

Lenten Devotions 2024



By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult

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Although not seen in the photo, atop this mountain stands Preikestolen – the Pulpit Rock, a favorite tourist destination. That reminded me (Lee) of Richard Rusbult’s life-long faithfulness in composing devotions that make each day of the journey meaningful. Thanks, Dick, for your insight, wisdom, vulnerability, and authenticity. Jesus’ agape love surely flows through all your writing!

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February 13 – March 31, 2024

Welcome aboard the 2024 Lenten Journey. If this is your first "walk to the cross", get ready for the challenge to walk on sandy, dusty roads, to leap two thousand years back in history to another era in time, and to seek new insights and answers to what really happened in Israel about 33 AD. If you've "walked the walk" before, may you be challenged anew to recall and reflect on the words and actions of Jesus, the disciples, and others.

Lent falls between Ash Wednesday and Easter, and it's about as early as it can get this year! For most of the Christian "world", the focus is on the climax, Resurrection Sunday, which we call Easter. Not many around the world will pause to read and reflect for forty-five days before celebrating Easter Sunday. If you follow this year's Lenten Journey, you will be giving up something for Lent – some time!!!! As you read, reflect, and pray about the daily readings, perhaps you will discover that you haven't given up anything – instead, you will have gained new perceptions and/or understandings of Jesus, God, and humanity.

My journey was interrupted two years ago with a broken back, followed by yet another fall. God has been gentle and healing and I decided to give it another go. And it turns out to be a leap year, as well!!! I am indebted to Dr. Lee Spitzer and his wife, Lois, for our many years of collaboration to produce the Lenten Journey for almost twenty years!!!! I just do the writing – they do all the cleaning-up and shaping of the whole booklet.

You probably won't agree with everything that's written herein – that's not a problem at all. We are friends of Jesus, traveling together! If you don't like some of the suggestions, conclusions, or questions, then just skip them! Perhaps you'll miss a day or two, here and there – that's OK, too. Each day's journey stands pretty much by itself, and can be missed, or picked up at a later date. We will meet good and evil people, consider wisdom from "above", ponder the humanity and divinity of Jesus, shudder at the suffering and brutality he endured, confront the "why" questions again and again, pray daily – and even more.

GOD LOVES US – AND GOD CAME!!!!!!

Day 1

Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Matthew 3:1

Not many people in today's world have either the interest or the time to stop everything at some point during the day to reflect on someone who lived almost two thousand years ago. And as Jesus walked those dusty roads in Israel – yes, the word is walked! – not everyone followed him around, either.

Unlike today, there were no radios, TV's, cell phones or multiple other means of communication. It was all “word of mouth” – and hearing wasn't always an easy part of the communication process.

As we join Jesus, he and his followers have been walking all over Israel for well beyond two years. Can you imagine what some of the stories were that were told again and again – and with all kinds of thoughts and observations added via the communicator?

Try to imagine what happened to some of the stories after they'd been passed on a dozen times. Some of them were so good that people decided they would walk the ten (or whatever number) miles in order to hear him themselves. Word got around, also that he fed people...thousands of them and several times. This was one of the best rumors that drew people to wherever he was going to be that day.

After all, who was this guy? That same question has been asked over the centuries since Jesus came and went. For most of my life, I've known that if I could do so, I'd drive anywhere to get in touch with Jesus. But things like that don't happen, do they?

Years back, my dad's health was declining...and Mom called me to tell me the end was near – could I get there? I was traveling at that point west of Erie, Pa., and needed to drive the shores of Lake Erie to Dunkirk, N.Y. As I drove, I ran into an ice storm and the road became like glass. I could only drive a few miles an hour, slipping all over the place! I finally arrived, in the middle of the night, and figured I was too late to see Dad one more time.

But Mom met me, filled with obvious excitement. “Wait until you hear what he has to tell you”. So I went into his bedroom, and he raised his hand with a big smile on his face and said: “Jesus held his hand up and told me to wait another day.” Then came hugs, tears and no sleep....as well as talk about Jesus. That's what happens when rumors about Jesus aren't rumors...Jesus is for real!!!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for coming then....and for being with us now. Amen.

**Questions: 1. When was the last time you knew Jesus touched your life?
2. What are the rumors you hear today?**

Yesterday's story didn't end there, however. The next day I was driving towards home in southeast Pennsylvania and as I drove through the middle of Williamsport, Pa., a police car came beside me with lights flashing, and I was motioned to the side of the street. The policeman came to the car, and kindly and gently said they'd received a call to let me know that my dad had died that morning...and I needed to get home in order to make another trip – just three days before Christmas.

As Jesus walked those dusty roads, he touched many, many lives. And then, as now, some wanted to be touched – and some didn't. As you reflect on the four Gospels, they are all about touching lives. What do you suppose people talked about as they walked many miles to hear him, and be where he was? What do you suppose people argued about as they carried on their conversations on their way back home?

Of course, when it comes to Jesus, there were the things he did – and there were the things he said! But for many, it was more difficult to understand what he said, than to believe what he did. You and I have what is called the New Testament that we read, study and ponder. As we have joined Jesus and his followers, we are not carrying a Bible in our hands. Jesus' followers were people from every village and town who could walk to wherever he would be. Jesus didn't stand before them with a Bible in his hands. Whether in a small village, or on one of their many hillsides, Jesus just talked to them. No one had ever heard this kind of "talk" before. There is no doubt that plenty of conversation took place every time he "talked" to the multitudes. And many questions remain to this day as to what he really meant.

Reflect on your knowledge of the New Testament. Of all the things Jesus said, what would you say is the "biggest or best" for you? Then think of all the things that Jesus did. How would you rate them in importance? What would be the top five items on your list?

Old Testament writings were found in local synagogues. Mention is made of Jesus reading Old Testament writings on more than one occasion. When you read your Bible today, how much of your time is spent in the Old Testament? For most of us, the answer would be "very little". So, for about six weeks, you've agreed to move back in time almost two thousand years. What did the world look like without a New Testament? What was Jesus' Bible?

Prayer: Jesus, help me get a handle on what your journey was really like. Amen.

Questions: 1. Why should you read the Old Testament?
2. What part of the Old Testament is your favorite?

As we listened to Jesus this morning as he talked to people on a hillside, he held no Bible in his hands. When he talked with people in the small village down the road, he didn't hold the Old Testament in his hands. However, when he went into the synagogue in that village, he took a scroll in his hands, and read one of the Psalms.

To begin to understand what Jesus was saying to his listeners, one must realize the context from which Jesus spoke was the Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament was the Bible Jesus read. He traced in its passages every important fact about himself...and his mission. Some of the images – ‘Lamb of God’ – ‘shepherd’ – ‘sign of Jonah’ – ‘stone which the builders rejected’ – to name just a few that came directly from the pages of the Old Testament.

People of Jesus' day were better “remember-ers” than we are today. They listened to the Old Testament readings in the Synagogue...and not having their own printed copy, were adept at memorizing what they were hearing. In some homes, the readings in the Temple were given in their homes from memory. How much of the Old Testament can you quote? For that matter, how much of the New Testament can you quote in your home or around your dinner table?

As you think of the Old Testament, how much of it have you found in Jesus' teachings and preaching? Most scholars believe the book of Job is the earliest of all the writings. When was the last time you wandered through Job? Would you find reading Job more enjoyable than reading one of the Gospels? Or can you tell me that you fully understand Jesus' “Sermon on the Mount”? What do we really mean when we call the Bible the Word of God?

Thomas Merton's observations about the Bible can be in both the Old and New Testaments: “There is, in a word, nothing comfortable about the Bible – unless we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves...Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it? Have we ceased to fight it? Then perhaps our reading is no longer serious.

For most people, the understanding of the Bible is, and should be, a struggle...not merely to find meanings that can be looked up in books of references but to come to terms personally with the stark scandal and contradictions in the Bible itself.

Let us not be too sure we know the Bible just because we have learned not to be astonished at it, just because we have learned not to have problems with it.

Because Jesus lived with the Old Testament, when he read, that's what he read...so to get in the mood before moving on, read a chapter from one of the books of the Old Testament.

Prayer: Jesus, help us to love both the Old and the New Testament. Amen.

Of all of yesterday's readings, I know one chapter that wasn't read! It was Psalm 119! Why? Because there are 176 verses!!! Most of us today would have read Psalm 120 which has only 7 verses and is a prayer for help. Altogether there are 150 Psalms. There is no doubt that Jesus prayed the Psalms, as did most Jewish people. Several years ago, I pondered praying one of the Psalms. So, each night after a time of "regular" prayer, I close my day by praying the 23rd Psalm, a favorite of many. I am not suggesting this should be "your" prayer...it is merely a sample of what could be said via one of the Psalms.

"I am an old sheep. God is my shepherd. I have plenty of wants...but have no needs. God keeps me and feeds me in luxuriously green pastures. God takes me to drink clear, pure shallow waters, gently moving since sheep cannot drink from deep, fast-moving water.

God, since I took my first step, I have been walking on the road that leads to the Valley of the Shadow of Death...but I have never been afraid because you walk with me every step of the way. You put my soul back together when it comes apart at the seams.

Because I have poor eyesight, I stumble and fall into crevices that I can't get out of. But you are always there to help me with your rod and staff, which in many cases have been life-savers.

You prepare banquet meals for me to eat in full view of my enemies. My plate is full, and my cup is running over.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and one day I will come and be with you forever and ever:

**My Saviour Jesus...God
My Holy Spirit...God
My Creator of the Universe...God**

Three in One – and One in Three...Amen and Amen."

Pick any Psalm you want – or any other Old Testament reading, and see if you can make it, with whatever word changes that are necessary, into a prayer of your own.

Prayer: Jesus, hear our prayer, whether from yesterday's world, or today's. Amen.

**Question: 1. How much time do you think Jesus invested in praying?
2. Where is Jesus referred to in the Old Testament?**

Day 5

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Matthew 5:1-12

We've been walking with Jesus a few days now, and wherever we go there are crowds of people – all trying to get closer to him not only to hear what he was saying, but to see what he was doing. Were people attracted by what Jesus said, or by what Jesus did? What, if anything, attracts people to Jesus today?

There's no question about people being impressed, or at least filled with wonderment at the things Jesus was doing. If you'd been there, and had a friend or relative dealing with any kind of problem, you'd work hard to get him/her to wherever Jesus was going to be that day. He healed all kinds of sicknesses and disorders. They brought people with demons, epileptics, and paralytics for Jesus to heal...and he healed them all!!!!

But it wasn't just what he did. It was – also – what he said that kept them coming back again and again. With today's autos, trains and planes, people have no awareness of what people did to hear Jesus in his day. When was the last time you walked a mile? Maybe two miles? OK...how about a half-mile? Would you attend your worship service next Sunday if you had to walk? None of us would. But in Jesus' world, most people walked.

The miracles that Jesus performed were great! People were in complete awe over what they saw happening to people. But they had a tough time with what he said. As an example, try this one: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

When was the last time you read for your devotions the 5th through the 7th chapters of the Gospel of Matthew? They are called by many the "Sermon on the Mount". Easy reading? Certainly not in today's world. Easy to listen to? Every person on that hillside pondered everything they heard. Harvey Cox said the Sermon on the Mount is: "the most luminous, most quoted, most analyzed, most contested and most influential moral and religious discourse in all of human history."

Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Blessed are the pure in heart. You are salt for all the human race. You are like a light for the whole world to see. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let them slap the left cheek, too. The list could go on.

As we have joined with Jesus' followers two years after the Sermon on the Mount teachings were delivered, they were still the topic of conversation as people walked back and forth, went to their synagogues, and ate together at their evening meals. Two thousand years later, how is the world different because of the Sermon on the Mount?

Prayer: Jesus, forgive us for not paying much attention. Amen.

Most scholars today believe the book of Job was the first to be written in what we call the Old Testament. The subjects of “suffering” and “God” have been around since the beginning of time. Do you know anyone who is suffering today – physical, or otherwise? If you do, do you know why? Is there anything you can do to help them?

Jesus knew where he was headed...and it included the word “suffering”. At the same time, he also knew God was in his future, although in a way that had never happened in the history of the world. Yes, Jesus pondered the book of Job, especially the last couple of chapters where God does the speaking.

One verse from Job he probably pondered was 42:2 – “I know you can do all things. No plan of yours can be thwarted!” Have you ever said anything close to that?

In Lamentations 3:26 he read: “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Jesus had been waiting over thirty years when we joined him on this walk.

In 2 Chronicles 28:20, he read: “Do not be afraid or discouraged for the Lord my God is with you.” Night and day, Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer. When was the last time you said, “God is with me today...or tonight?”

In Psalm 28, it says: “Father help! I feel low, sad, fearful...” With what Jesus faced on a daily basis, and what he knew was ahead of him at the end of his earthly journey, he asked for God’s help, again and again. He did it because he knew he would receive help from God. When was the last time you – literally – asked God for help?

In Job 23:19 – “When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” Jesus planned to be gold. Does God ever “test” you? Have you ever come through an experience when you “felt like gold” at the end of it?

In Jeremiah 46:28 – “Do not fear, O Jacob, my servant, for I am with you, declares the Lord.” In a sense, God is saying to Jesus: “Don’t be afraid, Jesus – for I am with you every step of the journey.”

Because the word “old” is attached to the earlier books of the Bible, we moderns tend to cling to the “new” – and after all, it’s Jesus’ story. Yet Jesus found helpful thoughts from the “old” – and so can we.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to read – and understand – the Old Testament. Amen.

**Questions: 1. Did Jesus ever read Psalm 22?
2. Have you?**

Now in his third year of walking the dusty roads of Israel, everyone was asking questions about him. “Who is he – really?” was heard often. The Jews of Jesus’ day had keen memories of how they got to where they found themselves – slaves of the Roman Empire.

They remembered names like Moses, Abraham, David – and many others. The deliverance at the Red Sea was still a story to be told. According to their writers, God was their leader – and sometimes they listened to what God expected of them. After all, it was God who brought them to the “Promised Land”, where they now found themselves bowing to Rome’s might and power. They also remembered what was to have been a couple of weeks trip to the Promised Land – that ended up taking forty years!

Jesus had a group of followers, called disciples. Not one of them had “army background” or political experience. It was a known fact that they were mostly a bunch of fishermen! Jesus never talked about a plan that would take on the power of Rome. They heard him speak negatively of the leaders of their Synagogues, but nothing about Rome.

He did some things that were unexplainable, too. “So maybe we should listen to what he has to say,” said many. “We’d been sitting on the hillside almost all day, and we were getting very hungry. No one asked him to feed us. Yet suddenly we were all told to sit down, and his group of followers came around with baskets of food...and we ate until we were full.” “It’s hard to ignore a guy who can do something like that. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t say a single word about Rome.”

Also heard were comments like:

- If someone slaps you in the face, then turn the other cheek? Some said that even if a Roman soldier slapped them in the face, no way were they going to turn the other cheek...
- If a soldier tells you to carry his extra load for a mile, instead, carry it an an extra mile...it is ridiculous to have such a thought!

Day after day, Jesus said things that shook people up and down. Some of it sounded so good – yet some of it sounded like it came from another world. As you walk the dusty roads with Jesus today, reflect on what he said. Is it the way we are to live today? Do we understand the “Sermon on the Mount” today? Over the next few days, we’ll take a look at some of what Jesus said.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to more fully understand what you said. Amen.

- Questions:
1. What would you have thought of Jesus then?
 2. In a few words, how do you describe Jesus to others?

Law. Laws! After all, the people we are walking with today are the people of the Ten Commandments. But beyond the ten commandments, there were not hundreds, but literally thousands of Temple, synagogue, and other laws. And you were watched!

So Jesus climbed a small mountain, his disciples followed him, and hundreds from the area gathered around him so they could hear what he was going to say. He already had a reputation...and people were still trying to figure out who he really was – or wasn't!

The people who gathered around him on the hill came from all walks of life...if you wanted to know what he was going to say, you'd better get there and hear it yourself. You wouldn't be hearing about it on a news channel that evening! Most of the listeners were poor and struggled with basics like food on the table.

We'll stop at the first word Jesus said. Did he say "blessed" or did he say "happy"? The word *makarios* can be translated either way. So, which do you like? Robert Wilking summarizes the differences: "For us the term happiness has come to mean 'feeling good' or enjoying certain pleasures...a transient state that arrives and departs as circumstances change or fortune intervenes. For the ancients, happiness was a possession of the soul, not something that one acquired, and once acquired, could not easily be taken away".

When one considers most of the terms Jesus used, it's hard to find much that suggests happiness in any way: meek, poor, mourn, persecuted, reviled. In one sense, happiness is something I can pursue...my happiness is up to me. But to be blessed doesn't seem to be general advice on how to be happy. Being "blessed" is being swept up in God's decisive movement in the world.

Mixed in with the crowd were some of the temple priests. They wanted to know who this guy was as he talked to such a crowd. No doubt their mouths dropped open at some of the things Jesus said. In fact, history would probably tell us that this was the beginning of the plot to hang Jesus on a cross. The more he talked, the more they knew he wasn't on their side.

If I begin to be poor in spirit or meek, if I hunger and thirst after righteousness or become more pure in heart, I will be shocked and then can think of nothing to say but "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Prayer: Jesus, help me to know what it means to be blessed. Amen.

**Questions: 1. Do you know – and like – someone who is meek?
2. Are you blessed in the ways Jesus talked about?**

As Jesus looked at the crowd gathered on the hillside, he knew he had before him the so-called “Ten Commandment” people. Not only were there the ten commandments, but over the centuries, hundreds, and then thousands of temple laws were added to the lives people lived. If you tried to get in touch with the reality of a living God, it was almost impossible to do so through your many temple experiences.

I’ve smiled to myself as I’ve thought of some of the people fully expecting Jesus’ first words to be in the “thou shall not” category. What a shock it must have been when they heard his first word “Blessed...”! When was the last time you sat in a church service, and was told you were blessed, for whatever reason? Have you ever heard a message on the Sermon on the Mount? If you have, hopefully you were blessed!!!

As Jesus added items to the word “blessed”, people were shocked. He said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Probably more than 90% of the people sitting and standing on that hillside were poor. It was during Jesus’ growing up years that Rome took away all small land parcels...almost everyone was now in the “poor” category.

“Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.” Most who had gathered that day (or perhaps days) were hungry. Food for the ordinary table was hard to come by. “How could I ever be satisfied in the world I live in today?” probably ran through many minds. More than one head was shaking “no” as a response to Jesus’ suggestion.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” “You’ve got to be kidding with us Jesus, because we’ve had nothing to laugh about for years and years.”

As Jesus continued to talk to them, I’m sure people were absolutely amazed that he wasn’t handing out a new set of laws, but instead was suggesting that all they had to do was follow in his footsteps. They were shocked when he suggested that the first mile doesn’t do the job, you need to go an extra mile. If you give your coat away, be ready to give the cloak, as well. He even suggested that we are to love our enemies... which was a concept totally unheard of until Jesus said it. Did I hear him say, “Blessed are you if you use your credit card to help someone else”?

Two thousand years later, are we still supposed to be doing the long list of things he addressed that day – or perhaps over several days? What are the things today that identify us as followers of Christ? Make your own list.

Prayer: Jesus, help someone know I am a follower of yours...today. Amen.

“So here we are today, sitting on a hillside, listening to a guy named Jesus who is telling us how we ought to live. After all, it was God who got us out of the Egyptian mess we were in and got us to what was called the promised land. Now the Romans have taken over and our way of life has completely changed...again!”

Ah, there’s that word – change. What Jesus said that day (or days) had never been heard before. He was calling for changes in living that humankind had never heard before. Neither did he suggest ways for them to get Rome off their back.

Could we be honest and agree that if God arrives on the scene, there are going to be some changes made? When I was a little guy, I had never seen the inside of a church until I was almost eight years old. During that time, my brother and I lived in fear of our mother. There were some good moments; but then there were some moments when we were threatened to the point that we would run out of the house – winter or summer – and run away until we thought it was safe to go back.

Then my dad’s boss invited us to his Sunday School and Church...and mom went with us. She met Jesus...and she was changed...almost instantly. Believe me, her sons liked the changes!!! She did, too. When Jesus shows up, things will never be the same again.

And that’s what Jesus was doing on that hillside for hours at a time. “Thou shall not” needs to be changed to “Blessed are you” was what he was suggesting. What changes were obvious right there on that hillside? The twelve men who were situated closest to Jesus were becoming known as his disciples. One radical change for almost half the group was they no longer got on their fishing boats early in the morning. Instead of fishing, they walked with Jesus wherever he went. Their days were totally different – changed, because of Jesus. Driving your car to get back home quickly from an hour away wasn’t any kind of reality then.

Neither did Jesus talk like the leaders of their synagogues. They read from books of the Old Testament or talked every day about the religious laws of the land. Not once did they discuss being meek, salt and light, turning your cheek, love for your enemy, peace-making, perfect love – the list would fill this page and many more. Jesus was CHANGE – in capital letters. Besides, he kept telling them they were blessed, or would be blessed if they followed his line of thought.

Two thousand years later, are you one of Jesus’ blessed followers, and if so, what changes do you live with because Jesus is a part of your life?

Prayer: Jesus, keep the changes coming...and bless me this day. Amen.

**Questions: 1. For what reasons do you feel blessed today?
2. When did you last go an extra mile in order to help someone?**

As we sit with the crowds on the hillsides and listen to Jesus share whatever he has to share, there's another reason we're there...it's all caught up in the word HOPE! Those sitting there considered themselves to be the People of God. They had exciting stories to share about how God, in the past, when things were bleak or totally negative, gave them reason to have hope. Going all the way back to Genesis there was Abraham and Sarah without an heir and no hope for a future (Genesis 11:10). The future was hopeless. In that circumstance, against all biological odds, God declared that an heir would be given...and it would provide a future for this chosen family. Yes, our God is a God of hope!

When Israel was in the Babylonian captivity, it appeared rather plain that there was no future for them as a people or a nation. But during this rock-bottom period in their history, prophet after prophet made statements about God's future for Israel. God had given them hope, again and again. Now they were sitting on a hillside, listening to Jesus, who said he was sent by God – and not only that, said he was God!!!! Would we dare to hope for such an act of God – to come in person, without an army, and not be part of the Temple priests or system...can we find any hope in what Jesus is saying?

Thirty-three years before this day on the hillside, his mother, Mary, sang a song (Luke 1: 46-56) that suggested her soon-to-be-born son would bring hope and a new approach to the social order, especially for the left-outs and the left-behinds.

No explanations are offered in any of the above (and many other) situations. When God is involved, it's often difficult to offer very much in the way of explanation. That's why the listeners to Jesus were quite stunned by the things he kept saying, while at the same time they kept asking how one such as he could bring them any hope. After all, throughout history God's promises have never depended on optimistic circumstances...they've depended solely on the resolve of God. Hoping is trusting in the promises against the evidence of circumstances.

So as we listen to Jesus, we do so with some Roman soldiers strutting at the base of the hill, with crosses used in crucifixions looming on the dirt road we walked on to get here, with Temple priests and lay leaders mixed into the crowd, and almost no one able to go home to a healthy meal...could Jesus possibly be the long-awaited HOPE that God kept promising?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for offering hope in a new way...Amen.

Question: What would have happened to whatever hope you had as you listened to the Sermon on the Mount?

Two thousand years later, what kind of hope is there in the world within which we live? Who, among your friends or family, do you “label” as hopeful people? After all, Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Have you ever heard a message about being meek? Have you ever been in a small group discussion where meekness was given as a kind of strength or hope?

The word meekness, today, is not a word to be sought after, in spite of what Jesus said. Being meek, today, means to have your head down when trying to talk, walking away from you with shoulders bent over, not being willing to take one side or the other of a current issue or problem. My guess is no one reading these Lenten writings wants to be considered as being meek.

But why not? Meekness is emphatically not weakness. If you’ve read the Old Testament (Numbers 12:3) then you know that the meekest man among them all was Moses!!! What I know about Moses doesn’t tell me that he was a feeble or weak leader. Think of him murdering the Egyptian. Bring to mind the picture of Moses smashing the first tablets of the Ten Commandments! Remember when he had the so-called golden calf ground into a powder, then scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it?

Perhaps the writer of Psalms 25: 9 hit the so-called nail on the head when he wrote: “The meek will he teach his way.” Perhaps meekness can be defined as teach-ability. It could mean a willingness to close one’s eyes to what we think we already know and ask God to show us another way – perhaps God’s way is at least worth considering – and be open to God showing us another way.

If there happened to be in the crowd that day a few of the landowners who were curious to know what this stranger was talking about, they were shocked by his first words! If there was a hated group in Israel in Jesus’ day, it was the landlords, those who possessed the land. In those days, nobody possessed land except by violence and oppression, by holding on to it and making all peasants pay huge portions of their harvest each year. Jesus was offering hope. Jesus was turning the system around and saying, “No, it’s you little ones who are finally going to possess the land.” Jesus was undoubtedly redefining the meaning of land, building on what every Jew in that crowd would have known.

In our day and age, for most of the world, it’s big-ness, most-ness, and safe-ness that rule people’s thinking. There isn’t much room for the meek in today’s world...in your own situation, ponder what Jesus meant for you on your journey when he said: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Prayer: Jesus, help me be more open to what you taught. Amen.

Question: In what ways could you be more “teachable” by being meek?

“Who is he?” was still whispered among the crowds that gathered wherever he went. Another question asked was “Who are they?” referring to the twelve disciples. As the weeks and months went by, a similar question was raised regarding those who had “bought” what Jesus was saying.

Justin Martyr, a noted early Christian leader, wrote to Emperor Antoninus Pius and described early Christians in this manner:

**“We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity;
before we used the magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and
unbegotten God;
before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share
what we have, and to everyone who is in need;
before we hated and killed one another and would not eat with those of
another race;
but now since the manifestation of Christ, we have come to a common life, and
pray for our enemies, and try to win those who hate us without cause.”**

Of the many things we find in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus said, what caught the crowd’s attention more than anything else? My vote would go for when Jesus said we could begin our prayers with “Our Father”. They were attracted to the thought of having “my own” God. He didn’t tell them they had to go to the temple or synagogue to do this. Neither did he say they had to be in a group – they could pray such a prayer while alone!!!!

Two things happened that day. First, a lot of those on the hillside crowd liked what they heard...and told themselves they needed to learn more about what Jesus had to say. Second, there was great unrest among those who either led, or were somehow attached to temple/group worship. What Jesus said that day was clearly a huge threat to the established religion. As Christianity slowly grew on the world’s scene, in secret gatherings or clusters of people who wanted to be followers of the Nazarene, more and more it was all about a God who cared directly about a human being.

Two thousand years later, how would you describe the distinguishing factors of Christianity? How important is it to – daily – pray the Lord’s Prayer? How important is it to your church to spend more time in prayer at your meetings than it is to talk with each other? What words do you use today to describe followers of the Nazarene – who did his talking on a hillside? Would Jesus today affirm our efforts to be his followers?

Prayer: Jesus, help me walk the walk you want me to walk. Amen.

Question: How do you identify someone as being a Christian today?

As we walk with Jesus each day, those who make up the crowd changes; but the group of men closest to Jesus remained the same. They have a name. They are called his “Disciples”. What is a disciple? The dictionary says a disciple is “someone who totally accepts the doctrine or teachings of another person.” Would you call yourself a disciple?

Some of the disciples were well known in their surrounding neighborhood because they were fishermen who worked long, hard hours to make a living for their families. Then there was Levi (Matthew) mixed in with the group of disciples. People wondered why because Levi was a well-known tax-collector for Rome in that area. He was hated. He was despised. He was viewed as a traitor. There is no doubt he was wealthy. He was wealthy because he stole money from some of the people gathered on that hillside.

Rome had an insatiable desire for money from those who came under their control. Everyone had to pay taxes to Rome. In each captured province, tax districts were created, and through them taxes were paid to the Roman government. Each province had a “chief tax collector” who employed others to collect the taxes from the villagers. Each person selected to do such was a local resident who knew the people, what they had, and where they kept it.

You became a tax collector by submitting a bid to Roman leadership to produce that amount of money, no matter how or what you did. You were then totally responsible to pay that amount to Rome. But anything over that amount you could keep for yourself! Tax collectors were, indeed, hated people.

Just think of how good a tax collector would feel at being able to collect huge sums beyond what you would pay to Rome. You see, local residents were caught in a tax trap...because if you dared to protest your tax bill, the tax collector reported you to the Roman government...which was like signing your own “death warrant”. People were, indeed, held hostage. Roman leaders were hated by all...and because tax collectors collaborated with these leaders, they were hated by all, too. For instance, to eat with a tax collector was considered to make you spiritually unclean. Even if a tax collector came to your house for whatever reason, it was then considered to be unclean.

So, Jesus approached the tax collector’s booth, looked at him and said two words: “Follow me”. The Greek word means “come after”. Can you imagine what Matthew’s mind must have been thinking when he heard those two words? He’d surely heard about Jesus...and he surely must have known what Jesus meant. And so he went. If you are a follower, how did it happen for you?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving tax collectors – and me, too. Amen.

Question: How does Jesus pursue people in today’s world?

How many times have you prayed today? And does it make any difference what the number might be? After all, what is a person's prayer life all about? Those who were closest to Jesus surely, regardless of what their past might have been, couldn't help but see how serious Jesus was about his prayer life. He was often late for the morning meal – because he had gone off by himself to pray. Slowly but surely, they were becoming more familiar with his times of leaving them and going off by himself for a time of prayer. They also noticed at times that they could see that he sat silently...as if he was heavily engaged in listening. How often do you sit and listen?

As the days and weeks went by, they soon began to realize that Jesus didn't do much of anything without praying about it first. The disciples soon recognized the fact that they didn't really know all that much about praying. So, they asked him to teach them how to pray. He told them that praying wasn't meant to be a "show" – put on for others. He then suggested it was best to find a "quiet" place" (today he'd suggest we turn off the TV and all our cell phones and devices!) and try to focus our thinking on God. He even gave them/us an example:

Our Father in heaven,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right;

Do what's best –

As above, so below.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil.

You're in charge!

You can do anything you want!

You're ablaze in beauty!

Yes! Yes! Yes! (*The Message*)

Contrary to our lives today, in Jesus' day, there were many prescribed times to pray during the day, and certain prayers you were supposed to say. What Jesus was doing was getting temples, synagogues, and priests out of the way, and putting people into a face-to-face conversation with the God of the universe! No wonder people were shocked at what he was telling them. No wonder the synagogue's leaders knew they had to get rid of such thinking!!!!

He basically told the disciples to stop worrying about their method, stop worrying about the wording, stop worrying about the setting....and concentrate on God and what God's message is for you during your time of prayer!!!

Prayer: Jesus, help me be a better listener when I'm praying. Amen.

Questions: 1. What do you really mean when you say the Lord's Prayer?

2. Do you take your conversations with God seriously? How so?

“Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.” So said Jesus in yesterday’s prayer. Who have you forgiven lately? Does that mean that Ukrainian Christians need to forgive Russia for what they’ve done to their country? During the worst of Covid 19 days, were you able to forgive those who refused to wear masks? It’s hard to forgive, isn’t it? And the deeper one has been hurt, the more difficult it is to forgive. In Simon Wiesenthal’s book, *The Sunflower*, he tells of his own struggles to forgive. In 1944, he was a young Polish prisoner of the Nazis. He had watched helplessly as soldiers killed his grandmother, and then forced his mother into a freight car jammed with elderly Jewish women. He even tried to commit suicide when first captured, but failed.

One day, while on prison detail, a nurse approached him and asked: “Are you a Jew”? Then she asked him to follow her. She led him to an upper floor of the hospital and into a dark, musty room, where a lone soldier lay swathed in bandages. White gauze covered the man’s face, with openings cut out for mouth, nose and ears. Then she disappeared. The wounded man was an SS officer who had summoned Wiesenthal for a deathbed confession.

“My name is Karl” said a voice from within the bandages. “I must tell you of this horrible deed – tell you because you are a Jew”. He told a ghastly story of what happened in a small town just abandoned by the Russians. As he told the story, Wiesenthal tried to leave three times, but the officer grasped him each time. Booby traps had killed 30 of their soldiers. So, they rounded up 300 Jews, herded them into a three-story house, doused it with gasoline and torched it. Soon people on fire began to jump from windows to their death – only to be shot as they fell. Then he said: “I am left here with my guilt.”

“In the last hours of my life, you are with me...In the long nights that I have been waiting to die, I have longed to talk to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. I know what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.” Wiesenthal, an architect in his early twenties, and now a prisoner of the Nazis, looked out the window at the small courtyard. He looked at the eyeless heap of bandages on the bed. “At last I made up my mind,” he wrote, “and without a word I left the room.”

What would you have done? Seventy times seven? How about once?

Prayer: Jesus, I need to know more about forgiveness – please teach me. Amen.

**Questions: 1. Remember the most difficult act of forgiveness you have ever made.
2. Whom do you need to forgive as we walk to Jerusalem?**

Whatever time of day you are reading this, when did you first have an interaction with the God of the universe? Jesus, long before the sun was shining, would leave the village where he was staying, and go off by himself in order to have quiet time with God. The disciples knew what he was doing...and no doubt pondered the question: When do I spend time with God? Or do I need to spend time alone with God? Two thousand years later, do you...and I need to find alone time with God,

You probably haven't read it, but a fellow named Brother Lawrence wrote a text titled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He was born Nicolas Herman in eastern France in 1610. During his teen years, his poverty forced him into joining the army where he was at least guaranteed a meal and a small amount of money. In the deep of winter, Herman looked at a barren tree, stripped of leaves and fruit, waiting silently and patiently for the hope of summer abundance. Gazing at the tree, Herman grasped for the first time the extravagance of God's grace and the unfailing sovereignty of divine providence. Like the tree, he himself was seemingly dead, but God had life waiting for him, and the turn of the seasons would bring fullness. At that moment, he said, that leafless tree "first flashed in upon my soul the fullness of God" and a love for God was born that was never lost.

Before reading further, how do you assess your love for God?

An injury forced him out of the army, and he entered the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris as Brother Lawrence. He was assigned to the monastery kitchen and took orders from everybody. Of this time, he said, "Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love, they learn rules and devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of God?"

"We can do little things for God. I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God. I began to live as if there were no one save God and me in the world." Together, God and Brother Lawrence cooked meals, ran errands, scrubbed pots and pans, and endured the scorn of the world. Jesus also knew it was him and God in everything. Brother Lawrence lived that kind of life, too. How goes it with you, and with me?

Prayer: Jesus, be by my side at life's most distasteful moments. Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you practice the presence of God in an average day?
2. When do you most feel as if you are in God's presence?

With Roman soldiers in complete control, Jesus stood on that hillside and said: “Love your enemies”, “Forgive one another”, “Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven”. If you looked around, you’d have seen a lot of heads shaking back and forth, meaning ‘no way’. What does that mean two thousand years later? Which way would your head shake today?

I read an article by Rachel C. Naffziger in which she told the story of a Russian Christian who spoke out. Last fall, Egor Redin was in hiding at a Baptist church in Tajikistan, two thousand miles from home. He had hoped to apply for asylum in Tajikistan but was warned that once they knew he was Baptist, he would be deported to Russia where he would be prosecuted for protesting Russia’s war with Ukraine.

His original plan was to wait out ‘the madness’ in Tajikistan. He was a father of two small girls, and as well, a pacifist and could refuse to serve in the military. But that fall, he began to hear of other Baptists being sent to prison. So, on September 24, he packed a small bag with his laptop, a toothbrush and toothpaste, several documents and a pair of socks and left Russia, not knowing if he’d ever return.

Shortly after the invasion began, Redin had reposted on Instagram an open letter issued by a nonprofit calling for an end to “this senseless war”. A senior television producer in state media who had helped him in his career contacted him to warn that his future public and professional life would shortly be complicated by his opposition to the war. Not long after that, the Russian government made it illegal to even call the war a war! Protesting would now mean a sentence of at least fifteen years in prison.

Redin hoped he had evaded detection, but after he had fled the country, the authorities finally followed up on his antiwar Instagram posts. He decided there was no way he could go back, and decided to fly to Istanbul, Turkey, and try to get his family there, too. That finally happened and they flew to Cancun, Mexico. As it turned out, their stay in Cancun ended up being much longer than they had anticipated. One set of plans to get them into the USA fell through completely, and they had to begin another process – and this time it worked. Although thousands of miles from their former home, they live in a peaceful neighborhood, thankful to be alive – and together.

It isn’t easy to love your neighbor...while feeling the need to protest what your neighbor might be doing. As we continue this journey, how many neighbors have you forgiven, how many neighbors have you loved, and in conclusion, just who are your neighbors?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to reach out...and love my neighbor. Amen.

Question: How do you live out Jesus’ three “commandments” listed above?

Do you suppose the world would be a different place if today's Christians spent as much time in prayer as Jesus did? The four Gospels tell of some of his efforts; but we can be sure there were more "alone" times than we have read about. We now live in a cellphone world. Do you spend more time talking with God...or on the cellphone? Jesus needed frequent time alone with God in order to do what he needed to do. As you've read the four Gospels, do you remember – just once? – reading about the disciples going off to spend time in prayer...or just to be silent? Indeed, there are none. Is it any wonder the disciples were unable to heal the man's son in today's reading?

Almost everyone reading today's devotional had to make a deliberate effort to make it happen. There are thousands of pressures, demands, frustrations, unanswered questions, heartaches, fears, stressors and time constraints that make prayer and time alone with God difficult for us, regardless of our lifestyle, age or status. Many people tell how frustrating it is to try to find time within their family to have a meaningful discussion – about anything at all!!!! So where does one find time for his/her neighbor/s? Oh yes...and where does one find time for God?

Richard Foster wrote a book on prayer, titled *Prayer*, and on page 103, the following was written:

“Blessed Jesus, I am not good at resting in the hollow of your hand. Nothing in my experience has taught me this resting. I have been taught how to take charge...to get things done! I have been taught how to be in control. But how to rest? No, I have no models, no paradigms for resting.

This is not exactly right.

Jesus, when you walked among the Jerusalem crowd and in the Judean hills, you pioneered this way of living. You were both alert and alive. You lived utterly responsive to the will of the Father. Manifold demands were placed on you, and still you worked in unhurried peace and power. Help me to learn how to walk in your steps. Teach me to only see who you see, to say only what you say, to do only what you do. Help me, Lord to work resting, and to pray resting. I ask this in your good and strong name. Amen.”

So, if you're feeling powerless these days, turn off your cellphone...and find time to listen for the voice of God. I promise you that God will take your call!!!!

Prayer: Jesus, help me to say less, and listen more. Amen.

Questions: 1. How high on your list of things to do is finding time with God?
2. How can we model Jesus' prayer life?

Two names we've been hearing in world news these days (and they will probably still be there when you read this) are Ukraine and Israel. What is happening in each is touching most of the world in some way. Where is God's love for the human race at times such as these? Authentic love is not simple; it is not cheap; it is not easy; it cannot be bought. That's why Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem. Since God loves authentically, that's why God "had" to come in Jesus, because there was no other way. Why does the world find it hard to love a God like that? The first suggestion in today's reading is that we should love God – with everything we've got in us! Jesus suggested that loving God is our number one priority in life. Of the folks you attend church with, how many give evidence of being in love with God? On a scale of one to ten, how much do you love God?

There are two aspects to loving God: one is the "inner" loving, and the other is "outward" loving. Nancy Mairs said, "Who one believes God to be is most accurately revealed not in any credo but in the way one speaks to God when no one else is listening." Do you talk with God as if you are God's lover? Many will shake their heads 'no' at such a question. Yet this is what Jesus was suggesting. He said to love God "with all your passion, prayer, intelligence and energy."

What gets in the way of loving God with all our being? For most of us, lots of things do. But for most, the issue of "time" proves to be the biggest obstacle. Earning a living, maintaining meaningful relationships, entertainment, and getting more "things" take their toll of our available time. Planet business such as wars also occupy our thinking much of the time.

We tend to pray to God about life's problems and challenges, more than anything else. We invest precious little time in just pondering who God is, how God loves us, and how I/we love God.

Most of us struggle with our "inner" loving of God; but even more difficult is the "outward" loving. Mother Teresa said, "Keep the joy of loving God in your heart, and share this joy with all you meet, especially your family."

As I told you once before, many years ago, I struggled with telling God about my inner feelings. They were hard to put into words! And besides, I had many other things to do! But the day finally came when I actually said those words – out loud – "I love you, God". I challenge you to try it sometime – it isn't easy, although the words are simple enough. But once you start, I promise that you won't stop until some day, you say those same words directly to God.

Prayer: Jesus, I love you. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways have you told God that you are in love with God?
2. In what ways have you told others you love God?

The last two months of Jesus' journey to the cross were complex, filled with activity and anxiety. It would soon be time for the Passover celebration. The crowds grew in size, and there were more of them. Temple leaders were openly threatening him. Roman soldiers were plentiful and stories about what might happen were wild. Passover was/is the time Jews celebrate their ancestor's liberation from Egyptian slavery. Passover often was a volatile time, marked by riots and bloodshed. Years before, Antipas had killed many thousands of Jews on the streets at the time of the festival.

Jesus' influence was increasing daily, the result of his teachings, and the many miracles he openly performed. The twelve disciples continued to surround him in all situations, while at the same time being worried about what might happen to all of them who were close to Jesus. His following was growing, some open about it, while others kept it a secret. Kids were excited about it and could be heard saying to each other, "I was there; I saw him spit on some dirt, rub it in the guy's eyes and later the guy could see as good as you and I can." More than one person said, "I can't remember when I ever had so much to eat; this guy had only a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish...but somehow the food just kept coming and coming. I was so full I thought I'd burst! Sorry you missed it – you've just got to see him".

What kind of stories do you tell others about Jesus today?

Can you not hear someone saying "You know your sister is sick all the time; he actually makes people well, right on the spot – no doctors – no medicine – no money, either. It's unbelievable. Why don't you take her to him, and I'll be willing to bet he will heal her."

"Hey, Mary, this guy is for real. We kids hung on the outside of the circle of big people, but he walked away from them, came over to us, sat down on a rock and told us to come and sit with him. We were mighty dirty and smelly, but he even took some of us and sat us on his lap – next time you've just got to come and meet him." Or "I know nobody loves a dirty kid; that's the story of my life, since I'm poor and an outcast – but you know, I heard him say God loves me – nobody in my whole life has ever said such a thing. You've gotta come and meet him."

What are the rumors out there today? What's the rumor on the TV ad that shows once in a while and the name of Jesus flashes on the screen? Have you ever started any rumors about Jesus? Maybe the time is here...

Prayer: Jesus, help me touch lives, as you touched lives in Galilee. Amen.

Questions: 1. What rumors have you heard about Jesus lately?
2. What rumor have you spread about Jesus lately?

How many days went by when one or more of the disciples wondered if Jesus was who he said he was? How many days go by when you, a follower of the Nazarene, wonder if God hears your prayers, or if God will do anything to help you?

Peter had his own bout with fear and wonderment as the disciples moved closer to Jerusalem. Peter had not only witnessed, but even shared in Jesus' power. Peter and the other disciples had just participated in the miraculous feeding of 5,000 men – and an untallied number of women and children – with a little bit of fish and some unleavened bread. The blessed fish and bread were placed in the disciple's hands, and the multiplication occurred as they served the crowd.

They then left the crowd behind and got in a boat and sailed away. Peter confronted Jesus to confirm his identity and was the first one of the disciples to recognize him walking on the water. Then he climbed over the side to join Jesus in his walk on the waves. But in spite of what Peter saw happening, the wonder-working power of Jesus was somehow short-circuited. Peter got scared. He gave in to fear. He looked down at the waves and realized he was beginning to sink. Peter was facing the stark reality that fear (whatever kind) can sideline even the most accomplished of God's great servants.

It happened in the Old Testament to Elijah (I Kings 18: 9-18). Israel had split into two parts, and the people's love and affection for Yahweh had turned to disobedience, their loyalty to infidelity. There is a war raging for the very souls of God's people. Then Elijah shows up. First Kings tells of the mighty acts of this prophetic warrior. A God-sent, miracle-working, one-man wrecking crew, Elijah took on King Ahab's Baal-worshipping wife, Jezebel, and got rid of 450 of her favored prophets. In response, Jezebel sent Elijah a special hand-delivered death threat. And what did Elijah do? He ran away, scared to death of what might happen to him!

But Peter did what all of us should do when evil seems to be taking over our lives. He looked at Jesus and said "Lord, save me". When I was growing up, a chorus we used to sing said: "Hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home."

Each of our journeys is different. But every one of us faces both "up" and "down" days. On bad days, remember what Peter did...as he slowly began to sink in the water, he looked up to Jesus' face and said that short prayer: "Lord, save me." What do you want to say to Jesus today?

Prayer: Jesus, when I start to sink, please hang on to me. Amen.

Question: 1. How do you feel about Jesus when you're "sinking"?
2. Do you ever feel "forsaken" or "forgotten" by God?

Jesus and the disciples had been walking and traveling together for over two years. They had been in small towns and villages, but much of their time – and ministry – occurred on the dirt roads in between. Even after two years together it appeared they hadn't had much conversation about who he really was, and why he was here, as well. Before reading further, whom do you tell people Jesus is today?

There were rumors all over the place. He was called John, the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, to name a few. He was called by many other names, as well, names they made up for him, but not the one God created for him. Despite the rumor mill, Jesus kept his identity cards close. He didn't want to reveal who he really was because some people wouldn't be able to handle it. So, Jesus had kept his true identity in the closet.

This day he took one, intimate step towards his closest friends, the disciples. I imagine Jesus was really hoping that they had an idea, since they had spent so much time together. So, he asked them, "Whom do you say that I am"? I wonder how much time went by before Peter spoke up on behalf of the disciples: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus poured out a lavish blessing on Peter, and all the others, as well. His chosen friends got him, though many others did not.

I can imagine that most of the disciples were ready to go and "tell it from the mountaintops!" Shouldn't the world know that the Redeemer has come?

But to the disciple's surprise, Jesus was tightly in control of his own destiny. He was obviously relaxed that Peter and the others knew who he really was, but the timing was not right to spread such information further.

Instead, Jesus ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. He was dead serious about this because he knew that he would suffer death for it. At that point Jesus wanted to remain in the closet to the world.

Jesus knew full well that coming out as the Messiah would be a political and religious gesture. He knew that some wouldn't like his name and wouldn't accept it. Some would even try to call him by other names. He knew that he'd lose followers and friends and probably family over what he called himself. His true name and identity would change things irreversibly.

So, as we continue to walk towards Jerusalem with Jesus, ponder what his inner feelings must have been, knowing full well what was ahead of him. As well, reflect on the "inside" feelings of the disciples, now that they had been told to, in a sense, keep their mouths shut about who they were, and what lay ahead.

Prayer: Jesus, help me feel the "load" you carried to the cross. Amen.

Question: Whom do you tell people Jesus is today?

Two thousand years later, this same Jesus is still impacting lives. “The things made by human hands will come and go, but the love of God will remain forever.” Seeing this statement at the top of a page, I had to go back and read what it was about.

It was about migrants...people looking for a home. As you readily know, there are all kinds of feelings about migrants, and America is divided into many camps regarding the subject. But what I learned is that at the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico, people come together once a week for communion across the dividing line. *El Faro – The Border Church/La Iglesia Fronteriza* is held every Sunday on both sides of the border.

For most people, the border is a place of division. But for Pastor John Fanestil, the borderland, or “la frontera” is a “place of encounter”. If Jesus came back today, would he go to your church, come to my church, or go to a border service? I think we all know the answer to that question.

On a Sunday morning, there will be a small number on the American side, but many people on the Mexican side of the fence. The fence is so thick it is even difficult to see clearly on the other side. On the Mexican side, there are booths, live music, and an immigration lawyer is there giving free legal advice.

The fence is so tight that it is impossible to hug or get close to a loved one. So people exchange “*besos de meniques*” – pinky kisses – fingertip to fingertip!!! “The fence, for me, means death”, says Guillermo Navarrete, the pastor in Tijuana who runs the border church on the Mexican side of the fence. These days, his main ministry is caring for those who have been deported from the U.S.

“Jesus, in the last three years of his ministry, only went to the temple about three times”, Navarrete says, explaining the mold for his work. “We spend our time in the streets”, he said. Fanestil plugs a microphone into a sound system to start the service. Navarrete plays the guitar. The service is bilingual, with much of it being in Spanish. Songs are sung. Prayers on each side of the fence are offered, and Fanestil reads the gospel text in Spanish.

After the message, this prayer was offered to God and all who could hear: “Turn this wall into the cradle of Christ (it was almost Christmas!)...remind us that the love of God is more powerful than any wall...the things made by human hands will come and go, but the love of God will remain forever.”

...and for what do you give thanks to God today?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for coming, and moving walls. Amen.

Question: Why doesn't God tear down such walls?

Did Jesus include all the migrants in the world in today's verse? After all, Jesus said the "second commandment" is to love your neighbor as yourself. Throughout all of history it has been the norm to love your family and friends, and "hate" everybody else. The Qumran scrolls, contemporary to Jesus, explicitly commanded them "to hate all the sons of darkness." Sitting on that hillside, Jesus sort of shook people up (including the disciples) when he suggested we were not only to love our neighbors, but we were to love our enemies, too. This may have been the most revolutionary thing he said.

In Jesus' day, Jews discerned 613 commandments in the Law. Many were the arguments and debates as to which were more important than others. Jesus threw a 'wet blanket' over all of them with his insistence that love is the essence of God. As a result, God has little concern about the good things we do, the rules we keep or how many times we go to church each week, or even what church we attend. Life isn't about things, titles, careers, houses or bank accounts. Life begins – and ends – in a God who loves us.

As you reflect on Jesus's words, no doubt your mind is racing in circles bringing to your mind faces of those who live near you, or perhaps right next door. After all, who did Jesus say are our neighbors? Did he mean the people who live right next door to us? Across the city or town in which we live? Did he include people who live across the oceans from us, and all around the globe? No matter who our neighbors are, it's pretty obvious they all have a wide assortment of needs.

Should we be concerned about those who are starving around the globe? What about the one/sixth of Americans who go to bed hungry every night?

The issue here is not how much money we have to give, how much time we have to volunteer, or how much we can help provide for others. The key issue in loving our neighbors begins with our love for God. If we are not absolutely crazy about a God who loves us – who came as Jesus came – then we are not going to be wild about loving all those neighbors of ours who have needs, and whom we judge in many cases as having created their own problems.

Would it be fair to say that if you are passionately in love with God, you will most likely have a passion for loving your neighbors, wherever they are? What do you think the disciples thought about what Jesus told them?

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes to see my neighbors, wherever they are. Amen.

**Question: 1. Have you ever "touched" a neighbor with God's love?
2. Jot down the name of a neighbor who is in need of love and care.**

Day 26

Sunday, March 10, 2024

At the end of each day's reading, there is a short prayer. How do you pray such a short prayer? The disciples saw Jesus taking time to get away from them, and to spend time praying. Did he get down on his knees to pray? Did he close his eyes? Was he quiet awhile before he prayed? There are all kinds of questions. I found delightfully honest an article written by Debie Thomas in the *Christian Century*:

“First, I fidget. I cross and uncross my legs, fold, and unfold my hands, bow and raise my head. Discover muscles I didn't know I had, muscles that twitch, quiver, itch, and ache. So, I waste several minutes wrestling my way into relative comfort.

Comfort that is conducive to prayer, that is, not to sleep. Because sleep will happen every single time I let it.

Next, I set my timer for 30 minutes, close my eyes and attempt to quiet my mind. Immediately my mind says: ‘No, thank you’ and takes off. I call it back; it takes off again. I call it back once more. It laughs. Often, my mind and I do this for the entire 30 minutes, while a practical, no-nonsense voice in my head scorns the whole enterprise. ‘Nothing remotely Jesus-y is happening’ it says. ‘How can this silliness count as prayer?’ I say nothing in response. I wait for my timer to buzz, toss a half-hearted ‘Um – OK – thanks God, see you later’ into the silence and go about my day.”

Hers is a very honest confession of what prayer has been for her for many years. How do you think the disciples prayed during those three years of walking with Jesus? How do you think they prayed after he left them? St. John of the Cross said, “God's first language is silence”. Thomas Keating said, “...everything else is a poor translation. In order to understand this language, we must learn to be silent, and rest in God.”

To be quite honest with you, it isn't easy for me to be silent, and just listen for God to communicate with me. Maybe I should learn how to use a timer. So, since we're walking for six weeks, and assume God is walking with us, let's have a little talk with God.

So, no more reading...examine and experience your prayer life to get you ready for tomorrow's walk.

Prayer: God, I'd like to have a little talk with you...

Ask God your questions! Then listen!

Yes, you read this verse several days ago. If the disciples had a lot of questions about who Jesus really was – and apparently Peter gave the right answer – they had even more when Jesus told them to keep it to themselves. I challenge you to ask the next person you meet to answer Jesus' question: "Who am I?" What would you expect to hear in today's world and context?

Where did this conversation take place? They were standing and talking in a seat of Roman power in the district of Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee. There is no doubt Peter saw Jesus as a "political" Messiah, one who would bring the Roman occupation to an end and fully establish the glory of God's people – the son of the living, all-powerful God.

Jesus could have continued the conversation, but he didn't. Instead, he blessed Peter and then shocked everyone listening when he said: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven".

Jesus knew what Peter didn't know. But instead of "educating" him – and all the rest of the disciples – he patted him on the back, and they went down the road together. Ahead of Peter was an upside-down world, and he would experience repeated disappointments before he would really understand what kind of a Messiah Jesus was.

Whom do people today say Jesus is? That's the first question Jesus asked the disciples. He got the answer: "Son of man/humanity". With that answer and having been around these twelve fellows for several years now, I'm sure Jesus was curious to know what this close-knit group thought. We don't know about the other eleven guys, but Peter made it short and clear!

Do you believe in a "living God"? In Hebrews 10:31, it says "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The phrase "the living God" often carries with it the sense that this deity is to be feared. Moses asked the people: "For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the fire, as we have, and lived?" (Deut. 5: 25).

As we walk the various roads on our separate journeys, how do we answer Jesus' question: "Whom do you say I am?" Two thousand years have passed since that conversation took place...and we now live in a world of AI, computers, and phones. How do you answer Jesus' long-ago question: "Who am I?"

Prayer: Jesus, you ARE the son of the Living God! Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you think Peter felt about Jesus' response?
2. How do you "explain" God to unbelievers?

The son of God walked the same walk we are walking today. Sometimes, in spite of a loving, caring God, we are hurting. Life often does that to us, just like it did to Jesus. His good friend, John, had been put to death, and in a horrible manner. When this happened, and they brought the news to Jesus, he wanted to go off by himself, be alone, and deal with his grief.

There were so many tender moments through all this story. Tears were shed by many along the way. Friends had the task of taking care of a body without its head, not a simple task. All that went with a burial had to be carried out. I wonder how they decided who would take this sad news to Jesus. As well, some probably wondered just what Jesus might do. Might this be the time that Jesus would take things into his own hands and act like they thought a Messiah could act?

Jesus heard the news about his friend, and he wanted to be alone. This is, in itself, a good lesson. At the same time, his grief did not close off to him the moments of compassion. His disciples were trying to help him be alone and told the crowd it was time to go on about their own business. It was at this moment that Jesus surprised them all by suggesting that the crowd of people stay right where they were.

Why did Jesus do what he did? There are no ideal conditions for a miracle, either then or now. Were the people hungry? Without a doubt. Most of those present had little to eat whatever day of the week it was. Today we talk about the miracle of feeding way more than five thousand people. However, I think Jesus did what he did as a memorial to his departed friend, John.

Was there laughing on the hill that day? Were any tears shed? Did Jesus sit in silence while all this was going on? Or what did Jesus do while the disciples delivered food to thousands of people? Did they give Jesus any food to eat?

Jesus was a good model for all of us...that when death or tragedy strikes, life does go on. In the midst of our sadness and loss, it is still possible to reach out to others. As we walk down our life roads, we soon learn that laughing is part of the journey; and so is grieving, crying, hopelessness, and fear.

It is comforting to know that when we cry, God understands, and Jesus cries with us. In Christ, and with Christ, there is compassion. That day, thousands of people met a Jesus who was caring and compassionate. How about you – today?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for standing with me when I cry. Amen.

Question: 1. How do you describe your “closeness” to a living Jesus?
2. What do you think the crowd thought of Jesus that day?

The four Gospels tell us about many conversations Jesus had, as well as a lot of questions he was asked. The more he said, and the more he did, raised new questions on a daily basis. As we walk with Jesus, and hear the many questions asked, which ones were the most important? From my perspective, the question in today's reading might be the most significant question anyone ever asked him.

In most texts, Jesus' answer is to love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. However, I like the words from *The Message* version: We are to love God with "all your passion and prayer and intelligence." It doesn't end there. Jesus said that, at the same time, we are to love others as we love ourselves!

Scripture doesn't tell us what the Pharisees said, if anything. If they had to say something, what do you suppose they might have said? As you look around you, how many people do you know who love God with ALL their passion, prayers and thinking ability? How many people do you know who truly love their neighbors?

Mother Teresa is one of my favorites from our human journeys. She tells this story: "Some time ago, two young people came to my house, and they gave me a large sum of money to feed the poor. I asked them 'Where did you get so much money?' And they said 'Two days ago we got married and we decided that we were not going to buy wedding clothes, and we were not going to have a wedding feast; we would give you the money to feed the poor and needy.' And I asked them again 'But why did you do that?'

They said 'We love each other so much that we wanted to begin our life together by sharing the joy of loving with the people you serve by making a sacrifice. This love is sanctity and the more we grow in this love, the closer we come to God.'"

How would you react to Jesus' answer in 2024? Did the young couple have the right interpretation of what God's love is really all about? In a sense, Jesus' answer was shaped in the form of a cross – the upward dimension was pointed to God – the horizontal dimension pointed to each other. You know, it isn't all that hard to notice someone who loves God with a passion, is it? By the same token, those who love others sacrificially are easy to see, too.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive us when daily living keeps us from loving you. Amen.

Questions: 1. Who do you know who loves God with an undying passion?
2. Rate yourself on passion, prayer, and intelligence.

Jesus was serious about loving God. He was just as serious about us loving our neighbors. As our globe shrinks, and there is more and more contact among earth's residents, we have lots more neighbors than the disciples had. Sometimes bad things happen to our neighbors. For several years, we've been hearing about our neighbors in Ukraine. It's a tragic, brutal story.

But it was good to read that last March, the Archdiocese of Toronto launched a humanitarian relief fund in response to the war. Refugees were being flown to Canada. They took the initiative to raise as much money as they could and used it to help in relocating and resettling Ukrainian refugees upon their arrival in Canada.

One young man, Martin Domo, a student who emigrated from Benin was overwhelmed when the war started. "When things like this start happening, you start having some personal spiritual reflections...I know God loves us and would not want harm to befall us. But situations like this will make you doubt everything."

Someone else described the situation this way: "Ukraine is going through its own Golgotha, especially what we are seeing in the horrific massacre of civilians across the country." Another suggested that some of the dead are known only to God.

Was Jesus serious when he said we should love our neighbors? "For me, the great presence of God is to see that love in people who courageously help others who don't have to be doing that but are doing it despite the risks" is one answer from inside Ukraine. "Those incredible moments of selflessness are moments of Christ being with us in these dark moments."

In addition to financial assistance, Christians across Canada are making efforts to offer prayers and spiritual support to Ukrainians who are fleeing the war. One day, a church in Toronto had a day of prayer for the besieged city of Mariupol.

Domo now lives in Berlin. He is seeking to start a new life. In spite of a lot of doubts about all that has happened, he says his faith is not shaken. He believes God has been protecting him. "I still believe in God in spite of the situation I find myself in. Somehow, sometime, I believe everything will get better, and be fine. Things may be difficult now, but you just need to believe....and keep on believing."

So that's what Jesus meant by loving our neighbors? It may be the folks next door, or in the next apartment. It might be the folks at the other end of our town. Or they might be those people who live and try to survive across one or more of the oceans. Sometimes loving God isn't easy; and sometimes, loving neighbors is even more difficult. How do you live out Jesus' "commands" on a day-to-day basis?

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes to new neighbors. Amen.

Question: What would it take to expand your list of neighbors – by one?

Does God go where we won't go? The question goes with the neighbor business. Much of the time, Jesus was surrounded by the disciples, and lots of Pharisees. They were all seemingly his daily companions, sometimes small groups, and sometimes in the thousands.

Then one day he sneaked away from all of them, and went into what we might call a 'red light' district...a place where most people wouldn't want – or dare – to go. The so-called outcasts, "unclean" and undesirable hang out – or live there.

First thing that happened is Jesus was confronted by a person who was a Canaanite woman – a double-whammy in those days. Yet this Canaanite woman wasn't afraid to confront the Jewish man named Jesus. Jesus walked into her neighborhood. Do you suppose he was modeling for the disciples (and us!) what loving your neighbor is all about?

And the woman had a problem...which leads me to think that somewhere along the way, she'd heard some things about him. She had a desperate problem, and she did love her daughter. Her daughter was tormented by a demon. What mother, even a Canaanite woman, wouldn't want her daughter to be healed? She went against social and religious norms to try to get help for her child.

When the disciples finally caught up with Jesus, they readily had the solution to the problem. "Send her away" was their solution to Jesus' problem, because to them, she wasn't worth the time to try to solve the problem.

With all the odds against her, this unnamed woman kept on pushing. In spite of her being a Canaanite woman, and seeing that Jesus did not immediately respond, with a look of agony on her face, she said: "Lord, help me". Pause for a minute and remember the last time you called Jesus "Lord" in a time of prayer, hurting, or desperation.

Even then, she gets referred to as a "dog" when Jesus said: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she was ready for him when she so rightly observed "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their master's table." And Jesus said that indeed, she spoke the truth, and at that moment her child was healed. Jesus didn't need to go to her home, and she didn't need to take her daughter to a synagogue – or anywhere else. Jesus then said her faith was "great". The woman showed the world a person can be bold and brave when approaching God without fear.

Will you talk with Jesus today, and call him "Lord"?

Prayer: Help me make you the Lord of my life. Amen.

After two plus years of following Jesus around, the disciples were becoming more and more concerned about changes coming 'down the road'. As you walk the globe today, do you honestly think that our so-called progress as civilization is making it a better world? Is so-called climate change actually happening? Who can you believe in this day and age?

It was the same in Jesus' day. Even the disciples found it hard to believe some of the things he said on the way to Jerusalem. Put a check mark on each item that you think is relevant for today.

- Forgive? Yes, but not once, or seven times...at least seventy times seven!
- Don't worry about tomorrow; it will take care of itself.
- If a person you fear slaps you in the face, turn the other cheek.
- Jesus ate dinner with Simon, the Leper...would you?
- Will you throw the first stone, because you're not a sinner?
- Do you have your treasures in heaven, or in stocks and bonds here?
- Little children are closer to God than we who "have all the answers".
- In God's kingdom, there are no undesirables.
- The kingdom of God has come upon you.
- If you are one of my followers, how much has it cost you?
- Come to me, all you who are tired and hurting...
- Blessed are the poor in spirit...how do you rate yourself?
- If your right eye causes you to sin, get rid of it.
- Give to anyone who begs for help, and do you refuse them.
- Heal the sick; raise the dead; cleanse the lepers; cast out demons.
- If you love your parents more than me, then you are not worthy of me.
- If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, say to the mountain "Move!"
- The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life away.

In all of history, no one had talked as Jesus talked, and everything he said pointed to a change of some kind. There was/is nothing different about Jesus, the Christ. He was different then, and the mystery of a living, loving and caring God in the world today demands that we, his followers, be different, as well. As you look ahead, what changes do you see coming for the human race and the globe on which we reside? At the same time, what changes do you think God will be bringing to the human race?

Prayer: Jesus, you were so different! Help me to be more like you. Amen.

Questions: 1. Which of Jesus' differences do you find bothersome today?
2. What excites you most about your daily walk with Jesus?

Day 33

Sunday, March 17, 2024

Matthew 19:16-22

Jesus was approached by a young man with “many possessions”. He wanted to know what he ought to do to more fully love God and his neighbor. The answer he got was one that has unsettled Christians for the last two thousand years – and will do the same for the next thousand or two! “Sell all you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me.” When did you last hear a sermon based on these verses from Matthew 19?

Are Jesus’ words hopelessly unrealistic? Did he really mean what he said?

We may worry about living a more faithful life with regards to our money, but we aren’t ready to kick it all back any more than the guy in Jesus’ story. A recent survey found that 61 percent of Americans couldn’t cover a \$1,000 expense item with their current savings. As well, 40 percent of Americans couldn’t even manage to find \$400 for an emergency. If we’re absolutely honest, except for the wealthiest few, most folks are just one job loss or hospital visit away from financial ruin.

If you could look at a number of congregations, what would you see? There are many senior citizens who are living life off of their Social Security checks. There are the twenty-somethings who are dealing with thousands of dollars of student loan debt. Some families are seeing their lives torn apart because of the hardships posed by the challenges of income/outgo. Most young couples have mortgages they are dealing with...and people lose their jobs. The Covid 19 journey created additional pressure on families of all kinds.

There were lots of people listening to Jesus that day. However, Jesus didn’t talk to the crowd...he directed his message directly to the young man. The instructions were rather simple, yet they sort of “hit the nail on the head”. Three things: Get rid of what you have by selling it all; give whatever you get to the poor; and follow me.

It’s one thing to give a tithe of what we earn. It’s quite another to give it all away. The young man was obviously shocked and/or dismayed at what he heard. What do you think the disciples thought when they heard what Jesus said? They had quit their jobs to follow Jesus. Did they, at the same time, give away everything they had? We don’t know the rest of their stories.

Even if we choose, for whatever reason, not to do what Jesus said, what does that say about us living out our lives as a follower of Christ? How have you answered Jesus’ challenge to the young man?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to understand what it means to be a follower. Amen.

**Questions: 1. Does what Jesus told the young man still have validity today?
2. If so, how?**

Has Jesus ever invited himself into your home, and if so, for what reason? If you had been living in the area where Jesus was moving around, would you have wanted to see him? To what extent would you have gone to see him? Guess we need next to ask how tall you are.

It seems that Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus. We're not sure of the reason...it could have been just curiosity, admiration, or wanting to have the so-called best seat in the area. Remember he was a tax collector. I wonder if he might have happened to know Matthew, once a tax collector, but now a disciple following Jesus. He was a villain in his community...so maybe he climbed the tree to get away from those who hated his presence.

Jesus wasn't satisfied with just seeing him in a tree. He wanted to enter Zacchaeus' house right then...no invitation had been given! Of course, this was the story of Zacchaeus' life...he had the right to go into anyone's home and when he did, you had to be ready to give an account of what you had.

But the story doesn't end there! Before any spiritual audit can happen, he immediately declares he will give half his possessions to the poor and pay back any he's cheated – fourfold – beyond what the law required. When Zacchaeus climbed the tree, he was a man whose character was as stunted as his height...but when Jesus came on the scene, he was moved to repentance – and was filled with joy and excitement about what was happening.

I've often wondered why he didn't become the thirteenth disciple...but the story didn't go in that direction. No, he was still short. He was still a tax-collector, as far as we know. Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' house, ate with him, and apparently had a good time with him. It actually seems as if Jesus' presence brought good feelings – even joy – into his life.

If Jesus came into your house today, would you give half of your possessions to the poor? Would he be welcome in your home? It's far different today than it was two thousand years ago. Jesus wouldn't be walking today, would he? Instead, he'd most likely be in a car or vehicle of some kind. So being short wouldn't really make any difference!!!

As we walk with Jesus, pause and ponder whom you think he really is today. It takes a long time to begin the process...and climbing a tree today probably isn't going to help anybody. It appears that Jesus highly approved what Zacchaeus did that day. If Jesus shows up – or even if he doesn't – how do you see Jesus today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me see you more clearly two thousand years later. Amen.

Question: Did Zacchaeus become a follower of the Christ?

Jerusalem isn't very far away now. It is only a matter of days before Jesus enters the city. As you ponder the crowds who still followed Jesus around, what do you think they really wanted? Some probably wished they had more food for their table. Some wished Rome would go away. Some probably wished for the glory days of David and the "kingdom". And there were some who wished that God would finally show up and set them free forever.

The key to all of this is probably found at the beginning of John's Gospel. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). Not a person standing in the crowds had ever seen the invisible God. But the Son of God, who was with the Father before the world was made, came to make God known.

In these words, Jesus dashed once and for all our human preference to make up a God who suits our desires. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said: "The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get what I want out of this world."

There isn't a shadow of a doubt but that everyone standing on all of those hillsides listening to Jesus stood before the God he was talking about before many years passed by. As well, every person reading this paragraph will, at some point, stand before the same god.

Two thousand years after Jesus, we who are Americans believe in a freedom that allows us to do whatever we want...within reason, that is. Yet Jesus was suggesting that to be free in the spirit does not mean the ability to do whatever we want.

Could it be said that ultimately, our freedom lies in the truth that Jesus came to set us free – free from illusion, ignorance, fear, selfishness, and enslaving compulsions? At the same time could we be free for love and service to the world, which is why Jesus was determined to walk into Jerusalem, whatever the price tag would be?

How do you describe your "freedom" today?

Prayer: Jesus, help us be ready to go 'face to face' with God. Amen.

Questions: 1. What does "freedom in Christ" mean to you?
2. Make a list of just who Jesus is to you today.

Thirteen years ago, Rev. Vidya Sagar, Hyderabad, India received permission to translate the *Lenten Devotions* into the Telegu language. Then he used each devotional as the preaching material for 46 evening services during Lent. Each service was broadcast on loudspeaker into the town where the church is located. One night, he preached on the “Kingdom” of God. Here is the testimony of a 25-year-old Hindu woman – and what happened during Lent.

“As I finished washing my clothes, and was about to dry them on my house terrace one evening, I heard a message through loud-speakers that God came to you, and was willing to give Kingdom to you. Out of curiosity, I stopped to hear where this message is coming. I saw it was coming from the nearby church that is two blocks away. All my life I was going to the temples and offering prayers but never in my life I heard about such a God, who came to people and was willing to give them a kingdom. A small desire came to my heart to go near the church the next day. So, I managed to gather courage and went up to the gate of the church and listened (I did not dare to go inside). But to my surprise, the wife of that pastor came and invited me to come inside. For the first time in my life, I stepped into a Christian church. I heard people singing with great joy. And some shared their experiences about God. Everything was so unlike in our temples where we stand in long queues for our turn to offer our prayers to the temple priest, and then out. When Pastor Sagar stood to give the message, I was surprised to see that he is the school principal. His wife told me he is both pastor and principal. He was telling that Jesus came to people telling them that the kingdom is at hand and we need to prepare to enter into that kingdom since that is made for us all. And he also said the first step in the preparation is to be MEEK, and those people who are meek will also be loved by God himself. This very thought touched me, and I started to come every day to church. The messages like you are the salt of the world, you are the light of the world touched very deep in my heart. Slowly, even without my knowledge, my heart began to love this kind of God. Suddenly, I wanted to be a part of this kind of people who know how to get peace, joy and salvation even while still in this world. I learned that by believing, and having faith in Jesus, I could become part of this kingdom. This church is now my family, and I was baptized by Pastor Sagar on Palm Sunday. I am now changed, because of Jesus, his follower’s testimonies, and God’s presence in my life.”

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for touching this woman’s life and bringing her into your kingdom. Amen.

Questions: 1. When has your witness brought light and life to someone else?
2. What does God’s kingdom really mean to you today?

Surely the disciples didn't want to hear what Jesus was saying to them. What he was saying didn't make any sense at all. "If you can do all the miracles you've been doing, then how are such things possibly going to happen?" They couldn't believe what he was telling them.

There once was a time when the Jewish people were prisoners – in Egypt. Didn't their God not only hear their cries of desperation, and in miraculous ways got them out of Egypt? One of the first stories Jewish children heard – again and again – was how fantastic their God was. In spite of an Egyptian army, fully equipped for any kind of a war, it was defeated by their own Jehovah! Their God didn't leave them forever lost in the wilderness...but brought them to a new land which they could call their own – their promised land!!!!

Then came the Romans, and they were now prisoners just like they'd been in Egypt. What did Jesus' twelve disciples really think he was going to do? If he was the promised Messiah, then things were going to change...for the better, too. They'd been taught as kids to look for the long-awaited Messiah, who would come and take care of the Jewish people. Yet the disciples had never heard Jesus say a word about the fact the Jews were now a captive people under Roman rule. Neither had he said a word about any kind of a plan that was going to happen that would get rid of the Romans and have a Messiah leader.

These few verses are descriptive of what Jesus knew was coming his way. What he said wasn't a very pretty picture. If the disciples understood what Jesus was trying to tell them, they surely didn't give a hint that they did. It was probably easier to think of all the miracles Jesus had performed...and that Jesus would perform another miracle when it was needed.

People in today's world who don't believe in Jesus and what he came to do, don't really feel any need of a "saviour". "Why do I need to be saved from anything?" might be a common response. After all, we survived a world-wide swath of Covid 19, and most of us are still living, in spite of some losses. And most fully expect technology to reverse the looming threat of global warming. The list could go on and it would be long.

As it turned out, the disciples soon found out what Jesus was talking about. Then Jesus went back to God's presence, and all of civilization has to make a decision, whether they want to, or not. Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah...or he was not. How can we help our neighbors (around the world) understand not only who Jesus was – but who he is today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to be a better mirror reflecting you to others. Amen.

Question: How much value do you place on your spiritual journey today?

If Jesus had been on TV back then, it would have been interesting to have seen his portrayal of a mustard seed...as tiny as they are, there wouldn't have been much to see. But he could then have "grown" it into a ten-foot tree to get his point across.

He could have had his handful of yeast and made a huge basket or bucket of bread. It would have been fun to watch. With Jerusalem just around the corner, Jesus was trying to get his key points across. And God's Kingdom was certainly one of them.

At this point in time, Jesus was surrounded by twelve men who were called disciples. Yet after spending close to three years with him, they still had little idea of what was going to happen soon – as well as all that would happen later. At this point, Jesus' family was wondering if he was out of his mind.

I'm guessing that the Synagogue's leaders had more of an idea about the mustard seed and yeast than anyone else. There is no question but that they viewed Jesus as a major threat to their 'business'. As Jesus was talking that day about the Kingdom of God, they were talking behind the scenes with synagogue leaders and Roman leadership. They knew that something had to be done or their future was in jeopardy.

I dare you to ask a question about God's Kingdom the next class or small gathering you are in. What do you think you might hear? Two thousand years after Jesus talked about it, just how tall is the 'mustard seed' tree now? As you look at a world population of over eight billion, how big is God's Kingdom?

How do you count the numbers for God's Kingdom? Do you look at the churches, and say that is the Kingdom? Or are there small groups meeting here and there that also make up the Kingdom? Can you not be a member of a small group or a church, but still be a member of God's Kingdom?

Has the mustard seed become a tree and started to grow around the world? Some of the reports coming to us from third-world countries seem to indicate a world-wide movement towards our Jesus.

What was shortly going to happen to Jesus in the next week has much to say about God's Kingdom, what it is, how it's going to happen, and the price tag that's attached to it. As you look at your own journey to the cross, what role do you have in an answer to Jesus' question about what is the Kingdom of God?

Prayer: Jesus, help me better understand the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Question: 1. Do you view yourself as a part of God's Kingdom make-up?
2. How do you view the Kingdom of God?

There's an old saying ... "Let's get the show on the road!" That's what Jesus was saying when they reached what is today called Palm Sunday. However, the disciples still didn't know what the "show" was, nor what their role would be in it, if they did. Did the disciples carry palm branches like those in the crowd that followed? Or did they linger at the back of the "moving" crowd?

If you read the four Gospels, (try it sometime without stopping until you're read all four of them!), what verse/s best picture what was happening to Jesus on Palm Sunday? Can you find a descriptor for the ride into Jerusalem on a donkey...with some of the people excitedly cheering him on the way?

Reading from *The Message* version of the four Gospels, my conclusion pointed to a verse that's familiar to quite a few people, but probably not understood by 7/8's of the world's population. "This is how much God loved the world..." is the way the verse begins. Have you ever pondered why the God of the Universe would want to love such a mess our world has become...and has been doing so from the beginning? How do you define love when you are talking about God doing the loving?

"He gave his only son, his one and only son." That's what Bethlehem was all about. That's what 30 years living in Nazareth was all about. That's what the last three years of his life was all about. Jesus was the Son of the Living God. And God's love for what was created centuries before had not been turned off along the way. Instead, God decided the time had come to love his people once again...this time by paying the ultimate penalty for sin – our sins.

Does the man on the donkey riding the streets into Jerusalem look like God in any way? Does he look like the Son of God in any way? He's dressed just like everybody else. He's clean, his hair is like everybody else.

"And this is why...so that no one needs to be destroyed." Most of the human race lives life a day at a time...and little thought is given to the fact that each one of us will, some early and some later, breathe our last breath – and move on. And when we move on, it's either into God's presence, or forever banned from God's presence.

"By believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." That's on earth, and as well, after earth! "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it is."

As hard as it was going to be later in the week, Jesus looked at the crowd – and loved them as God loved them...and it meant a cross. How much does God love you as you read this today? How much do you love God?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the greatest love the world has ever known. Amen.

When was the last time you washed someone else's feet? When was the last time you washed your own feet? Not one of us has probably done such a thing while we were fully clothed. We wear shoes and socks most of the time. They didn't wear socks and wore types of sandals. Even though Jesus was leaving them soon, the disciples were still caught up in debating their future roles in the Kingdom that Jesus talked about. So only a few days before the crucifixion, Jesus said to them: "Whoever wants to become great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done. He came to serve, not to be served..."

It was obvious to Jesus he had to do something else to get his point across. He did the unthinkable by removing his outer robe, got a towel and a basin, and began to wash each of the disciple's feet.

I did this with a group of folks one time. It was a strange feeling – both for them and for me. In Jesus's day, washing feet was so low on the job listing that only the lowliest of the slaves got the job – or small children. Not one of the disciples had ever seen or heard about a teacher, leader, or person of stature even hinting at doing such a thing.

The Graeco-Roman world only valued titles, positions and power. Judaism stressed the opposite – humility. Having said that, however, there were distinct roles to be played out, and what Jesus did in washing their feet was like turning the world upside down. We know what Jesus was going to do was radical, because Peter immediately described what he was intending to do was unthinkable.

In your own life journey, have you seen any examples of humility? Do you know someone who lives a humble lifestyle – they approach life in humility? How would Jesus apply to our churches today what he said to his disciples that night? Can you imagine what Jesus would say about our global family – and humility?

When Jesus was gone, how would he want the disciples to remember him? Feeding the five thousand? Walking on the wind-whipped waves? Sitting with little children playing at his feet? Casting out demons? Healing a leper? Or, perhaps seeing him on his knees, head bent over, and slowly but surely, working his way around the disciples while washing their dirty feet? I think you know.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for showing us the way. Amen.

Questions: 1. How can we be "servants" of Christ in today's world?
2. How can church members and leaders deal with humility?

It was about a fifteen-minute walk from where they ate the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus and the disciples may have arrived there around 10 or 11 pm. Remember that sleep had been in short supply for many days. Tensions of all kinds were increasing.

One burning question was what had happened to Judas? Why had Jesus told him to leave – and where had he gone? Despite all that Jesus had shared with them, they were most likely more confused than ever. For Jewish people of Jesus' time, it was customary to stay awake late on Passover night and tell the stories of God's redemption. One might assume that the disciples should have been able to stay awake this particular night...but they were as human as we are.

Jesus began his prayer "Abba, Father...". *Abba* is the Aramaic word for Papa, a term of great intimacy and affectionate respect. For many of us, in our earlier years, the use of the term 'Daddy' would connote the same. It could be used by Jews to refer to their own fathers, and sometimes it was used in reference to teachers. But because of the great intimacy implied, Jews would never use the term in reference to God. Yet this is precisely the message that Jesus had been trying to give to the disciples – "God loves you, God loves me, and it's O.K. for you to love God, too."

The human side of Jesus didn't want to die any more than ours would. Since he was both human and divine, he needed to clarify for the human side that dying for humanity was still God's will. In his agonizing prayer, he learned that he was still God's sacrifice...for the world. As well, Jesus committed himself to following through with the divine plan which began long before his birth in a stable in Bethlehem.

The disciples sleeping? If you and I had been there, we'd most likely have done the same thing! Do you find it disturbing? Over the years, occasionally I've fallen asleep while praying, too. Thankfully, our God understands us when such things happen. The disciples were merely human beings, dazed, confused, worried, exhausted and fearful of what was still to come.

On the plus side, at least the disciples were still with Jesus, both asleep and awake! Jesus wasn't totally alone...yet.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us even when we fall asleep when we shouldn't. Amen.

Questions: 1. Do you think Jesus HAD to die? If so, why?
2. With what level of intensity do you pray to God?

We don't hear much talk about one of the most significant occurrences during Jesus' crucifixion—the tearing apart of the Temple Veil. In Herod's Temple, as it was centuries earlier in the nomadic sanctuary of the Hebrew people, a curtain closed off access to the Holy Place, and another closed off access to the Holy of Holies. During the period of darkness as Jesus hung on the cross, this millennia-old barrier to all but the High Priest was torn from top to bottom.

It's tearing signified an end to the ancient worship ways, and once and for all, opened the door to 'free access' to God for anyone who would believe. This is addressed specifically in Hebrews 9.

There were two "holy places". One was called the Holy Place in which were the lamp stand, the table, and the bread of the Presence. The other was called the Holy of Holies. A number of highly significant items were lodged there (vv. 3-5). The priest went continuously into the first Holy Place. However, only the High Priest could go into the second, and he could only go once a year (vv. 6-7).

The writer of Hebrews continues: "But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption (v. 12). At the moment Christ's blood was shed, the temple veil was torn in half and fell to the ground in a heap – a relic of a system that was no longer valid or needed.

Yes, Jesus Christ is God's sacrifice. Jesus died once – at that moment salvation was provided for all who believe. Those who stood watching Jesus die knew nothing of the curtain being torn in half, and falling to the floor. The Roman soldiers paid no mind to anything that was happening in the temple. The disciples, wherever they were, were totally unaware of what was happening. But I promise you that all the forces of evil in the universe heard the thud of the veil as it fell...and knew at that moment that evil, itself, was doomed.

At that moment, all the world knew that God would prevail; good would prevail; Jesus rose from the dead and Jesus' followers will live forever with God.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for giving everything, so that not only could I be free from the clutches of sin; the whole world could be redeemed, as well. Amen.

**Questions: 1. How do you think the temple priests interpreted the tearing apart of the temple veil?
2. What did the disciples think when they heard what happened?**

There was a significant difference between the Romans and the Jews regarding dead bodies. Since it was approaching the Sabbath, Jewish leaders were anxious that Jesus' body be buried by sundown. The Romans would have wanted it otherwise. There are accounts of persons hanging on a cross, bound by ropes, who survived several days. The dying man could 'rest' himself on a seat in the middle of the upright post. This support allowed him to breathe – and prolong his agony and death. When death needed to be hastened, Roman soldiers would break the legs of the person, thus causing asphyxiation and sudden death. But the Romans would have left the bodies on the crosses till they rotted.

Jewish sensitivities were quite different, however (see Deuteronomy 21:23). They wanted a body on a cross taken off immediately, and especially Jesus' body. As it was, the Romans were quite willing to accommodate the Jews because they were fearful of a major riot during the crowded festivals. Political influence and intrigue continued long after Jesus had died.

One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear. According to first-century Jewish tradition, the priests were supposed to pierce Passover lambs with a wood pole from their mouth to their buttocks.

Jesus' legs were not broken because he was already dead. A little known fact of Jewish tradition is that early Jewish law stipulated the maximum corporal punishment for breaking the Passover lamb's bones.

The writer of today's Scripture, John, tells all who come after him that he saw all that happened "with his own eyes". Eyewitness accounts were always considered more valuable than second-hand accounts.

It is reassuring to know that one of the disciples was right there – at the foot of the cross. He was there when Jesus asked him to take care of his mother. He was there when the soldier thrust the spear into his side. John cared enough to risk his life – to be there at the cross.

Two thousand years later, pause and reflect on the scene of the crucifixion. Would you have been found standing at the foot of the cross? Would you have been standing with the crowd some distance away? Or would you not have been found anywhere near the events of that afternoon?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for paying the full price for our sins. Amen.

Questions: 1. Have you ever thanked Jesus for hanging on a cross for us?
2. How do you think Jesus' followers felt that afternoon?

Jesus' last recorded words from the cross, "It is finished", cover a lot of time and territory. Most who read his words casually think he is referring to his 33 year journey to be crucified...from Bethlehem to Golgotha. However, it goes far beyond that.

Travel back in time with me to the Garden of Eden story...the world of Adam and Eve. This is what is finished. Fast-forward your thinking with me to the last humans on the globe...that is what will be finished! What does this mean?

However long you think it has been since God created human life, whether you take the long numbers or shorter ones, "It is finished" goes back that far. As the first two inhabitants of the Garden, Adam and Eve, who were friends of God and enjoyed their existence with their friend, God...."It is finished" goes back that far. As it turned out, it was the sin of these two that presented God with an eternal problem – no longer innocent, no longer welcome, no longer worthy – no longer residents in the Garden of Eden.

We have all of the Old Testament that tells story after story of a loving, seeking God who wanted the Israelites to live like the People of God. We also have story after story of people who wanted to follow every whim and fancy that came their way – other than responding to God's overtures. When Jesus said, "It is finished" – he meant the Old Testament story was complete – finished. A new story was beginning with his death and resurrection.

With Jesus' death – salvation, having a right relationship with God, a new life, a new spirit – all are now available to we who are alive, as well as those that are yet to be born. No other ways are needed, or acceptable – "It is finished" – once and for all, for all time. Jesus was and is the sacrifice. God redeemed his people by coming, himself, to pay the price for alienation from God.

Jesus (God) accomplished that in his death on the cross – and he sealed it for eternity with his last words "It is finished".

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for ending our alienation from God for all time. You opened the door for us to approach the God of the Universe, as you hold our hand as we walk into God's presence. Amen.

Questions: 1. What would you have felt if you'd heard "It is finished"?
2. Do you think Jesus was/is the only acceptable sacrifice?

By the time Jesus died, it was only a few hours until sundown. For the Jews, Sabbath began at sundown. Neither was it lawful to prepare a body for burial on the Sabbath. What could be done needed to be carried out in haste.

Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin. He was a person who was respected by all sides. We also know that not every member of the Sanhedrin reflected those who through trickery and unlawful acts brought about the death of Jesus.

Scholars tell us that the bodies of few crucifixion victims have ever been found in excavated tombs. In most cases, the Romans left the bodies to rot on the cross. It was rare for them to be willing to release a crucified body to family or friends. We can only conclude that Joseph was a man of power and wealth, since he gained access to Pilate.

At this point, Pilate was probably quite willing to get rid of the body. What do you think Pilate was thinking after he washed his hands in public, heard the rumors from the soldiers and the crowd, and saw the darkened skies for three hours prior to Jesus' death? He most likely wanted to bring it all to an end and was glad to receive Joseph's offer.

Joseph didn't have much time to purchase the linen shroud, which was customary for burial. Since he was a person of wealth, we can assume that the tomb was cut from virgin rock – these were viewed as the best. Large disk-shaped stones could be rolled in a groove over the mouth of the tomb, making entry difficult. After a body had been prepared for burial, it would be left to decompose for one year. Then the oldest son or other closest family member would return, gather the bones for burial in a box, and deposit them in a slot on the tomb wall.

The above writing represents the human side of the story. Two thousand years later, we're glad to know there is another side to the story – could we call it the Divine? Yes, there was another plan. In spite of the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers and their leaders, and even nature itself...death could not claim the Son of God...for long.

Prayer: Jesus, two thousand years later, may we be found as faithful to you as Joseph was. Amen.

**Questions: 1. Where were the disciples while this was going on?
2. Do you think that Pilate had any 'second thoughts' about not standing up for Jesus when he could have done so?**

Day 46

Saturday, March 30, 3035

It's a quiet day. Not many people are out and moving around.

The three crosses remain as they were, on the hill.

The center cross has no body.

The two side crosses each has a body hanging on it.

Each hanging body is dead.

But they are not the same.

The soul of one body is in heaven...with God.

The soul of the other is not in heaven – permanently separated from God.

So it is today...we who believe in Jesus will at some point move on to be with God.

That's why Jesus came.

Day 47

Sunday, March 31, 2024

It's Easter Sunday.

The cross is empty.

The tomb is empty.

Jesus is alive!

It's all over...finally!

Isn't it?

No, it isn't.

Why?

Because it won't be over until the last person to believe in Jesus will have done so...

and then God takes over.

Now our task is to introduce people to the risen Christ...so that Jesus can come back.

Let's keep on walking with Jesus and telling the story of the empty tomb!



Lenten Devotions 2024

By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult

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