for the tabernacle. However, it seems that the people just couldn't stop giving of their valuables to support the creation of a place for the presence of God to dwell. In fact, the artisans are overwhelmed by the gifts and eventually have to ask Moses to stop the people from giving anything more. The overabundance is a great sign of the people's generosity, but it also means that some of these items will not be utilized and could then be wasted. Moses gives an order to halt the offerings, and we are told that the people had to be restrained from giving. What an amazing idea! People so committed to the faith community and to God that they give so freely that they have to be told to stop. This image of the Israelites does not seem to align with the stories of their whiny and doubting behavior. Like all human communities, they had moments of doing great good, just as they had moments of doing great evil. This is the nature of being human, according to the Hebrew Bible. Contrary to traditional church doctrine, the Hebrew Bible has no claim of original sin. Rather, humans are understood to be created with the potential to be the true reflections of the Divine we are created to be. Yet, because we are created with free will, humans make choices in each circumstance to either work for good or for bad. While there are stories in Exodus that portray the latter, there are also stories like this one that show the former.

This text is a wonderful opportunity to consider our own stewardship. What if people responded to the calls for giving today in the same way that the Israelites did? While some might say that people do give generously for special offerings or to justice causes, too often people are not so excited to give for the more mundane daily needs of a church. Yet, this story

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shows that the offerings of the people were actually used for a kind of building maintenance. They gave of all they had until it was too much. Imagine if this were the case today! Unlike a wandering group of freed slaves, our faith communities could find a way to utilize the surplus of giving. Perhaps a lesson from this story is that people are not guilted into giving or expected to give 'til it hurts. Rather the call to offering is one of giving what you can (time, talent, or material goods), knowing that everyone's ability to give will be different, but every gift will be equally valuable. This is about a theology of abundance and a trust in the Holy to guide our actions for the common good.

November 22, 2020

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, I Myself Will Be the Shepherd of My Sheep

Theme: Faithful

In order to understand this text from Ezekiel, we need to have an appropriate way to envision the role of prophets in ancient Israel. Prophets, traditionally, have been understood as predicting events in the distant future. They are often equated with fortune tellers. However, this description is not an accurate way of understanding the role of biblical prophets. They were more concerned with the present than with the past. Their interest in what could happen was tied directly to what they thought needed to change in people's behavior.

So what did it mean to be a prophet? They were not predicting the future—they were speaking to a concrete historical context. They were often just pointing out the obvious: the enemy is headed our way, and we do not stand a chance of withstanding their onslaught. Prophets provided a faith-based understanding for what was occurring or what could occur. They provided a critique of society through a theological lens. A prophet is one who tells the people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. Sometimes this may be the same, but most of the time it isn't. Prophets were not providing a way of avoiding the impending doom. Rather, they understood that if the future unfurled as it seemed it would, and the people were unfaithful, it would seem as if God was punishing them.

The Hebrew Bible prophets were persons who felt deeply the suffering of oppressed people and the anger of God over sin and rebellion. They were frightened by people with power but were more afraid of what would happen to the people if they did not speak, so they proclaimed the message with audacity. Prophets reminded people of their past, so they would know what God expected and remember what God had done for them and their ancestors. Prophets were also intercessors, taking the concerns of Israel to God and at times even seeking a delay of judgment, imploring God's mercy for the people to give them more time. Prophets reminded the people of who they were, so they would know how to be and to act. They spoke words of comfort to people in pain.

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible are identified as "Major Prophets" (i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and "Minor Prophets" (or the book of the 12 – Hosea thru Malachi). This distinction does not reflect the importance of the each prophet but is a recognition that the three "Major Prophets" each have their own scroll; whereas the twelve "Minor Prophets" are all contained in one scroll. Further, these prophets of the Hebrew Bible can be divided into basically three groups: pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic. These labels reflect the socio-historical contexts of the texts themselves. Some prophets like Jeremiah spoke to both the time before the exile and the time of Babylonian displacement. Whereas pre-exilic prophets often seemed to be more focused on pointing out the ways that the people had broken their covenant with God, exilic prophets spoke to people who had lost everything. They reassured the people that God had not deserted them. They comforted them and offered them hope. Prophets assured the people of

God's presence with them in all times and places. They held out a vision of a renewed community that lived out God's desires.

The book of Ezekiel is one of the most bizarre texts of the entire Hebrew Bible. Within its pages are strange visions of wheels, dry bones, and strange animals, alongside peculiar prophetic behavior (e.g., shaving hair, lying on the left side for 390 days, etc.). Ezekiel is a book that celebrates God's mysterious nature. Ezekiel was among the first group of those deported to Babylon in 597 BCE, after Nebuchadnezzar's first siege on Judah. His prophetic career spans from 593-571 BCE. His father is identified as Buzi, a priest, so it is possible that Ezekiel was also a priest. Ezekiel's wife died during the siege on Jerusalem. While in Babylon, he first announced words of judgment and warning to the rebellious people still in Judah (Ez 4-24), but after Jerusalem fell, his words became assurances of God's presence still being among the exiles. (Ez 25-39)

The Lectionary selection (Ez 34:11-16, 24-27) is found in this latter section of Ezekiel, in which the prophet speaks oracles against the foreign nations who had been the enemies of Israel, and offers words of future restoration to the exiles. One of the concerns in Babylon was that God was not present among the people. Not being in the holy city of Jerusalem and with the temple destroyed, the exiles felt that God had abandoned them. In this week's text, the prophet addresses these fears by using an image common to an ancient agrarian culture as a way of helping the people to have hope and know that God would not leave them in exile.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we find references to shepherds and the care that these pastoralists gave to their flock. From Abel (the first tender of flocks), to Rachel and Zipporah (both of whom were tending their fathers' flocks), to Moses and David (both of whom received a call from God while watching sheep), the image of a shepherd was common for the people who created and maintained the stories of ancient Israel. It even became one way of speaking of God, as we see in the beloved Psalm 23.

Ezekiel continues this metaphor in his prophecy in chapter 34. Thanks to the Babylonian practice of forced migrations, the Israelites had been scattered like sheep in a large field, and they had wandered into desolate places. The prophet portrays God as a good shepherd who will seek out the lost sheep and bring them safely back into the Divine's fold. (vv 11-13a) Then the Shepherd will lead the sheep into their own pasture, where they will be safe and have plenty to eat (vv 13b-14) and a place to "lie down". (v 15) If there are any among the flock who have been injured during the time of their scattering, the Shepherd will tend to their wounds and nurse them back to health. (v 16a) These images do call to mind those of Psalm 23, but here the background of exile means that Ezekiel is sharing with the exiles a promise of God liberating them from a new place of oppression: the Babylonian exile. Those who claim the covenant that God made with their ancestors once again will inhabit the Promised Land and know God's protective care.

One intriguing metaphor used in verse 16, where the Holy promises to “feed (the new flock) with “justice”. While the previously-mentioned pastures and good grazing land are certainly expected for the agrarian context, “justice” is not something understood as feed for animals. This word in Hebrew, *mishpat*, comes from the root that means “judge” and is connected to human judges (e.g., in Judges) and the Divine as judge. So, *mishpat* is the just rulings of a fair judge. However, justice implies more than a legal system. It is a primary concept among biblical prophets. While a short definition of justice can be difficult to create, the prophets make it clear that Divine justice involves taking care of the most vulnerable members of society and empowering everyone to live in the Divinely-intended wholeness expressed by the term *shalom*. In Ezekiel’s message, the Holy will go beyond just balancing the scales of what the people feel has been their unjust treatment by others. God will fill their bodies with justice, which will allow justice to imbue their whole selves so that keeping covenant with the Holy and each other becomes a natural way of living.

There is not, however, good news for everyone. Among the sheep who suffered in exile, there are some sheep who got fat by greed, and these will receive their just rewards. (v 16b) These strong sheep have bullied the weaker sheep, keeping them from the good grazing land and forcing them out into dangerous and barren places. (v 21) The Shepherd will judge between the good sheep and the wicked sheep, protecting the former from the latter. (vv 20, 22) Once the flock has been gathered and brought into the Promised Land, then the Divine Shepherd will entrust the responsibility for their care to a human shepherd. (vv 23-24) The fact that the text names that shepherd as David should not be seen as anything more than a reference to a new ruler of Israel who will govern the people with the same obedience to God that tradition had attributed to King David.

The last promise of the Divine is found in verse 25. The prophet says that God will make a covenant of peace with the people. Two important words are found in this promise: covenant and peace. The word covenant is the translation of the Hebrew *be’rith*, which can have the basic meaning of a contract, agreement, or covenant. In a covenant, both parties agree to certain promises that they will keep. If one party fails to keep the covenant, there is a breach that must either be mended or the covenant ended. There are many references to covenants throughout the Hebrew Bible, both between human partners and between the Divine and humans. The first official covenant is the one that God makes with Noah and all of creation to never destroy the earth again. (Gn 9:9-17) This is followed by God’s covenant with Sarah and Abraham and their descendants. (Gn 15) Of course there are also the covenants at Mt. Sinai (Ex 20) and with David. (2 Sm 7) Like the first Divine-initiated covenants, this one is one-sided. The people have no responsibilities to keep the covenant; it is only God who is obligated by this promise.

The promise of a covenant of peace is unusual, and outside of Ezekiel, this phrase is only used a few times. The word *peace* is the English translation of the Hebrew *shalom*. This word is probably one of the most well-known Hebrew words for non-Hebrew speakers. While it is

usually translated as *peace*, this rendering does not provide a full understanding of what *shalom* entails. A better translation would be *wholeness* or *well-being*. Shalom embraces both personal and communal wholeness and health. Shalom seeks the well-being and personal fulfillment of everyone. Shalom embraces justice, reconciliation, and nonviolence. Shalom is the experience of being in right relationship with God, which means that you see yourself, your neighbors, and all of creation as God does: inherently good and worthy of respect. The covenant that the Holy promises is one in which the people and all of creation will experience the fullness of *shalom*.

Even though Ezekiel was addressing people living in physical exile in the 6th century BCE, there are lessons taught by this prophet that defy the limits of historical and cultural context. Exile can be experienced as a physical place, but it can also take on the form of a spiritual separation. For people of any era or place, there are times when God seems to be absent or when persons feel isolated from a place called home. In the midst of such exile experiences, Ezekiel's words echo through time to remind us that God's presence is not limited by location or humanity's behavior. There is nowhere we can go or anything we can do that will separate us from God. While the image of a shepherd may have lost its power for the twenty-first century post-modern world, we can certainly relate to the idea that God's justice will be the standard by which everyone will be judged. When we are the weak sheep that are bullied by the fat sheep, we know that we can trust in God's love and be empowered to bring an end to injustice. However, we must also be attentive to the ways in which we get strong off the oppression of others. We are called to make certain that all have access to what they need to flourish. We are given the responsibility to assure those who feel scattered of the protection of the Divine Shepherd.

For those who live in a fast-paced, gadget-filled, global society, what metaphor for the Divine might be a fitting replacement/equivalent for what shepherd meant to the biblical audience? Is there an image that would convey some of the same ideas about God (e.g., protection, guidance, life-giving, etc.) for today's faithful? One image that comes to mind is God as a tour guide on a very difficult trip (life). However, this might not be a powerful enough image because not many tour guides are willing to risk their own well-being for those on the trip. An inanimate metaphor might be God as a person's GPS; the voice that directs you to a desired destination and warns of dangers/delays ahead.

The generous faithfulness of the Holy reflected in this text does not have any restrictions or obligations. It is not a tit-for-tat arrangement; God will do all that is promised regardless of how the people respond. However, given the relationship between the Holy and the people portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, there is only one expected response. Humans should reflect this Divine generosity in our interactions with other people and all of creation. Once fed with justice all of our acts will reflect this way of caring for the least of these and creating a community in which all are treated as valuable. All of creation will be given the opportunity to be who/what the Holy created them to be.

December 13, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, They Will be Called Oaks of Righteousness

Theme: Faithful

In order to better interpret Isaiah 61, we need to have an appropriate way to envision the role of prophets in Ancient Israel. Prophets, traditionally, have been understood as “predicting events in the distant future.” They are often equated with fortune tellers. However, this description is not an accurate way of understanding the role of biblical prophets. They were more concerned with the present than with the past. Their interest in what could happen was tied directly to what they thought needed to change in people’s behavior.

So what did it mean to be a prophet? They were not predicting the future, rather they were speaking to a concrete historical context. They were often just pointing out the obvious; the enemy is headed our way, and we do not stand a chance of withstanding their onslaught. Prophets provided a “why” for what was occurring or what could occur. They provided a critique of society/faithful through a theological lens. A prophet is one who tells the people what they need to hear not what they want to hear. Sometimes this may be the same, but most of the time it isn’t. Prophets were not providing a way of avoiding the impending doom. Rather, they understood that, if the future unfurled as it seemed it would, and the people were unfaithful, it would seem as if God was punishing them.

The Hebrew Bible prophets were persons who felt deeply the suffering of oppressed people and the anger of God over sin and rebellion. They were frightened by people with power but were more afraid of what would happen to the people if they did not speak, so they proclaimed the message with audacity. Prophets reminded people of their past, so they would know what God expected and remember what God had done for them and their ancestors. Prophets were also intercessors, taking the concerns of Israel to God and at times even seeking a delay of judgment, imploring God’s mercy for the people to give them more time. Prophets reminded the people of who they were, so they would know how to be and to act. They spoke words of comfort to people in pain.

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Prophets assured the people of God's presence with them in all times/places. They held out a vision of a renewed community that lived out God's desires.

For some time, biblical scholars have recognized that the Book of Isaiah is a composite work, representing at least three different historical periods: 8th century BCE, 6th century BCE (during the Babylonian Exile), and 6th BCE & later (after the return from exile and during the rebuilding of Jerusalem). Some scholars argue that this division is too "neat", that some passages within each section actually come from an earlier or later time period. While there is some textual support for their arguments, it is still appropriate to use these categories as a general outline for Isaiah.

Traditionally, the three sections are identified as 1st Isaiah (1-39), 2nd Isaiah/Deutero-Isaiah (40-55), and 3rd Isaiah/Trito-Isaiah (56-65). While these titles are descriptive of the ordering within the whole of Isaiah, they are not very helpful for remembering the historical context for each collection. Another classification system would be: Isaiah of Jerusalem (8th century), Isaiah of the Exile, and Isaiah of the Return. Each of these prophetic collections spoke both to people in their own time period as well to future generation. This week's reading is taken from the third section of the Book of Isaiah (56-66) and is attributed to a prophet, or prophets, who spoke during the Post-Exilic period (5th-4th centuries BCE). When Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians, he allowed exiles to go back to their homelands, if they chose to do so. Many, but not all, of those who were exiled from Jerusalem (and Judah) gladly welcomed Cyrus' invitation to go home. The prophetic voice, Isaiah of the Return, addressed the people who were trying to rebuild Jerusalem (the city walls, Temple, and Jewish community) after the Babylonian exile (circa 586-538 BCE).

For decades, the exiles in Babylon had dreamed about finally being allowed to return home to Jerusalem. Prophetic voices had promised them a glorious return, painting pictures of dry bones coming to life and a great highway leading them home. But when Cyrus of Persia issued the edict that freed them from exile, what they found in the city was anything but glorious. The walls of the city had been destroyed in the attack by the Babylonian armies. Their homes had been inhabited by others. They had no land and their jobs were gone. Worst of all, their place of worship, the beloved Temple built by Solomon, lay in ruins. Instead of a wonderful homecoming celebration, they were faced with desolation. They were strangers in their own land. Disappointed and discouraged, some returnees must have envied their friends and family who had remained in Babylon, where at least they had a life and a livelihood. With the remains of the once great city of Jerusalem at their feet, all they could think about was the work that needed to be done. The dominant concern was to get the Temple and the city walls rebuilt as soon as possible, to have at least some sense of security. But where would they get the resources for the construction? Not only was their city in shambles but so was the community. There were divisions among them, arguments about how to start and who would be in charge. It seemed utterly hopeless.

Out of the laments of mourning and despair, a voice declared: “The spirit of the LORD God is upon me!” A prophet stepped out from among the people and proclaimed words of encouragement. Without denying their pain and disillusionment, this messenger of God was called to preach: release, freedom, healing, and hope. These promises of God, spoken by the prophet, were indeed good news. After having lost their land and their dignity, the idea of no longer laboring to benefit others must have been a powerful dream. The God of their ancestors had not abandoned them, during the exile or in the time of return. No, the Holy remembered the covenants made with the people and kept those covenants by being present during the difficult times of exile and remaining with them in the time of rebuilding. When all seemed lost, the prophet reminds them that their God was a God of restoration, bring new life out of barren situations.

But the prophet not only proclaimed restoration of property but also restoration of responsibility. Like strong trees, this new community would stand as a testament to the God whom they worshiped and served, so that one day, in the near future, all other nations would look to them and to their future generations and recognize that they were a people blessed by God, that through them others would be blessed. This was just the motivation the people needed to begin the process of rebuilding their city and their lives. But the impact of these words would not end there.

This mission was not for the prophet alone. The spirit of God also had anointed the whole community to fulfill this call to make the messages of release, healing, freedom, and hope a reality. Out of their own experiences of oppression and loss, the people were reminded of the basics taught to them by Torah: love God and love others as they love themselves. In order to be in proper relationship with the Holy, they must work to bring the fullness of God’s shalom to all people.

As with all authentic prophecy, these words from Isaiah 61:1-11 continued to beckon future generations to ministry, even unto today. It should come as no surprise that, when Jesus was ready publicly to accept his call to ministry, he chose these words from Isa 61 to describe his mission. In a scene probably similar to an ordination interview, Jesus sat before the people who had known him since childhood, people who asked “Is this the son of Mary?” “Is this the son of the carpenter?” Gathered in the synagogue, they wanted an explanation; they wanted to know to what kind of ministry Jesus was called. Jesus’ answer was a way of telling the people that he was continuing in the great tradition of Israel’s prophets and their resounding call for God’s justice to become a reality in this world.

Much like the ancient audience for whom the words of Isaiah 61 were originally spoken, faith communities are in a familiar but new place. We have experienced exile, loss, broken hearts, and uncertainty about the future. For quite some time now, it has seemed like we have worn the ashes of mourning and despair. Many churches in North America are experiencing membership and attendance declines, and money seems to be an ever-dwindling resource. Like

those who faced rebuilding Jerusalem, many of us feel that our beloved churches have suffered the brunt of attack, and we wonder if it's even possible to rebuild them so they will be around for more than another generation.

One possible response to this situation would be for us to seek protection by building walls that keep us safe, with sure answers and the confidence that we alone have the truth. Another possibility would be for us to be like the exiles who remained in Babylon because it was comfortable, and we can try to fade into the religious backdrop, losing our identity and becoming just like everyone else. The words of Isaiah 61 call us to a different path, one of action and faith. The prophet's message was not a call to grasp at security or to embrace complacency. These were words of challenge, risk, and service. Is not this message still relevant for us today?

Who are the oppressed who need to hear good news? Those oppressed by unjust economic systems that penalize working single-moms because the cost of daycare is too high for them to afford on their salary. Those oppressed by political systems that protect the rights of the powerful few while exploiting the powerless masses. Those oppressed by the high cost of health care that forces them to choose between food and medicines, between their children's education and a life-saving operation.

Where are the broken hearts that are in need of our binding? Hearts broken by dishonesty in relationships where covenantal trust has been shattered. Hearts broken by the diagnoses of loved ones with terrible diseases that seem to defy treatment much less healing. The hearts broken by abuse at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them from harm. Who are the captives that need to be liberated? Those enslaved by systems that discriminate based on differences in physical abilities, religion, sex, and race. Those enslaved by addictions to power, money, drugs, and anything else that dulls the pain of feeling unloved. Those enslaved by image of perfection perpetuated by media, to the point of starving themselves to fit the ideal.

Where are the ones who need to be released from the things that keep them imprisoned? Those imprisoned by the fear to be who God created them to be, we can work for laws that enlarge the definition of hate crimes and for fairness ordinances throughout the country. For those imprisoned by others who say that they are not created in the image of God, but are inherently flawed, an abomination because of whom they love.

Who needs to hear a word about the LORD's favor? Those who are held captive by fear that our world will not survive the continual environmental abuse visited upon creation by greed and hubris. Those who have bought into a theology of scarcity and cannot see that sharing our bounty actually multiplies the abundance that is already present. Those caught on the roller coaster of the 24-hour news outlets that constantly headline dire predictions and violence rather than promoting stories of compassion and peace.

Is this not the ministry to which we are called? What would this call to ministry require of us in this time and in this place of exile? How will we work to make justice happen in our time? How we love the stranger as ourselves? To respond to this call to ministry we will have to take off our mourning clothes, tear down our walls of security, and take the risk of being generous, in order to bring about this realization of God's will. We, as individuals and as congregations, will stand strong and tall, like trees planted by God, giving witness to the God whom we worship and serve. Our future will not be one of foreign occupation or despair but of hope and promise. During this time of Advent, when we wait to see how Immanuel ("God with us") will be made manifest this year, the challenge of Isaiah 61 reminds us that we are called to do more than just wait. It is our task to make Immanuel obvious in the lives of those who need God the most. The story of Jesus' birth in a stable should remind us that too many children are born into, live in, and die in poverty, around the world and in our own backyards. The image of young parents having no safe place to welcome their newborn child should make us mindful of the countless people, families and individuals, who live on the streets or in their cars because of the greed and reckless behavior of the wealthy and Wall Street. As we hear about the shepherds and magi who came to visit the manger, our righteous anger should be stirred-up by the growing gap between the ultra-rich and the poorest of the poor. When we sing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", our voices should be lifted-up in speaking on behalf of the oppressed, broken-hearted, captives, and imprisoned.

We are the messengers called by God to proclaim the Divine Favor and work for God's shalom to be experienced by all here and now. "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations". (Is 61:11) May the words of the prophet Isaiah be fulfilled in our living!



Worship Resources

January 26, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23, Come and Follow Me

Theme: Faithful

The invitation to follow Jesus is “come and follow me”. What does it mean to follow Jesus? How does that impact the things we are stewards of in our lives?

Call to Worship

One: Come! Now is the time to gather for worship. Christ calls us into community and into communion with him.

Many: Let us enter in with open ears and open hearts, ready to receive the call of Christ in a new way today!

Invocation

Holy One, you call out to us again and again throughout our lives. Sometimes the call comes bold and insistent: sometimes it is a nudge or a whisper. However you are calling us today, O God, help us to hear you, and to feel your nearness.

Offering Meditation

A friend told me a story of the most meaningful gift he ever received from his elementary-school-aged daughter: Three bright blue post-it notes, each one with careful childish penmanship spelling out the phrase, “Just say NO”. When the father asked his daughter what they were for, she quickly replied, “One for your phone, one for your computer, one for your desk at work.” She went on to explain that her father said “Yes” too often to too many things, and it meant he wasn’t available to spend time with her.

It is a common refrain in church offering meditations to be invited to think about what it is that we can give—how to say “YES” so we can offer ourselves more fully to the world’s need. Today, I’m asking you to think differently.

January 26, 2020 Worship Resources – 2

Think about what “No” is needed in your life so that you can spend more time with Jesus, discerning what Jesus truly wants from and with you. Let this earnest consideration be part of your offering today.

**Additional engagement option: Put a post-it note on each bulletin and suggest to the congregation to jot down something they will say “no” to, and include it with their offering in the offering basket or plate as it passes. Another option is to invite the congregants to make their own “Just say NO” note with the bulletin post-it to remember this invitation.

Offering Prayer

Jesus, thank you for the gift of your love. Help us to connect more fully to you, and to say “no” to the things that distance us from your hopes for our lives. May we choose your way forward with all that we are. Amen.

Communion Meditation

What courage it must have taken for the disciples to follow Jesus—to quite literally drop what they were doing and follow him! As we come to communion, think about what you might need to drop from your life to more closely follow Jesus. Before you partake in the communion elements, allow time to consider this question deeply in prayer. As you pray, you might find it helpful to open and close your hands. With this motion, imagine the things you are holding on to tightly, and what needs to be let go in order to better follow Christ’s call. When you are ready, come and receive the communion elements—bread and cup, nourishing you on the way with Jesus.

Prayer Station

Set out markers, construction paper, and several sets of scissors along with these instructions: Jesus called the disciples to follow him—to change the way they lived to be in step with the way Jesus lived. Trace the outline of your shoe or your foot and cut it out using the materials provided. On the cutout, share your responses to these questions:

- How could you make space in your life to listen for Jesus’ calling?
- What do you need to leave behind to follow Jesus?
- If you truly followed the call of Christ, where might it take you?

Music

Traditional

“He Leadeth Me”

“I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”

“Where He Leads Me”

“Softly and Tenderly” (consider replacing “dear sinner” with “dear children”)

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

“All the Way, My Savior Leads Me”

“Be Thou My Vision”

Alternative

“Lead Me On” (Amy Grant)

“What Do You Want From Me” (Andra Moran)

“I Hear a Call” (Emmylou Harris)

“He Leadeth Me” (arr. Sarah Watkins)

“Stepping In” (Christopher Grundy)

“Savior Like a Shepherd” (Andra Moran)

“Be Thou My Vision”

Benediction

May God bless you, keep you and call you—and may you have the courage to answer the call!
Amen.

February 9, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Is this not the Fast I Choose

Theme: Loving

The particular verse “Is this not the fast I choose” calls us toward loving actions toward others by caring for the basic needs of others, assuring the well-being of the more vulnerable in the community, which in turn improves the over-all health of the whole community.

Call to Worship

One: O come let us worship and bow down!

All: We come to worship, but if we are honest, is it hard for us to bow down. Our hearts are full of pride and our hands are stained with sin.

One: O come let us sing to the Lord; Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

All: We come to worship, but is it hard for us to sing with joy when we know in our hearts that we have turned away from those most in need of our help.

One: O come let us worship! Our God welcomes us with forgiveness and hope.

All: Yes! Yes, this is our God, and we are God’s people. Indeed we come to worship, to bow down in humility, and to sing with joy.

Invocation

Loving God, you call to us with forgiveness and hope. You lift us out of the quicksand of self-centeredness. You help us to truly find ourselves in your embrace. We have seen the vision of truth and grace in your son Jesus. Fill us, move us, and enliven us to live out that vision in our lives as we follow him. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Offering Meditation

There is no joy in giving when it is done under a scolding scrutiny. There is no joy in giving when it is done under an avalanche of shoulds and oughts. The prophet Isaiah calls us to account, reminding us of the kind of giving that is pleasing to God. It is when we recognize what God wants, aligning ourselves to the loving, forgiving, out-reaching ways of God, that we can be free to give joyfully. Our offering today is an invitation to follow Jesus Christ in how we love and how we give.

Offering Prayer

In the name of Jesus the Christ, we offer these gifts to you, O God. These gifts are part of us. They represent our time, energy, activities, and abilities. With joyful hearts we dedicate them to you. Amen.

Communion Meditation

This familiar setting, this table, this bread and this cup, recalls for us the upper room where Jesus ate with his disciples. He took the familiar setting and made it a holy place. He took the familiar bread and cup and made them symbols of his body and his blood. The familiar comes alive in our hearts when we open them to Jesus! Come eat and drink with Christ, and be transformed by his love.

Prayer Station

GRAPHIC

Print the cards on the next page on card stock or on printable business cards, and use the design guides to cut the cards apart. Ask people to pick up a card that they can commit to and to use it to guide their “fasting” for the next thirty days.

Music

Traditional

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”

“We Remember You”

“Your Love, O God” (Frostenson /Kaan)

“These I Lay Down” (Iona)

Alternative

“Where the Spirit of the Lord Is” (Tomlin /Nockles)

“Brokenness Aside” (All Sons and Daughters)

“Beautiful Things” (Gungor)

“These I Lay Down” (Iona)

Benediction

May God bless you, keep you and call you—and may you have the courage to answer the call!
Amen.

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO SHARE FOOD WITH THE
HUNGRY

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO WORK FOR JUSTICE BY

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO PROVIDE SHELTER BY

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO OPEN MY EYES TO INJUSTICE

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO WORK AGAINST OPPRESSION
BY -----

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:
TO CLOTHE THE NAKED BY

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:

AN ACCEPTABLE FAST

BASED ON ISAIAH 58,
THE ACCEPTABLE FAST
I AM CHOOSING IS:

March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11, Our Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

Theme: Hopeful

“Our hope does not disappoint us”—what is the power of hope and how does it change the direction of our lives? What freedom does it offer? Does it free us to be generous (among other things)?

Call to Worship

One: Today as we gather together for worship, each one of us brings our own unique experiences.

Left Side: Some of us are on the mountain top, relishing a joyful season of life.

Right Side: Some of us are in the valley, sitting with unimaginable disappointment and sorrow.

One: No matter the condition of our hearts or the circumstances of our lives, God’s hope is steadfast and God’s love is abundant.

All: Let us rejoice in the Hope we share through Christ Jesus, and give glory and praise to God!

Invocation

God of hope, draw us near to you in this time together. Remind us of the many ways we are connected, both to one another, and to you. Encourage us to be resilient, to rely on you to see us through, even when it feels impossible to keep going. Renew our hearts, O God, and revive our spirits, we pray. Amen.

Offering Meditation

In 1964, The Beatles had a smash hit with their song, “Can’t Buy Me Love.” Certainly, there’s no price tag on real love, but there are some practical ways to use our resources to buy hope: School supplies for underserved classrooms, stocking the shelves at a food pantry, underwriting counseling for trauma survivors, funding rebuilding after a natural disaster—all of these are practical investments in hope. As a church, mission and outreach is a crucial piece of having a ministry that reflects the teaching of Jesus. As we take time for offering today, consider how you are investing in hope.

Offering Prayer

God, you are with us through everything—from heartbreak to hope, you are present. Help us to be people who invest in hope. Guide us as we make decisions about the resources we have. As Christians, we know the deep generosity of your love. Thank you for teaching us to be generous people. Amen.

Communion Meditation:

In the book *A Grace Disguised* Jerry Sittser writes: “The soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering. Loss can enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair and anguish—all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. But, once enlarged, the soul is also capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace and love.” The Last Supper, a final meal between cherished friends, was a prelude to the intense series of events that followed it: Christ’s betrayal, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Communion stretches our souls’ understanding that even when the table is laden with suffering, hope is still on the menu.

Prayer Station



Build or source a tabletop fountain with four bowls similar to this one (link below). From top to bottom, label the bowls: suffering, endurance, character, hope.



https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00FR6SV62/ref=oh_aui_detailpage_o00_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

Print these instructions in large type and set them beside the prayer station:

Let your spirit soak in this visual representation of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Is there one bowl in the fountain that you feel is representative of where you are in your life now?

Remember times where you have been in transition from one “bowl” to the next. What propelled you forward towards hope? What held you back?

*You may also consider offering pebbles or pennies for people to set in the bowl that they feel represents this particular time in their life.

March 15, 2020 Worship Resources – 3

*Another option for a similar station to this one would be to source a marble run and label different sections of the run. Instruct participants to watch the progression of the marble as it moves through the run.

Music

Traditional

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

“How Can I Keep From Singing”

“In the Bulb, There Is a Flower”

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

“There Is A Balm in Gilead”

Alternative

“I Have a Hope” (Jim Firth)

“God Is Holding Your Life” (Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, worldmaking.net)

“There’s Hope” (India Arie)

“Everlasting God” (Chris Tomlin)

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go” (Sandra McCracken / Indelible Grace)

“I Hope” (Dixie Chicks)

“Pour Us Out Like Water” (Andra Moran, convergencemp.com)

Benediction

As you leave this place, remember that Hope does not disappoint. May you feel God’s love pouring over your hearts through the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

April 26, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, What Shall I Return to the Lord

Theme: Loving

The question “What shall I return to the Lord for all of the bounty I have received?” speaks of gratitude of God’s loving intention toward us and God’s abundance, which we imagine should give us some hope!

Call to Worship

Leader: We come together to see and hear God through the presence of one another. What shall we return to God for all God’s goodness to us?

All: We shall return the offering of our presence—our investment in the world as God’s people.

Leader: Let us lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon God. All: We give thanks that God is always near! We give thanks that God is always faithful! We give thanks for the gift of worshipping God in this time, together as one people.

Invocation

Holy God, thank you for hearing us as we call to you—what comfort that brings us! In all the ways we arrive here for worship today, you greet us with gladness and warmth. Some of us here are aching for mercy. You provide it. Some of us are reaching for connection. You are reaching for us in return. Some of us are in the valley, and some are on the mountaintop of our lives. Where ever we are today, you are alongside us. What can we return to you for all your goodness to us? Only what we have—our very selves. Guide us, Loving God, to surrender to you. Amen.

Offering Meditation

Little Calla was three—and relishing some Easter chocolate. Imagine with me that sweet, smudgy face and that happy grin. Her mother brought over a napkin and said, “Come here, Calla, let me look at you. You’ve got chocolate all over your face!” “Hmm,” she replied thoughtfully, “I don’t see it.”

Sometimes it’s like that with us and God. We’ve got goodness and sweetness all over us and we just don’t see it—but God does! God sees us, knows us, loves us, and calls us. And actually, God calls us GOOD! One way we can return thanks to God for all of the goodness that God lavishes on us is to recognize our own propensity and possibility for good, and to act on it. Let’s share in receiving our offerings now.

Offering Prayer

Thank you, God, for making us in your image—for weaving goodness and generosity into the fibers of our being. Help us to act upon that which is already part of who we are, and to contribute to building a just and generous life for all. Amen.

Communion Meditation

In the second act of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon Moncrieff blurts out, “When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me!”

All of us have some troubles in our lives—the state of the world ensures it. Again and again, Jesus calls us to the communion table to remember him, to be consoled, and to be nourished by him to go back out into the world and to love it with all that we have, all that we do, and all that we are. Come to the table. Remember. Be consoled. Be nourished. Open your heart to hear Christ speaking to you.

Prayer Station

Get packages of plain paper cups (Dixie cup size, or short coffee cup size) and sharpie markers to write on the sides of the cups. Put these supplies on tables along with a printed copy of the instructions below.

Please note, there are two variations to this station:

1. Do this station without markers, and with a variety of goblets instead of paper cups. By removing the act of writing, people of all literacy abilities can participate.
2. Do this station with ceramic or glass mugs/glasses/cups instead of paper cups, and use dry erase markers, which will easily wipe or wash clean. This raises the eco-friendliness of this station.

Instructions:

Raise a toast to God!

In Psalm 116, the Psalmist describes lifting the cup of salvation in thanksgiving to God. God blesses us in innumerable ways! Prayerfully consider some of your most poignant blessings and write them on a cup. When you’re finished, raise your cup towards heaven as an act of prayer.

Music

Traditional

“Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven”

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

April 26, 2020 Worship Resources -3

Alternative

“Be Merciful” (Andra Moran, also based on Psalm 31)

“Come As You Are” (Lay Down Your Burdens; David Crowder)

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy (use “All Who Hunger” tune)

Psalm 116 musical setting from Psalm Immersion

(<https://www.psalmmimmersion.com/psalm-116>)

Benediction: As you leave this place, let your heart be light, knowing that God goes with you, now and forever. Amen!

May 3, 2020

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47, They Held All Things In Common

Theme: Loving

The arrival of the Holy Spirit transforms the community into one of both “care for those in need” and the powerful sharing of the gospel. Both are acts of stewardship and love toward the neighbor.

Call to Worship

Leader: We come for worship this morning because we believe!

People: We believe we are united through the love of God that extends to all people!

Leader: We come for worship this morning because we belong! People: We belong to God, and we belong to one another. We worship in community so that we might learn from each other, grow together, and practice loving one another, just as God loves us. Amen.

Invocation

We gather in the name of God, who enlivens and transforms everything! O God of goodness, kindle the spark of generosity in our hearts today. Set us alight in your love! Renew us to share life together with joy and generosity. Amen.

Offering Meditation

How do you answer when someone asks how to know if they’re giving “enough?” It seems like a complicated question—“What is enough?”—but the answer is really quite simple. Loving each other enough means making sure we all have enough. Most of us can quickly think of someone close to us who is struggling with having even the basics for human living. For our offering today, let us give generously, knowing that what we share truly makes a difference. In the coming week, may we each commit to doing something extra that helps another person get a little closer to having what they need.

Offering Prayer

Holy One, you give so much to us—what a precious gift it is for us to belong to one another in communion with you. Help us to move from simply sharing positions to sharing purpose as we work together to enrich your *kin-dom* (kingdom) here on earth. It is through our work together that we are grounded in our work with you. Help us to be good stewards of all that you give to us. Grow our hearts to be generous like you, God. Amen.

Communion Meditation

There is one primary rule of potluck etiquette: as you move through the line, be mindful of those who come behind you. As you fill your plate, maintain an awareness that the person after you may also want to taste Mrs. Lockert's chicken a la king or Mr. Gregory's Frito pie. If you want to be good at potlucking, you have to be good at portioning, so as to provide for everyone. Part of loving one another well is making sure we all have enough.

As we come to the table, let us imagine those in our world who don't have enough and make space for them in our prayers and in our actions. May we be mindful of how we could better love all God's children, and how we might better share the feast that God so lavishly lays out for us.

Prayer Station

This station is designed to be used during communion. Set a table as if you were setting it for dinner with non-disposable plates and cutlery. You may want to add candles or flowers to the table setting. In addition to these items, set out several dry-erase markers and the instructions for this station. Recommendation: Have a few people set up the prayer station in advance of worship, so there are examples in place to get people thinking.

Instructions:

The table is set, but some of the guests are missing. Think about our social engagements. Which people or groups are overlooked and excluded from our gatherings? Write their names here on the plates with the markers. Pray that as Christians, we would widen our welcome for all people at the Christ's table.

Music

Traditional

- "Break Thou the Bread of Life"
- "It Only takes a Spark"
- "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love"
- "All That I Am, All That I Do"
- "Come Share the Lord"

Alternative

- "To Be Faithful" (Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, worldmaking.net)
- "Get Together" (Youngbloods)
- "Where the Spirit of the Lord Is" (Chris Tomlin & Christy Nockels)
- "Leaning In" (Christopher Grundy, convergencemp.com)
- "Offering" (Andra Moran)

Benediction

May our life-giving God continue to give us glad and generous hearts so that we might better serve one another. Go in peace, sharing with the world what you have and who you are!

June 7, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 4a, And God Proclaimed It All Very Good

Theme: Loving

God loves and delights in the creation, and provides for it abundantly so that it may flourish.

Call to Worship

Leader: The heavens and the earth, the wind and the waters: God made it all!

People: And it was good!

Leader: The light and the darkness, every tiny seed, and every tall, tall tree: God made it all!

People: And it was good!

Leader: The birds of the air, the inhabitants of the seas, every animal that moves on the earth, and yes, you and me: God made us all!

People: We are made in the image of God, the Creator. God calls us good! We are made for goodness. God delights in us!

All: With glad hearts, let us worship God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and Maker of our souls!

Invocation:

People of God, open your eyes! Look around: Surely God is here. For this is none other than the house of God, and all of creation sings God's praise Let us worship God together!

Offering Meditation

Shel Silverstein's book *The Giving Tree* caused quite a stir when it was published. The story details the life of a boy and a tree. In the beginning, the young boy climbs the tree and basks in her shade, and spends many afternoons playing make-believe in her branches. The tree is happy to be able to make the boy happy, but as he grows up, he wants things the tree cannot provide, like money. She offers him her apples to sell to get money. He wants a house. She gives him her branches for lumber to build one. He wants, and wants and wants, and takes and takes and takes until there is nothing left of the tree but an old stump. At the end of the book, the boy comes back to visit the tree as an old, tired man. He looks sadly at the tree, and says, "I don't need anything now: just a quiet place to sit and rest." And, the tree—happily—provides it.

Our Creator provides so lavishly for us: from twinkling stars in the night sky to the incomparable joy of a perfect sunny day. How often do we go to God asking for more, and more and more, oblivious to God's provision which is already in process?

Prayerfully consider this as we prepare to receive our offering today.

Offering Prayer

Before the prayer, ask people to keep their eyes open, and to open their hands, and study their hands during the prayer.

Creator God, you made this big, bright, beautiful world, and all that is alive in it. We give thanks for our world, and for the uniquely beautiful ways you have made each one of us. From the tips of our fingers to each beat of our heart, each one of us is individually made in your image, and you call us good. Help us to always use our hands to give generously in praise and thanksgiving to you.

Communion Meditation

Ask anyone you know who cooks: the way to feel confident in what you're preparing before serving it is to taste as you go.

Hmmm—needs a pinch of salt! Ooh, I think a tablespoon or two of honey, and it'll be perfect. Actually, I have the perfect herbs in mind to round out this flavor...

Maybe the taste-as-you-go principle applies to Christian living. Each time we come to Christ's table of love, we are reminded of the flavors in the feast Christ lays out for us: the richness of love, the robust sweetness of healing, a great helping of both full-bodied forgiveness and zesty hope!

What is God making in the kitchen of your soul today? As we receive communion, what do you need to taste? And, in the days to come, don't forget to taste as you go.

Prayer Station



Here is a borrowed prayer station with permission from BrimProject.com, the worship design website based on the book *Brim: Creative Overflow in Worship Design* by Andra Moran and Suzanne Castle. For additional prayer stations to match this service and others in this series, we recommend *Brim* as a resource.

Source salt and pepper shakers from a restaurant supply store in various shapes and sizes, moss, potting soil, aquarium gravel, air plants and little toy animals (plastic or wooden), some disposable chopsticks for scooting things into place, bowls of water and a few towels or paper napkins.

Print out the following instructions in large font and set on tables with the supplies.

Instructions:

Pray your thanks for God’s beautiful world as you build a micro-world of your own. Feel the joy of creating!

Recommended layering:

1. Rocks and/or dirt
2. Moss (add a few drops of water)
3. Plants and / or little creatures

In the coming weeks, care for your micro-terrarium and watch it grow. Use it to guide your your prayers and your social and environmental choices.

Music

Traditional

“All Creatures of Our God and King”

“Morning Has Broken”

“This Is My Father’s World”

“How Great Thou Art”

“Spirit”

“For the Beauty of the Earth”

Alternative

“Big Bright Beautiful World” (Andra Moran, andramoran.com)

“All Creatures of Our God and King” (David Crowder)

“Creation Sings God’s Praise” (Bryan Sirchio, convergencemp.com)

“Day and Night” (Andra Moran)

“How Great Thou Art”

“Indescribable: (Tomlin)

Use the text of “For the Beauty of the Earth” with the call and response tune of “Hail Jesus”

Benediction:

Go forth in joy, for you are wonderfully made—and God delights in you!

July 26, 2020

Scripture: Romans 8:26-29, Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of God

Theme: Hopeful

“Nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus.” How does this confidence empower the church’s mission or our ability to risk on behalf of the promise of the realm?

Call to Worship

One: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress? Danger, fear, hunger, or anger?

Many: No, nothing will separate us from Christ’s love!

One: What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will power or weakness? Will death or life, angels or evil?

Many: No, nothing will separate us from Christ’s love!

One: Is there anything in all of creation that can separate us from Christ’s love?

Many: No, nothing! Nothing will separate us from Christ’s love!

Invocation

Surely God is in this place! As we assemble for worship, we rejoice in the assurance that we are bound to God by love. This love surrounds us as close as skin, warm, constant and true. God of love, open our hearts to have a strong sense of your presence today and always. Amen.

Offering Meditation

Our scripture today is so powerful—the assurance that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus is one of scripture’s greatest gifts. Some years ago, a credit card company ran an ad campaign designed to help people think of what is “priceless.” Think about it for a second: what is priceless to you? The value of a love that never leaves us is almost hard to fathom, it’s so great! What a wondrous love is this, that Jesus gives us so freely. I don’t know about you, but it inspires me to want to give freely, too.

Offering Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks for your unfailing love. Let us show our gratitude to you by generously giving of ourselves in all ways, every day. Amen.

Communion Meditation

We come to communion at Christ’s invitation. The table is lovingly set, and we are welcomed to come as we are. We can lay down our burdens and be lifted up by God’s love. God’s love is constant, faithful and trustworthy. We can never be separated from this love. As we receive Communion today, may we all remember the beautiful sacrifice of love that Jesus pours out into our lives.

Prayer Station



Source heart cutouts, people-shaped craft sticks and wood-craft glue online or at a craft supply shop. Type up the text of Romans 8:35, 38-39 and the instructions below in large type. (Note: omit verse 36 and 37 for this station). Cover a table with a plastic table cloth in case of glue spills, and set out all the supplies.

Instructions: Paul’s letter to the Romans assures us that nothing can separate from the love of God. If there is anything at all that you fear could cause God to pull away from you, remind yourself of this promise at this station. Write your fear on the stick person. If there is nothing you fear, simply write the words “thank you.” Then, cover your fear or your thanksgiving with glue, and stick a heart over it. As the glue dries, let your prayers rise that God would assure you of the constant sticking of divine love upon your life. Take your stick person with you as a reminder of how deeply loved you are.

Music

Traditional

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”
“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”
“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”
“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Alternative

“Nothing Can Separate Us” (Andra Moran)
“All to Us” (Chris Tomlin)
“Amazing Love” (Hillsong)
“Come As You Are” (David Crowder)

Benediction

As you leave this place, may the peace of God go before you, behind you and beside you, all the days of your life. Amen.

August 30, 2020

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21, Rejoice in Hope

Theme: Hopeful

“Rejoice in Hope...Contribute to the needs of the saints.” What hope for the world is there if the church community genuinely cares for the needs of others, but lacks its own hope?

Call to Worship

One: Friends, as we gather today, let love be genuine.

Many: Let us love one another from the very center of who we are.

One: May we rejoice in hope, and be patient in the face of suffering. Let us strengthen ourselves with prayer when the days are hard.

Many: May we be led to give generously; to share the needs of others, and to be inventive in how we serve one another.

One: Let us be honest in our blessing of one another—help us to truly love those who are difficult to love. Let us discover the deep beauty of all God’s children.

Many: So far as it is possible, may we live in harmony and peace with everyone.

Invocation

We come together in the name of God, who is patient and loving with all of us, so we might be patient and loving with our neighbors. God, we ask you to renew in us the joy of loving the way that you love. Amen.

Offering Meditation

A pastor friend told a story about being on retreat with a church group in rural Kentucky. The cable to the microphone needed for their programming had gone missing, and they were far from any shopping areas to purchase a new one. Exasperated, the pastor searched the web for “Music stores near me.” To her surprise, her maps app suggested an address just a mile down the road. She was curious—and desperate to find the cable—so, she went to the address, but instead found a hot dog stand and a junk shop at the street number listed. She called the phone number from the web search, and spoke to a friendly man on the phone who explained that indeed, he owned a music shop and that it was located in a small trailer a ways behind the hot dog stand. “Technically, it’s closed,” the man said, and then explained that the hot dog stand owner had a key for emergencies. “Ma’am,” he continued, “it sounds like this feels like an emergency to you. Go get the key and pop inside and borrow anything you need. Just bring it back when you’re through.” The pastor accepted the man’s offer to borrow the cable, and the retreat went off without a hitch. When she returned the cable, she thought to herself, “This stranger quite literally enabled our group to be able to hear the good news. His simple response to our frazzled, frustrated request was truly a gift.” How can you be a gift to others around you

today? What are you giving in response to the world, which far too often feels frenzied and frayed? Let us commit ourselves again to being people who give of our whole selves.

Offering Prayer

Dear God, make us more like you. May all that we do, all that we share, and all that we are be reflective of the generous way you love us. Amen.

Communion Meditation

Psalm 34 reminds us to “Taste and see that the LORD is good,”(v 8) and to be happy for the chance to take refuge in God. However, our scripture today from the twelfth chapter of Romans reminds us that sometimes instead of taking refuge, we are to set up camp right next to someone who is weeping. Think of a time in your life when there has been great sorrow. Was there someone who sat with you? Who was there to share your sorrow? How did that feel for you? [pause]

Now, think of a joyous time in your life. Who are the people who celebrated alongside you? Doesn't it feel marvelous when someone is genuinely happy for you?

What precious memories these are, remembering the people who have been present with us in different seasons of our lives. True friends are present for us in ways that invest in the growth of our hearts in good times and bad alike.

What Paul describes in Romans 12 is a kind of communion—to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep. Living in harmony together, taking care to be honest and kind with others even as they challenge us and test our patience—these are the hallmarks of a Christian.

As we come to communion today, let us recommit ourselves to aim for these marks—to let our love be genuine and to resist evil. Friends, hold fast to what is good: In this moment, it is bread, cup and togetherness.

Prayer Station

Source Velcro tape, strips or dots. Set out the Velcro pieces separated from one another along with the instructions.

Instructions: Community is a complicated thing indeed. Humanity is intricately connected, often in ways that go unsuspected and undetected. Match a set of Velcro here and take it with you to pray. As part of your prayer, try to carefully, silently untangle the tiny hooks of the Velcro. Ask

August 30, 2020 Worship Resources – 3

God to remind you how much God longs for us to be together as ONE—all people contributing and caring to the welfare of each other in the joy and service of Jesus Christ.

Music

Traditional

“Rejoice Ye Pure in Heart”

“Jesu, Jesu”

“Make Me A Servant”

“All That I Am, All That I Do”

Alternative

“Offering” (Andra Moran)

“Rejoice in the Lord Always” (round)

“Be Our Vision Now” (Andra Moran)

“Jesu, Jesu”

“Make Me A Servant”

Benediction

Friends, let love be real! Hold fast to what is good. Outdo one another in love! Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. In the name of the One who calls and equips us in community, Amen.

September 22, 2020

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13, For God is at Work in You

Theme: Loving

“God is at work in you”—what kind of fruit do our lives bear if God is a work in us and how does this give hope not only to us but to the world?

Call to Worship

Leader: Come! Now is the time to realign ourselves with the Good News of Jesus Christ, who humbled himself for our elevation. Today, we lift up the name of Jesus, remembering his profound love for us. Come, let us worship together!

Invocation

Faithful God, you are always with us, even when we are not faithful. Humble Christ, you are always near, even when our egos get the best of us. Holy Spirit, you are always moving, even when we are stalled out and stuck. Draw especially near to us now, we pray, and inspire us to be more like you.

Offering Meditation

Social Chain CEO Steven Bartlett wrote, “If you apply pressure, [people] will do what you want them to do. If you take the pressure off, you’ll see what they’d rather do.” This could be great advice for relationships with people, but today, imagine how this might apply within your relationship with God. God doesn’t control or pressure us—and well, we do what we do. What are you doing in this season of your faith life? Honestly ask yourself if your spiritual life is in good shape. Are you giving God the kind of attention, commitment, and stewardship that you feel you should? As we join together in offering, let us all take some time to really consider what it is that God longs for from us, and whether we are willing to offer it back.

Offering Prayer

God, you are indescribably generous—all good things come from you! If we gave all we had, it would still be only a fragment of what you share with us. Help us, Holy One, to be generous with you and with the world you have entrusted to us. Amen.

Communion Meditation

The poster on the classroom wall read, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It’s thinking of yourself less.” Isn’t that well said? With this idea in mind, I’ve been thinking about Jesus’ teaching to think of him when we break bread and share the cup. Jesus said, “When you do this, remember me.” So, Jesus is directing us to think of him; to remember him when we are together to share a meal. We aren’t thinking of ourselves when we gather at the table; we’re thinking of Jesus, and of one another. As we come to the table today, may we do so humbly; thinking of ourselves less, and thinking of Jesus more.

Prayer Station

Purchase denture cleaning tablets and remove their individual packaging. Set a table with the instructions, cleaning tablets in small baskets, and large basins of plain water.

Instructions: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

These words from Philippians are at odds with our western culture that tends to thrive on ego and self-glory.

Take a tablet. Hold it in your hand and pray that Jesus will help to dissolve your ego, so that you might be more like him. When you’re ready, put the tablet in the water. As you watch the bubbles rise, imagine your prayer rising to heaven.

Music:

Traditional

“More About Jesus Would I Know”

“We, Your People, God Confessing”

“Loving Lord, as Now We Gather”

“We Give Thee But Thine Own”

Alternative

“Lighthouse” (Eastlake Church)

“I Boast No More” (Caedmon’s Call)

“Humble Thyself” (round)

“Offering” (Andra Moran)

“We, Your People, God Confessing” (use the tune of Come Thou Fount)

“Table of Love” (Andra Moran)

Benediction

As we depart, may our hearts and minds align with Christ Jesus. May we be humble. May we be compassionate. May we be love. Amen.

October 11, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 36:1-7, More Than Enough

Theme: Faithful

Call to Worship

One: The presence of the Holy is here. Come, let us gather together. For with God with us, blessing abounds.

Many: God has blessed each one of us abundantly in ways that are evident and in ways that are still unfolding.

One: We come here to listen to God's story and to learn. Many: When we leave this place may we go and tell God's story. One: Today, may our story and God's stories come together. All: And may we be bearers of Good News!

Invocation

Today, God calls on us again to be God's own people; to recommit all of who we are to serving God and loving one another. We are here together because God is in this place. Siblings in Christ, let us be still and listen to what God is speaking today. May the God who blesses us be blessed by us. Amen.

Offering Meditation

"Stop giving money to the church! We have too much!" Can you imagine if I said that this morning? What if we no longer needed a stewardship emphasis because our church bank accounts were filling up faster than we can use the money to serve God? When Moses put out a call to the Israelites to provide freewill offerings for the building of the sanctuary, the response was so overwhelming Moses actually had to turn gifts away.

Don't worry, the church will NEVER turn away your gift, but wouldn't it be nice if we could say, like Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough." It's not a question of whether or not we have enough, because we know we do. No matter our individual circumstances, each one of us has something unique we can bring to share in community. We are all blessed beyond abundance by God. The question is whether or not we are ready to share that abundance in order to meet the needs we see every day around us. In our scripture today, the people brought freewill offerings every morning. For us, every morning is a new opportunity to give of who we are for the building of God's sanctuary in this world. Sometimes it feels like the need in this world is too much. May we be able to say the same of our offerings, both those we make every morning and those we collect now in worship.

Offering Prayer

Giving God, you have blessed us beyond measure, not because we deserve it, but because you love us beyond measure. May these offerings we return to you today symbolize our gratitude for your generosity. Use these gifts and use us to bless others. Amen.

Communion Meditation

We live in a world of excess. Why have one of something when you can have two? Why buy a small TV when you can have a bigger TV? We get caught in the consumerist trap of “more is better.” And yet, when we come to this table, we are met with the most meager of meals. A small piece of bread, a thimble-full of wine. Really? Is that all God has to offer us?

And yet, we know that what this simple meal represents is an abundance: an abundance of grace, an abundance of forgiveness, an abundance of love. This table is more than enough for us, because what we receive here overflows from us into the dark and empty spaces around us – hospital rooms, broken homes, shatter hearts - transforming them into sanctuaries where God can reside. All are welcome at this table, because there is more than enough here for everyone.

Prayer Station

Set out several baskets with single dollar bills (yes, real money), index cards, and the following instructions. Plan to display the index cards by hanging them with painter’s tape on a window or use a bulletin board near the entrance of your worship space the next time you gather.

Instructions: It’s true! Every day, we are living in abundance. The church is literally giving away money today to illustrate the concept we explored in Exodus 36. Take one dollar and an index card. This week, think about how you can use your single dollar as a way to bring the realm of God closer to a reality for all God’s people.

Write a note on the card about how you used your dollar, and bring it back to worship next week to share and trade ideas.

Notes: If your church has the budget to cover this station, say a prayer of thanksgiving. It may be that you need to ask if there’s someone or a small group of people in your church that will underwrite this prayer experience.

If you’re feeling extra ambitious, you can explore the idea of making a DIY custom ATM for your church. Check this link on youtube: [https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=idsBg-m0NZM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idsBg-m0NZM)

November 22, 2020

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, I Myself Will Be the Shepherd of My Sheep

Theme: Faithful

"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." God seeks us out in divine faithfulness to us—providing for us, etc. How do we respond?

Call to Worship

Leader: The voice of Jesus calls his people, like a shepherd calls the flock, "Come, follow me!"

Left Side: We follow Jesus because we long to learn a world-changing way of loving, and because we are inspired by his deeply courageous compassion.

Right Side: We follow Jesus because he is faithful and constant. Again and again, he brings our wandering spirits back to find peace and comfort with him.

Leader: Jesus is calling us in this moment, and always.

All: Here we are, Jesus. Guide us, O Christ!

Invocation

Hear us now, O God, as we pray to you. We are all too aware that we have strayed from your guidance for us. In both big and small ways, we have lost our sense of center in you. Through this time together, encourage us to find our way back to where you are. Pull us together as one flock. Help us to hear your voice calling our names, and renew in us your call to genuine kindness and care for the world. Amen.

Offering Meditation

An English bishop decided to pay a visit to a young minister who had been at a small church on the outskirts of London for about a year. The minister was a little defensive about the lack of progress he seemed to be having in his church, so when the bishop asked him how things were going he said, "Well, you can't exactly set the world on fire in a year, now can you?" "Of course not," said the bishop. "But I would hope that if you happened to fall into the river you would at least sizzle."

Yes—God wants us to at least sizzle. God doesn't expect each of us to set the world ablaze with love overnight, but God does want us to lend our spark, our joy, our faithfulness, our love—our sizzle to life each day!

Offering Prayer

God, just like a good shepherd, you watch over us and provide for us. In all that we do, guide us that we might bring the best of ourselves to share with a world in need of love and hope. May the gifts that we give today bring a little spark, joy, and sizzle into the world. Amen.

Communion Meditation

Most of us are familiar with the feeling of eating too much—it's hard to resist indulging at a feast, after all. But as I stand here today, I'm hungry. I'm not hungry for food: I'm hungry for forgiveness, I'm hungry for grace; I'm hungry to know that I am still loved, despite how short I've fallen in my life. There's nothing in this world, not even Aunt Karen's casserole, that can satisfy the hunger we feel in our souls, except for the feast laid out on this table. The cup and the bread are the mainstays that quell our hunger to know that we matter.

I don't know what you are hungry for today, but I can almost guarantee you are hungry for something. Maybe you need to know you're more than your mistakes. Maybe you need to know there's new life after a bitter ending. Maybe you need to be reminded that God loves you for who you are and is calling you to be more than who you are. No matter the depth of your hunger, there's a place for you at this table. Don't worry, you can't eat too much! And, don't hold back—there's enough here for everyone! Come to the table, and receive the feast of Christ!

Prayer Station

Set out extra-large cotton balls and the following instructions.

Like sheep wandering in the fields, we sure can get ourselves in trouble. One of the major dangers of modern life is to become callous. Our human instinct to harden ourselves comes from our fear of vulnerability. Pick up a cotton ball here, and let your mind prayerfully wander into the pleasant pastures described in the book of Psalms. Feel the softness you are holding in your hands, and pray that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will supply you with the ability to keep your heart soft, open and responsive to others.

Music

Traditional

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

“He Leadeth Me”

“God Is My Shepherd”

“My Shepherd, You Supply My Need”

“The Voice of Jesus Calls His People”

“The Lord Is My Shepherd” (choral, John Rutter)

Alternative

“He Leadeth Me” (Sara Watkins)

“Savior Like A Shepherd” (Andra Moran)

“Follow the Shepherd Home” (Mindy Smith)

“Psalm 23” (Andra Moran)

“Hills and Valleys” (Tauren Wells)

Benediction

Friends, as we leave, let us go out with peaceful hearts, knowing that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, provides for our needs. Let us go now, taking peace with us to share!

December 13, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, They Will be Called Oaks of Righteousness

Theme: Faithful

“They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD.” This is a strong social justice message relative to caring for others which becomes our true identity as the people of God.

Call to Worship

One: The Spirit of the Lord is upon us!

All: God has anointed us to bring good news to the oppressed,

One: To bind up the brokenhearted,

All: To proclaim liberty to the captives, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor!

One: We come together as God’s people, claiming Isaiah’s vision of justice and service.

All: Indeed we come following Jesus Christ who fulfilled Isaiah’s vision in his life for us all. All praise and thanks to God, now and forever!

Invocation

Loving God, we come as your people—courageous yet afraid, enlivened yet hesitant. Touch our hearts today so we can see with eyes of compassion. Fill us with your Spirit as we gather so that we can be fueled with energy to follow the way of Jesus. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

Offering Meditation

There are few things that motivate us to action like seeing an instance of gross injustice or wanton cruelty. Yet we live in a world where these very things are increasingly woven into the fabric of life. In many ways, we have become accustomed to them. We shrug our shoulders and think, “Well, I can’t do anything about it.” Thus we sink deeper into the quicksand of the status quo where the rich grind the faces of the poor and the strong trample the rights of the weak. We could wonder if it makes any difference in our world when people gather to sing and pray and give and receive each Sunday. Let us imagine today that it does make a difference—God knows it, and in the heart of our hearts, we know it too. Part of that difference comes from our giving to support the ministries of our church and our outreach ministries. Let us receive our offerings.

Offering Prayer

In the name of Jesus we offer these gifts to you, God. We give these gifts as we give you ourselves, with love and faithfulness to you. Amen.

Communion Meditation

We are people who eat and drink. We do it several times a day. We need food to survive and thrive. Without nourishment we would quickly wither and die. Jesus gave us a simple and profound way to remember him with these very basics of life: food and drink. We are reminded that when we are nourished by God, our lives are rich and full. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. So come! Come to Christ's table with empty hands and open hearts to receive the nourishing blessings of God.

Prayer Station

Print several copies of Isaiah 61:1-2 in large type. Print each one of the thought starters below on a separate sheet of paper in large type as well. Prepare for graffiti-style responses by setting these prompts on top of long tables covered in paper tablecloths, or setting out large chalk boards or flip charts. Be sure to space the questions out widely so there is plenty of room for response.

You may also want to print these questions on a hand out and tuck them into the bulletin for people to take home as journal prompts, or use one or two of the questions as conversation starters on social media threads.

Which of these acts in scripture would you call "love-in-deed?" Any? All?

1. Are any of the acts named in this scripture controversial today? In what ways?
2. What movements of change are you paying attention to in the world? Note that this can be anything from global politics to small changes in your community.
3. Who are the leaders of these movements? Do you know how they got started?
4. Can you feel the Spirit of the Lord anointing you? As a follower of Jesus, how can you participate in Christ's ministry of justice and service? What gifts do you have that you can add to the work of Christ? What can you do in your church or community to show God's love?
5. Acknowledging it's not just what we can do, it is also how we can be, ask yourself: Can I be more loving, caring and attentive? Can I be a better listener? How can I tune in better to the needs of others?

Music

Traditional

“Standing in the Need of Prayer”

“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”

“Be Thou My Vision”

“They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”

“Jesus Calls Us O’er the Tumult”

Alternative

“What Does the Lord Require Of You” (Jim Strathee round)

“Lead Me On” (Amy Grant)

“What Do You Want From Me” (Andra Moran)

“I Hear a Call” (Emmylou Harris)

Benediction

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you! Bring good news to the oppressed. Bind up the brokenhearted. Serve God in the power of the Holy Spirit. Go in Peace! Amen.



Children's Sermons

January 26, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23, Come and Follow Me

Theme: Faithful

Ask the children to raise your hand if they have. . .

been fishing?

caught any fish?

caught something other than fish?

What did you catch?

(If you prefer, ask the children to just raise their hand if they caught something other than fish. (Be prepared for any and all kinds of interesting answers!)

Did any of you catch people?

No? Well, guess what? Jesus did!

Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee and decided he needed some helpers. Jesus saw two brothers: Simon—who is called Peter—and Andrew. The brothers were fishing. Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for PEOPLE”. They left everything and followed Jesus. As they walked, they saw James and John. Jesus said to them too: “Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for PEOPLE.” They left everything and followed Jesus.

Jesus called these helpers, disciples. Jesus and his disciples helped people who were sick, fed people who were hungry, and told everyone about the good news of God's kingdom.

The disciples are showing us something called stewardship. Have you heard that word before?

Stewardship means taking care of others. The disciples are showing us how to practice stewardship when they leave everything behind to follow Jesus and help others.

January 26, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

Jesus wants us to follow him just like the disciples did! Can you do that? I think we can!

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.

(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for people who teach us how to follow Jesus. Help us be helpers like the disciples, and show us how to practice stewardship just like the disciples did. Amen.

February 9, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Is this not the Fast I Choose

Theme: Loving

(If the Scripture has not already been read, consider reading Isaiah 58:1-9a in an easily-understandable version, or tell the story of the Scripture.)

In our story today, there are some people who are acting a certain way just to get recognized or to have someone else say, "Way to go!" Do you know anyone like that?

God is not happy with these people. God wants us to do things because they are the right things to do and the right ways to live as people of God.

For example, let's say you are playing outside at recess and you see someone sitting all by themselves and not playing with anyone. You decide to ask them to play just so you can hear your teacher say, "Oh, wow! That was so nice that you made a new friend."

It is nice to listen to someone who gives you a compliment, right? I like that too. But did you play with the friend just to hear someone tell you that it was a nice thing to do? Or did you play with them because you are loving and following Jesus, and it is what Jesus would want you to do?

That is what God is upset about. God's people are doing things to make themselves look good. God isn't upset about what they are doing, but why they are doing it.

If you want to be friends with someone who doesn't have anyone to play with, then do it because you are following Jesus. Be nice to others because Jesus says, "Love your neighbor." Don't do it just to hear someone say, "Good job."

Do you think you can practice that this week? I will practice it too.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,
Thank you for this lesson
that helps us learn to do things for others,
and helps us to be honest and loving in our actions,
because it is the right thing to do as followers of Jesus. Amen.

March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11, Our Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

Theme: Hopeful

Today I would like to talk to you about sin. Has anyone heard this word before?

What is a sin?

Something you do wrong. Something that is not loving. Not being nice to others. Not taking care of others.

I think the greatest sin is NOT to love, or NOT being loving towards others.

There is good news too!

We have the good news in Jesus. God sent God's son, Jesus, to forgive our sins.

For example, let's say you hurt a friend. You can ask Jesus to forgive you and to help you be nice to that friend again. Jesus will forgive you, but Jesus also wants you to try not to sin again.

Jesus wants you to be nice and loving with your friends. And, Jesus also wants you to be nice, caring and loving with people that aren't your friends too!

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.

(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for sending us your son Jesus
to forgive our sins.

Help us to learn how to love and care for others

Just like you love and care for us. Amen.

April 26, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, What Shall I Return to the Lord

Theme: Loving

Today in our psalm we are going to hear the words, "What can I give back to the Lord for all the Lord has given to me?"

(Depending upon your order of service, reference that the Psalm was read, or will be read. You also can read Psalm 116:1-4; 12-29 to the children using an easily-understandable version.)

What does the Lord give to us?

EVERYTHING!

Everything we have comes from God. So we should give back to God what is God's. God is just letting us use and borrow it for a short time.

This is why we collect an offering.

Later in the service when we pass the offering plate we are collecting money. The money is one way we can give back to God what is God's to begin with.

(Depending upon your order of service, reference that the offering was received, or will be received.)

Do you know what the money is used for?

*Caring for God's people. Giving food to those who are hungry. Helping everyone have clean water to drink and healthy food to eat. Some is sent across the world to help others and some of it stays right here in our community.

**use examples from your own congregation*

Now I was wondering, what do you do if you don't have any money to give for the offering? Guess what? You can still be good stewards and by giving your time and talents, and maybe something you have, too.

*You could donate toys to children who may not have any. You could donate your time to the church. Maybe you could offer to help dust the pews, or pick up and recycle bulletins after worship? Or bake something for coffee hour. Those are great ways to give back to God and care for others.

**use examples from your own congregation*

April 26, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for trusting us,
to care for your people and your world.
Help us to give back to you what is originally yours.
Help us to use the money we collect in the offering,
and to help others have clean water to drink
and healthy food to eat.
Help us to remember there are other ways to give too, like sharing our time and talents with
the church. Amen.

May 3, 2020

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47, They Held All Things In Common

Theme: Loving

Children's Sermon

*Internet instructions for this finger play or they can be found here

<https://www.wikihow.com/Create-a-Church-With-Your-Fingers>

*Teach children and congregation this finger play. You may need to repeat it a few times depending on its familiarity.

Here is the church, here is the steeple;
Open the doors and see all the people.

If I asked you, what is the church, what would you tell me?

I used to think this was the church
(Use hands to show the building/sanctuary)

But now I think the PEOPLE are the Church.

Let's see if we remember our finger play.
Repeat finger play

Here is the church; here is the steeple
Open the doors and see all the people

The PEOPLE are the Church.

The church is each and every one of us.
God wants us to be the church together.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for people.
Help us to be the church together
and love others like you love us. Amen.

June 7, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 4a, And God Proclaimed It All Very Good

Theme: Loving

Today we are going to talk about stewardship of creation.

Does anyone remember what the word stewardship means?

Yes, stewardship means taking care of something. In the story you will hear today, God is trusting to be good stewards of the Earth and take care of all of creation.

I need your help to tell this story. When I say what day something was created, will you hold up that number of fingers? And when we get to the part where God says, "It was good," can you say that with me? Now we need all those people sitting out there to help us too. Will you help us?

On the first (*hold up one finger*) day, God made the light and God said, (*encourage children and congregation to say together - continue this for each day of creation*) "It was good."

On the second (*hold up 2 fingers*) day, God made the sky and the water and God said, "It was good."

On the third (*hold up 3 fingers*) day God made dry land and God said, "It was good."

On the fourth (*hold up 4 fingers*) day God made the sun, moon and stars, and God said, "It was good."

On the fifth (*hold up 5 fingers*) day, God made the fish and the birds, and God said, "It was good."

On the sixth (*hold up 6 fingers*) day, God made people! And God said, "It was good."

God didn't say it was good. God said, "It was VERY good!"

God said it was VERY good because God made people to take care of the rest of creation: to care for the fish and the birds, to take care of the dry land and the water, and to take care of each other.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(*invite congregation to pray too*)

Dear God, thank you for creating the earth and the animals.

Most of all, thank you for creating us.

Help us to be good stewards of the earth, and to care for each other. Amen.

July 26, 2020

Scripture: Romans 8:26-29, Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of God

Theme: Hopeful

(Preparation: have heart stickers available for each child.)

I have good news to share with you today.

God loves you!

Did you know that?

God loves each and every one of you!

God loves each and every one of those people in the pews too. God loves me!

God loves our pastor(s)!

The other part of the good news is that there is NOTHING we can do to make God stop loving us.

Raise your hand if you have ever had a fight with your parents.

Guess what, God still loves you!

Raise your hand if you took something that wasn't yours.

That wasn't a nice thing to do, but God still loves you!

Raise your hand if you didn't help someone who needed it.

Jesus wants us to help others, but if you forget, God will still love you!

After our prayer, I would like to give you a special heart sticker. When you look at this sticker it will remind you that God loves you and will always love you.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.

(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for sending your son Jesus to love and care for us.

Help us to remember there is NOTHING we can do to make God stop loving us. Amen.

August 30, 2020

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21, Rejoice in Hope

Theme: Hopeful

(Depending upon your order of service, reference that the scripture was read, or will be read. You also can read Romans 12:9-21 to the children using an easily-understandable version.)

Do any of you have rules at your house?

Do any of you have rules at school you need to follow?

Why do you think we have rules?

Rules can keep us safe.

Rules can teach us things.

Rules can help us learn how to care for other people.

In our story today, Paul is giving us Jesus's rules for loving others.

The first rule is, "Be happy with those that are happy and cry with those who are crying." This sounds like being a good friend. Do you think we can do that? I think we can.

The second rule is, "Pray."

When should you pray?

What should you pray for?

Remember to pray for other people.

Remember to thank God for creating us.

Remember to thank God for sending his son, Jesus, to teach us rules for loving others.

The third rule is, "Love everyone like members of your family and treat everyone as a friend."

That sounds easy, right?

When Jesus said this he said to love EVERYONE. That includes people that you don't like, and people that are mean to you.

Hmmmm...that sounds a little harder.

Have you ever had to be nice to someone you didn't like? Or be nice to someone who is mean to you? How easy is it to love them? To be nice to them?

August 30, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

This could be something you pray for. You could pray to ask God to help you to be nice and kind to someone who isn't nice and kind to you.

I have prayed to God and asked for help with this and I bet a bunch of the people out in the congregation have too.

Let's pray for this now,

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for sending us Jesus,
to give us rules to follow for how you want us to live.
Help us to follow the rules and be nice to others,
especially those people that are not nice to us. Amen.

September 22, 2020

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13, For God is at Work in You

Theme: Loving

(Preparation: invite a volunteer to play the role of the leader and Jesus; Invite a volunteer to play the role of the person who fell down; invite a volunteer to play the role of the hungry person, as found in Philippians 2:1-13.)

Today we are going to play a game.
We are going to play follow the leader.

“Name of Volunteer” is our leader and you need to do everything they do.

(Leader pats head, turns around, skips through sanctuary, etc. Children (and you) follow the leader.)

There is a story we are going to hear today later in worship about Jesus. In this story Jesus wants us to follow him and be just like him.

(Depending upon your order of service, reference that the scripture was read, or will be read. You also can read Philippians 2:1-13 to the children using an easily-understandable version.)

Now, “Name of Volunteer” is going to be Jesus and we will all follow Jesus.

One day Jesus is walking along and finds a person who is hurt. Maybe they fell down. Jesus picks them up and helps them on their way.

Jesus acts out picking the person up, brushing them off and sending them on their way. Encourage the children to do the same.

Jesus keeps walking and sees someone asking for money to buy food because they are hungry. Jesus gives them some extra food from his bag.

Jesus acts out giving food from bag. Encourage the children to do the same.

Jesus knows he might be hungry later, but the person he sees probably didn't have any breakfast. Even if he had, Jesus still gave him his food.

Jesus helps people who are hurt and people who are hungry. Jesus wants us to help people that are hurt and hungry too. Hmmmm, this sounds like taking care of people. Do you remember that big word we use when we talk about God wanting us to care for something or someone?

September 22, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

Yes, it's stewardship.

Caring for people that are hurt and hungry is showing good stewardship for God's people.

Do you think we can follow Jesus and help others who need it?

I think we can.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.

(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for sending your son, Jesus
to show us the way to live and take care of others.

Help us to remember to follow Jesus. Amen.

October 11, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 36:1-7, More Than Enough

Theme: Faithful

Have you ever been to a worship service that was not inside a church? (Allow for responses.) Sometimes we have worship services outside at camp, or at a church picnic, or some other occasion.

What would it be like if we didn't have our church building and we had to worship outside every week? (Allow for responses.) It might be nice when we have a lovely, sunny day, but it might not be much fun when it was raining, snowing, windy, very cold, or very hot.

(Depending upon your order of service, reference that the scripture was read, or will be read. You also can read Exodus 36:1-7 to the children using an easily-understandable version.)

In our scripture today, we learn about Bezalel, Oholiab, Moses, and the Israelites. For many, many years, the Israelites didn't have a church to worship in like we do. In fact, for a very long time they didn't even have homes, because they were traveling from their old homes in Egypt to their new homes in the Promised Land. And it took them forty years to get there! At first, they didn't have any kind of a structure where they could worship God. But in the book of Exodus before this story, God gives Moses—the leader of the Israelites—plans to build a tabernacle—a big tent—that the Israelites could use for worship as they continued to travel to the Promised Land.

Here is a picture of what the tabernacle might have looked like. *(Show picture on page 166.)* It was a big, big tent: about forty-five feet long, fifteen feet wide, and fifteen feet high. *(If possible, compare to the size of your sanctuary, or a well-known space like a Sunday school room or fellowship hall.)* And there were many, many special things for worship inside the tabernacle, just like we have many special things in our sanctuary for our worship. Can you imagine taking all the things we have in our church and putting them in a big tent and putting the tent up and down every week? (Allow for responses.)

In our story today, the Israelites were finally ready to build the tabernacle. Everyone was excited, and many people wanted to help! Some helped because God gave them talents as good carpenters and sewers and metal-workers. Some helped by giving money and things. And they gave, and they gave, and they gave...and do you know what? They gave so much that Moses said they had more than enough and could stop giving!

We can learn a lot from the Israelites. We can learn to be grateful for our worship space. We can learn to use the talents and skills God gives us for the glory of God and our neighbors' good. And we can learn to give and give and give, so that we have more than enough to make our church building a place that helps everyone who comes here learn more about God.

October 11, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for our worship space.
Thank you for our friends and family who join us in worship.
Help us to give and give and give
So everyone who comes here can learn more about you.
Amen.



November 22, 2020

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, I Myself Will Be the Shepherd of My Sheep

Theme: Faithful

(Preparation: have a shepherd's crook for a visual prop: either a real crook or a picture. You may have a shepherd's crook as part of a painting or artwork in your sanctuary.)

What do you think this is?

Yes, is it called a shepherd's crook.

What do you think it is for?

It is for herding sheep and keeping sheep in one place like in their pen or stable.

Today we are going to talk about shepherds and sheep.

What do you think a shepherd's job is?

A shepherd's job is to take care of the sheep.

If a sheep gets lost the shepherd goes to look for it to bring it back home. If there is a sheep that is eating all the food and the other sheep don't have any, the shepherd will make sure the sheep shares with the other sheep.

God cares for us just like a shepherd cares for his sheep.

God makes sure God's people get enough food and enough water. God makes sure we have a place to sleep. God makes sure that everyone has just enough and has just what they need. God needs our help with this too. If you have a lot of food at your house, share some with others. If you have lots of clothes and you can't possibly wear them all at once share them with someone else.

Hmmmm, this sounds like something we have talked about before. I'll give you a hint, it is a word which starts with the letter s. Yes, it's stewardship.

Helping God by taking care of others is a great way to practice stewardship.

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.

(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

Thank you for shepherds and sheep.

We ask that you help us care for others just like a shepherd cares for their sheep. Amen.

December 13, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, They Will be Called Oaks of Righteousness

Theme: Faithful

(Preparation: be ready to demonstrate anointing with olive oil. Check with your clergy about your church's practices regarding anointing. She/he can also help you with supplies. If appropriate, the anointing can be offered to the entire congregation, either as part of the children's sermon or at the end of worship.)

A long time ago there lived a person named Isaiah.

Isaiah was a prophet.

A prophet is someone that God speaks through to deliver a message.

God anointed the prophet Isaiah.

Does anyone know what it means to anoint someone?

Have you heard that word before, *anoint*?

When God anoints Isaiah, God blesses him to go out and deliver God's message.

God sent the prophet Isaiah to bring good news to the poor and to comfort those who are sad and hurting.

*I am going to anoint you today. I will make the sign of the cross on the back of your hand. After you are anointed today, you are blessed by God and by all the people here to go out and do God's work in the world, and to go out and show good stewardship by caring for the God's people.

**Check with your clergy about your church's practices regarding anointing.*

Does anyone remember that word, *stewardship*?

What does it mean?

Yes, it means taking care of something or someone.

What are some ways you could do God's work in the world and show stewardship to others?

December 13, 2020 Children's Sermon – 2

Will you pray with me? Please repeat after me.
(invite congregation to pray too)

Dear God,

*Thank you for the prophet Isaiah.
Today we bless and anoint these children
to go out into the world and do your work.
Be with us as we bring good news to the poor
and comfort those who are sad and hurting.
God, please be with us all
as we practice stewardship by caring for other people. Amen

**If you will not be anointing the children, you can remove the words and anoint from the second line of the prayer.*



Introduction

What is Stewardship? This question adorns many books on pastors' shelves, is the subject line of many emails sent to church leaders, and is a scary subject to discuss. Often stewardship is understood as only dealing with money. If that is the only aspect of stewardship that you know, I am sorry. If you understand money as the dominant aspect of stewardship, I am also sorry.

Money is *one* aspect of stewardship. Stewardship is much bigger than this one thing. Stewardship makes an appearance at the beginning of all creation. In the creation story of Genesis 1, as God is finalizing all of what creation is supposed to be about, God says to humanity, "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."²

Dominion does not mean ownership. To understand what dominion means, it is wise to look at Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." (Ps 24:1) The world may be ours to live in, but the ownership is God's...we are renters. As renters, we have the task, the honor, the responsibility to be good tenants of all that God has created.

I am a big comic book fan. I have a couple favorites, and one of them is the Miles Morales version of Spiderman. I was awestruck by the *Spiderman into the Spiderverse* movie, and I am currently reading the Miles Morales version of Spiderman. At the end of the third comic of Miles Morales Spiderman (LGY#243), Miles writes the following thoughts in his journal; "'With great power there must also come great responsibility.' The first Spider-Man used to quote that at me all the time. I've been to other planets. I know androids and demigods. But real talk? Our neighbors are more important than alien invasions or global conspiracies. And the people around us are our great responsibility."³

I would add onto that thought that all of God's creation is our responsibility. If we are to truly understand the depth and nature of God's call to stewardship that began in the book of Genesis, then we must see that stewardship is not just about our money: it also is about our time, our neighbors, our enemies, the people like us, those unlike us, the ones we agree with,

² Genesis 1:28 (CEB)

³ Ahmed, S. Miles Morales: Spider-Man [Cartoon] New York, NY: Marvel, 2019.

Youth Studies Introduction –2

the ones we disagree with, the Earth both in our backyard and across the world, the world currently, and the world to come. Stewardship is not a conservative or progressive idea. It is a God idea.

I desire to have us explore the different ways we might see stewardship played out in our lives by using Scripture to guide the conversation. Any time we study the Bible, it is important that we be aware of some things:

1. The time in which Scripture was written helped shape how scripture was heard in its time.
2. The Bible comes with a lot of baggage, as it has been used for generations for good and bad things.
3. The continuing revelation of God reminds us that we are not going to know everything God does. Jesus says as much in Matthew 24:36.
4. When studying the Bible, it is good to ask questions. Questions mean those who are hearing are trying to listen and understand. Jesus says that we are to humble ourselves like children to enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Children ask questions. Youth ask questions. Questions are good. Let us now question the idea of stewardship.

⁴ Matthew 18:2-4

January 26, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23, Come and Follow Me

Theme: Faithful

Read the Scripture text: Matthew 4:12-23

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are five parts, each ending with a discussion question. For an hour time block, allow approximately 10-12 minutes for reading the part and answering the question. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Section 1

The first disciples were dumb. Really, they were. We look at them with a sort of romantic view, but we would be better served to see them for what they are: ill-advised people making impetuous decisions that will have lifelong repercussions for them. They were dumb. Imagine for a second that you are working at your job. It is tedious, tiresome, and relentless. In the middle of the day, you find yourself confronted with yet another person who is yelling at you for something you didn't do, or something that you had no control over. And then, suddenly, in the midst of being yelled at by customer number 1,000,000, a man shows up and says to you, "Come and follow me!" Tempting, isn't it? Anything to get out of what you are doing.

But then you remember why you are working. You have bills to pay, you have obligations, you are saving for a big purchase, etc. And you smile at the man and say, "I'd love to, but I have work to do here. Sorry." And the man leaves. When the grumpy customer leaves, you find yourself thinking about what it would have been like to follow that weird guy. You know that it is not a smart idea to do it, because, well, because. Logically, you know there is no point in entertaining what it might have been like to follow that guy at work. But you can't shake the thought. You know that to follow that man would be dumb by every measurable standard. If you know it is dumb, if you know that it is unwise, if you know that choosing to follow that man would have been incredibly scary, unnecessarily risky, and the complete opposite of everything *Stranger Danger* taught you, then why do you keep thinking about it? Yes, to follow that man would have been dumb...but what if. . .

The disciples were dumb, by every measurable standard of the day, and by the standards of our day. ***What is something dumb that you have done?***

Section 2

It is important to recognize that the wisdom in following Jesus is going to be considered foolish, uneducated, even dumb. It bears mentioning that just because something is dumb, doesn't mean we should do it. Sometimes, dumb is dumb. But sometimes, dumb can be faith-filled. It is not easy to know the difference between what is dumb and what is faith-filled.

Jesus' call to these first disciples follows a whirlwind set of experiences. Just a few months before this calling, Jesus was baptized by his cousin and in front of many, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the voice of God spoke. It truly was one of those amazing experiences that we all clamor for: a clear and unmistakable interaction with God. Jesus then goes into the desert for forty days and is tempted three times by Satan. Oh, yeah: and Jesus was fasting during this time period. Hangry doesn't even begin to talk about it. When Jesus comes out of the desert, he finds out that his cousin has been arrested. ***Was Jesus afraid?***

Section 3

Jesus goes around proclaiming, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" If Jesus was afraid, he wasn't quiet: he spoke up. It would have been smart for him to be quiet. People knew who he was in relation to John the Baptist, and to go around talking, even a little bit, like John, was...well...dumb. Lay low, Jesus! Let things calm down before you do what you're going to do. Jesus seems to double down on the dumb; he starts recruiting people. The first disciples don't seem to negotiate with Jesus when they hear the call. There is no discussion about work week, expectations, hours, benefits, health insurance, pay scales, coworkers, travel expenses, anything. Nothing was discussed. Just "Come, follow me. And I will show you how to fish for people." So, is this 1) the best pitch meeting of all time, 2) the fishermen were really tired and at that point, anything seemed better than fish, or 3) something else is going on here.

It isn't often that people get such a clear call from God about what they are supposed to do. Many of us struggle to hear and experience the call of God in our lives. There is so much noise and distraction that I wonder if we even *hear* like the disciples did. ***How do you feel God speak to you?***

Section 4

The disciples hear Jesus call to them and they follow. Yes they were dumb. And they were faithful. By every measure of the world in which they lived, their decision to follow Jesus proved to be a problem. Some were imprisoned, some went into hiding, some made difficult journeys to other countries, and some were killed for their decision to follow Jesus.

Yet, here we are, nearly 2000 years after their choice to follow, and we are talking about their dumb choice. Either the disciples' decision was the dumbest decision ever, or there is something else going on in this story. It is often said that faith is belief without evidence. That argument would seem to be true here, at least on first glance. But what if there was something else going on, something that we don't see, yet we understand completely. What if there was

something else going on? What if following Jesus reached a deeper something than people could understand, at least until they follow?

Describing the disciples' decision to follow Jesus as dumb is meant to have us examine and question why we follow Jesus. If we follow Jesus without examining *why* we follow Jesus then maybe we are the dumb ones. For the disciples, each day following Jesus gave them reasons to examine why they followed Jesus. Each examination would lead to more and more questions and they would ask those questions of Jesus. Yes, following Jesus seemed to not have any questions at the beginning, but the questions would flow later. Yes, following Jesus would lead to hardship, times of doubt, fear, and wondering what they were doing.

This is a key stewardship concept for people of faith. Stewardship is working to assure that using what God has given us, and seeing our resources as entrusted to us, we live a life focused on following God's call. This call may seem problematic, it may seem contrary to what we would like to do, it may call us to suspend our earthly logic and rely on the logic of God, and it will be scary. It might be seen as dumb, and our communities may not understand or support what we feel, but we sense somehow that we are supposed to do something that we just can't explain.

While it would be easy—romantic, even—to just do what we want, it is also key to see that these first disciples had others with them. The journey to follow God is not one that is done alone. It is one that asks of us to assure that we have people whom we can rely upon, who love us, and seek to help us grow into who God has created us to be. ***What would your community look like?***

Part 5

Indeed it is faithful to have others be a part of your journey, even if your journey calls you to live radically different than you would otherwise choose to live. Good stewardship is trusting that the call from God will lead where God desires. The question is, Will we follow?

The disciples, dumb by the world's standards, modeled a new standard: a godly standard that may require people to do things that they wouldn't have thought possible or even logical. We are also called, just as the disciples were. How will we respond to the call? It may call on people to leave their safe lives and embark on something completely unknown. It may call upon us to change how we see the world. ***What is the scariest thing you think God could call you to do?***

Closing prayer

Pray together: Lord, may we hear your call and follow. Steer us into your life so that we may reflect your call in this world. May we show your grace. Amen.

February 9, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Is this not the Fast I Choose

Theme: Loving

Read the Scripture text: Isaiah 58:1-9a

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson. For this lesson, you may want to use the Common English Bible version since it is referenced in the lesson.

There are seven parts, each ending with a discussion question. For an hour time block, allow approximately 5-8 minutes for reading the part and answering the question. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

Make no mistake about it; God is mad here. God wants those who claim God as their Lord to live in such a way that none could mistake who they are. Yet that is not what they are doing. They are living in such a way that you can't tell them apart from others. They look like everyone else. They are going through the motions of a religious community, but they are not engaging in the life that God wants them to live. They are glaring hypocrites. ***How can you tell when someone is not being authentic?***

Part 2

I love cars. My favorite cars are Mini Coopers. I fell in love with them when I watched *The Italian Job*. I love the idea of a little car that is so nimble that it can dart around roads, and then go on sidewalks (miraculously never hitting anyone...the Mini is amazing like that), go down stairs, and then be able to outrun law enforcement vehicles. The versatility and the beauty of that tiny little car stuck with me, and introduced me to the world of cars in ways I had never known.

There are also cars that I cannot stand. They cause me to wonder what was wrong with the engineers and designers of the car that made them think that was a good idea. But no car makes me more annoyed or frustrated as a car that looks like it has been worked on and appears to be an amazing version of that car, but it has only had a good washing and a noise-making exhaust added to it. The car that is made to look nice, but not actually be nice. There is a phrase that I use in those moments to sum up why I do not care for those cars; **all show and no go.**

In essence, it is a car that is worried about appearance, and not performance. ***What do you think is more important: appearance or performance? Why?***

Part 3

This idea of appearance over performance is one way to understand what Isaiah is talking about in today's scripture. Isaiah highlights some of the problems of God's people by saying, "Announce to my people their crime...on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists." (Is 58:1, 3-4 CEB) Fasting is an act of prayer, an act of worship, and a reminder of what truly is important in life. Fasting is an opportunity to think about how you can change your heart and mind to what God is calling you to do. **What are some of the ways you listen to God's calling and direction for you?**

Part 4

Performance can take many forms in life. For example, the performance of a car is dependent on where it is being tested and what it is being tested for. Racing usually measures speed and handling, depending on the type of racing. Everyday driving usually measures fuel mileage and miles on the odometer to determine effective or ineffective performance. A crash test measures how much force and protection is offered to people in the car when an accident occurs. To measure performance in a car, you have to know what you are looking for and why. The same is true when following God.

The prophet Isaiah is calling the people of Israel to a life that has a system of measurement based on how other people are treated. It isn't about the show, it isn't about how great the Israelites look, or how closely they appear to be following the acts of faith. Rather, the measurement is this: how are you treating other people? What is in the heart of the people of God? **When you think of your heart, what do you think of? What does the heart represent?**

Part 5

Isaiah's challenge, on behalf of God to God's people is "How have you shown God's love in this world?" That is the question that is at the...well...heart of this question. How has God's love been shown to the world? It is easy to condemn the world, it is easy to judge the world, but God is the one who holds the rights and ability to judge the world and all within it, including us. (Dt 32:35) Yet, for a very long time, the church has done a great job of judging, not loving. **When you felt judged, how did it feel? How does it feel when you judge others?**

Part 6

To be active and good stewards of God's love, we are to actively work to show God's love in the world. God's love is marked by many factors and many measurements of performance. Some show God's love by working for social justice. Others show God's love by visiting and listening to those who are alone. Still others show God's love by making sure the business and work of a faith community reflects the love of God. That is the first thing we should all ask ourselves when we are faced with a tough decision, or are faced with a stressful situation: **How can we show God's love?**

Part 7

That is not the only question to ask, but it may be the first question to ask. We are called to reflect God's freedom by sharing grace-filled, life-changing love.

I want to add one more point here at the end that absolutely must be discussed. Do not skip this, please. Love is a word that has many meanings. When we speak of love within the context of relationships, we must reflect a tenderness to the reality of abuse within those relationships. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do, the best way we can show God's love in this world, is to show love to ourselves and remove ourselves from relationships in which we are abused. Perhaps we need to remove ourselves from relationships in which we are enabling those who are battling addiction. There are very real moments and realities in our lives in which if we stay in the relationship, then we are not showing love: we are showing self-victimization in a way that does not help the one we love feel God's love. It can be loving to walk away. **Have you ever been in a situation where you showed God's love by walking away?**

Pray together: Lord, may our actions and lives reflect your love, not your judgment. We are called to be that witness in this world. Guide us with your love. Amen.

March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11, Our Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

Theme: Hopeful

Read the Scripture text: Romans 5:1-11

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are seven parts, each ending with a discussion question. For an hour time block, allow approximately 5-8 minutes for reading the part and answering the question. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

The Shawshank Redemption is an amazing movie. Admittedly, the R rating and the language can be off-putting for some people, but the content of the movie is quite powerful. It is a story of hope in a hopeless place, situation, and life. The focus of the movie is on the life and false imprisonment of Andy Dufresne (pronounced *Du-frain*). Andy was wrongly convicted of murdering his wife when he found her in bed with another man. The ultimate betrayal of someone he loved led to the betrayal of a justice system and thrust Andy into a world he did not deserve, nor could have imagined he would ever be a part of.

While incarcerated, Andy ends up befriending Red, a man whose conviction was many years before, and whose prominence within the prison community is held in high regard. Andy and Red develop a very close friendship. During one time in their long history inside prison together, Andy is released from solitary confinement, a punishment he incurred due to playing Mozart over the PA system in the prison. As he is talking with his friends, Andy has a powerful quote which I have slimmed down for this study: "That's the beauty of music, they can't get that from you...there are places in the world that aren't made out of stone. That there something inside that they can't get too, that they can't touch, it's yours...hope." **What is yours that no one can touch? What gives you hope?**

Part 2

Hope is maybe the most powerful four-letter word you will ever hear, speak or think about. Hope is something that can't be censored, it can't be monetized, it can't be taken, and it can't be controlled. It can be given away, it can be ignored, it can be mocked. According to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*, hope is defined as something "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true." Hope is the desire for something to happen that hasn't happened yet. That desire is very dangerous. **Why do you think hope is dangerous?**

Part 3

In response to Andy's statement on music and hope, Red replies that "Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside: you better get used to that idea." Red, who has been in prison longer than he has been out of prison, learned to survive and thrive in the prison world by ignoring hope. I think that Paul, the writer of our scripture text for today, would have appreciated this movie. Paul is writing to the church in Rome. At the time, Rome, which in our time is the home of the Vatican, was the seat of the mightiest superpower the world had seen. Rome had conquered vast lands and enforced its conquest with something called *Pax Romana*, Roman Peace.

This was not a peace based on satisfaction or a universal meeting of needs of all the people, but a peace based on fear: the fear of the Roman power, manifested in their mighty military. So long as the people followed the rules of the Roman power, then no one would be injured, hurt, or killed and peace would be maintained. Rome maintained a peace of no violence out of fear.

Is that really peace?

Part 4

According to Paul, hope comes from an unlikely place: it comes from our problems, our suffering. The moments in our lives that frustrate us, annoy us, and hurt us are the garden bed of hope. The power of hope comes from the belief that the pains, the struggles, the frustrations, the annoyances, and the fears of our lives and this world are not the *only* things in this world. Hope comes from those moments of pain that create endurance, then character, and then hope. It is a weird cycle of growth, but it is not wrong. Hope is the rejection of the status quo, rejection of the way things are, and the belief that something better is not only possible, it is coming. Hope is dangerous to those who want to keep things the way they are.

Paul points out the status quo—the way of the world—that people are unrighteous and ungodly and deserve to be punished. That is the weakness that Paul is referring to. Yet, within that weakness comes the chance to see the world differently, to experience the world differently, and to see hope where others would see only brokenness, weakness and sinfulness.

Where do you see hope?

Part 5

There is also a deeply vital reality that hope is a deep act of stewardship. Stewardship is about caring for what was and what is, and preparing for what is to come. Stewardship is about continuing the work that was done before by previous stewards. The current stewards provide care and supervise the health and growth of the work, and prepare for other stewards to take over. Hope is the fertilizer, the growth agent, the nectar of stewardship. If there is no hope, there is no one to care for what is now, and what is to come. It comes back to the struggle between Andy Duphrene and Red. **Was Andy right? Was Red right?**

Part 6

Perhaps the answer to those questions is yes. Hope refuses to accept the status quo. Hope rejects the status quo that perpetuates systems of oppression, structures of inequality, and dehumanizes people. Hope can drive someone to do some crazy things. **What is the craziest thing that you have done?**

Part 7

Hope does not disappoint, though it may leave us bruised and battered. We may have to crawl through some unsavory realities to find freedom. But hope is the fuel behind those actions that leave us amazed, inspired, challenged, and wondering: **how does hope show through us?**

Pray together: Lord, may your love bloom hope through our lives. Cause us to be active purveyors of your hope and grace in this world. AMEN.

April 26, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, What Shall I Return to the Lord

Theme: Loving

Read the Scripture text: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson. You may want to use the Common English Bible version since it is referenced in the lesson.

There are four parts, each ending with a discussion question. Part 4 includes watching a 5-minute video (you may want to have the video queued and ready to watch). For an hour time block, allow approximately 10-12 minutes for reading the part and answering the question for parts 1-3, and 15-18 minutes for part 4. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

Author's confession: I struggle with Psalms like this. I struggle because this passage feels as though it has been misused at worst, and abused at worst. It is impossible to ignore the suffering that we all experience. And to some degree or another, we all do. When there is deep suffering and sorrow, many people do not know how to react or how to comfort, so they make statements like, "All things work together for good," or "God wouldn't have brought you to something that God couldn't have brought you through." While those statements are true, they are often used as bandages on wounds that need to be stitched. The line in our Psalm that sticks out to me as problematic is, "What can I give back to the Lord for all the good things he has done for me?" **Have you had experiences or moments when someone tried to comfort you in your suffering and it didn't help? What was that like?**

Part 2

The question posed by the Psalmist is very important to review and discuss. While the passage may have some baggage, the examination and exploration of the question in all seasons of life is a good and healthy thing to do. The question of what can I give back to the Lord can seem a bit odd, because, well, God doesn't *need* anything really. God doesn't need like we do. In Psalm 50:12, God says, "Even if I were hungry, I wouldn't tell you because the whole world and everything in it already belong to me." Talk about the ultimate dilemma of what do you get the person who has everything!

Micah 6:6-8 brings into perspective what we can give back to the Lord. "He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." (Mi 6:8 CEB) The things that we are to give back to the Lord are the things that have already been given to us. Does that mean we are being ungrateful when we give back a gift? No. God wants this gift to be given to those in whom God's image is

placed: everyone. **What are some ways that you have “given back” to God? Is it easy or difficult to give back to God? Why?**

Part 3

This passage seems to be written from the perspective of someone who has come through the valley of despair, the season of sorrow, the struggle of life. Often when someone is struggling, simply applying a virtual bandage as was noted earlier is done not so much to help the person who is hurting but to help the person who is observing the hurt. Seeing someone in pain is uncomfortable. One of the lessons in this passage is: don't tell people who are suffering how they should feel when they face suffering.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but there is great hope in allowing people to experience what they feel. The writer of this Psalm experienced joy in the face of sorrows. In other Psalms (see Psalm 44 for example), the psalmist is quite clear about the sorrow and suffering that is being experienced. The psalmist understands that God's love endures: “Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.” Ps 44:26), but this does not ease the experience of suffering. **What does it feel like to see someone suffer? What does it feel like to be seen suffering?**

Part 4

I want to invite you to stop here and go to YouTube and search with this sentence; “The Skit Guys Mourning Booth.” Go ahead. I'll wait.

One of the ways that we can exude the hope of God is to honor the sorrow that others feel. Pain and suffering are things that we all experience. To be good stewards of our relationships, we must not overlook the sorrows and the suffering, but acknowledge, be present with it, and when possible, defend against it. There are no quick solutions to suffering, yet the hope in God shines when we are willing to recognize the importance of investing in one another's lives: good, bad and everything in between. **Are there ways you can show hope in God when you experience suffering, or when you see suffering?**

Pray together: Lord, may we give back to you the grace, patience and wisdom you have shown us in places of sorrow and places of joy. May we show your hopeful love to others. AMEN.

May 3, 2020

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47, They Held All Things In Common

Theme: Loving

Read the Scripture text: Acts 2:42-47

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are six parts, each ending with a discussion question. For an hour time block, allow approximately 10 minutes for reading each part and answering the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

When we see the works of Jesus, the prophets, the disciples—in fact, all of the characters in Scripture—there is definitely a political background related to all of them. Jesus is showing that the political might and peace of Rome and the ruling Jewish leaders are not the ways of the Lord. Moses stands up to Pharaoh, literally believed to be a living god. Paul is arrested because his message of adherence to Jesus challenges the ruling powers wherever he seems to go. Following the life, teaching, arrest, murder and resurrection of Jesus, there is an act of protest against the powers of this world as much as it is an act of faithful love.

“They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” (Acts 2:46) Food makes me happy as well. But the politics of the table—who was welcome to it and what was set on the table—were very important messages to people as well. **What is your favorite food? What does it feel like to share that food with someone new?**

Part 2

While the selling of possessions and holding all things in common is an important claim, the act of eating with people is a daily statement of what is important to the community. The word *love* has many definitions and each definition has a lot of baggage with it. **How do you define love?**

Part 3

There is no universal description of love, but one way to understand love is the desire and actions in which the needs of another are more important than the needs of the self. The meals for the Acts church included people who were different in their backgrounds and social stature. There are multiple instances in the book of Acts in which the new believers sell all of their belongings for the good of the community. This service to the community over and above the

desire to serve the self is a signal that this community is going to be defined differently than the community around it; this community will include those that others ignore. **What is it like to welcome someone at your table that others don't like? Do you have an experience of being welcomed at a table by strangers? Have you welcomed a stranger, or a strange person at your table?**

Part 4

Actively welcoming those who others ignore, or welcoming those with whom we may struggle, is an act of love because it is putting the needs of the one being welcomed above the needs of the ones already welcomed at the table. Likely, there will be those who are already welcomed at the table who are unwilling, reluctant, or scared to welcome others. They may make requirements and actions of those wishing to join the table that are difficult for them to complete. This is not what the first church—the church as closely modeled on the life of Jesus—lived. Nor should we.

To create a table that is open for others will cause friction. This is a good thing. To hold all things in common is to reject the idea that there is a hierarchy, where those who have more of anything are somehow more important than those who have nothing. **What barriers have you seen that prevent people from being welcomed at the table that God sets?**

Part 5

As a camper, I learned a song called “Magic Penny”. As I reflect on the model that the first church sets, the lyrics crawl through my mind. They go like this: “Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Oh, love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny. Hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor, for..Love is something if you give it away. . .” The members of the first church—the disciples who have just stepped out from hiding—are beginning a trend of openness, giving, and sharing. They chose to share the love of God as shown through Jesus. They did not restrict access for people, but actively sought to create a place where people could come and be cared for and loved. They gave the love away. And in giving it away, more and more people came. Strangers became friends. The unknown became the loved. People were changed: not because of strict, rigid limiting rules, but because love was given freely. **How do you feel when you get something for free? Do you feel different if the thing you got was something you wanted?**

Part 6

As we reflect on the first church and God's love, it is important to notice that the disciples were acting in ways that might not have been seen as good stewards of their reality. They were proclaiming the Messiah as Jesus in a land where that could get you killed. They are pooling

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Their resources to care for others: those like them and those that are very much not like them.

When we pause and ask ourselves how we can show that we can be trusted with the gifts that Jesus have given us and how can we be good stewards of God's love, the answer is terrifyingly simple; give it away.

Let us pray. Lord, may we give your love as freely as you gave it to us. Calm our fear of loss, and help us to create space for others to share in your love alongside us. AMEN.

June 7, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 4a, And God Proclaimed It All Very Good

Theme: Loving

Read the Scripture text: Genesis 1:1-4

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are five parts, each ending with a discussion question. For an hour time block, allow approximately 10-12 minutes for reading each part and answering the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

Have you ever heard a song and thought, “This is my jam!” I have. I like a lot of music. I grew in the 90s (1990s, not 1890s...just to be clear.) Some music is deeply rooted in experiences of my life that as soon as I hear them, I experience the memories so much that I can almost taste them. Those moments of experience are truly transformational for me. I remember who I was before I heard the song, and who I was after I heard the song. I remember what I thought before, and what I thought after, and how very different those thoughts were. I remember the change. **Can you remember something that changed you? How did it feel?**

Part 2

This scripture is one of my “jams.” I remember seeing the word *good* and wondering if I was reading a typo, or a bad translation. I pursued other Bible translations and as I read them, I kept seeing the word *good*. When I started studying Scripture and learned about translations and languages, I went to this passage because I was still trying to figure out something. I was trying to figure out if we were supposed to be perfect. For so long, I had heard about the fall of man—the sin of Adam and Eve. As I heard it spoken about, preached about, and read what writers said, there were distinct references to the fall of man and the fall from God’s perfect love. The indication that I had always heard was that when Adam and Eve were part of creation, everything was perfect. Except, it wasn’t. Creation was not perfect. It was good. Not perfect. Good. **What is the difference between good and perfect?**

Part 3

I found that the word that is translated as *good* is the Greek word *καλός* (pronounced Kalos). The word has several uses: good, beautiful, desirable, nice, pleasant. All of these words are how God, looking upon creation, saw creation. God did not see perfection, God saw goodness. Think about that for a few moments. Go on, I’ll wait. **What if we thought about the creation of each of us as something that is good, not something that is perfect?**

Part 4

When we see what the world was created to be—as something good—that changes the view. No longer are we bound to a standard that God did not hold us to. At this point, it is important to reflect on what the image of God represents. The scripture shows us the story of God with God’s people. It is not an easy story. There is hurt, anger, betrayal, rejection, suffering, celebration, restoration, healing, miracles, and more. Scripture is the holy depiction of God teaching and leading God’s people, trying again and again to get them accept God’s love. **What does it feel like to have your love accepted? What does it feel like to have your love rejected?**

Part 5

When God looked upon all that God had created, God saw that it was indeed very good. When Jesus was on the cross, he cried out to God to forgive the people who were trying to kill him. This act shows that the goodness of God is not immune to sorrow, pain, and mistreatment. The response to suffering is not condemnation, but forgiveness. In short, in this moment of pure torture, betrayal, and heartbreak, Jesus did not call for the people to be killed: he called for them to be forgiven. Perhaps this forgiveness was rooted in the deep understanding that even though the people were trying to kill Jesus, they were made in the image of God, and that image is worth loving. **What if you looked at yourself and thought that you were good? What if you looked at the person beside you and thought that they were good? What if you looked at the people who you don’t like and thought that they were good? What if you looked at the people trying to hurt you and thought that they were good?**

Prayer: Lord, may we see one another as you see us; as good images of your love. AMEN

July 26, 2020

Scripture: Romans 8:26-29, Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of God

Theme: Hopeful

Youth Study

Read the Scripture text: Romans 8:26-39

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson. For this lesson, you may want to use the Common English Bible version since it is referenced in the lesson.

There are five parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 10-12 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

For reasons that are not clear to me, recently I have been reading books that I was forced to read in school, except this time I am reading them because I want to. I find that they are more relevant and meaningful to me now than when I was a high school, college, and grad school student. I do not fault the educators for making me read them and then testing my comprehension of the material, but I must say I like the books a lot more now than I did when my grade depended on them.

I just finished reading Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. There were more than a few times that I had to stop reading and just sit with the words that were written. One example is "Real courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what."⁵ That statement on courage is born of the same soil where hope grows. **How do you define courage? What are examples of courage that you have seen? What are examples of courage you have shown?**

Part 2

Atticus Finch, the father of Scout—the young woman who narrates *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is appointed to be the attorney for a black man in Maycomb, Alabama in the early 20th century. The setting of the story carries with it an understanding by most readers that racism is still very alive and strong in that time. There is a tension that is embedded within the story: how Scout figures out how to respond to and understand a world in which so much happens that is out of her control. This is the same type of setting that we find in today's Scripture passage. **What do you think of the world? Is there hope?**

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3275794-to-kill-a-mockingbird>

Part 3

Paul is writing to the church in Rome, a church embedded in the heart of the evil empire of conquerors and forceful peacemakers and completely aware of how unfair, how depressing, and how despicable the world is. “...sighs too deep for words.” (v. 26) “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,” (v.28) “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (v.32) The crowds that heard the words of Paul were experiencing some serious problems and struggles.

The start of their struggles was the composition of the group. There were some who were Jewish and had begun to follow Jesus. They still understood their identity as Jewish, and followed the customs and practices that they had been doing all their lives. There was also a large number of converts who were Pagan, and they asked questions and challenged what the community would be. **When you look at your community, is everyone the same, or are there differences? Do you think that is good?**

Part 4

It is important to see that the struggle is quite real for the people in Rome. They claim to worship a God who calls them to live a life different than that of those who are around them. Scholars believe that the book of Romans was written around the same time that Nero became emperor of Rome. While Nero is often associated with tyranny and extravagance, it is also widely believed that Nero was quite active in encouraging the greatness of Rome. In the midst of this Rome is the best mentality—this little group of people—from very different backgrounds, gathered to worship a Messiah who Rome had killed. The church in Rome was not a safe place, not an easy gathering, and later became a target and fodder/scapegoat for problems in Rome.

When you see the words of Paul—his defiant and hopeful proclamation that, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor 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.” (v 39)—these words either look like the ramblings of a crazy man, or someone whose hope is quite powerful. **What do you think is stronger: fear or hope? Why?**

Part 5

Hope and fear are both quite powerful, but they do not have to be opposites. The difference comes in what they cause a person to do. “Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win.”⁶ Hope is the reason sports are as

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3275794-to-kill-a-mockingbird>

popular as they are. If hope didn't exist, then we could just look at statistics and determine who is the best from that, and be done with it. While the better team may win the majority of the time, they don't win all the time. Those who are considered the underdogs work hard, train, study, and take care of their bodies, knowing that even if they are supposed to lose, they are still going to try.

This kind of hope is similar to Paul's hope then and our hope today. We can very easily look at the problems in the world and say, "There is no hope." We can see the stat sheets that show that the rich get richer, those with power hurt those without power, and greed takes a backseat to greed, and decide to not even try. But as stewards—as caregivers of God's love—we try anyway. Yes, we may lose: yes, we may not get the results we want. Yes, we may come away from our attempts to help thinking we have not made any noticeable difference. But just as we have a God who looks at the heart of why something is done, acts of hope in places of fear can be places and opportunities in which stewards of God's love grow something amazing. "Things are never as bad as they seem."⁷ - *To Kill a Mockingbird* **Have you witnessed acts of hope in places of fear? Have you done your own acts of hope in places of fear?**

Prayer: *Lord, we see the struggles and we acknowledge that we are called to be beacons of your hope in this world. AMEN.*

⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3275794-to-kill-a-mockingbird?page=2>

August 30, 2020

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21, Rejoice in Hope

Theme: Hopeful

Read the Scripture text: Romans 12:9-21

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are four parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 12-15 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

I often think about what would I say or do if I could have a face-to-face interaction with God. One of the things I would like to do is talk about passages like this one. "Hey God, that is an interesting passage. There are some good things in there. But..well..umm...I don't really like all of it. I really like the genuine love, doing good, loving one another, outdoing one another, showing honor (great piece of advice there), rejoice! I like that. I don't know so much about that being patient in suffering deal. Or that blessing those who persecute me, or not repaying evil with evil. And really, I shouldn't I try to avenge myself? I like the idea of heaping up burning coals on those I don't like." **If you could have a face-to-face with God, what would you ask or say?**

Part 2

As mentioned in an earlier lesson, the church in Rome is in an interesting place, and there are struggles on all sides of their reality. They are not in a safe place: in Rome or in their identity as followers of Jesus. They are trying. They do face serious persecution. They are attacked often. They are afraid. Can't say that I blame them. Paul's writing to them both comforts and challenges them. Today's Scripture passage is a challenge that they are not sure if they can live up to.

Have you ever been playing with a toddler and the toddler hit you too hard, or kicked you somewhere you wish they hadn't, but they think is funny? When the pain flashes through your body, you are faced with some choices in that instance: hit the toddler in retaliation, step away for a short time to catch your breath, or use your wisdom to respond in a way that helps them understand what they have done. **When you have been hurt, does it matter if the one who hurt you did it on purpose or by accident?**

Part 3

John 16:33 says, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world **you face persecution**. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” It is not a matter of *if* we will face struggles, perhaps persecution in this world: we *will*. It is not a fair reality, but it is the reality. When suffering and persecution happen, we begin to find the edge of what we are willing and able to tolerate before we snap. A life of faith in God does not remove the chance for pain and sorrow. In some ways, this faith may actually increase the likelihood of experiencing struggle.

A word of clarification is needed here. Persecution is a word that has a lot of weight and heft to it. Merriam-Webster defines *persecuted* as a verb meaning “to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict.”⁸ There are more than a few instances where some have claimed that they were being persecuted when, in truth, they were being inconvenienced. Persecution is very real and devastating. It dehumanizes and demonizes those who are its victims. That is persecution.

How can a person find goodness in persecution? How can someone “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer,” when they face persecution? What does it mean to rejoice and celebrate when there is suffering and persecution? There is no one way to answer these questions. Each instance of persecution is unique. Because of that, each response of hope to persecution will have to be unique. In American history, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is seen as a revolutionary in how to approach the struggle of persecution.

A whole way of thinking has arisen since the assassination of Dr. King, called Kingian Nonviolence. This way of conflict resolution has six principles that form how persons respond:

- 1) Nonviolence is a way of life for brave people;
- 2) The Peaceful Community is the goal for the future;
- 3) Attack problems, not people;
- 4) Know and do what is right, even if it is difficult;
- 5) Avoid hurting the spirit and body of yourself and others;
- 6) The universe is on the side of justice.⁹ **Have you seen any of these principles in practice?**

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persecuted>

⁹ <https://nonviolentschoolsri.org/kingian-nonviolence>

Part 4

The call to rejoice when persecution is being confronted breaks the cycle of violence. The cycle of violence says that when a person is a victim of violence, they then become perpetrators of violence later, and create more victims, and the cycle repeats itself. There is nothing to look forward to in that system. There is no hope: there is only suffering and death.

Rejoicing when there is suffering and persecution attacks the problem and not the people, humanizing one another. When people humanize one another, they are far less likely to continue persecuting each other. Engaging in healthy stewardship is to live into the hope that comes from humanizing one another, by breaking cycles of violence. When we do that, we overcome evil with good. And when we overcome evil with good, then the love of God works through us, with us, and within us. **Have you witnessed someone break the cycle of violence by rejoicing in suffering? Have you ever done that yourself?**

Prayer: Lord, may we be beacons of hope that break cycles of violence. May we face persecution and rejoice in you as we resist answering pain for pain. Amen.

September 22, 2020

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13, For God is at Work in You

Theme: Loving

Read the Scripture text: Philippians 2:1-13

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are five parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 10-12 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

I have enjoyed standup comedy since I was twelve years old. I have many favorite comics. One of my all-time favorite is Bill Engvall. Many times I feel like I am the type of person that he jokes about. His 2004 standup special titled *Here's Your Sign Live* opens with a comment about his marriage. He says that he has been married for twenty-one years and then goes on to say, "If you had a job for twenty-one years, you would know that job inside and out, backwards and forwards, wouldn't ya?...I can honestly stand here tonight and tell you that after twenty-one years of marriage, I know nothing more about marriage than I knew the day that I got interested in them."¹⁰ Relationships are not about mastering them, but about working within them each and every day.

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi has a line where Paul says, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Phil 2:13) When work is present, it means there is something that still needs to be done. There is work that needs to be done within us all. Admitting that there are elements of ourselves that need to be worked on can be very difficult, and unbelievably scary. **What do you think needs to be worked on within you?**

Part 2

Work is not easy. Work is rarely fun. Work is absolutely vital and important if there is to be growth in any meaningful, helpful, and hopeful way. When Paul tells the church in Philippi that God is at work in them, Paul is telling the people of Philippi two facts: 1) the people are important to God, and 2) God loves them. People don't work at something they don't care about. God's working on the people of Philippi is an act of love: God's love.

¹⁰ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0816435/?ref_=nm_film_wr_11

There is an adage that exists in our culture that needs to be addressed here. “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.”¹¹ More often than not, this quote is meant to provide direction and encouragement when people are choosing a job or career. There are two flaws to that thinking that need to be considered; 1) a career and job will never love you; 2) Love people, not professions. **What do you love? Who do you love? Is there a difference in how you feel about who and what you love?**

Part 3

Now, there is an important face to see in this text. When you read that God is at work in you...that means you are worth working on. Let that sink in a minute. You are worth it. You are worth being challenged. You are worth growing. You are worth the investment. And here is the best part of that fact: even if you don't grow the way you think that you should, God never gives up and will keep working on you. God loves you so much to help you be more than you think you can. If that line ends up on a poster, someone tell me, please. **Do you think that you are worth working on?**

Part 4

When there is pause to consider that each of us is worth working on, then the next step is seeing that the person beside you, the person you are thinking of right now, the person who frustrates you, the person who may have hurt you, the person who makes you happy...God is working on them as well. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Paul's words here could be seen as an encouragement to see that God is at work, and always making us better than we were, better than we are, and better than we thought we could be.

The act of working on something, or someone is always an investment in the past, present and future. To work on something means that how it worked has been seen, how it is working now needs something else, and that the person working on it can help it. It is the fundamental reason that stewardship happens. This concept of God being at work on us shows that God's investment in us—the future plans for us—are worth having, worth doing, and worth working for. **What does it feel like to think of God working on you?**

¹¹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/09/02/job-love/>

Part 5

To end this study, pause for a moment and imagine. Imagine a world in which people approached one another in the way that God approaches us: seeing one another as worth working with, worth trying to bring the fullness of what each one of us has together, worth the investment. What if we saw each other as better than who we are: not because of a terrible sense of self-worth, but from a deep sense that our worth is quite large and the worth of others is also quite large? What a humbling world that would be; what a peaceful, loving world that will be. **What are some ways that people have assured you that you are worth the investment? What are some ways that you have assured others that they are worth the investment?**

Prayer: Lord, we trust in your view of us, even if we don't understand it. Steer our eyes to see the worth in ourselves, in others and the love that is there. AMEN

October 11, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 36:1-7, More Than Enough

Theme: Faithful

Read the Scripture text: Exodus 36:1-7

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are four parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 12-15 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

If possible, you may want to view the Youtube video mentioned in Part 1.

Part 1

The first church that I served as pastor had a tradition called Stone Soup Sunday. I had never heard of it, and was interested in it. It is based on a story, a really good story. There are many variations of it, but if you want to go to Youtube, look for the story retold by Heather Forest with art by Susan Garber. Here is the link <https://youtu.be/BZf60cb3Th8>

I was immediately enthralled with the story and concept. Fear is such a powerful motivator in life that when someone asks for help as they did in the stone soup story, the fear is that in helping others there will not be enough for the one providing the assistance if they are in need. The villagers in the stone soup story were too afraid to offer what they had until they saw someone else give. Many of the stories in Scripture seem to be focused on having enough or not. Moses is connected to one of the more monumental stories of having enough or not: manna. (Ex 16) **What do you have enough of? What do you want more of? When would you know that you had enough?**

Part 2

Exodus 16 tells of a hungry people lost and wandering in the desert. In case you are wondering, the Exodus 36 and Exodus 16 people are some of the very same people. During his lifetime, Moses saw God's people move from slavery to freedom to prosperity. It might be easy to think that faithfulness in God results in the same trajectory as the Israelites. Not really. Despite many voices who argue differently, God's blessing, faithfulness, and love is not necessarily shown through an abundance of wealth or a transition from poverty to wealth. **What do you want from God? What does God want from you?**

Part 3

“The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do.” That is a stunning sentence. For so long the people of Israel—God’s people—had been slaves to Egypt. (NOTE: the Israelites made themselves slaves. (See Gn 47:18-25) They wandered, struggled, and relied on God for their survival. Now they were in a place and a time where they had far more than they had for generations. Now were they wealthy? Perhaps. But the people were still nomadic, still wandering. They were not in the place that they would call home. Not yet. Moses only saw that home from a distance and never lived in it. The people who gave to the building of the sanctuary gave even though life was still not stable, safe, or secure. They were probably still fearful, for though they have won battles, they are not powerful like the other nations around them.

Stewardship is about future thinking and hoping based on what has been felt and what is going on right now. Few could have argued that Israel was in a safe space. A wise investor may have encouraged them to save all they had so that they could use it to trade for what they would need later. However, the Israelites give so much that they are asked to stop. Apparently, the cup runneth over. **Have you ever seen giving exceed the need? How did that affect those who received and gave?**

Part 4

In the story of Stone Soup and in Exodus 36, the needs were clear. In the Stone Soup story, those knocking at the door asked for whatever could be given. Later, they asked for specific things. While naming those specific needs was clever, it also is often true that when the need is known and specific, the response tends to be better. The Israelites’ project of building the sanctuary was their focus. That focus prompted the people to give more than was needed. Sometimes naming what is needed is almost as important as the response to the need.

It is easy to think that there is just not enough of anything. God’s people have a storied history and identity rooted in God providing when there really wasn’t enough. Trusting in God is not easy. Most of the Exodus story shows the people trying to trust in this God whom they can’t see, and they are struggling with that trust, that faith. But they keep at it. In today’s Scripture passage, they give to the point of overflowing. **If you had to pick one *something* to give to, with the hope that overflowing would happen, what would that be? Can you be the first ingredient in that giving?**

Prayer: Lord, may your blessing flow through us, and may we not allow fear to distract us from your overflowing grace. Amen.

November 22, 2020

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, I Myself Will Be the Shepherd of My Sheep

Theme: Faithful

Read the Scripture text: Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are six parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 7-10 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

Have you ever wondered why the Bible mentions sheep so much? It seems like every other story involves sheep somehow. Research of the word “sheep” revealed a new favorite website for me: www.sheep101.info. I am smitten with everything about this site. If you want to email the webmaster, it goes to an @baalands.com email. If you are wondering about that domain, it too is a site all about sheep. It is also adorable.

The website says that sheep are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. I do not know where they got that number, which translation they used, or if there is another source, but the reality is that sheep are everywhere in the Bible. Sheep play roles in the Akedah (the almost-sacrifice of Isaac). Sheep are used for sacrifices in God’s synagogue. They are given as trade and used as currency. They are used by Jesus in stories about how people are to act (sheep and goats). (Mt 25:31-48) Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God. Sheep are everywhere. **What are your thoughts about sheep?**

Part 2

Sheep are vulnerable. Their greatest defense against predators is that they are part of a flock. The sheep also determine a social order through fighting, threats, and general competition, usually during feeding.¹² The sheep that are lower on the social order or are sick are often pushed to the edges where they are vulnerable, keeping the healthier flock better protected. Perhaps sheep have more in common with humanity than most humans would like to admit, and perhaps that is why the role of sheep within Scripture is such a powerful connection to the story of God and God’s people.

¹² Ekarius, C. *Storeys Guide to Raising Sheep*. Tiptree Book Service, 2010.

The prophet Ezekiel, speaking God’s word to God’s people, says that God will be the shepherd of the people. Every herd of sheep needs someone to guide and protect them. But this shepherd promises that the fighting, threats, and competition that determine the sheep social order are going to be revoked, turned over, and destroyed. The bigger, healthier, and dominant sheep who earned their status at the expense of the other sheep will be destroyed. **Is there anything wrong with the way sheep create their social order?**

Part 3

When Jesus uses sheep in the famous parable of the sheep and the goats, (Mt 25:31-48) the actions of the sheep aren’t really all that new. When you compare Jesus’ words with today’s Scripture, you see that both reflect the caring nature of God. The sick, lost, and broken are not ignored, pushed, or left to fend for themselves. Instead, the shepherd assures that they are cared for, protected, and sought after. **Have you ever felt broken, lost or sick? What did it feel like?**

Part 4

Ezekiel’s words are part of a larger sense of blessing for God’s people. The people needed to hear a blessing, because they were not feeling very blessed. Israel was getting pressure from the Babylonians. The prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah warned of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, the heart of Israel. The people ignored these warnings and the call to rely on God within the warnings. Subsequently Jerusalem is destroyed and the people are conquered, scattered, and murdered. And the temple—the very heart of the heart of the Jewish life—is destroyed.

This destruction matters in the story and identity of the Israelites. The temple was seen as the place where God lived. The Israelites believed that as long as God was with them, they would be fine. When the temple was destroyed, the identity of the people was shaken to their very core. If they did not have the protection they thought they would have, then what did they have? **Has your identity been challenged or shaken? What goes on in your heart and mind when that happens?**

Part 5

Ezekiel’s words in this Scripture encourage the Israelites to understand that they can still believe in God and that their identities are not destroyed and life is not hopeless. Yes, it is a difficult life, but it is not a life that is beyond God. God’s home among the people may have been destroyed, but God has not been. Using the sheep analogy, Ezekiel tells the hurt, struggling, suffering, and confused people that their future includes being cared for, being gathered again and being loved.

God doesn't give up on people. The faithfulness of God is a reflection of the future—the stewardship, if you will—in God. But faith in God isn't a guarantee against bad and terrible things happening. Since the people of God had their identity destroyed, they wondered what would happen next. How would the people live in this new understanding of the world, and where was God? Ezekiel provides comfort in this distress: not anger or judgment, but comfort. Sound familiar? (Sheep and goats again) **When you have seen someone hurting, how have you supported them? When you have been hurt, how have you been supported?**

Part 6

For the Israelites, God was defined by the continued relationship between God and God's people, even if the nature of the relationship changed from what the people wanted. Stewardship is active in relationship, and God is an active steward, because God does not give up no matter what happens. Because of this, the model that we have before us is a shepherd who responds to the broken, hurting, and lost not with judgment or anger, but with tenderness, healing, and seeking. The identity of the people changed when Jerusalem was destroyed, but God's identity didn't. **Was there a time when your relationship with God was changed because of difficult circumstances?**

Prayer: Lord, may we be your sheep, tended by your love and able to tend to others. May our identities be rooted in your love for all in the world. Amen.

December 13, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, They Will be Called Oaks of Righteousness

Theme: Faithful

Read the Scripture text: Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

Your group may enjoy reading the lesson aloud. You or volunteers from the group can read the lesson.

There are four parts, each ending with a discussion question or questions. For an hour time block, allow approximately 12-15 minutes to read the part and answer the questions. Allow time at the end to read the closing prayer together (and ask for prayer requests if you choose).

Part 1

The prophet Isaiah is writing to a people whose world has been devastated and their identity has been forever broken from what they thought it would be: the temple had been destroyed, they had been conquered and destroyed, and their faith in an undefeatable God was shaken because it seemed that God was defeated. They are scared, they are weary, they are hurt. I am not a hunter, but I was raised by hunters and was around hunters as a child. I have picked up a few lessons. An injured animal is the most dangerous animal, because all the animal knows is that they are injured, and they will lash out at anything that might hurt them, even if there is someone trying to provide aid.

Once my wife, young son, and I were driving through a small community and I saw a dog run out into the road and get hit by a car. The driver had no time to react. As soon as it happened, the driver jumped out of his car, and you could see that he was devastated by what had happened. I checked on the driver, and aside from being emotionally distraught, he was physically fine. I then approached the wounded animal which was trying to drag itself across the street. I approached slowly, hunkered down, and spoke gently to the animal. In my desire to help the wounded creature, I forgot that this animal was now very dangerous. I was reminded as soon as I touched the dog. He bit me. **Have you had an experience like this? What did it feel like when the one that you were trying to help lashed out and hurt you?**

Part 2

God's words to the people of Israel, spoken here through Isaiah, are designed to help those who are wounded. The Israelites are hurt, angry, and confused. They could have easily fallen into a blame game (blaming another person for the pain that everyone is suffering), gone into attack mode, and hurt others—in other words, biting anyone who tries to help them. **When you are hurt, how do you act?**

Part 3

Isaiah sees the hurt of the people and wants to do whatever can be done to assure that these hurts don't happen again to anyone. He has good news for the people: news that will bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, free prisoners, and comfort all. These actions are designed to make the people of Israel righteous among all nations and be a garden of God. To do this, Isaiah tells the people that they have to be different than their instinct might tell them to be when they are wounded.

Isaiah encourages the Israelites to be God's oak of righteousness, to display God's glory, to build up things that are ruined and devastated, and to heal up the wounds of generations. Then they will be a people who love justice, hate wrongdoing, and actively live in such a way that God's peace is known. It is not an accident that the prophet Isaiah is so important to understanding the nature of Advent. The birth of Jesus fulfills the words of God spoken through Isaiah.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the people of Israel are experiencing strain and stress just as they did in the time of Isaiah. And, just like in the time of Isaiah, shortly after the death of Jesus the temple was destroyed again and the identity of the people will be called into question. They were, yet again, wounded and hurt. In so many ways we are wounded as well, and if we aren't now, we will be. **Have you ever done something when you were hurt that you later regretted? When you look at that experience, what do you remember most from that time?**

Part 4

It is no accident that the prophet uses oak trees to talk about the righteousness of God to a people who are hurting and wounded. Wounded people want quick reactionary justice, which often isn't justice but a continuation of a cycle of violence. Oak trees take a long time to grow and are some of the strongest and most durable trees in existence. God's righteous healing may seem to take time to those who hurting. However God is working to do something different. God is being a steward: God is being faithful to all of God's creation and is actively creating a world in which all are able to rejoice in God and be clothed in garments of salvation and righteousness.

It is my deep desire that as you read this in this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the child Messiah being born, you will see the wounding reality of the season and instead of perpetuating a cycle of violence towards others, that you will plant oaks of righteousness, loving God's justice (not the justice of man, but the justice of God...justice that frees prisoners), actively going out of your way to avoid wrongdoing and be part of a people who are clothed in righteousness and salvation. **What do the words righteousness and salvation mean to you? What is God's justice and what is man's justice? Where are they different, where are they the same?**

December 13, 2020 Youth Study –3

Prayer: Lord, as we wait in this season for the arrival of the child Messiah, may we use this time of expectant waiting to look at how we can experience healing in places of wounded and hurting. May we be your people of your justice and righteousness. Amen.



Adult Studies

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23, Come and Follow Me

Theme: Faithful

STEPPING OUT ON FAITH

Opening prayer (read together or by one person) – 2 minutes:

Good and loving God, thank you for your son, Jesus, who faithfully followed your guidance and proclaimed the good news to your people. Guide our hearts and minds as we begin this stewardship journey that, like the disciples, we might faithfully follow and do what you have called us to do. It's in the name of Jesus that we pray, Amen.

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5 minutes: What does “faithful” mean to you?

Read aloud – 3 minutes: Matthew 4:12-23

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5-10 minutes: What word or phrase in this text caught your eye and why?

Re-read aloud – 1 minute: Matthew 4:18-22

The Text in Context – 7 minutes

Without a doubt, Jesus was faithful to the call to ministry that God had placed on him. In Matthew 3, we read how Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer in the Jordan River. Immediately after that, Jesus spent forty days and nights fasting in the wilderness. At the end of that time, the Devil tempted Jesus, but Jesus resisted. After being ministered to by angels, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee.

Truly Jesus faithfully responded to his calling. We wouldn't expect anything else from the Son of God. We are not Jesus, however. We are mere mortals. There is no way we can ever live up to the expectations that God placed on Jesus. When it comes to stewardship, we can strive to faithfully live up to the expectations that Jesus placed on his disciples.

As the text tells us, Andrew, Simon (Peter), James, and John were all fishermen. It wasn't that they loved to fish—it was their career. In an area that is dry and very rocky, agriculture (farming the land) was not a good option. Fish (along with bread) were a major source of sustenance for the Galilean community and a fundamental part of the economy during Jesus' time. Most fishing families were poor, barely making it each day because of the fees, taxes, and toll rates that were imposed on fishing families by the Roman Empire.¹³ It was a hard, tedious career that took its toll on the fishermen and their families. Some days you didn't catch anything. Luke talks about such a time: "When [Jesus] had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'" (Lk 5:4-5) The writer of Mark also tells us about storms that could come up unexpectedly, threatening their lives: "On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'" (Mk 4:35-38) It was hard, it was dangerous, and it was a job that people were willing to do to support their family. Yet when Jesus shows up and says, "Follow me," four fishermen drop everything they are doing to follow him, leaving their family in a financially unstable situation.

There's something about that command, "follow me." The Greek word— *deute* (δεῦτε)—is used seven times in Matthew's Gospel with this instance being the first. The next time it is used is in Matthew 11:28 when Jesus says to those following him, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (emphasis added). All the other occurrences are translated as *come* in the New Revised Standard Version. The Greek is also in the imperative tense. This wasn't Jesus asking, "Would you like to follow me?" Jesus essentially said, "You need to come after (i.e., follow) me now." His tone meant that he only expected one response from those he was speaking to: drop everything that they were doing and get into step behind him.

Faithfully, those who heard the call responded and did just that, despite the implications it had on their lives. We know that Simon (Peter) had at least a wife and the mother of his wife that he supported: "After leaving the synagogue [Jesus] entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them." (Lk 4:38-39) James and John helped their father, Zebedee, in a thriving business that occasionally required hiring day laborers: "As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

¹³ Alicia J. Batten, "Fishing Economy in the Sea of Galilee", n.p. [cited 2 Sep 2019]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/places/related-articles/fishing-economy-in-the-sea-of-galilee>

(Mk 1:19-20) People relied on these four fishermen who stepped out on faith and walked away from their jobs to follow a man they barely knew.

The Text in Our Context – 5 minutes

People today choose to leave their lives (or careers) behind and follow Jesus for different reasons. Some do it out of fear. Something terrifying happens in their lives and they promise to follow Jesus if God will safely get them out of their situation. The fear of death is a strong motivator for some to lead a life of ministry. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German theologian and reformer of the church, was preparing to be a lawyer. On July 17, 1505, Luther suddenly abandoned the study of law and entered a monastery. Luther attributed this sudden change to a violent thunderstorm that terrified him so much that he vowed he would become a monk if he survived. After surviving the storm, that is exactly what he did.

Others follow Jesus for financial reasons. They see ministry as a way to support their family or get rich. There have been many instances over the years of televangelists who proclaim the word simply to fill their bank accounts. In 2019, HBO started a new original series based on this concept. *The Righteous Gemstones* “tells the story of a world-famous televangelist family with a long tradition of deviance, greed and charitable work.”¹⁴ A report published in 2010 looked at preachers who don’t believe, providing case studies on five unbelieving ministers. Although their “small and self-selected” sample of ministers represents a microcosm of the theological collapse at the heart of many churches and denominations,¹⁵ it is a significant look at the integrity of the Christian church. Even that is not something new; in 1739 Rev. Gilbert Tennent preached a sermon titled “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” where he describes unbelieving pastors as “a great curse and judgment.”¹⁶

Although Jesus can use those who follow out of fear or for financial reasons (e.g., Martin Luther with the Protestant Reformation), Jesus commands people to follow him faithfully. They should not follow him because of what they can get out of it (e.g., salvation or financial blessings), but because of what they can offer to God’s ministry: their time, talents, and treasures (resources). When Jesus called Andrew, Simon (Peter), James, and John, he didn’t promise them riches or salvation. All Jesus said he would do is make them fish for people. They faithfully followed and trusted that Jesus would provide for them. Jesus calls each of us to faithfully follow him as well, asking us to be good stewards of all that God has provided for us.

¹⁴ <https://www.hbo.com/content/hbweb/en/the-righteous-gemstones/about.html> [cited 2 Sep 2019].

¹⁵ Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Preachers Who Don’t Believe—The Scandal of Apostate Pastors,” n.p. [cited 2 Sep 2019]. Online: <https://albertmohler.com/2010/03/18/clergy-who-dont-believe-the-scandal-of-apostate-pastors/>

¹⁶ Gilbert Tennent, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” n.p. [cited 2 Sep 2019]. Online: http://www.sounddoctrine.net/Classic_Sermons/Gilbert%20Tennent/danger_of_unconverted.pdf

Reflecting on the Text – 20 minutes (use mutual invitation)

- How do you think those around Andrew, Simon (Peter), James, and John reacted when they walked away from their jobs to follow Jesus?
- If Jesus walked into your work, school, or home and commanded you to drop everything and follow him, how do you think you would respond?
- How do you think those around you (e.g. family, friends, employers, or teachers) would respond if you suddenly told them?
- What have you given up to follow Jesus? Think in terms of the three 'T's: time, talent, treasures (financial resources).
- What else might you give up as you faithfully steward what God has given you?

Closing Prayer – 1 minute

Creator God, thank you for our time together today and for your word and Spirit that guides our lives. As we move through this year of stewardship, continue to instill in us a faithful heart so that we might step out in faith as we seek to serve and follow your son. It's in Jesus name that we pray, Amen.

February 9, 2020

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9a, Is this not the Fast I Choose

Theme: Loving

LOVING JUSTICE

Opening prayer (read together or by one person) – 1 minute:

Loving Lord, we thank you for the witness of your prophets – like Isaiah – who proclaimed your word despite the resistance that they faced from those who refused to hear. Help us to better hear the word that they proclaimed and give us the courage to proclaim that word to others. We ask this in the name of your loving son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5 minutes: What does “justice” mean to you?

Read aloud – 3 minutes: Isaiah 58:1-9a

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5-10 minutes: What word or phrase in this text caught your eye and why?

Re-read aloud – 1 minute: Isaiah 58:6-7

The Text in Context – 7 minutes:

What do you do when it seems as if you have lost everything? What does God ask you to do? Those are the questions that the writer of this portion of the book of Isaiah tries to answer. Chapters 1-33 of Isaiah consists of prophecies (warnings) to God’s people. In various struggles for power, they had divided themselves into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah – with neither being as strong politically or spiritually as they had been when they were united. By the time the prophet begins delivering the Lord’s message to the people, Israel had already fallen to the Assyrian Empire (722-721 BCE). The book of Isaiah begins with prophecies to the Kingdom of Judah. In the very first chapter of the book, we hear some strong words of judgment from the Lord that Isaiah proclaims to Judah. First, the Lord says they are a wicked people: “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!” (Is 1:4) Then the Lord says they are a corrupt city: “How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross [worthless; rubbish], your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.” (Is 1:21-23) Again, this is how the book of Isaiah begins! Those are harsh words for God’s children. The tone doesn’t change much in those first thirty-three chapters. Walter Brueggemann describes this narrative as “a

continued meditation upon the destiny of Jerusalem.”¹⁷ That meditation does offer some hope in the midst of the judgement, promising restoration to Jerusalem and Judah. But because the people of Judah haven’t been good stewards of what God has given them, they are subjugated by Assyria as well around 701 BCE.

By the time that chapters 34-54 are written, Judah moves from being under Assyrian subjugation to being under the thumb of Babylon. The Babylonians aren’t as easy on them as the Assyrians were. The elite of Judah are exiled from their homeland. The author(s) of these chapters gives hope to the people by sharing a vision of Zion: “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Is 34:10) Even though God’s people have been oppressed and scattered, the Lord promises to restore them to their land because their debt has been paid: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Is 40:1-2) To do this, God uses Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, to conquer Babylon (539 BCE) and end the exile. By 515 BCE, many of the exiles have returned to the land. Now new conflicts arise. Those who had stayed in the country and now own the land resent those who return. There is also disagreement over what form of government should be established. This is the background for the remaining chapters of this book.

Written after the exiles have returned, chapters 55-66 offer both hope and new warnings to God’s children. God issues an invitation to an abundant life, a life where everyone’s needs are met: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Is 55:1) It’s a wonderful new covenant, but there is a catch: “Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.” (Is 56:1-2).

It’s a bit of a surprise, then, that by chapter fifty-eight God is again chastising the people for their behavior. They believed that simply following some of the rituals that God has established was enough to make God happy. God is clear on this: practicing righteousness (that is, doing the rituals) doesn’t make God happy. Anyone can go through the motions. What God is looking for is people with loving hearts. It’s not a new message that God is giving. It’s the same message that we find in the first portion of the book of Isaiah written perhaps over one hundred years earlier: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of

¹⁷ Brueggemann, Walter. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, p. 160. Westminster John Knox, 2003.

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lambs, or of goats... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Is 1:11, 16-17)

The Text in Our Context – 5 minutes:

Too often we want to separate out justice and love. Merriam-Webster.com defines *justice* as “the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments.”¹⁸ When we place that definition into Isaiah 1:17, it doesn’t quite make sense: “learn to do good; seek the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” God’s idea of justice has nothing to do with the maintenance or administration of what is just with regards to rewards and punishments.

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” (Is 30:18)

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Am 5:24)

“But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.” (Hos 12:6)

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

“Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.” (Jer 9:23-24)

“Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones.” (Ps 37:27-28a)

“For I the Lord love justice...” (Is 61:8a)

“For the Lord loves justice...” Merriam-Webster.com also defines the verb form of *love* as “to hold dear: cherish.”¹⁹ That’s what God does with justice: holds it dear and cherishes it. When

¹⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice> [accessed 4 Sep 2019]

¹⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/love> [accessed 4 Sep 2019]

the Lord talks about justice, love is always there. For God, justice is not separated from love. Because of the divine love God has for humanity, God wants justice to roll down like waters. God also wants God's children to practice loving justice. Like the people of Judah and Israel that Isaiah prophesied to, God wants us to do more than focus on the rituals that we think will please God. God wants us to gather regularly with other believers in worship and praise. That gathering means nothing if we do not work to free the oppressed. God wants us to pray without ceasing. Our prayers will not be heard on high if we do not share our resources with those who are hungry or homeless. God wants us to show loving justice to all of God's children. This may shock some: loving justice is a form of stewardship. Stewardship is about how we care for (i.e., steward) what God has entrusted to us. It is easy to talk about stewardship as time, talents (gifts God has given us), and treasures (money and resources). Stewardship is bigger than those things. We are called to be good stewards of all that God has created. When we show loving justice by providing for those who are hungry or homeless, that's stewardship. When we show loving justice by working to loose the bonds of injustice on children in captivity and reconnect them with their families, that's stewardship as well.

Loving justice will require giving of our time, but it is more than posting a story on Facebook or Instagram—it's more than marching on the oppressor. Loving justice will require giving of our talents, but it is more than creating a compelling meme or writing a song. Loving justice will require giving of our treasures, but it is more than writing a check or donating online. Loving justice requires that we see our neighbors who are hungry, homeless, oppressed, persecuted, or forgotten in a different way. We need to see them as God sees them.

Reflecting on the Text – 20 minutes (use mutual invitation)

After going through this study, has your view of justice changed? If so, please share how. What are some of the ways your church has worked towards justice?

What are some of the ways that you as an individual have worked towards justice? Do you feel that the church (i.e., all believers) has done a good job of seeking justice in the world? Please explain why you feel that way.

Stewardship Challenge

Consider giving of your time, talents and treasures to help fight an injustice in your community or the world. If you are already doing this, consider increasing your commitment.

Closing Prayer – 3 minutes

As they come to your mind, take a couple of minutes and list those who are experiencing injustice (e.g., the homeless, victims of human trafficking). When you are finished, pray together the prayer on the next page.

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Justice-loving Lord, you have given all peoples one common origin. It is your will that all should be gathered together as one family in you. Fill the hearts of all believers with the fire of your love and with the desire to ensure justice for all. By sharing the good things you give us, may we secure—through loving justice—release of the bond of injustice for all our siblings throughout the world. Help our light to break forth like the dawn, so that healing can spring up quickly. May there be an end to division, strife and war. May there be a dawning of a truly human society built on love and peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.²⁰

²⁰ Adapted from *Prayer for Justice #1* as found on Catholics Online
(<https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=722> [accessed 4 Sep 2019])

March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11, Our Hope Does Not Disappoint Us

Theme: Hopeful

HOPEFUL BOASTING OR BOASTING HOPEFUL?

Opening prayer (read together) – 1 minute:

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. Amen.

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5 minutes:

What does “boasting” mean to you? Share some examples of boasting that you have seen.

Read aloud – 3 minutes: Romans 5:1-11

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5-10 minutes: What word or phrase in this text caught your eye and why?

Re-read aloud – 1 minute: Romans 5:1-6

The Text in Context – 3 minutes:

Scholars agree that the Letter to the Romans (abbreviated from here on as Romans) was written by the apostle Paul (some of the epistles bearing that name were not written by him). This letter was Paul’s way of introducing himself to the believers in Rome before he traveled there. For years Paul had hoped to visit the believers in Rome, but other ministerial duties kept him from traveling there. “But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.” (Rom 15:23-24) At the end of the letter, Paul sends greetings to various people in Rome, indicating that this wasn’t one church that Paul was writing to but to all the believers in Rome.

Theologians and reformers across the centuries have loved this letter. Martin Luther put it this way: “This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian’s while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well.”²¹

²¹ Luther, Martin, *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* (Translated by Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB), as found at https://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref_romans.html [Accessed 7 Sept 2019]

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Theologians have loved Romans because of Paul’s detailed explanation of salvation: humanity is justified (saved) by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Reformers (those wanting church renewal) have used it over the centuries as a focal point for instituting change (Augustine, Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, and Karl Barth to name a few). Theologians and reformers over the years have focused on what Paul wrote. Maybe it is time to look at to whom the letter was addressed. To see this letter in a different light, we need to understand what the believers in Rome were going through at that time.

Discussion break – 5 minutes (sharing by mutual invitation): What images comes to your mind when you think of Rome?

The Text in Context (cont.) – 4 minutes:

When we hear “Rome” today, it is easy to think of it as a major center of Christianity. Vatican City—the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church and the home of the Pope—is surrounded by Rome. Christians from all over the world travel to Rome to see their centuries-old iconic architecture and art (including the Sistine Chapel Ceiling by Michelangelo). In Paul’s time, that wasn’t the case.

Rome in the first century after Jesus Christ was ruled by the Roman Empire. The empire was polytheistic, i.e., believing in many gods. This included Greek gods (which they renamed) and several foreign cults. As the empire expanded, it didn’t force its religious beliefs on those they conquered but it didn’t mean they were tolerant of all religions. Even before Jesus was born, the Roman Empire had issues with Judaism since observant Jews refused to participate in the worship of Roman gods or offer sacrifices at their temples.

This is the circumstance the early believers in Jesus Christ find themselves in as they begin to form congregations in Rome. At first, the empire considered them just another sect of Judaism. Emperor Nero (37 CE – 68 CE) started becoming suspicious of them as they continued to grow. About 6 – 10 years after Paul wrote this letter, Nero even blamed the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE) on the early church. In response, the believers in Rome dubbed him the anti-Christ. The first 200-plus years after Jesus’ death and resurrection was not a good time to be a Christian in Rome. If you were of Jewish ancestry, your family and friends ridiculed you for not keeping the faith of your ancestors. If you were non-Jewish and were part of this strange new sect, your loved ones gave you a hard time for not keeping the *pax deorum* or “peace of the gods.” On top of that, sporadic persecution of believers was carried out by the Roman Empire. This is the community of believers that Paul’s letter is addressed.

When looking at this epistle in this light, we see that the Letter to the Romans is more than a powerful statement of what Paul believes. It is a message of hope to people living out their faith during difficult and trying times. That helps us understand better why Paul reminds the readers why they should “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” This isn’t about “expressing excessive pride in oneself” (Miriam-Webster.com’s definition of “boast”); this is

about holding your head high as you go through difficult times. The Greek word translated as “boast” (καυχᾶσθαι [kow-khah'-om-ahee]) properly means “living with ‘head up high.’” In suffering, this isn’t the former practices of Greek fraternities where initiates would be paddled and they were expected to hold their heads up and say, “Thank you sir, may I have another?” This is the God-given confidence that no matter what suffering one might face, believers still hold their head up high because we are not stuck in the pain of the moment; we have hope in our salvation through Jesus Christ.

The Text in Our Context – 7 minutes:

Many pastors can tell you about a pattern they see around their congregation: when regular attendees go through a difficult time in their life (e.g., money, health, or marital problems), they stop coming to church. This may seem counterintuitive to many, but it happens in congregations across all denominations. The generic excuse is “Some hard things have happened, and I need space.” The truth is that some are embarrassed to come to church when they are going through difficult times. “If I am going through this hardship, others will think that my faith isn’t strong.” Their heads are hung in shame, so they choose not to gather with other Christians. Paul reminds us that being a believer doesn’t mean we will never experience suffering. Because we live in a broken world, suffering is a part of the human existence. It may not happen all the time, but it will happen sometimes. When it does, we need to hold our head up high and continue to live hopeful to the promise we have through Jesus Christ.

In 2011, an article on PsychologyToday.com had this to say about hope:

Hope often gets a bad rap. For some, it conjures up images of a blissfully naïve chump pushing up against a wall with a big smile. That’s a shame. Cutting-edge science shows that hope, at least as defined by psychologists, matters a lot.

Hope is not a brand new concept in psychology. In 1991, the eminent positive psychologist Charles R. Snyder and his colleagues came up with Hope Theory. According to their theory, hope consists of agency and pathways. The person who has hope has the will and determination that goals will be achieved, and a set of different strategies at their disposal to reach their goals. Put simply: hope involves the will to get there, and different ways to get there.

Why is hope important? Well, life is difficult. There are many obstacles. Having goals is not enough. One has to keep getting closer to those goals, amidst all the inevitable twists and turns of life. Hope allows people to approach problems with a mindset and strategy-set suitable to success...²²

Being hopeful has its place in our lives. It helps us to be a better person. It also helps us to be a better Christian. When we can hold our head high (boast) even in the midst of difficult times,

²² Kaufman, Scott Barry. Dec. 26, 2011. *The Will and Ways of Hope*, as found at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beautiful-minds/201112/the-will-and-ways-hope> [Accessed 7 Sept 2019]

we remember what God has done in the past and trust that God will do the same in the future. It changes how we look at life and look at faith. It also changes how and what we give to God. We need to be careful, though. There is a big difference between “hopeful boasting” and “boasting hopeful.”

“Hopeful boasting” is what athletes do, often before a game: “We’re going to crush them! They think they’re good, but they haven’t had to deal with us yet.” Never mind the fact that the team that they’re about to play is undefeated. “Hopeful boasting” is also done to boost an athlete’s ego. Boxer Floyd Mayweather once declared—while speaking in the royal third person—that he was the greatest boxer of all time. “He’s beaten more champions than any other fighter right here. He’s done it in a shorter period of time than any other fighter up here. And he’s done it in less fights than any other fighter up here. Record-breaking numbers all around the board: pay-per-view, live gate, landed punches on the highest percentage and took less punishment.”²³

“Hopeful boasting” is like the first part of a parable Jesus told: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income’” (Lk 18:10-12). “Hopeful boasting” in the church takes on a unique perspective when it comes to giving to God. A member of a congregation told his pastor, “Pastor, times are hard for me now. I can’t give to the church like I used to. Let’s be real: I can’t give to the church at all now. I need everything that I make to just pay the bills. I even had to take on a second job just to make ends meet. So, I’m not going to be able to come to church like I used to. And I definitely can’t sing in the choir anymore. But, Pastor, when I hit the PowerBall jackpot, I’m going to be back and I’m going to take care of the church. I’ll give a tithe (i.e., ten percent) on whatever I win.” That’s hopeful boasting, putting your trust in what you can do and not what God can do. For the record, the pastor never saw the man in church again.

“Boasting hopeful” is what you sometimes hear from people with terminal illnesses, especially cancer. “I know the doctor said the odds are against me right now. I don’t know how much longer I have. It could be days or months, but it could also be years. I’m not going to dwell on that. I’m going to hold my head high and live my life the best that I can for as long as I can, thankful for each day that I do have.”

Christians who boast hopeful find themselves living their lives in a much more positive manner. An unemployed, single mom of an infant was on WIC (a food assistance program for Women, Infants, and Children) and had to regularly go to a church-sponsored food pantry just to make sure she had enough food to eat. She wasn’t happy that she was in this situation, but she wasn’t ashamed to talk about it either. She held her head high even when people looked at her

²³ As found at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2015/aug/10/floyd-mayweather-greatest-of-all-time-five-division-world-champio> [Accessed 7 Sept 2019]

strangely or started talking about her being an “unwed mother.”

She continued to go to church and even tithed from the small amount of money she received. She also tithed back to the food pantry, giving a food donation once a month and volunteering in the food pantry. When her child was old enough to be in preschool, the mom was offered a part-time position thanks to some connections she had made through her church. With the extra time that she had, the mom started a food pantry at her church, utilizing the insights she had gained from volunteering at the other food pantry. Eventually the food pantry grew to the point that she was hired full-time by her church to run the pantry and help in other administrative areas.

When we can boast hopefully, we trust in all that God can and will do for us despite our circumstances. Also, we are able to live our lives in a way that truly honors God because we know that hope does not disappoint us thanks to the love that God has poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Reflecting on the Text – 20 minutes (use mutual invitation)

Do you consider yourself a hopeful person? Why or why not?

Share a time when it was hard to feel hopeful. What did you do in that situation?

Have there been times in your life where you felt you could not give to God as you would like?

What changed for you?

What can you do when you feel it is difficult for you to hold your head high (i.e., boast)?

Stewardship Challenge

Think about an area of your giving to God (time, talents, treasures) that you have reduced the amount that you give because of difficult times that have occurred. Develop a plan for returning your giving to its previous level.

Closing Prayer – 1 minute

Generous God, we know that we have hope always through your son, Jesus Christ. Help us to hear you saying that over all the other voices of this world that try to drown you out. When times are hard, guide our feet so that we run to you – with both hands stretched out – instead of running away from you. Help us hold our head high with hope and give us a reminder today that hope is a spiritual lifeline that is unbreakable. It's in Jesus precious name that we pray. Amen.

Adult Study

NOTHING

Opening prayer (read together) – 1 minute:

Loving God, nothing can separate us from you. No time or place or language or existence can take us out of your steadfast love. Wherever we find ourselves, you are the one who loves us unconditionally and unfailingly. You have given us so much. Help us to trust you with all we love, all we are, and all we have. Amen.

Sharing by mutual invitation – 10 minutes

Everyone has had times in their lives when it seems as if God has abandoned us. When have you felt separated from God?

Read aloud – 3 minutes: Romans 8:26-39

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5-10 minutes: What word or phrase in this text caught your eye and why?

Re-read aloud – 1 minute: Romans 8:38-39

The Text in Context – 4 minutes

An earlier study (March 15) described in detail the life experiences of first-century believers in Rome. Here is a summary of the context:

- Paul sent the letter to the Roman believers to let the community know he would be making his first visit to them soon;
- Unlike today, Rome was not a friendly place for Christians;
- This letter was a message of hope to those living through difficult times.

The term *difficult times* may be an understatement. The early followers of Jesus had difficulty throughout the Roman Empire; it was probably the worst in Rome.

Followers of the Way (as the early believers referred to themselves) became a major presence in Rome by the late 40s CE. Since these believers—along with their Jewish siblings—were not polytheistic (worshipping multiple gods), they did not participate in the Imperial Cult, also known as emperor worship. Emperor Claudius had definite problems with the fact that this Growing group would not worship him as a god. That prompted Claudius to ban all Jews from Rome around 49 CE. Since the Roman Empire considered Jesus' followers to be a sect of

Judaism, they were expelled as well. Luke references this expulsion in Acts 18:1-2a: “After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.” This expulsion lasted until Claudius’ death around 54 CE. Paul’s letter “To all God’s beloved in Rome” (Romans 1:7a) was written between 55 CE and 58 CE, shortly after Jews and Followers of the Way were allowed back into the capital city.

Just because they were allowed to return didn’t mean things were easy for God’s beloved. Around 30 CE the Roman Senate went against the wishes of Emperor Tiberius and pronounced Christianity (a derogatory name given to the believers) as an “illegal superstition,” making it a crime under Roman law. Although Tiberius ordered Roman officials to not interfere with this “sect,” the believers still dealt with religious hatred. Unless you were a Roman citizen, you could face a variety of persecutions. Your home or property could be taken from you. You could be forced to work for no pay. You could be beaten or imprisoned for just being a believer. Even though the major persecution of Christians didn’t begin until after 64 CE, it was still hard to be a believer in Rome.

Discussion break – 5 minutes (sharing by mutual invitation)

Have you ever felt persecuted for your faith? If not, have you ever known someone who has?

The Text in Context (continued) – 4 minutes

During this time in history, a common belief was that when something bad happened to someone, it must be because they had offended their god or their god had turned its back on the person. This idea had been around for centuries: good things meant you pleased the gods; bad things meant you hadn’t. This concept was not limited to polytheistic religions. After Job lost his cattle, lost his children, and sores broke out on his body from head to toe, three of his friends come to comfort him. What they really did was spend much of their time trying to get Job to admit he had done something wrong. Eliphaz the Temanite puts it this way in Job 4:7-9:

⁷ “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?

⁸ As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.

⁹ By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.”

In other words, Job must have done something wrong (sinned) to have all these bad things happen to him in a short period of time. By Jesus’ time, that mindset still existed among the Jewish community, even among those who walked closely with Jesus: “As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” (Jn 9:1-2)

Those outside the community looking at the believers in Rome surmised that the only reason why these people faced such persecution was because they did something wrong that angered their God. There was no other explanation for why the Followers of the Way were being treated in such a horrible fashion. They angered their God, so their God must have abandoned them. For people who believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it still had to hurt hearing this over and over again from family, friends, and even the government. Your God has abandoned you. Your God has abandoned you. Your God has abandoned you!

Earlier in the letter, Paul told God's beloved in Rome that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23b). In chapter 8, Paul wants to make sure that they understand what this means: nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not hardship or distress. Not persecution or peril. Not famine or nakedness. Not even death. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Rulers, angels, or other powers can't separate us from God's love. Neither what we do now nor what we do in the future can't separate us from God's love. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing! That's a powerful message of hope for people living in what seems like a hopeless situation.

The Text in Our Context – 6 minutes

Studies have shown that hope has a powerful effect on those in difficult situations, especially serious or terminal illnesses. The 2019 film *The Farewell* is about a Chinese family that's scattered around the globe. They gather together in Changchun, China to say goodbye to Nai Nai, the maternal head of the family. Nai Nai has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and given only a few months to live. The catch is that the family doesn't want Nai Nai to know about the cancer. The gathering, therefore, is under the pretense of the wedding of Nai Nai's grandson.

This may seem strange or deceitful to those of us raised in European-influenced cultures. The movie shares that this is very common for Chinese culture. The Mandarin name of the movie is *Bié Gàosù Tā*, which is translated as "Don't Tell Her/Don't Let Her Know." The reasoning behind not telling is that when someone knows they have terminal cancer it changes how they live. By not telling, the person has a more positive, hopeful life. Billi, Nai Nai's Chinese American granddaughter (and clearly, her favorite grandchild), can't understand this at first. She struggles in the movie between honoring what her family wants and doing what she wants. The message of the movie is that it is important to give people hope because hope can change the way someone views life.

For a Christian, that hope is knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, your Lord. That means it doesn't matter what people think of you. It doesn't matter what people do to you. It doesn't matter what type of difficult situation you are going through. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Sadly, too often Christians forget this fact. For example, when disasters strike, we may be tempted to assume that some sort of

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Divine retribution is at work and that sinners are justly being punished by an angry God. This response fails to take into account the scale of destruction that impacts those who are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. It also suggests the capricious and fickle nature of such Divine actions which wreak havoc in some places and not others which may be equally deserving of Divine wrath.

We shouldn't go to church for fear of what God will do to us if we don't. We should go to church because we want to give God the praise for all God has done and we hope will continue to do.

We shouldn't tithe just because it was something mandated in the Old Testament, and we'll be financially destitute if we don't do it. We should tithe because God has provided generously for us (even if we are broke!) and we want to give back a portion of that generosity for the continued ministry of the church.

We shouldn't use the talents that God has given us because we think we will lose them if we don't. We use our talents to uplift God's children who need to hear a message of hope. Knowing that nothing can separate us from God means we stop acting like every bad thing that happens to us is because God is mad and has abandoned us. Knowing that nothing will cause God to turn against us means there is nothing to keep us from living in the hope of the present and the promise of the future.

Reflecting on the Text – 25 minutes (use mutual invitation)

Do you consider yourself a hopeful person? Why or why not?

What is it like for you to spend time with someone who does not have hope?

We are all human. This means that even when we know intellectually that nothing can separate us from the love of God, sometimes our emotions get in the way. How do you regain your hope when you feel a bit hopeless?

Stewardship Challenge

Being around someone who is lacking hope can drain our hope. Our natural reaction is to pull away from someone who feels hopeless. Make a commitment to not run away the next time you are around a hopeless person. While you are with them, see if there is any way you can lift their spirit by passing on some of your hope.

Closing Prayer – 1 minute

Hear us, O God, as we share the prayers in our hearts today – those spoken aloud and those spoken silently in our hearts. When we don't even have the words to pray, let us release our hopes, groans, and sighs to you. Help us to rest in your love, even when we feel separated from

you. Help us to trust that you will always hold us in your loving hands, no matter the circumstances. Help us to remember that you will always hear the prayers of our hearts and our minds. And help us be a witness to others who need to be reminded of that as well. Amen.

Adult Study

SHOW YOUR MARKS

Opening prayer (read together) – 1 minute:

God of hope, we seek your guidance today. Teach us to love all those we meet. Lead us to offer help and hospitality to those who need it. Help us to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. We seek your direction and your inspiration to be stewards of hope and love wherever we go. Amen.

Sharing by mutual invitation – 10 minutes

What do you think are the signs of a good Christian? Share why you feel that way.

Read aloud – 2 minutes: Romans 12:9-21

Sharing by mutual invitation – 5-10 minutes: What word or phrase in this text caught your eye and why?

Re-read aloud – 1 minute: Romans 12:9

The Text in Context – 4 minutes

NOTE: Although Paul never referred to those he wrote to as Christians, to keep things clear, we'll use that phrase for this study. It may seem a little strange how it is used as we will talk about Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

Earlier studies (March 15 and July 26) shared what life was like for the believers in Rome. The social/political climate around them was clearly a harsh one for these believers who before 49 CE were considered by the Roman Empire as a Jewish sect. Many of the Christians in Rome were culturally Jews. That is understandable since the good news of Jesus Christ was first proclaimed by Jews to Jews. For that reason, the early house churches would have felt culturally Jewish. Not all the Followers of the Way were Jews, however. The gatherings in these homes were not limited to Jewish believers, but that cultural influence would have been experienced by the Gentiles.

When Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE, Jewish Christians were forced to leave as well. Gentile Christians, however, could stay in Rome. For five years, the Gentile Christians continued to gather together in homes, worshipping God without the influences of their Jewish Christian siblings. The number of believers didn't stop growing during those five years. The Gentile Christians continued to proclaim the gospel to those around them, the non-

Christian Gentiles who remained in the city.

When Claudius died in 54 CE, the edict that kept Jews out of Rome lapsed. Slowly Jews began to make their way back to Rome. Jewish Christians returning to the house churches that they had left would have found them greatly changed. The house churches were filled with more Gentiles than Jews, which meant they were culturally more Gentile than Jewish. The Jewish Christians probably felt as if their home church was gone. To add to the feeling of loss, there are historical indications that the reason for the expulsion of Jews in 49 CE was because of disturbances between non-Christian Jews and Jewish Christians. When all of them returned in 54 CE, the non-Christian Jews chose to distance themselves from Jewish Christians. They thought that if they didn't have any disturbances with the Jewish Christians, they could avoid another expulsion by the Roman Empire.

Discussion break – 10 minutes (sharing by mutual invitation)

Many churches consist of people who have been members for twenty to fifty years and with only a few who have been members for less than ten years. Think about how your church might look if all of the long-time members were forced to leave for five years and the new members continued to worship and grow the ministry. What would it look like and how would you feel when you returned?

The Text in Context (continued) – 5 minutes

Jewish Christians would have been placed in a very awkward situation when they finally returned to Rome. They had done such a great job teaching the Gentile Christians that those who remained were able to continue growing the ministry. Before 49 CE, Gentile Christians had to adapt to the Jewish ways of worshipping. Now it was the Jewish Christians who needed to adapt to the Gentile way of worshipping. This was despite the fact that they were gathering in house churches that the Jewish believers had started. Tensions would have increased as issues of leadership arose: who is in charge, the Jewish Christians who started the ministry, or the Gentile Christians who have been leading it for five years?

There were also the issues of what defined a Follower of the Way and how believers related to Jesus Christ's Jewish culture. In other words, what are the marks of a Christian? The Jewish Christians believed that circumcision, setting aside the Sabbath, and other Jewish practices were essential marks of being a Christian, since Jesus was a Jew. These were not traditions for the Gentile Christians, so they were less important to them. Some believed that the Jewish law was no longer relevant, because they had been freed from it by Christ.

Paul wrote this letter to the Roman believers just three years after the expulsion had ended and Jews were still moving back to Rome. He was clearly aware of the tensions that existed among the community of faith. Besides wanting to give them hope in the midst of trials and

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persecutions, Paul wants them to find some harmony—some unity—in the community. He does this by asking questions throughout the letter:

Romans 3:1 - Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

Romans 3:9 - What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin...

Romans 3:29 - ...is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also?

Romans 3:31 - Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

Romans 7:1 - Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime?

Romans 9:30 - What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith...

To add to the confusion and tension that existed, there were those who thought that certain roles or positions in the community of believers were more important than others.

Paul wants these believers in Rome—those of Jewish heritage and those who were Gentiles—to understand that all those external things that the Roman and Jewish authorities had placed on them were not what defined a Christian. The mark of a true Christian is love. Even though *love* is only used twice in our text for today, it is the underlying message in every aspect of the text.

Let love be genuine...

...love one another with mutual affection

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil...

...live peaceably with all.

Circumcision was fine for those who wanted to do that ritual; showing love to the stranger was more important. The Law was still a part of who they were and what God had done; showing love to those who persecuted you was more important. It really didn't matter who was leading the groups if you couldn't show love to each other by living peaceably with everyone. Paul tries to make it clear to those he was writing to: you don't show the mark of a true Christian by any of these rituals; you show the mark by the love you show to everyone.

The Text in Our Context – 6 minutes

In the Harry Potter Universe, it's easy to identify the bad people. Death Eaters (dark wizards or witches who follow Lord Voldemort) have a brand on the left wrist that consists of a snake slithering out of a skull. This dark mark clearly shows their allegiance. If there is any question when one Death Eater meets another for the first time, they simply show their mark to confirm their connection to the Dark Lord.

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Television and movies have a long history of marking certain people so you can easily connect them to the group to which they belong. You knew who was who in old westerns: black cowboy hats were worn by the bad guys, white ones by the good guys. Witches had crooked noses with moles on them plus tall pointy hats. Police had Irish accents. Those types of visual marks were meant to help viewers immediately know where someone stands in relationship to others.

Marking people as a means of identification has spilled over into the church. We get into the weeds trying to define what a true Christian looks or acts like. You should wear a cross, carry a cross, or have one hanging in your home. It's okay for women to be pastors—or it's not okay for women to be pastors. Persons should be baptized as infants, or not baptized as infants. Certain people are welcome in the church, or certain people should not be welcomed in the church. This translation of the Bible should be used, or a different translation (or not a translation at all, but a paraphrase).

In the late 1960's, Father Peter Scholtes was serving a Roman Catholic parish on the south side of Chicago, including as director of a youth choir. Father Scholtes wanted a song that the youth could sing at a series of ecumenical, interracial events that addressed the tensions faced at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. When he couldn't find one, he wrote one (in a day!) that captured what Jesus said is the mark of one who truly follow him (sing along if you like):

1) We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored

Refrain
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They will know we are Christians by our love

2) We will work with each other, we will work side by side
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride
Refrain

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3) We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land
Refrain

God has poured into us an abundance of divine love. We are good stewards of that love not by hoarding it but by letting it flow out of us. That means that as good stewards and true Christians, we show our mark by our love shared with others. That love may be shared by giving

to the church or those in need. It may be shared by serving communion in worship or serving a meal at a homeless shelter. It may be shared by doing work to repair a problem in the church building or work to repair the wrongs in our society. However we might share our love, the important thing is that we proudly show our mark to the world.

Reflecting on the Text – 25 minutes (use mutual invitation)

What does showing love look like for you?

Who are the people that are easy for you to show love? Why do you find it easy to show them love?

Who are the people that are hard for you to show love? Why do you find it hard to show them love?

Is there anyone you think should not receive our love?

Stewardship Challenge

Thanks to Facebook and other social media sites, it is easy for us to spend time with or listen to those who think like we think. This has prompted more division in our society and more unwillingness to listen to one another. That is why this challenge is a little different: Make a list of at least ten people for whom being with or talking to is hard for you to do. Pray over each name and ask God to open your eyes to ways you can show them love. Then actually show them love.

Closing Prayer – 1 minute

God, plant a seed of genuine love and harmony in our hearts. Let us not rest until we have contributed to the needs of the saints and showed hospitality to all the strangers we meet. Help us leave behind vengeance, hatred, and bitterness. Help us to outdo one another in showing our mark by honoring our neighbor and loving one another with mutual affection. Amen.

Charts

You may want to use these charts as part of your emphasis.

WEEKLY GIVING GUIDE								
ANNUAL INCOME	MONTHLY INCOME	WEEKLY INCOME	4%	6%	8%	10%	12%	15%
18,000	1,500	346	14.00	21.00	28.00	25.00	42.00	52.00
25,000	2,083	481	19.00	29.00	38.00	48.00	58.00	72.00
30,000	2,500	577	23.00	35.00	46.00	58.00	69.00	87.00
40,000	3,333	769	31.00	46.00	62.00	77.00	92.00	115.00
45,000	3,750	865	35.00	52.00	69.00	87.00	104.00	130.00
50,000	4,167	962	38.00	58.00	77.00	96.00	115.00	144.00
60,000	5,000	1,154	46.00	69.00	92.00	115.00	138.00	173.00
75,000	6,250	1,442	58.00	87.00	115.00	144.00	173.00	216.00
100,000	8,333	1,923	77.00	115.00	154.00	192.00	231.00	288.00
125,000	10,417	2,404	96.00	144.00	192.00	240.00	288.00	361.00
150,000	12,500	2,885	115.00	173.00	231.00	289.00	346.00	433.00
175,000	14,583	3,365	135.00	202.00	269.00	337.00	404.00	505.00
200,000	16,667	3,846	154.00	231.00	308.00	385.00	462.00	577.00
225,000	18,750	4,327	173.00	260.00	346.00	433.00	519.00	649.00

GROWTH GIVING CHART

As Christians we are encouraged to grow in our giving in response to our blessings. As we recognize the gifts that God has provided for us, we are able to share a portion with others. Being a proportionate steward is our way of giving in relation to our abundance. The steps below illustrate the weekly giving levels in our congregation. Please take a moment to determine the step where you are. Then consider how God has blessed you. We invite each household to grow to the next step for the coming year. By taking the next step, you are putting God first and living your faith.

