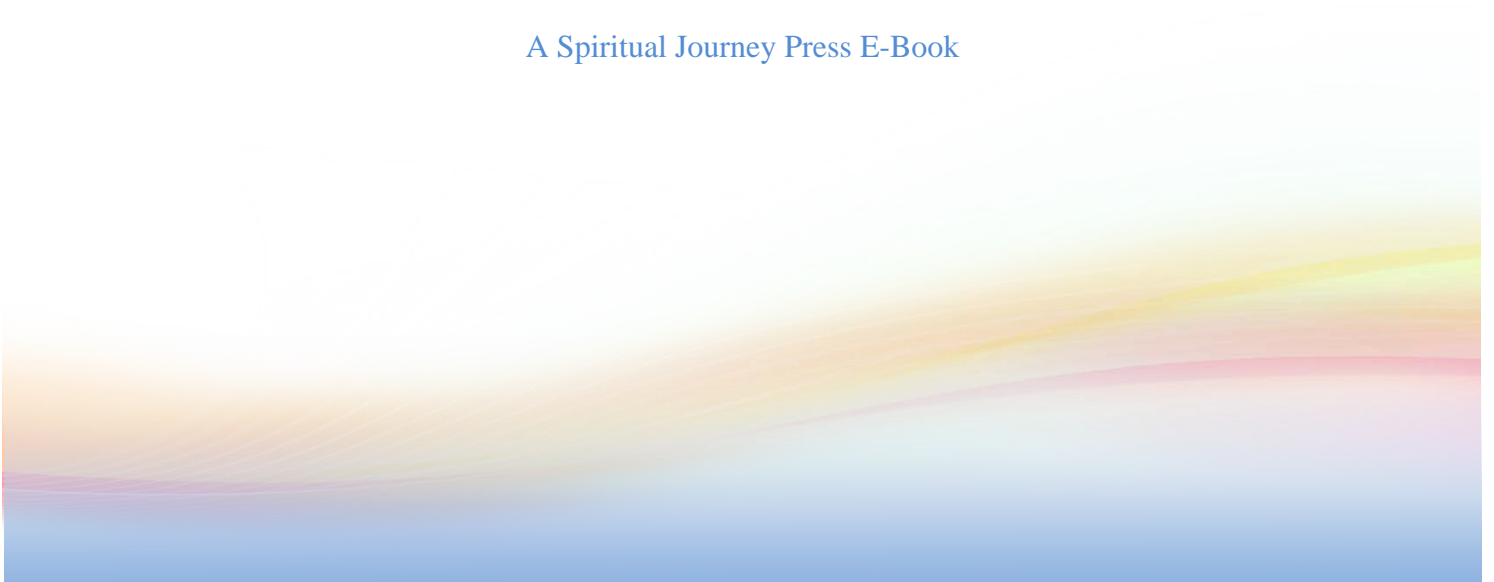




Lenten Devotions 2012

Rev. Dr. Richard E. Rusbuldt

A Spiritual Journey Press E-Book



Lenten Devotions 2012

By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult

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For further information, contact Dr. Rusbult at 364 Pughtown Road, Spring City, PA 19475, or email him at rrusbuld@comcast.net. All opinions expressed are his own.

*Front Cover Photograph entitled “2011-10-01 NJ Ocean City 37 – Beach at Sunrise.”
Copyright © 2011 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. Like the ocean, Lent calls us to consider the vastness of God’s goodness and power and to embrace a spirit of humility and wonder.*

Back Cover Photograph entitled “2011-10-28 NY NYC 41 Central Park – Solitary Man and the Pond.” Copyright © 2011 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. The Lenten pilgrimage is often a solitary one, even when we are surrounded by other people.

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*Spiritual Journey Press
P.O. Box 3041
Mercerville, NJ 08619
www.spiritualjourneypress.com
Email: sjourneypress@comcast.net
Dr. Spitzer’s Flickr Photography Site: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/29012022@N05/>*

February 22 – April 8, 2012

AN INVITATION TO A LENTEN JOURNEY

Some of you are new to a Lenten Journey, while others have walked to the cross with Jesus many times. For first-timers, the question is: “What can I learn about Jesus?” For others, the question is: “Since I’ll never know all I can about Jesus, what new things can I learn this year?”

Lent is that period of time between what is called Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Early church history tells us that one or two days of fasting were to be observed in preparation for Easter. The first reference to 40 days is found in Council of Nicene documents in 325 AD. Scholars believe that the number “forty” was suggested by the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

In the earliest days, the fast was rigorous. Only one meal a day was allowed, with no meats to be eaten. Gradually the fast was relaxed until eventually it was replaced with other practices. Today, we hear references to “give up something for Lent”; the possibilities are many. In some churches, however, there is a greater emphasis on penitential practices and private devotions.

It is the latter to which you are invited. You don’t have to “give up” anything – you are invited to do something, namely, a forty-six day walk with Jesus – to the cross and the tomb.

For 2012, Mrs. Larissa Van Horn (Bangor, Pa.) has translated the Lenten Devotions into the Spanish language. She has invested many, many hours in the translation process, and I am deeply indebted to her for her willingness to give of her time and talents (without pay, too!!!) so these devotionals can be shared with many others around the world. Each year, I am also indebted to Dr. Lee Spitzer of ABC, New Jersey, who provides the cover pictures, edits all of the material, and provides the technical expertise to make this study booklet available online and without cost to you.

Some of our journey will find us listening to Jesus’ teachings to his followers as he prepares to die. Some of the journey will deal with preparations for his death. And of course, the latter part of the journey will deal with his death. You probably won’t agree with everything contained herein – and that’s quite alright. After all, we’re friends of Jesus, traveling together! You may not like some of the suggestions – if not, skip them. Perhaps you will miss a day here and there; that’s O.K., too. Each day’s journey stands pretty much by itself, and can be missed, or picked up at a later date,. We will meet both 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. But over-riding our whole journey will be one universal truth:

GOD LOVED US – AND GOD CAME!!!!

Day One

Wednesday, February 22, 2012

John 1: 1-3

Thought: As we join Jesus and the disciples on their journey towards Jerusalem, take a good look at him. What do you see? What did you expect to see? He was in his early thirties, dressed in line with the customs of his day, and walked far more every day than either you or I ever do. As he traveled, he didn't stop at any fast-food places, nor did he dine in fancy restaurants. At night, there were no motels where he could shower away the dust of the day's walking, and relax in a comfortable bed.

As you reflect on Jesus, what pictures come into your mind's eye? Obviously, there are no pictures from long ago to show us what he looked like; neither are there any written descriptions of his features. The only description of Jesus in the Bible is found in Isaiah 53: 2-3. Read these verses from The Message, and then decide if you want to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem: "The servant grew up before God – a scrawny seedling, a scrubby plant in a parched field. There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look. He was looked down on and passed over, a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand. One look at him, and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum."

Of course, as we join Jesus forty-six days before the cross, we'd most likely agree that, at times, he was a very popular fellow, and in today's jargon, he'd be listed at the "top of the charts". Several times he fed thousands of people, and he was considered by most to be a great fellow to have around. In his early ministry, it was reported he healed everybody brought to him from a certain town or area, and people were grateful for him. On occasion, he did things that only God was thought to be able to do. No doubt there were whispers on the edge of every gathering raising the question: could he possibly be God?

After all, he didn't look like God. He looked like them. When people were critical of him, he didn't wipe them out with a lightning bolt or some such act to put them in their place! As it was two thousand years ago, so it is today. Just who was/is this fellow named Jesus? What right did he have to make the claims he did? What were/are his intentions?

In today's verses from John, consider his opinion of this man called Jesus. "In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with God, and Jesus was God. Yes, in the very beginning, Jesus and God were/are One." (my paraphrase) When read this way, the suggestion is that Jesus was, and is, a mind-defying combination of God and humanity. As we continue to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, and to the cross, almost on a daily basis we will be asking the question again and again: Who is this Jesus? Who is Jesus: to your family? to your co-workers? to your classmates? to your neighbors? to your friends? Exactly what do you tell them about Jesus? Ponder this question as we wend our way through the dusty roads of Palestine with our destination being Jerusalem.

Prayer: Jesus, reveal yourself to us in new ways as we walk with you through this Lenten journey.
Amen.

Questions:

1. What do you like most about Jesus?
2. What do you tell others about Jesus?

Thought: In the earliest days of his three year journey to the cross, Jesus was surrounded by rumors. We who have “instant communication” today find it difficult to imagine a world or time when communication was by “word of mouth”, which had to span both time and distance. We know today that rumors abound in every nook and cranny of our lives. Can you imagine what it was like when Jesus walked those dusty roads as people told, and told again and again, what they had seen or heard – or perhaps what they thought they had seen or heard. Have you heard any good rumors about Jesus lately? In your home? In your neighborhood? In your town or city? In your workplace? In your church? Give some thought to what you’ve heard, and make a list.

Rumors were flying fast and furious as he walked those dusty roads. No one alive had ever seen anyone heal another person – just by pronouncing it done! No one alive had ever seen anyone command evil in possessed persons to leave them, and it actually happened. No one had ever lost a herd of pigs because cast out demons caused them to plunge over a cliff and drown. No one had ever been healed of a disease simply by touching the hem of his outer robe. No one had ever publicly dared to suggest other meanings for the laws of the synagogue, as he did when he and his disciples ate grain on the Sabbath.

As his ministry moved into the third year, however, there were other rumors. How does he survive? After all, he doesn’t have a job. Where does he get his money? What do you suppose are his relationships with those women who follow him everywhere? Why does he continually choose as friends, and spend time with the riffraff of the day, the tax collectors, the outcasts? Is he really a revolutionary? If so, where are his leaders, and where is his army? Why doesn’t he go to church (the synagogue)? Where does he stay at night?

As we walk towards the cross with Jesus, we will become aware of more and more rumors. Reflect on your life today -- are you aware of any rumors about Jesus? Or is the Jesus of history relegated to be just that – a historical character who made some noise and raised some dust in Palestine – and now he’s gone? In yesterday’s Scripture, Jesus is pictured as God, without beginning or end. Scripture suggests that Jesus is still around, still available, still searching, still healing, still listening, still loving. Have you planted any “rumors” about Jesus lately? In today’s world, few people are “turned on” to a living Jesus through mass media. What the world needs today is for you and me to get some rumors started about Jesus – things that will cause people to think, to wonder, to question, to search for -- Truth. As we “talk” each day on our way to Jerusalem, try to identify some things you can share about Jesus that might just possibly bring Truth and Light to someone’s life?

Prayer: Jesus, give me courage to tell my friends and family about what you mean to me in my life.
Amen.

Questions: 1. What did you say the last time you told someone about what Jesus means to you?
2. Make a list of things you can share with someone else about Jesus.

Thought: On our first day of walking towards Jerusalem, you were asked about what comes to mind when you think about Jesus. Isaiah's words (53: 2-3) were shared with you. As you reflect on the Jesus of history, and ponder your current thinking about Jesus, consider a contemporary's observations. In his book *Jesus with Dirty Feet*, Don Everts says: "He was nothing like anyone had ever seen. There was something so clear and beautiful and true and unique and powerful about Jesus that old rabbis would marvel at his teaching, young children would run and sit on his lap, ashamed prostitutes would find themselves weeping at his feet, whole villages would gather to hear him speak, experts in the law would find themselves speechless, and people from the poor to the rugged working class to the unbelievably wealthy would leave everything to follow him."

What was Jesus really about? Was he seeking popularity? Was he trying to get people's attention by healing a leper, casting out demons, raising the dead? Was he trying to recruit a large following? Was he trying to bring to an end the corruption of the synagogue? Was he angry with Roman domination? Was he pro-poor, and anti-rich? Add to the list of possibilities.

In every contact that Jesus had, he was a "reflector" of the living, caring, loving God of the universe. His period of ministry lasted only three years. He knew that in order for his disciples to gain the full value of his life on earth, they needed to have intimate access to him. In today's verses, Jesus cried out: "He who believes in me, believe not in me but in him who sent me. And he who sees me sees him who sent me." He also knew the disciples needed to spend time in his company when they would be confronted by his words, and inspired by his actions in a way that would lead to change in their own lives.

The closer you are to a "reflector", the more clear is the image, vision, message being communicated. Unfortunately, many of today's Christians observe Jesus from a distance. They allow perceptions to be formed by the observations of others; through the songs that are sung; through the sermons that are heard; through the books that are read. As it was then, so it is now – the closer you are to Jesus, the more clear is your understanding of who God is, how God loves, and how God will walk with you every day. If Jesus had not come, there would not have been that blazing reflection of God spread across the land of Palestine those three years. After that, all of the reflecting was left to us – that's right – to you and to me! We are God's reflectors of love in a world in its ever-darkening night. How do we reflect the living Christ? How does your church reflect to the unchurched of your community a God who loved, came, died – and is willing to forgive?

Prayer: Jesus, come closer to me, spend time with me, help me be a better reflector. Amen.

Questions: 1. Of your personal acquaintances, who reflects the love of Jesus better than any other?
2. List ways your church reflects clear messages to your community about a loving God.

Day Four

Saturday, February 15, 2011

John 6:30

Thought: Two thousand years later, the question hasn't changed. "They waffled: 'Why don't you give us a clue about who you are, just a hint of what's going on? When we see what's up, we'll commit ourselves.'" (The Message) Everybody had questions. Everybody wanted to "be shown". They were really saying "If you are God, then prove it to us." Even the disciples wondered who he was.

Leap back in history with me to the time after Jesus ascended. There were no church buildings. There were no clergy leaders. There were no printed resources of any kind available to the early church. How did the early Christian church survive? After all, it was quite unthinkable that a small, despised movement from a corner of Palestine could move out to become the dominant faith of the once mighty Roman Empire, an empire steeped in fiercely defended traditional pagan religions.

The early church was considered a "religio prava", an illegal and depraved religion. Wave after wave of persecution was unleashed to destroy it. But, as we know, that didn't happen. Consider the fact that they had no buildings; they had no public ceremonies that would introduce them to the public; they had no access to media for that day; they had no educated leadership. In those first few hundred years after Paul, we do not come across many "big names" who were missionaries, preachers, whatever. How did it happen?

Christians were primarily an urban faith in those early years. They established themselves in the city centers of the Roman Empire. Most of the people lived close together in crowded tenements. There were few secrets in such a setting. The faith spread as neighbors saw the lives of the believers close-up, on a daily basis.

When they saw forgiveness taking place, rather than hearing words about it, it communicated. When they heard the beginning words of the Lord's Prayer – "Our Father, who is in heaven...", it was so radically different that neighbors talked among themselves about what it could mean. Justin Martyr, a noted early Christian theologian, wrote to Emperor Antoninus Pius and described the believers: "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 one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race; but now since Christ has come into our lives, we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause." All this – and no buildings!!!!

Prayer: Jesus, help us to capture again the need to reflect you in our everyday lives. Amen.

Questions: 1. What did it really take to be a Christian in those early days after Christ left earth?
2. How could you and your church "reflect" who Jesus is in more authentic ways today?

Thought: As you walk the dusty roads with Jesus, try to think of him as the very embodiment of a loving, caring, seeking God. In Jesus, God came in person to show human beings they were worth redemption, even if it meant that Jesus had to die. In the midst of our postmodern world, God is still the “pursuing God”, seeking us out in every way imaginable. Few of us can imagine such love, such caring, such persistence, or such thoughtfulness.

I had a personal experience a few years back that illustrated for me in vivid ways how God seeks us out. It’s a story in a hunting context, so if you’re anti-hunting, just skip the next two readings, and I’ll see you in two days! It was 5:30 AM, and there were five inches of new snow. It was pitch dark as my son, son-in-law and I left the house where we were staying to head to the woods. As I stepped off the bottom step, I was met by a big, black cat. I’d never seen him before and knew nothing about him, but he let me know he was friendly, and rubbed against my boots to show his affection.

We headed to the woods, and I noticed the cat was following. When we got to the creek we had to cross, I figured that was the end of the cat. But when we crossed the creek, and reached the top of a steep ravine, the cat was already there. When we reached my spot to turn into the woods, the cat continued to follow my son-in-law. I thought that was good, and I was finished with him.

About an hour later, settled into my tree stand which was sixteen feet above ground level, I thought I heard something – a bit strange. It was still dark, so I couldn’t see anything, but continued to hear a cat meowing. Again and again I heard it. I wondered where he was, and why he was there in the woods near me. As daylight came, I was finally able to make him out on a dead tree laying up against the tree I was in – looking up at me, and meowing his heart out. Silence reigned in the woods – except for a cat crying. What do I do now, I thought.

A little later, he left his log, and was positioned at the bottom of the ladder to my tree stand. I shushed him, tried to motion him away, and threw some small snow clumps towards him. Instead of running away, he came up the first two steps. But he chickened out and went back down, his meowing getting even louder. By now, being in the tree was a waste of time, so I climbed down, and tried to shoo him away from the tree. I went back up the ladder, but he was back at the bottom step before I had reached the top. By then, I’d made enough noise to chase all deer for a mile away out of the woods. So I thought maybe I’d better just bring the cat up with me.

However, he was so excited at being with me, he rubbed, jumped up on the handrail and tried to smooch me, and then tried to climb inside my hunting jacket. Obviously, this wasn’t going to work at all. So I gathered him in my arms, took him to the ground, and carried him some distance from my tree. But when I got back to my tree, he passed me, and ran up the ladder as fast as he could. I climbed up once again, wondering what to do. It got worse when he jumped up on the railing again, hit my lunch box, and both went over the side. Somehow I grabbed at them, and luckily caught both. By now, it had been daylight for almost two hours, and hunting was out of the question.

(There’s more to this story, so take a break until tomorrow. And as you do, by the way, has God ever been as persistent with you as this black cat was with me?)

Day Six

Monday, February 27, 2011

Luke 19: 1-10

Thought: Not knowing what else to do, I decided I probably had to carry the cat out of the woods, and take him back to the house we'd left early in the morning. So I gathered him in my arms once again, carried him to the ground, and walked him all the way out of the woods and to the middle of a field. Then I threw some snowballs near him to discourage him. Finally he headed the other way.

For the next few hours, things were actually quiet and rather peaceful. I felt pretty good that I'd finally been able to get rid of my pursuing and persistent cat-friend. Early in the afternoon, I spotted movement in the field. It looked like a wild turkey, so I kept watching. But after awhile, I was able to see that my "wild turkey" had four legs, was pure black, and was searching. I watched him as he got to the edge of the woods. He looked up at the first tree, and then moved on to the next tree. It didn't take long to realize that the cat was, once again, looking for my tree, looking for me!

I confess to having had some rather warm feelings towards Pokus (I didn't know his name at the time) as he searched for me. I surely didn't know why, but it didn't make any difference – by then, I wanted him to find me. Slowly he made his way, tree to tree, further into the woods, always working in my direction. As you can guess, eventually he got to "my" tree, and once he saw the steps, he bounded up them, and pretty much leaped into my waiting arms. What a reunion!!!

By then, I knew my hunting for the day was over – and it didn't matter at all. "Someone" who cared for me, who pursued me, who sought me out, had found me, and even if it was only a black cat, it felt pretty good. We spent the next couple of hours together, and when afternoon light began to wane, I carried him down, and he walked beside me all the way back to the creek, where this time, I carried him across! We finally made it home – together!!!

I resonate with this story, for you see, this is the very way I found out about Jesus. I was one of two boys whose father had been unemployed for 7 years during the Great Depression. It was the Superintendent of the steel company, Walter O. Jackson, who went to my Dad who had just gotten a job, to ask if his two boys could come to Sunday School with him. God came looking for me when I was only 8 years old. God pursued me in a steel mill, just as persistent as Pokus was to find me. Jesus pursued people, whether they were lepers, miserly tax collectors, fishermen, hungry people in the desert, rich young rulers – Jesus cared, pursued, loved and changed people.

That's why Jesus was walking those dusty roads to Jerusalem. Jesus was God in flesh, pursuing the people created eons ago (whenever it was doesn't really matter!) who had chosen a different, and very wrong path for their life journeys. Jesus was ready to do anything to reach people, including walking to Jerusalem, and hanging on a cross. Why? Because God loves us. Because Jesus loves us – and doesn't want to let us go. As we continue our walk together, would you be willing to pause and honestly consider how much God loves you? Does it ever bother you that God loves so much?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us so much you were willing to follow any path, and give whatever it took to bring redemption to a world in need of being saved from itself. Amen.

Questions: 1. Reflect on your life journey; in what ways has God "pursued" you?
2. When, in your journey, have you tried to avoid a "pursuing" God?

Thought: Yesterday, I mentioned Walter O. Jackson, who was the Superintendent of the Allegheny Ludlum Steel Company in Dunkirk, NY in the early 30's. From the time I was born until I was close to eight years old, Dad couldn't find full-time work. Finally the day came when he was able to get a steady job at the steel company. He was elated, obviously, but so afraid the "new job bubble" would suddenly burst, and we would be hungry again. We lived on the "wrong side" of 244 Railroad Avenue in what folks called a "shack". We wore hand-me-downs that were so out-of-date we were laughed at daily at school. So when Dad got the job, he was desperate to hang on to it if at all possible.

Only a few days after he began work, he saw a fellow dressed in a white suit moving into the hot furnace area where he worked. He'd heard rumors about the Superintendent, that he always dressed in a white suit, and could be found in the heart of the steel mill from time to time. It appeared that he was headed in Dad's direction, and Dad immediately feared the worst. As Mr. Jackson moved towards him, he tried to "disappear" by moving to the back side of the boiling hot furnace. He figured no one would come back there for any reason whatsoever. So he carefully peaked around the side of the furnace, and breathed a sigh when he didn't see the Superintendent. He turned around to go back the other way to where he was working – and there was Mr. Jackson – waiting for him!!!

Dad told us he "froze", and figured his job was over already. But Mr. Jackson moved towards him, and extended his clean white hand to shake Dad's very dirty and grimy hand – which surprised him. He asked him how he was doing. After a bit of small talk, he said to Dad that he understood he had two boys. Dad told him he did. Then he asked if we went to Sunday School. And Dad had to say "no". "Would you like them to go to Sunday School?", he asked. Although Dad knew nothing about Sunday School, he sort of figured that he'd better agree with whatever he asked if he wanted to keep his job. So he said "Yes, that would be alright". So Mr. Jackson told him to have us ready at 9:30 on Sunday morning, and he would pick us up.

And so it was that next Sunday morning that Mr. and Mrs. Jackson arrived at our shack on the wrong side of the railroad tracks to take us to Sunday School – in the biggest Cadillac in the whole world (so thought this 8 year old boy!). We learned about Jesus right away, and both of us thought Jesus was the greatest person we'd ever heard about.

As the years have gone by, I've seen many times when God, who loves me, has continued to call me, tried to catch my attention, pleaded with me, chastised me, smiled on me, turned his face away from me, and yes, pursued me whether I was doing right or wrong. Yes, God loves me on the bad days just as much as on the so-called "good" days – maybe even more so. I confess to having great confidence in God who loves me unconditionally, and I also confess that sometimes, it's scary, too. How about you? That's a bit of my story. What is your story about our pursuing, loving, caring, and redeeming God? Will you tell your story – to someone, somewhere?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us on our worst days, as well as on the "good" days. Amen.

Questions: 1. What three descriptive words best describe your feelings about God?
2. Name someone you will "pursue" on behalf of a loving, pursuing God.

Thought: Jesus reflected an “inviting” God when he called twelve disciples to be his followers. Scripture gives brief accounts of how they were called. Have you ever wondered if Jesus actually had invited others to come and follow him – and they turned him down? There is no scriptural evidence that this happened. At the same time, it is a bit difficult to believe there wasn’t at least one person who said “no”. If you find this a bit hard to believe, then do you know anyone today who hasn’t responded to a loving God? I’m sure you do. Dozens – hundreds – millions of them!

Of all the persons Jesus asked to follow him, Levi (Matthew) was certainly the one who would have been expected to say “no”. He was a tax collector. He was hated. He was despised. He was viewed as a traitor. No doubt he was also wealthy. He was wealthy because he stole money from people. Rome had an insatiable demand for money from those they held under their power. Everyone had to pay taxes to Rome. In each province, tax districts were created and through these jurisdictions, taxes were paid. Each province had a “chief tax collector” (Zaccheus was one of them – Luke 19:2), who employed others to collect the taxes from the various villages. Each person selected as tax collector was a local resident who knew people well enough to know who had money, and where they kept it.

Now here’s the good part. You became a tax collector by submitting a bid to the government, which you were then **responsible** to pay. Anything you collected beyond the bid, however was yours to keep. Most tax collectors were able to assess, and as well collect money well beyond what was required. Hatred towards them ran deep. If you dared protest your tax bill, all the tax collector had to do was tell you that you would be reported to a Roman leader. That, in essence, was signing your own death warrant. People were held hostage. Levi/Matthew was one of the hated tax collectors.

Rome, too, was hated. Its troops occupied the sacred land, and had a garrison of men quartered in the northwest corner of the holy Temple precincts in the Fortress of Antonia. They were the oppressors, the takers, the enforcers. Tax collectors who collaborated with the hated Romans were despised even more. They were viewed as traitors, turncoats, quislings. Basically, tax collectors were shunned by the Jewish people. To eat with a tax collector was considered by the Pharisees to render one spiritually or ceremonially unclean. Even a house entered by a tax collector was considered unclean. The Pharisee’s prayer at the Temple put tax collectors on a par with robbers, evildoers and adulterers (Luke 18: 9-12).

Jesus goes after Levi. It was he who approached the tax collector’s booth alongside the highway. Jesus looked at him and said two words: “Follow me”. The Greek word means literally “come after”. It also had a specific meaning: “to follow someone as a disciple”. Can you imagine what ran through Levi’s mind when he heard -- and knew full well what Jesus meant – he was expected to leave his life of luxury and its hatred to follow Jesus? What for? At that moment, he had no idea. Jesus loved him – the most unloved man in Capernaum. Jesus came seeking, calling, supporting, and loving those who would follow him. Is it any different today?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving me, and calling me even when I was very dirty. Amen.

Questions:

1. How does God pursue those today who have not yet responded to God’s love?
2. How do you suppose Peter and Andrew felt when Jesus asked the hated Levi to come and follow him?

Thought: The Sermon on the Mount was delivered by Jesus early in his three-year ministry. Those who were gathered with him were basically new friends, new listeners, new followers, and probably new doubters. How could Jesus say to those who listened: "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow" (v 34, The Message).

Some of those who listened weren't worried about eating tomorrow – they had not eaten yet that day! Every person present lived in fear of what was next to come from Rome, either in the form of a new decree, or the whims of Roman soldiers. Deadly disease was a constant threat to a body and to the whole community. Every person present was paying increased taxes to both Rome and the Temple. Although there were plenty of rumors, there were no viable candidates for someone who could lead them in a successful rebellion against Rome. How could Jesus make such a statement to people who had so much about which to be anxious?

Who is there among us today who doesn't have anxious thoughts and moments – probably about today, as well as for tomorrow? Can you imagine what might have run through the minds of those who listened to him on that mountainside so long ago? The listing above provides some clues, but there were many others. What about us who live in 2012? Do we have anxieties – about today? -- about tomorrow? Take a moment and list those things that provide you with worry, anxiety, and perhaps fear.

Today's anxieties...

Tomorrow's anxieties...

To help sort out your lists, place an "x" beside each item over which you have no control.

What was Jesus suggesting to his listeners? Much of their world was unhinged, filled with unfairness, dishonesty, distrust, fear and helplessness. Is today's world any different, wherever you live, whatever your age? Jesus' point was *God does not keep us from suffering, but God does keep us.*

Jesus told them, and us, to focus on God, to be aware of evidences of God's presence in our lives.

Jesus was headed to the Cross. His humanity told him of the dangers that were ahead. But Jesus knew that God would be there with him, not to spare him from death on the cross, but to help him through it all. He was counting on God, not luck, money, position, health or anything else. Are you?

Jot down some evidences of God's presence in your life today: _____

Prayer: Jesus, help me trust God to be there to help me when I need divine help. Amen.

- Questions: 1. What worries or anxieties can you remove from such a listing – today? Tomorrow?
2. What can you do to strengthen your hope that God REALLY cares for you?

Thought: Jerusalem is ten days closer than when we began our journey. Looking back two years, Jesus set the stage for what was about to unfold when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount. As people listened with awe and shock at his teachings, at the heart of it was the term “kingdom of heaven”. In Matthew, you will find the term 55 times; in Luke, it is used 44 times. Dr. Manfred Brauch likes to use the term “the reign of God” as an accurate paraphrase. Reflecting on your thoughts of yesterday about anxieties, how is one to pursue life as if God is in charge, while living in a very human, evil, corrupt context?

Consider what life should be like, according to Jesus’ teachings:

- Don’t be angry with your brother or sister, husband or wife, mother or father, neighbor or friend—if something is wrong, seek reconciliation, understanding, forgiveness -- now, not later.
- If someone hits you on one cheek; turn the other cheek.
- Don’t only love your enemies, but pray for them and their salvation.
- Don’t be anxious about what you don’t have.
- Stocks and bonds, investment portfolios and bank accounts have no value whatsoever in God’s reign.
- Spend your time helping those who are helpless, giving food off of your table to those who are hungry, opening your door to those without homes -- these are things that count in God’s reign – this is your treasure in heaven.
- Whatever it is that you wish people would do to and for you, do this to them.
- Stop looking at the speck of dust in your neighbor’s eye, while ignoring the “log” in your own.
- If you are addicted to anything, get rid of the addiction, regardless of the cost.
- Seeking God’s kingdom is more important than your job, your home, or food on your table.

The list could be much longer. Most of you will probably agree that those who listened were amazed, shocked, puzzled and challenged to fully understand the meaning of his words. Gregory the Great said: “The kingdom of heaven has no price tag on it. It is worth as much as you have. For Zaccheus it was worth half of what he owned, because the other half that he had unjustly pocketed he promised to restore four-fold! For Peter and Andrew, it was worth the nets and vessel they had left behind. For the widow, it was worth two copper coins; for another it was worth a cup of cold water. So, as we said, the kingdom of heaven is worth as much as you have.”

Jesus brought to all humanity a new understanding of a loving, caring compassionate God, and as well, new explanations of what life can be like when living hand-in-hand with God. Turn back to your lists of yesterday. How do anxieties fit into Jesus’ picture of a life being walked, literally, hand-in-hand with God? How do you view life today, what are your expectations, your hopes, your fears? As the old chorus goes – “Let’s have a little talk with Jesus...”

Prayer: Jesus, challenge my thinking about God’s kingdom, and what it can mean today. Amen.

Questions: 1. What do you find unrealistic about the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount?
2. Does Jesus’ teachings suggest any lifestyle changes for you today? If so, what?

Thought: One of the first things the twelve who were closest to Jesus learned was that he was most serious about time for prayer – far more serious than any of them were. I’m certain that if they were giving ratings for prayer, they would have given Jesus the maximum ten, and probably have given themselves a one or two. The disciples saw him steal away early in the morning to pray. They were slowly becoming accustomed to the times he left them to go off by himself. And when they saw him off by himself in an attitude of prayer, they noted that he was often silent.

They soon realized Jesus didn’t make a single move in his ministry without spending quality time in prayer. In observing Jesus, they began to realize there was so much they didn’t know about praying – so they asked him to teach them to pray. First, he suggested their prayers need not be a show – for others to hear or see. Second, he told them to find a QUIET, secluded place – to be alone with God. Get some place where you can get away from others as well as yourself, focus on God, and then you will begin to sense his grace. Third, he gave them a sample:

“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)

What do you mean when you repeat The Lord’s Prayer during a worship service? I often wonder what people are thinking as they pray. As well, when the prayer is completed, I often ponder what I said, and what I really meant. In Jesus’ day, there were not only prescribed times for prayer, but there were prescribed prayers as well – for every occasion. Jesus was trying to liberate the people from the notion that: *“If I say it just right – and if I say it often enough, or if I pray long enough, THEN God will think me worthy...and answer my prayer.”* In plain words, Jesus called such thinking rubbish.

Jesus was trying, in a few short observations, to liberate the disciples from “missing the boat” in their attempts at prayer. To summarize, he was suggesting:

- Stop worrying about your method!
- Stop worrying about the wording – or the number of times, or the length of the prayer.
- Stop worrying about the setting.
- *Start concentrating on what God wants to offer you in your time of prayer!!!*

Prayer: Jesus, what message does God have for me when I pray? Help me be a better listener. Amen.

Questions:

1. What do you really mean when you pray The Lord’s Prayer?
2. Rate your prayer life/experience on a scale of one to ten (high). What would it take to raise the number? Do you *want* to improve your prayer life?

Day Twelve

Sunday, March 4, 2012

Thought: When we pray the Lord's Prayer today, we obviously take it out of the context in which it was given almost two thousand years ago on that hillside. Some say it was OK for Jesus to suggest we turn the other cheek then; but does such thinking fit in today's world? Let's take a look at Jesus' "world" context.

For more than a hundred years before Jesus' birth, the Jews were in open revolt led by the Maccabees. They managed to hold off foreign troops until the Roman armies arrived in Palestine. It took 30 years to quash their rebellion and Herod was then installed as "King of the Jews". Herod is quoted as saying "Would the Romans deprive the city of all its inhabitants and possessions and leave me a king of the wilderness?" – this was said as Roman soldiers killed Jewish women and children in their houses, markets, and the temple. Not many years before Jesus was born, Jerusalem and the entire country was in ruins.

Herod managed to make Galilee the most prosperous province in Palestine, but only a few reaped the benefits. Landless peasants were at the mercy of their landlords, the weather and poor living conditions. We know that Jesus was raised poor – his family could not afford a lamb for the temple sacrifice and offered instead a pair of doves.

Galilee also had a reputation as a breeding ground for revolutionaries. Not long before Jesus' birth, a Jewish rebel broke into the arsenal in Sepphoris (3 miles from Nazareth) and looted it to arm his followers. Roman troops recaptured – and burned – the town, while crucifying 2,000 Jews who had been in on the uprising. The town was being rebuilt as Jesus grew up, and Joseph could have worked there in the reconstruction. Ten years later, Judas incited a revolt while urging Jews to pay no taxes to the pagan Roman emperor. This was the beginning of the Zealots who were a thorn to the Romans for six decades. Jesus came into this turned-upside-down world and suggested they/we should love our enemies.

Galilee was the farthest province from Jerusalem and the most backward culturally. P. Yancey says "Rabbinic literature of the time portrays Galileans as bumpkins, fodder for ethnic jokes. Galileans who learned Hebrew pronounced it so crudely that they were not called on to read the Torah in other synagogues...The Aramaic words preserved in the Gospels show that Jesus, too, spoke in that northern dialect, no doubt encouraging skepticism about him."

Opposite the Zealots were the Essenes, who withdrew into monk-like communities on the edge of the desert. Between these two groups were the collaborationists, who tried to work within the system. The Sanhedrin was granted some favor by Herod, in return for which they scouted for any signs of insurrection. (Yes, they were probably there listening to the Sermon on the Mount!) The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two expressions of the collaborators. Both became enemies of Jesus and his teaching. Turn back a page, and read Jesus' sample prayer in the context of his real world as he walked the dusty roads of Palestine. Then read the prayer within the context of your world today.

Prayer: Jesus, show me the reality of your prayer for my own world today. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your reactions to Jesus' teachings in his Sermon on the Mount for today?
2. What parts of Jesus' "sample" prayer mean the most to you today?

Day Thirteen

Monday, March 5, 2012

Thought: Thus far, we've considered God as one who loves, cares, pursues and comes. Before we end this journey, we'll consider the God who dies. In order to consider how far-fetched Jesus' teachings, parables, stories and actions really were, one needs to look at the "god" concepts in the world at that time.

One criticism Romans had of Jews was their rejection of the pantheon of Roman gods. The Romans believed in many different gods and goddesses. For just about everything in life, they had a god or goddess in charge. Before Rome became a large city, the area around it was called Latium, and was settled by superstitious villagers, the Latins, who believed in many gods and spirits. As Rome grew into a city with power, it came into contact with the Greeks, who had a complex pantheon of their own gods. So the Roman pantheon was a mix of those two influences.

Consider comparing Jesus with the Roman pantheon: Jupiter (master of all gods); Juno (Jupiter's wife, and goddess of women); Mars (god of war); Venus (goddess of love and fertility); Minerva (goddess of wisdom, learning); Neptune (god of the sea); Ceres (goddess of the harvest); Vulcan (god of the underworld); Diana (goddess of hunting); Bacchus (god of wine and partying, and Rome's most popular god!); Mercury (messenger of the gods); Vesta (goddess of hearth and home).

That's not all. Beyond the above, every Roman household had its own personal spirits which protected it. The *lares* were the spirits of the family's ancestors. The *penates* were kind spirits who guarded the home. Little figurines of these spirits were kept in a small household shrine called the *lararium*. The spirits would be worshipped by the family on special days. Bits of food or wine might be sacrificed to them. Rome finally figured out what to do when in 27 BC, they erected the Pantheon of Rome, dedicated to "all gods" as a gesture to embrace all of the religions of the known world. (By the way, the building was renovated for use as a Christian church in 609 AD under Pope Boniface IV.)

So that you can see how complex the business of "god" can be, consider the fact that there was/is a Sumerian pantheon, Egyptian pantheon, Armenian pantheon, Incan pantheon, Greek pantheon, Germanic pantheon, Norse pantheon, Celtic pantheon, Slavic pantheon, Hindu pantheon, Rigvedic pantheon, Japanese pantheon, Aztec pantheon, Mayan pantheon, Native American pantheon, numerous African pantheons, Guanche pantheon, and a theosophical pantheon.

The Jews maintained their belief in one God, Jehovah – there were no other gods to be considered. They also believed that Jehovah would at some point in the future return to them, God's chosen people, in the person of a Messiah who would usher in God's kingdom. As Jesus taught, healed, extolled, and described the One who had sent him, in the midst of all the pantheons of the world's teachings, was there any way he could have avoided a cross? I find even more remarkable, in light of the above, the Centurion's comment "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15: 39).

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for bringing Truth and Light into the world that all might see and believe. Amen.

Questions:

1. How would you rate Jesus over against the various pantheons of gods?
2. How do you explain to others your belief in one God, as revealed in Jesus Christ?

Thought: Jesus said “Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness...”. Everything will be alright, he suggested, if you get one thing right – namely, your agenda. From the youngest to the oldest reader today, we have agendas to deal with. We get up in the morning and immediately face agendas. Each day brings new agendas. We go to bed with agendas running around in our heads, too.

Many who listened to Jesus were the poorest of the poor. They were drawn towards him since he seemed to be wise beyond his years, and what they were hearing they had never heard in their lives before. Yet he didn’t preach at them to go get a job or go get an education, but to be about the business of God’s kingdom, whatever that was! The middle-class who listened to Jesus were no doubt challenged by what he said, especially when it came to their agendas. The Sanhedrin had their “listeners” there, as well, to find out what was Jesus’ agenda, since they were already certain it was in opposition to their own.

Then there was the Roman agenda: obey, don’t cause problems, and pay more taxes to Rome. The Temple agenda was a mix of keeping all of the temple laws and rules, and like the Romans, to pay more tithes to the church. The Zealots had for their agenda to rebel at any point it was possible. The Pharisees had an agenda of collaborating with the Roman leadership, while keeping their thumb on the Jewish people. The Essenes agenda was to get as far away from all of the rest that they could, and live near the desert. With such an array of agendas everywhere, how could Jesus ever hope to get his message across?

Two thousand years later, has anything changed? As you read this page today, what agenda is screaming at you for attention? There are two major agendas that seem to be world-wide today. First and foremost is the desire to “get more” – of anything and everything. Technology and marketing, fueled by profits, bombard our thinking and lifestyles with temptation to put what they are about first. Such thinking invades the family unit, education, lifestyles, churches, interpersonal relationships, politics, and relationships between countries and the global family. The second agenda is the desire to be entertained, whether it be with music, sports, gambling, online activities, recreational pursuits of all kinds, and a host of illegal and immoral “businesses” offered under the guise of entertainment.

Jesus suggested, again and again, that some things are more important than others. He also tried to convince those who listened that God thought they, themselves, were more important than anything else in the universe. Why else was he there? Why else did God choose to come? Why else was he headed towards Jerusalem? Jesus also suggested that our most important agenda is our relationship with God. Where do we place God on our list of priorities? Is knowing and relating to God our first agenda? Or are these things competing with a hundred other agendas? As it was then, so it is today ... agendas consume us. Make a list of your agendas – the big ones, that is. Is “the kingdom of God and righteousness” high on the list? Which agendas could you move to bring you closer to God?

Prayer: Jesus, help me sort through my many agendas; help me move you to the top. Amen.

Questions: 1. How important is the “reign of God” to you in your life today?
2. What steps could you take to follow Jesus’ advice to “seek first God’s Kingdom...”?

Thought: In an age when children had no status, Jesus placed them high on his agenda. He asked us to do the same. When the Romans took over Palestine, their coming generated many fears for what they would bring with them. One of the fears was their practice of infanticide. A newborn would be placed before its father; if he picked the child up, it would be considered a member of the family, and its life would begin. However, if the family was on the edge of starvation, if the child was deformed, or if the father had any other reason not to accept it, the infant would be abandoned to die of exposure. Rescue for the child was a possibility, although not always likely.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish writings told again and again of God's concerns for the poor, and for the children of the poor. Jesus addressed these same concerns on numerous occasions. He suggested that one agenda for a person who had extra food or resources was to give it away – to those without. In the Didache 2.2, one of the earliest extrabiblical Christian documents, it says "You shall not kill a child in the womb, nor shall you slay it when born".

Jesus went out of his way to show love and compassion for the least in human society at that time – the children. He took time to do this while on his way to his death. Can it be any less important for us today? Every person reading this page lives not far from a hungry child, an unloved child, a child without hope. There is a hopeless, helpless and miserable world. In a book co-authored with Ron Sider titled *Hope for Children in Poverty*, Heidi Unruh tells her story: "I remember using a bucket to pour water taken from a neighbor's tap to flush our toilet when our water was shut off. I remember using the oven for heat and candles for light when the electricity was shut off. I remember moving into friends' homes, cramped trailers, and even more crowded motel rooms when we didn't have money for rent. I remember the local elementary school refusing to enroll us because we didn't have a permanent home address. I remember searching the house for spare change to buy groceries. I remember the almost-stale taste of food-pantry bread and the almost-spoiled taste of food-pantry meat. I remember the shame of wearing school clothes that didn't fit me, or fit in. And I remember my mother calling churches when we found ourselves stranded in a strange town, our car out of gas, on our way to another city where my stepfather had been promised work. In the difficult time after the work did not materialize, I recall that money, food, and even a place to live appeared without fanfare, thanks largely to Christians who heard of our predicament. And I can never forget the joy of sharing what little we had with others in the same situation and seeing God miraculously provide enough to go around." Followers of Christ DO make a difference!!

Sonya (age 15, Phoenix, AZ) puts her life this way: "I look up at da sky and wonder why – we're livin this crazy life – wondering why I'm still alive – Got all this hate, guilt deep inside – Not tryin to commit suicide -- cause that will make me less – than who I am – Why don't you understand – these gangsta wayz – just getting blazed – So we can't think of this heavy pain – I can't explain – Da nightmares I have every day." As you continue to walk with Jesus, would you consider reaching out to just one poor kid – somewhere – some how – some way – and do what Jesus would do if he was here today?

Prayer: Jesus, challenge me to reach out and touch someone in need in your name. Amen.

Questions: 1. Whatever your age, in what ways do you touch a poor, needy child's life today?
2. In what new ways could your church reach out to children?

Thought: Is helping a leper on your agenda today? We've been talking about agendas, and should note that Jesus, in the midst of all he was about, placed leprosy and other diseases high on his agenda, too. As a result, word spread like wildfire everywhere that Jesus could heal the sick.

More than 100 cases of leprosy a year are reported in the United States. Leprosy exists in many countries around the world. In 2005, the Indian government announced that leprosy had been "conquered". Yet 130,000 new Indian patients are being diagnosed with it annually. Many cases exist in Indonesia and other tropical countries.

Leprosy is a disease that attacks nerve endings, lowering a person's ability to sense pain or injury. It leaves persons susceptible to ulcers and infections. Over time, these infections can lead to loss of fingers, toes and even limbs. Blindness and facial disfigurement often occurs. Contrary to rumors of old, it is not a contagious disease.

In Jesus day, to touch a leper meant you were unclean. Not even the shadow of a leper should fall on you, or you were unclean. In spite of the stigma attached to the disease, early in his ministry, Jesus sent out twelve disciples to, among other things "cleanse the lepers". These people were important to him.

The point Jesus made was that wherever there is ugliness and evil, cloaked in disease, addictions, hurting relationships, loss of hope, abuse, poverty, lack of faith, bondage to systems or people – it is in those very places Christ's followers are to be found. We are to tell them about Jesus, to bring healing where it is possible, to give hope to the hopeless and be a friend to the friendless, give "beyond our means" of our possessions, and pray for a loving God to respond.

The person who comes to mind who "touched the lepers" of her day and society was Mother Teresa. Listen to her tell her story: "Those who were materially poor or sick can be very wonderful people. One evening we went out and picked up four people from the street. And one of them was in a most terrible condition. I told the sisters: You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks the worse. So I did for her all that my love can do. I put her in a bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand, as she said two words only: 'Thank you' – and she died."

Mother Teresa reflected the loving Jesus who touched the untouchables of his day. It was too late for her to bring physical healing to the woman. But it was not too late to show her God's kind of loving – the very same kind of love God wants us to share – on a daily basis.

Prayer: Jesus, who is the "leper" you want me to touch – on your behalf? Amen.

Questions: 1. Today's "lepers" come in every shape, size, color and location you can think of. Make a list of sick, hurting, hopeless people whom you know desperately need help.
2. Who on the list will you place on your day's agenda to "reach out and touch" before we reach Jerusalem?

Thought: Jesus prayed often. The disciples were more aware of his insistence on spending time with God than anyone else. Having talked about agendas the past few days, I smile as I think of Jesus spending so much time with God – because he had so many agendas!!! Do your agendas drive you to God's presence? Or can you handle your agendas on your own? Or are your agendas disguised distractions that keep you away from God's presence?

Have you ever decided you wanted/needed to pray – and the phone rang? -- or one of the kids wanted something? -- or your spouse asked you a question? -- or your agenda was over-the-top with demands, and there just wasn't enough time in the day? When life is so rushed, what happens when you try to pray? How long does it take to unwind enough to even begin to make sense to anyone, let alone God? Martin Luther said this about trying to pray sensibly: "When I would speak and pray to God by myself, a hundred thousand hindrances at once intervene before I get at it. Then the devil can throw all sorts of reasons for delay in my path; he can block and hinder me on all sides; as a result, I go my way and never think of it again. Let him (or her) who has not experienced this only try it. Resolve to pray earnestly, and no doubt you will see how large an assortment of your own thoughts will rush in on you and distract you, so that you cannot begin aright." My only observation on his comment is that I don't need to blame it on the devil; I can create the problems all by myself.

Teresa of Avila, known in history for her commitment to, and ability to pray, also admitted to shaking the sand in her sixteenth-century hourglass – to make the hour go faster! Do you find it interesting that the one thing, more than any other, that can encourage, sustain, enable and empower us on our journeys – prayer – is filled with very human pitfalls that probably erode, if not erase its power?

As Jesus moved closer to Jerusalem, so grew his need to not make the trip alone. More and more, he needed to be certain that God was with him every step of the way – he didn't have the human strength to do it alone. In a sense, Jesus and God were partners; and good partners who work well with each other, understand each other, and are committed to the same goals will talk – often! Jesus announced a major change in what he was about, both for God, for the Jews, and for all humanity. In those times, the Jews traveled to the temple to worship God, believing God's presence rested there. But in today's verses, when questioned by a Samaritan woman about the proper place for worship, Jesus replied: "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks". Jesus removed God's presence from the temple (which he said would soon be destroyed) and relocated it in a most unlikely place: ordinary people like the Samaritan woman herself.

Yes, we ourselves are God's temple, the Spirit's home. God lives within us. God and I (and you) are partners. Prayer is cooperation that opens the way for God's grace to work. How often do you and your Partner talk? Do you give your Partner priority time? Is your Partnership growing? Don't just go to church to pray. Pray wherever you are. Pray often. Pray with your Partner. Pray out loud.

Prayer: Jesus, challenge me to be a better partner with you. Amen.

Questions: 1. What keeps you from more time with your Partner – in prayer?
2. Which of your recent prayers have been answered as you wanted them to be?

Thought: “...how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?” Do you get everything you ask God to provide? Are your prayers always answered? How do you feel when sincere prayers go unanswered? Once when Jesus was asked to identify the most important rule in life, he quickly responded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” In those words, he summed up what God wants from us. Simply said, our most treasured gift to God is our love – authentic, honest, open and unconditional.

If I love God with all my soul, and God loves me unconditionally, God won't play tricks on me, give me a snake when I ask for fish, or give me a scorpion when I ask for an egg. Consider that sentence in light of the memoirs of Helmut Thielicke, a great German preacher during World War II. He lost his university teaching position for opposing Hitler; he endured humiliating interrogations by the feared Secret Service agents; he was threatened with imprisonment often. As the war came to a close, he walked to his Stuttgart church one day only to find it bombed to rubble. He returned to his home and found it destroyed, too. His heart nearly broke when he found his famished children licking the pictures of food in recipe books. And each week, as best he could, in the midst of the rubble of their former church, he tried to bring a message of hope to a demoralized congregation.

“The one fixed pole in all the bewildering confusion is the faithfulness and dependability of God,” he declared to his congregation. He assured them that God's faithfulness can never falter, and that through the maze of history and the disorder of our personal lives there runs the constant thread of God's purpose.

Remarkable words, would you not agree? What do you say when you face an unending problem, experience a hurtful broken relationship, try to endure in a situation that you can't get out of and struggle internally to survive, and your earnest prayers go unanswered?

Philip Yancey put it this way: “Those of us who follow Jesus believe that God's faithfulness spans the world like a rainbow, with Jesus himself offering one of the best proofs of that faithfulness. Times will come as they did for Thielicke in Stuttgart and Jesus at Gethsemane and Golgatha that test such belief to the limit. When I face my own versions of those times, I cry a prayer of desperation, a thrust in the dark in hopes of regaining trust in the big picture, a renewed glimpse of God's point of view. “

When I don't get what I asked for, who is at fault? God, or me? When I don't get what I want, who is at fault? God, or me? When my health journey is arduous, why won't God fix it when I ask for that? Is that God's fault, or mine? When my kids are addicted, why doesn't God cure them when I ask for that? Is God too busy? After all, didn't Jesus himself tell us to “Ask, and you will receive”? Yes, Jesus did say that; he also said to love God with all your being. Even in the worst of circumstances, keep on loving God --and God will love you through the worst of life's disappointments. Yes, some prayers seem to go unanswered, and a sense of God's love ebbs and flows. Often I sense more mystery than answers. With Paul, I say “now I know in part; then I shall know fully...” --and keep on praying!

Prayer: Jesus, help me to keep trusting and loving – even when my prayers aren't answered. Amen.

Questions: 1. What important prayers have gone unanswered in your life for a long time?
2. How do you feel towards God when things go wrong that you've prayed about?

Thought: We are nearing the half-way point on our walk to the cross with Jesus. He was a busy person focused on teaching, healing, and leading. As well, he was stalked by temple leaders, was becoming a person to be watched by Roman authorities, was an everyday puzzlement to his disciples and close followers, was besieged by needy people wherever he went, and was constantly in conversation with the One who had sent him. What would you say was “driving” Jesus at this point?

Could you be convinced that, at this point, Jesus was a man obsessed? If so, what would you say was his obsession: freeing the Jews from Roman captivity? healing every sick or hurting person in every village? restoring true worship of God in the synagogues? getting through to his rather thick-headed band of followers? helping people grasp what he was saying to them in his parables and teachings?

I would suggest that his primary obsession was “none of the above”. Oh, they were all factors every day of his journey to Jerusalem. However, I truly believe that Jesus was obsessed with his words recorded in today’s Scripture reading. “...God so loved the world...He came...” My mind will always go back to the statement of the woman in India who had heard about God/Jesus for the first time, and who said: “All my life I was going to the temples and offering prayers but never in my life had I heard about such a God, who came to people, and was willing to give them a Kingdom.” That’s just what Jesus was about. That’s what he is about today, too.

But loving people, in the midst of our human condition, is not easily done, then or now. As God knew from the beginning, human pride and sinfulness could only be dealt with one way: God had to come and clean up our mess Himself!

Flora Wuellner, in her book titled *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey*, tells the following story: “I’ll never forget a story I heard from a woman at a retreat several years ago. It has become for me a profound metaphor of God’s incarnation in Jesus, and also of God’s sharing our pain right now, the pain of the world, as well as the pain of each one of us.

The woman told us that she had brought home from the animal shelter a young dog abused by former owners. The dog was especially terrified by water. Perhaps someone had tried to drown him. Eventually, of course, he had to be washed thoroughly, especially after running in thickets, picking up insects and bleeding from thorns. When she put the dog into the tub of water, he screamed, struggled, and scratched in his terror. Her whole heart hurt for him. She could do only one thing. She climbed into the dirty, bloody bathwater with him. Some of the blood in the water came from her own scratches. There she sat in the tub with him, holding him in her arms, stroking him until his panic subsided. Then, while still in the bathwater with him, she began to cleanse him – very gently.”

God knew, from the beginning, that the only way our “mess” could be taken away was to come and do it Himself. Jesus came with an obsession to show us what the love of God really is all about – even if it meant hanging on a cross. This is truly the heart of a loving, caring, responding God.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your total commitment to show us God’s love. Amen.

Questions: 1. What was the hardest thing Jesus had to deal with on a daily basis?
2. Explain to yourself what God’s loving-us-to-the-death means to you today.

Thought: In Jesus' day, a "young man" would have been in the age range of 24 to 40. To be both young and rich was somewhat unusual. Seeking an education in the Greek and Roman worlds of Jesus' day was far different from what we know today. Those who wanted to learn, and who had the financial means to do so, would seek out a teacher they respected, consider his teachings, and become a follower. The question this young man asked Jesus is noted in many other contemporary writings. People who had wealth and possessions wanted to secure a place of status, or if possible, make sure of their "share" or "place" in the coming world, often referred to as the "kingdom of God."
In other words, how can I buy or guarantee my place in the next life?

Jesus reminded him that only God is good, and all he had to do was keep the commandments. Note that none of the commandments mentioned by Jesus are directed towards God – the "vertical" dimension. All are "horizontal" – directed towards other human beings. The young man didn't even wince when Jesus suggested he should "love his neighbor as himself".

Judaism stressed charity heavily; but no Jewish teachers demanded of their followers that everything be given away. There were a few radical Greek teachers who actually asked what Jesus suggested – give everything away. The difference, however, is that those teachers were to be the recipients of what would be given away, whereas Jesus wanted the person to give it all to the poor.

You've probably not heard about them, but at this time the Jews had what were called "charity laws". These laws limited such an amount that a teacher could levy on a learner/disciple to twenty percent. However, keep in mind that this amount could be levied AFTER the tithes (approximately 30%) and the tax load, as well. The charity law was enacted to protect a person from reducing himself to the poverty level.

Can you imagine what would happen in today's world if Jesus would, again, make such a pronouncement? The young man said, "I've done all that. What's left?" "If you want to give it all you've got," Jesus replied, "GO SELL YOUR POSSESSIONS; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then COME FOLLOW ME." (The Message – caps mine)

In a world possessed with madness over acquiring more – of everything – not giving it away, how would Jesus fare with his message today? Is it little wonder that no matter what Jesus said or did, he shocked people!!! Jesus' answer to the young man's question shook him to his very foundations. And what gets very little attention today, if ever, is Jesus' comment that when we get "there" (heaven) each of us will have our own little "bank account" – consisting of all we've given away throughout our journey. I'm sure every reader knows almost exactly how much money he/she has in bank accounts, savings and retirement plans, etc. Do you have any idea how your "heavenly" bank account is doing these days? Putting all you can in God's "saving plan" will reap you dividends far beyond anything you will ever dream about from Wall Street, banks, etc. Do you believe – and trust -- the "banker" up there???

Prayer: Jesus, you challenge us even today with such teachings – help us to understand. Amen.

Questions: 1. Why was the young man so jolted by what Jesus told him? Is money that important?
2. From Jesus' perspective, how much do you think is "enough" for you to have today?

Thought:

The Arithmetic of Poverty

By Appadura (India)

“Decide mother who goes without. Is it Rama, the strongest or Baca, the weakest who may not need it much longer, or perhaps Sita? Who may be expendable? Decide, mother, kill a part of yourself as you resolve the dilemma. Decide, mother -- decide . . . and hate.” Does God get calls like this?

Caller: God, are you there? I’m so hungry. Don’t you care for us?

God: Yes, I care for you.

Caller: My children haven’t eaten for four days now. The last time we ate, we had roots that I was able to dig up. They didn’t help our stomachs much.

God: I sense your desperation. You are really hurting.

Caller: (with urgency) We are desperate. The government gave us some baby formula but it’s gone and there won’t be any more. My wife has no milk left to nurse the baby.

God: Is there anyone who will share with you?

Caller: The few who have anything are keeping it for themselves. Maybe if I was in their shoes, I’d do the same thing. But I’m not, God. I’m hungry! I can’t understand why they keep food for themselves when they know we are so desperate. And another thing, God, I’ve heard it said there is so much food in some places in the world that it goes to waste. How can that be?

God: It was never my intention that the world would be this way. I desire that all members of the human race share with one another.

Caller: So why won’t people share?

God: People are selfish, caring only about themselves. My kingdom will not be that way.

Caller: Is there any hope for my family?

God: The hope is in others who care enough to share.

Caller: Will they?

God: A few will. They are kingdom people, my people, the real people of God. However, as I see the world today....(voice fades away)

Caller: Then there is little hope? So we will all die?

God: Yes, I’m afraid many will die. Those who die in my name will never again be hungry. This probably won’t mean much to you now, (voice grows much louder), but I am a just God. Those who are last will be first in my kingdom. Those who have everything in this world and who don’t share it with the poor and hungry will *never* enter the door of my Kingdom.

Caller: Why are you shouting at me God?

God: I’m sorry. I’m not angry with you, but I’m disappointed in my followers.

Caller: We’re hungry and tired, God. Please do something for us.

God: I’ll try my church again...if only they would believe – and act.

Caller: I’m hungry, God, and I’m afraid.

God: I’m not leaving you alone; I’ll be with you to the end.

Caller: My baby’s crying, God – and I’m hungry.

Prayer: Jesus, open my ears to hear, and my purse to provide hope and help. Amen.

- Questions: 1. What five words first come to mind when you hear the words “world hunger”?
2. What did Jesus mean “...let him give food to those who have none”?

Thought: Jesus suggested giving a drink of water to someone who is thirsty is high in God's expectations for "kingdom" people. Most of you are familiar with CROP Walks, usually carried out in October around our country. I have been a CROP walker for many decades, and count it high on my list of life's priorities. CROP monies are used to help people around the world who have food, water, and other critical needs. Here's a CROP story that tells how significant is a "drink of water."

"The jeep came to a stop in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. Five perspiring Church World Service staff persons stumbled out of the cramped vehicle, glad to have their feet on solid ground. Before long, a small group of villagers emerged from a nearby cornfield.

Mrs. Andrea, a leader of the Water Committee, and other village dignitaries greeted the group and led them to the site of their newly installed well and hand pump. They beamed with pride. Ma-zi-ya-ya is one of the hundreds of villages where wells have been installed recently by the Malawi Christian Service Committee, with financial help from CROP Walks. Jim, one of the staff visitors, questioned them about how their life was before the well. "Where did you used to go to fetch water?" he asked. "To the river," Mrs. Andrea answered. "How far away is the river?" Jim asked. "It's about 1.5 kilometers away," she offered matter of factly. Jim thought of the 10 kilometers that CROP Walkers hike every year. Compared to that, 1.5 kilometers sounded easy.

"That's not a bad distance," Jim commented half aloud to one of the other staffers. The Ma-la-wi guide translated his words to the Well Committee. Mrs. Andrea, a woman in her fifties, stepped forward, her eyes intent on Jim's as she listened to the translator. He became nervous. His comment had not been intended for them. But Mrs. Andrea nodded, and surprisingly, agreed with Jim.

"No", she answered, "it's not too bad, at least not for us grown women. We're stronger and more accustomed to the distance and the load. But in our villages it's both the women and the children who haul the water, and it's a lot harder on the children because they are smaller. "You see", she went on, "a lot of them are sick and malnourished." Jim glanced around at over two dozen dusty and barefooted kids, and what she said was obvious. "Not to mention the fact", she continued, "that the pails of water are heavy; they weigh about 30 to 35 pounds each. And not to mention the fact that the river is downhill from the village, so the little ones have to haul the water uphill." Jim realized Mrs. Andrea's purpose was not to embarrass him, but merely to educate him to their facts of life before the well was dug.

"Not to mention the fact that after all that work of carrying water uphill to the village, the river water is polluted. It's full of guinea worms, amoebas, and other parasites. That means walking another couple of kilometers to get firewood to boil and purify it." As Jim squirmed, she made her final point by saying "Oh yes! I almost forgot to mention the fact that fetching water from the river was quite risky for the children. You see, the river is crocodile infested." Will you join me in a CROP Walk next October? If you can't walk, will you give a gift for water for the thirsty -- give a drink in Jesus' name!

Prayer: Jesus, help me know what's really important in this world. Amen.

Questions: 1. What can you give from your abundance to improve the plight of the hungry and poor?
2. How do you rate yourself in light of today's Scripture verse?

Thought: What is your answer to Jesus' question? You can read the next verses and learn what at least one disciple thought. However, what they answered is not my answer, nor yours. No, every human being has, or will have the opportunity to create her/his own answer to the same question. For each of us, in some way, in some place, at some moment God will ask us this eternal question.

Today, we are half-way to Jerusalem, walking with the Christ who asked the eternal question. It is difficult to slip back in time by removing two thousand years of recorded history, and discover the reality of his world as he walked to the cross. Consider some of the realities of Jesus' day:

- * In most biographies you read today, the death of the person composes less than one-tenth of the content. However, over one-third of the Gospels focus on the climactic last week of Jesus' life. For the writers, death was the central mystery of Jesus.
- * The Jews faithfully waited for, indeed, clamored for their Messiah. Messiahs came, and went. Not one of them "delivered the goods". When Jesus' day came to ride into Jerusalem, he did so riding on the back of a young donkey. Note he was not forced to do this – he chose to do so. Jewish leaders couldn't believe their eyes. Roman soldiers laughed at him.
- * The most sophisticated, detailed, demanding religious system of the time (Judaism) was then pitted against a fellow riding on a donkey!!! Who do you think would win?
- * The most powerful political empire of the time, Rome, was pitted against a solitary figure riding on a donkey. Who would win?
 - His rag-tag band of followers (you and I were there!) are not sure what he's doing, are worried about what's ahead of him/them, and follow at some distance from him.
 - Every year, Jews paused as a nation to remember God's great feat of deliverance from Egypt. They celebrated the Passover, that time when their all-powerful God dealt a blow to the ruling powers, and brought them out of their captivity. Since God had done it once, they prayed for God to do it again. They were, right then, traveling by the thousands towards Jerusalem. But God – a donkey???
 - Jesus cried as he approached Jerusalem. He knew how easily a mob could turn.
 - The religious authorities resented Jesus. The Roman legions, brought in to control the festival crowds, kept an eye on what was happening, and laughed about it, too.

Two thousand years later, who is Jesus Christ? Since the year he was crucified and ascended, Jesus is the one "god" of history that historians still don't know what to do with. Why? Because, here and there, in surprising and unexpected circumstances, Jesus (God's Spirit) still transforms lives, performs miracles, helps to carry people's burdens, and genuinely loves every last soul on the planet. At the same time, evil is growing so fast and so big that one can only wonder what the future holds. As you continue the last half of our walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, who do you say he is – today?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to better answer the question you asked so long ago. Amen.

Questions: 1. Who do you say Jesus is – today?
2. Ponder how God could have redeemed lost humanity, without resorting to a cross.

Thought: Almost three years ago, among the first things Jesus talked with his closest friends about was the subject of prayer. As you reflect on the four Gospel accounts, how many times do you recall the disciples praying? What you probably remember most is when they were asked to pray, and fell asleep!

“Dear Jesus, how desperately I need to learn to pray. And yet when I am honest, I know that I often do not even want to pray.

I am distracted!

I am stubborn!

I am self-centered!

In your mercy, Jesus, bring my ‘want-er’ more in line with my ‘need-er’ so that I can come to want what I need.

In your name, and for your sake, I pray. Amen”

So said Richard Foster in his book *Prayer*. Jesus encouraged the disciples, and all of his followers to master the discipline called praying. Why? Because God is in love with us, wants to listen to us, wants to respond to us, wants to communicate with us. Note the prophet Elijah didn’t encounter God in the mighty wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire – but in the still, small voice (I Kings 9: 9-13).

Let’s change the wording a bit. Neither will we encounter God via cellphones, TV, Ipods, entertainment ventures, automobiles, agendas, profit-making, working, non-working, unending relationships, you-name-them. In our so-called modern world, theologian Daniel Hawk may have got it right: “The basic human problem is that everyone believes there is a God and I am it.”

Perhaps it’s all about attitude. In societies that worship things, possessions, wealth, and entertainment, why would we need God? After all, we have all that we can possibly want – we don’t need a God, too. Maybe that’s why prayer doesn’t stand much of a chance today – with most. Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby chose one word as the best summary of the heart attitude that God accepts as prayer: *helplessness!* “Whether it takes the form of words or not, does not mean anything to God, only to ourselves. Only he/she who is helpless can truly pray.”

This goes against the grain, doesn’t it, because from birth we are taught to be, if nothing else, self-reliant? In the Roman empire, humility was despised as the worst of all sicknesses! That’s why Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was seen as being utterly ridiculous!

Jesus tried to tell them/us that a healthy, meaningful relationship with God demands listening and sharing – by both parties. God is always ready and willing – what about us? We live worried, overfilled lives, and the confusion derived from such makes hearing the “still, small voice” most difficult, if not impossible. Jesus suggested we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear. Jesus was “all ear”. He listened often. He shared often. That is true prayer – being all ear to God—specially when Jerusalem is on the horizon!

Prayer: Jesus, in a communication age, help me learn to communicate better with my God. Amen.

Questions: 1. In each 24 hour day, how many minutes do you spend talking to God?
2. In each 24 hour day, how many minutes do you spend listening to God?

Thought: In today's words, this friend so rudely awakened basically tells the pleading man "Get lost!" But this fellow is not so easily put off. He keeps banging on the door, calling him, leaving messages on his answering machine, bugging his cell phone, texting him messages, in short, making a general nuisance of himself until finally the man, though he cares little about the dilemma of his friend who needs to be a host, says to himself, "Though I care nothing about this guy's predicament, and though I think he's a pain in the neck to be bothering me this way in the middle of the night, I'll give him what he wants to get him out of my hair so I can get back to sleep!" What Jesus is saying is that we ought to "bang on God's door" at noon or midnight just like the fellow in the parable.

It's a fact that some folks find this a rather disturbing parable. What are we to take from the story? That God is like that sulky friend at midnight, the man who requires constant banging on his door in order ever to get his attention? Or was Jesus making another point? Can we agree that prayer is more than the words that we say to God? Prayer is all that we do and say in our relationship with God. In fact, we can say that our relationship with God is prayer. So this is not so much a story about the right technique in prayer, but our side of a right relationship with God. God, in Jesus Christ, has already done all that needs to be done to fulfill God's part in the relationship. Walking towards Jerusalem was part of that. God sent Jesus to us, who taught us, healed, lived among us, suffered for us, and died, then rose again from the dead. He came back to us and he forgave us. That is God's part of the deal.

But what is our part of the deal? Jesus was telling us that we need to be PERSISTENT!!! Yet a lot of people say such things as:

- God is distant from me;
- When they pray, they feel like they are just talking to themselves;
- They hear stories of God impacting people's lives, but these stories seem like fairy tales;
- God has never said or done anything to them;
- If there was a God, the world wouldn't be the way it is;
- If there was a God, they'd be rich, healthy, young, successful, happy.

Could it be that God is not distant from them, but the other way around? Do they ever pray, ever read the Bible, ever worship God -- alone or with others -- ever seek God's presence in their lives?

Annie Dillard said "God does not demand that we give up our personal dignity, that we throw in our lot with random people, that we lose ourselves and turn from all that is not God. God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars. It is a life with God that demands these things. You do not have to do these things, not at all. God does not, I regret to report, give a hoot. You do not have to do these things -- unless you want to know God. They work on you, not on him. You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."

I dare you to become a pest with God. Jesus would love you if you do.

Prayer: Jesus, help me be as persistent with God, as you were to get to Jerusalem. Amen.

Questions: 1. Recall times when you banged on God's door, again and again.
2. For whom, or for what should you be banging on God's door about today?

Thought: Jesus was surrounded by “nobodies”. Men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around him, listening intently to everything he had to say. The so-called “religious” folks were off to the side, disgusted with him. So Jesus gave them today’s parable – about a lost sheep.

Upon hearing the story, people tend to focus on that poor, lost sheep. The story has a happy ending when it is found. But that’s not the only point of the story. Yes, Jesus is suggesting that the worst of us, those in the most dire straits, those who are cheats, addicted, unloving, dishonest, need to be “found”. But another point of the parable is that God wants EVERYONE – the good, the bad, and those in-between – to enjoy God’s reign, God’s kingdom.

Does Jesus really know how strange, mixed-up, and weird a lot of people really are? Have you heard about the woman who plugged her power cord strip into itself, and then complained because nothing worked? Have you met the guy who called his local township office and asked for the removal of the “Deer Crossing” sign on a local road near his house. Why? “Too many deer are being hit by cars there, and I don’t want them to cross there anymore – so please move the sign.” Or the couple who went to pick up their car at the dealership. They were told the keys were locked inside. They saw a fellow working feverishly on the driver’s door, so went and stood on the other side of the car. Out of curiosity, they tried the door, and it opened. They hollered over to the mechanic and said “This side’s open”. He replied “Yeah, I know, I already got that side.”

These, and many others without humor, are today’s lost sheep. These are the people who don’t know about God’s love, or God’s love for lost sheep. Whether you live in South, Central or North America, there are lost sheep everywhere. Whether you live in Europe, Africa or Asia, there are lost sheep in every village, town, and city. The difference between today’s Christians, and the shepherd in Jesus’ story is that the shepherd knew, by name, the sheep that was missing. He knew who had to be found. The lost sheep had a history and an identity. That’s the difference between Jesus’ shepherd of the parable, and the people of God today. We don’t have lists!!! We don’t have names!!!

You ask what kind of a list? Lost sheep prospect lists. Kingdom of God prospect lists. Reign of God prospect lists. Hurting families prospect lists. Addiction prospect lists. Troubled teens prospect lists. Hungry and homeless people prospect lists. Handicapped people prospect lists. Out-of-work prospect lists. People without hope prospect lists. Lonely people prospect lists. You can add to the list.

There are two types of lists. First, Jesus expects his followers to be shepherds, and one task of a shepherd is to go after lost sheep. EVERY person who names the name of Jesus should have her/his own prospect list. And every church should have its own prospect list. So as you walk with Jesus, would you put the name of a lost sheep on your own prospect list? _____

First, pray for that “sheep”; then ask God to open a door for you to introduce that sheep – in some way – to a loving, caring God. At the same time, check out your own church’s prospect lists.

Prayer: Jesus, give me a passion for one person, “my” lost sheep to find for your kingdom. Amen.

Questions: 1. What would it take for you to invite a “lost sheep” to hear about God’s love?
2. Why do Christians, and their churches, not go looking for “lost sheep” today?

Thought: For a moment, reflect on your life journey to date, and consider these two questions. First, when did you persist most with God on behalf of yourself or another person, refusing to let the situation go unanswered (i.e., pounding on a friend's door at midnight)? Second, when did you invest the most of yourself to help someone who was lost, desperate, helpless, hopeless (i.e., searching for a lost sheep)? What did these efforts cost? In other words, when have you ever gone completely out of your way for another person who was in need of God's presence and response?

Today's Scripture tells yet another story of persistence. Capernaum was a small fishing village located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, population about 1,500. Jesus selected Capernaum as his base of operations after he left Nazareth. It was also the home of Peter, Andrew, James and John, as well as the tax collector Matthew. Jesus taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath. A number of miracles are reported from his time in Capernaum.

This is the story of four very persistent, believing friends. Excavation tells us that the largest homes at the time of Jesus were no longer than 18', and less in width. It is estimated that no more than 50 people could have crowded into the home, and the door was blocked by a crowd outside.

The walls were constructed with basalt blocks (hard, volcanic rock) and reinforced with stone and mud. Most homes had a courtyard, as well as a grain mill and a set of stone stairs that led to the roof. Homes did not have second stories, due to the type of construction. The roof was constructed of light wooden beams, and thatch mixed with mud filled all the open spaces.

Do not allow yourself to picture these four fellows bringing the paralytic to the house on a stretcher with two long poles! No, he was on a mat or pallet, which was his own bed at home. To carry someone with a degree of weight wasn't easy, and it took a lot of working together to keep the fellow level, especially as they tried to get him up the stone stairway. My guess is they had worked up quite a sweat by the time they got to the roof.

Then came the mess. Can you imagine what this home looked like when they finally pulled the thatch apart, dried mud falling everywhere, dust probably floating around, even on Jesus? And as they worked to get him through the hole, my guess is they had some help below from others, lest they drop him and he would end up worse than he already was.

As you walk to Jerusalem, do you have as much faith as those four fellows did? Do you know anyone who believes so entirely in what Jesus can do for those in need today? Have you ever, in your own life journey, exhibited the persistent faith that these four fellows did that day? Have you had faith the size of a mustard seed, and moved a mountain along the way for someone else, or perhaps even for yourself? I've also wondered who cleaned up the mess. Do you suppose the four friends helped to not only clean up the mess, but repaired the roof they had damaged? I allow myself to think that, and give thanks for people who give everything they have – because they believe Jesus can do anything.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for responding to the persistent friends. Make me persistent, too. Amen.

Questions: 1. Of all the Christians you know, who is most persistent in believing God?
2. What will it take for you to be more persistent on behalf of God?

Thought: Of all of Jesus's stories, this is the one that hurts most of all. Why? Because it sneaks into our pocketbooks!

Have you ever given away your "last dime"? Or, if you were down to your last dime, would you be willing to give it away? Have you ever, without any credit cards, savings accounts, ATM access, stocks or bonds, given away a week's salary? Most of those listening to Jesus that day had little of this world's goods in their pockets; a few who listened had much. Where do you fit into today's story?

I have visited the country of Haiti a number of times. I always came away totally shocked at the poverty rampant in that country, now made even worse by the devastating earthquake of '09 followed by the cholera epidemic. At the same time, I have marveled over the faith of those who follow Jesus in that country.

One day, in a remote rural setting, a group of teenagers and I were sitting in a structure they called their church. We were there as a group working at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Limbe. On this day, we had been invited to join with this very rural and poor congregation for worship. We waded the same river 12 times before we reached our destination. As their guests, they insisted we sit on crude benches in the front of the structure. There were no windows, no walls; the roof was made of corrugated metal – and there were many holes in the deteriorating metal roof.

But oh, could these Haitian Christians sing! And could they pray. Although we couldn't understand the words at all, the meaning was most clear in the expressions on their faces, the gestures of their arms and bodies, their hands lifted high in adoration and praise.

Then it came time for the offering. We were the last to receive the baskets, since they began at the back row and moved to the front. We were surprised to see no money at all in the baskets. We were the only ones to put money in the baskets. What we did see was rice, beans and buttons. Like the widow in Jesus' story, they loved him so much that, although many were obviously living at a starvation level, they were willing to give of their meager food supply – and buttons. Buttons were items they hoped to sell or barter for food.

Jesus said "All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford – she gave her all." (The Message) Have you ever wondered what this woman ate that next week? Because she lived a frugal life, perhaps she had a bit of extra food stored away. Maybe she didn't. You know, when it comes to giving, it wasn't the amount then, and it isn't the amount now.

Jesus knew what counts in God's sight. He knew that with God, it's the condition of the heart that counts, not the condition of the pocketbook. Does your pocketbook today reflect your heart – in God's sight?

Prayer: Jesus, forgive me for my obsession with getting – and keeping; please teach me how to truly give, both of material things, and myself. Amen.

Questions:

1. Have you ever, or do you often, give away more than you feel you should?
2. How do you determine the amount of time, money, or self to give away?

Thought: How much do you love the Jesus with whom you are walking to Jerusalem these forty-six days? Most of us have never had to choose between Jesus and death. In verse 33, Jesus suggested that for some, the day would come when they would have to choose.

After Jesus' ascension, history has recorded for us what happened to many who chose to follow Jesus. Lyons was the Roman capital of Gaul, and one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. Less than a hundred years after Jesus' ascension, a large number of Christians had migrated to Lyons and other Gallic towns from Asia Minor. Because they were Christians, they were prohibited from appearing in public places. Next came abuse from many sources, including trying to earn a living. Eventually the Christians of Lyons were arrested and imprisoned – only because they followed Jesus.

In 177 AD, mob "justice" took over, and forty-eight Christians died either in prison or in the arena. Blandina, a Christian slave girl, is typical of the incredible suffering endured by Christians. She and others were interrogated by the provincial governor. Those who professed to being followers of Christ, and chose not to renounce their faith were horribly tortured and condemned to the beasts of the amphitheater. They were "being made all day long a spectacle to the world in place of the gladiatorial contest in its many forms" (*Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius). Blandina was the last to die. A letter from the early church states "Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn until evening were worn out and exhausted, and themselves confessed defeat from lack of aught else to do to her; they marveled that the breath still remained in a body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds, and they testified that a single form of torture was sufficient to render life extinct, let alone such and so many."

Blandina refused to give up her faith, and finally she was returned to the prison where she encouraged the other prisoners to "stand firm in their faith". Several days later, they took her back to the arena, tied her to a cross and let loose wild "beasts" on her. The letter says "...others who were being tortured gained strength by looking at Blandina and hearing her prayers, for they saw in her the image of the Christ who had suffered for them all." The crowds and authorities watched in shock as the wild animals refused to touch Blandina. Not knowing what else to do, she was taken down from her cross, and once again returned to the prison. Later she was brought back to the arena, where she was beaten, put on a red-hot iron grill, ensnared in a net, and trampled and gored to death by a bull.

Blandina and all the others who died were left unburied, guarded by soldiers. After six days, the remains were burnt and their ashes cast into the Rhone. One of the Christian beliefs was that they would be in heaven with Jesus after death; the hatred against Christians was so great that they believed by destroying the body totally, they would prevent any possibility of life after death. We shudder at such treatment for those who followed Jesus, the Christ. We marvel that so many of them were true to their faith to their last breath. Not all were faithful, however, for history records the dilemma of the church in dealing with those who had recanted their faith and left the church, only to later return and ask for forgiveness.

Prayer: Jesus, thanks be to God for those throughout history who wouldn't give up on you. Amen.

Questions: 1. Rate your depth of faith in Jesus with that of Blandina's.
2. What have you given up, suffered, endured because you are a Christian?

Thought: Have you pondered the mix of people who were, on a daily basis, with or around Jesus? What a picture it would be if we had one to view today. We'd find the poorest of the poor, the richest of the rich, and those anywhere in between. Some were healthy; some were sick. Some were old; some were young; some were children. Some lived in villages; some lived in outer, rural areas. Jesus included even the hated Samaritans in his gatherings. Other ethnicities were involved, also.

In the 1960's, Martin Luther King, Jr. (quoting Billy Graham) used to say that 11:00 AM on Sunday was the most segregated hour in America. It is generally true in America today. Remember the children's song we used to sing: "...red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world". For most churches, however, the rule of thumb has been "...but don't mix the colors."

Not many years after Jesus left the scene, from the beginning, the early churches consisted of an absolutely unheard of mixture of people: Jew and Greek; rich and poor; slave and free; women and men. Paul said "the old labels we once used to identify ourselves – labels like Jew and Greek, slave and free – are no longer useful. For in the One Spirit we were baptized into one body!" The church is expected (by God!) to be a place where distinctions of race, culture, education, financial status and class are left behind. A church that is working diligently to become that kind of church is First Baptist, Cleveland, Ohio (Dr. Martin Rolfs-Massaglia).

Over the last decade, the church has moved from being predominantly a euro-American congregation (located in a very racially mixed part of the city), to an ever growing mix of African-American, Asian, and euro-American. If you were to ask most of the members of the congregation, they would tell you that the racial diversity they now experience is one of their main reasons for attending the church.

But, as you might guess, such assimilation doesn't just happen. The church is working intentionally at the formation of interracial and intergenerational small groups as the core units for fellowship and study. The nominating committee of the church is tasked with ensuring that the multiculturalism in the church is authentic, not token. Worship planners are working hard to ensure that the many voices represented in the congregation are heard in the congregational singing and in the music of the choir and praise team. Last summer, they launched a major event held outside on the church lawn that celebrated racial and ethnic diversity and peace.

And no, it hasn't always been an easy thing to do. Some folks chose to leave First Baptist to go to another church where they could be with "their kind". Perhaps we should remember the first part of the Christmas story – often. How unbelievably different were the first visitors to Jesus' manger crib. The shepherds were the first: dirty, unlearned, and poor; they came because God invited them to come!!! Wouldn't it be true today that as we form deepening relationships with people in the church who come from very different cultures and experiences from our own – we lay the ground work for creating the kingdom of God – on earth, as it is in heaven?

Prayer: Jesus, love us all, no matter what our color, status, sex or occupation. Amen.

Questions: 1. What feelings stir within you as you contemplate an all-inclusive church family?
2. In what ways is your church "color blind"? In what ways are you?

Thought: As Jesus moved closer to the cross, those who would be his eventual accusers pressed him with questions to trick or test him. As we all know, there are the original Ten Commandments. Which one is Number One for you?

Jesus really threw them a curve; and that curve entangles each of us today in one way or another. First, Jesus suggested we should love God with heart, soul and mind – even on bad days -- even on the days when there are no answers to our prayers -- even on days when the sun doesn't shine -- even when we've lost all hope -- even when we've lost our health, our dreams, or the person who means the most to us -- even when we can't find a job -- even when we hurt, and no one notices.

The second "greatest" commandment was even more astounding to those who listened: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Really, Jesus? You don't know who my neighbors are. You mean I'm supposed to actually "love" that guy who cut me off at the traffic light this morning? You mean I'm supposed to "love" my boss, who is creating hell for me at work? You mean I have to "love" my neighbor whose kid puts my kid down every chance he gets? You mean I have to "love" people I can't even understand?

Bob Snyder, M.D., wrote a book titled *Lessons Learned on the Journey*. When sports fans are together, their passion is sports. When medical folks get together, their passion is medical talk. Talk quickly gravitates towards shared interests. Put people together who share a common passion, and talk will quickly steer in that direction. "Yet when followers of Christ get together, what is the focus of the discussion? I am afraid that conversations about our passion for Christ are not as common as I wish. However, I have one friend who always engages me in five questions to measure my passions. They are:

- How are you loving God?
- How are you loving Pamela? (his wife)
- How are you loving your daughters?
- How are you loving your colleagues?
- How are you loving your friends?

This friend always focuses his questions on the two great commands of Jesus -- to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Although there have been times when I dreaded answering his questions, I appreciate how he helped keep my priorities in the right places." Reflect for a moment on your conversations with others. Do you find any trace at all of joyfully recounting the goodness and mercy of a loving God? If a stranger listened to our conversations, would he/she be able to identify our passion for the Christ?

Prayer: Jesus, first help me learn how to love God on my worst days; and then help me learn to love just one person I don't like, or someone who has hurt me or one of mine -- just one -- help me begin to keep your commandments. Amen.

Questions: 1. Of all the possibilities, who is Number One on your "love list"?
2. Which "neighbor" (co-worker, relative, etc.) is most difficult for you to love? What can you do about it?

Thought: Today's verses need a bit of explanation in order to understand what actually happened to the disciples. Jesus' prediction of crucifixion may not sound harsh to us today, due to our familiarity with the story. But it was most jarring and upsetting to the disciples. Inhabitants of the Roman Empire, especially in places like Jewish Palestine, saw crucifixion as the most cruel, painful, and degrading form of common criminal execution.

In these verses, Matthew alone draws attention to Jesus' knowledge of the connection between the Passover and his death. The Passover was the major Jewish festival. It was an annual commemoration of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, with all that this implied for Israel becoming a nation with its own land, and a source of blessing to the world.

The private meeting of the priests and elders to plot the execution of Jesus who was not yet convicted certainly violated Jewish law. The fear of a riot at the festival was entirely reasonable. Under the crowded conditions at such festivals, riots were more likely than at any other time, and hundreds of people had been trampled to death in tumults at previous festivals. Both Roman and Jewish leaders were on high alert to deal with "Messianic pretenders" in as effective way as possible – while at the same time making every effort not to incite the crowds gathered for the festive occasions.

Jesus was not the first Jew to claim he was the long-awaited Messiah. But Jesus was the first of the list of "messiahs" who suggested we should "turn the other cheek" when confronted by adversaries. He even suggested we should "love our enemies". Another suggestion he made was that "we should love our neighbor as ourselves". "Do to others as you want them to do to you", he said. "Give away your possessions, and follow me" – how strange a teaching to all who heard. "Don't store up treasures on earth – but instead, work on treasures for heaven" went against the grain of both Roman and Jewish value systems. His teachings were so much the opposite of all who had claimed messiah status before him that neither Roman or Jewish leaders were sure what should be done with him. The Romans saw him as a curiosity; the Jewish leaders saw him as a threat to their establishment.

Jesus was popular among the common people. He was the "enemy" to Jewish leaders. He was a "suspicious character" to the Romans, who could easily and quickly dispose of him if it was their choice. Much of today's world has no label for him at all, since they know little about him or his teachings, and have no time or interest in pursuing him.

These verses are shared now as we approach the final days before the cross. Perhaps they will better help us understand the tremendous stress, strain, unfairness and political trickery in which not only was Jesus surrounded, so, too were his disciples. Ponder the emotional, mental and psychological pressures Jesus and his band of followers openly had to deal with on a daily, if not hourly basis. Days of this kind of pain and suffering were to be followed by the actual physical suffering. Perhaps we can appreciate a little more the tremendous sacrifice Jesus made on behalf of you and me – and all the world.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for all you endured – because you love us so much. Amen.

Questions: 1. Could I have said "Father, forgive them", in light of the above facts?
2. What would you have said or done when he announced he would be crucified?

Thought: Jenny took these verses at face value. Philip Yancey shared her first-person story in his book *Prayer – Does It Make Any Difference?*

“My father drank way too much, and still does. Mom spent most of my childhood depressed, and so I grew up with an emptiness deep in my belly. I wanted somebody to protect me, nurture me, and want me around. I wanted somebody to love me, and it wasn’t going to happen at my house. So I went to church with a hope that maybe something was there. My dad would take us to church – the one time when he was never drinking. And I soon found it was more than just a sober Dad that I was encountering in church.

One Saturday afternoon I stood in the back of the church and looked up at the cross and it dawned on me that if Jesus died for me then he must love me. My life began to change at ten years old when I found God and he found me.

Now my continuing struggle is that I am single and don’t really want to be. Singleness is an awkward thing to talk about, especially in a culture like the church that’s always promoting family and marriage. *What’s wrong with her?* people think. *Is she gay? Is she too picky? Maybe she’s afraid of commitment. Oh, the poor thing.*

The song “Enough” by Chris Tomlin is cast as a prayer: ‘All of you is more than enough for all of me. You satisfy every thirst and every need. Jesus, you are more than enough.’ The Scriptures agree, promising that Christ fills everything in every way: ‘My God will supply all your needs, according to his riches in Christ Jesus.’ God and I have an ongoing argument about those passages. After all, if you’re not married you have to find someone to fight with!

The fight goes like this: ‘God, if you are really more than enough, then why don’t you just take care of my problem?’ God doesn’t answer, and the fight goes on. ‘Okay, if you’re really enough, then why is it harder today than it was twelve months ago to be single? Why does it get harder and not easier?’ And God still doesn’t answer, and the fight goes on and on.

The truth is, 49% of the time God isn’t enough. It hurts. It is hard to drive home alone all the time. But 51 percent of the time God is enough. Especially when I rely on others in the body of Christ – and the loving families who have ‘adopted’ me – to fill that emptiness deep inside me. Meanwhile, we keep fighting, God and I.”

When was the last time you had a fight with God? Or, aren’t your prayer concerns big enough, serious enough, critical enough to merit God’s time or your own? Abraham approached God at first in fear and trembling. To his surprise, he found out God wanted him to stop groveling, and start arguing. Do you expect a lot from God; or is a little bit O.K.? After all, ask, and you will receive; and if you don’t, start arguing with God.

Prayer: Jesus, help us take seriously what you told us so long ago on your way to Jerusalem. Amen.

Questions: 1. How serious are you when you talk with God? Is what you pray about very important?
2. What have you ever argued with God about? If nothing, why not?

Day Thirty Four

Monday, March 24, 2012

Thought: Have you ever wrestled with God? Some people have. One who wrestled with life and God was Paul Young, author of *The Shack*. Reflect on your own journey as you read about his.

“Perhaps it was a nudge of grace, but I finally decided I had to face Kim, even if the anger in her voice terrified me. All the secrets had to come out, all those things that had happened to me so long ago yet still seemed too much a part of the present, my behaviors and addictions I could never talk about.

The trip to my office was one of the longest of my life. I pulled into the parking lot and slunk out of the car. I pushed open the door. The place was a shambles. Files thrown on the floor, drawers open, paperclips and pens dumped on the carpet, memos ripped off my bulletin board. In the middle of it all sat Kim at my computer. She knew I was having an affair with one of her best friends. All the emails between us were there for anyone to find. The guilty, they say, seek punishment.

‘How could you? How could you betray me like this?’ Kim shouted. I couldn’t meet her scorching gaze. Pathetically, I promised that I would end it right away, that I’d never let it happen again. ‘Why should I believe you?’ Why indeed? I didn’t even trust myself. I did make one pledge: ‘I don’t want to be like this, Kim. I love you. I’ll do anything to keep you. I’ll get counseling. Secrets have been killing me all my life and if we are going to do this, I can’t have any more secrets.’

Kim slammed the door as she left. All my life I’d heard people say God loved us – that God loved me – but I’d never really believed it. How could I? I didn’t love myself. What could God love about me, especially now? Kim wouldn’t talk to me. I started seeing a therapist two or three times a week.

You see, my parents were missionaries to a primitive people and in those days missionary children were only allowed to be with their parents until they reached school age. At six I was sent to a boarding school. Sexual abuse that had already been occurring at the hands of the tribe since I was four now continued at the missionary school. I was terrorized, brutalized, dehumanized.

At night, at home, after the children had gone to bed, I would tell Kim what I had told the therapist, the horrible stuff I had been running away from for more than 30 years. She would listen, but not respond. I began to despair. I began to be angry – with God. Where were the people who should have protected me as a child? Where was God? Didn’t anyone care at all? One day I went to an old barn and found a pile of fallen wormy apples. I flung them against the barn, watching them smash and explode, until I had no rage left. I picked up a seed, and wished I could find a seed of hope. ‘Are you there anymore, God?’ I wondered.

Later I confessed to a family friend I had a plan to commit suicide in Mexico. I was done, exhausted, finished. She said quietly, ‘Paul, there is a seed.’ I thought ‘A seed can grow’. What God could do for a seed, he could do for me. Healing is a process, and it took 11 years of hard work to get right with God, right with Kim, right with myself, right with my family. Kim and I had long, long conversations about how God had reached me when I had completely bottomed out. Then one day she said ‘Why don’t you write down what you’ve learned as a gift for the kids?’ And the book *The Shack* was born. It’s a book about love and forgiveness, the liberation of the soul through openness and grace.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving us even when we’ve hit the bottom. Amen.

Questions: 1. Remember the last time God lifted you out of a quagmire.

2. What secrets lie hidden in your past, that still impact your life for Jesus today?

Thought: Mother Teresa told this story: "Once a beggar came to me and said: 'Everybody is giving you something. I also want to give you something.' And he offered me a ten-paisa coin. If I accepted the money, he would go hungry, but if I didn't, he would be unhappy. I accepted it. And I felt within me, that his gift was greater than the Nobel Prize they gave me because he gave all that he had. I could see in his face the joy of giving."

Today's verse from Mark is, first, about giving. What she gave is not the point. The key to this story is that "she gave" without asking any questions, without any help, without any hesitation, and without any fear. Even if it was going to be perceived as a wrong thing to do – she gave.

Consider the story of Joe Prime. In his first week as pastor at Trinity Methodist Church in El Paso, Texas, Bob Goodrich received a thick envelope via the mail. Inside were seven little envelopes, each containing seventy-five cents. On each envelope was written "My Tithe". An attached note said: "Dear Pastor, I am no longer able to attend church because of poor health, but here is my tithe." Signed: Joe Prime.

Joe was a victim of tuberculosis. He lived in a little lean-to shack in back of a big house in a poor section of town. His pension was \$7.50 a week. He was able to stay there because a Christian nurse came each morning to prepare him two meals for the day. The pastor went to visit Joe, and said he felt as if he was in the presence of royalty.

At Christmas, a serviceman sent a check for \$100 to the church, asking that \$50 go to the church, and \$50 to a needy person. Pastor Bob immediately took the money to Joe Prime. The old fellow's face lit up, and tears began to flow. "Pastor, you don't know how happy this makes me," he said. "Every year at Christmas, our church has two offerings, one for the orphanage and one for missions. I never have any money to give. This year, I'm giving \$25 to the orphanage, and \$25 to mission".
But Brother Joe," said Pastor Bob, "this is for you – not to give away."

Joe said "The greatest joy I could have this Christmas is to be able to give these two gifts." The gifts were made.

The very act of giving is precious in God's sight. It isn't so much what is given -- it is the act of giving itself – as the woman gave her gift to Jesus that night in Simon's home. Her anointing of Jesus indicated the depth of her love – love put into action so that everyone could see. She was determined that those present would not have a shadow of a doubt about her feelings toward this man, whether he was the Messiah, whether he was God, whether he was human – or some strange combination of all three. She didn't have all the answers, but it didn't prevent her from giving.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to understand that God deeply loves every person who gives – of self, or possessions, even as you gave for me. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what new way(s) can I give of myself or my possessions?
2. Who in my regular life contacts needs to receive something that I can give to him/her?

Thought: As Jesus moved closer and closer to Jerusalem, he did so at this precise time because of an event that occurred 3,500 years earlier. It was/is called The Passover. Within a matter of days, Jews would be celebrating the Feast of the Passover in Jerusalem. Passover is a Jewish holiday and festival that commemorates the story of the Exodus, in which the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Passover begins on the 15th day of the spring month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar.

The commandment to keep Passover is recorded in Leviticus 23:5. The tenth plague upon the Egyptians was the slaughter of the first-born. The Israelites were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spring lamb, and on seeing this, the spirit of the Lord passed over those houses. When Pharaoh freed the Israelites, they left in such a hurry that they could not wait for the bread dough to rise (leaven). As a result, for the duration of Passover (seven or eight days), no leavened bread was/is eaten.

According to Exodus 12: 14, God required three symbolic foods to be eaten that Passover night: lamb; matzah (unleavened bread); and bitter herbs (called “maror” in Hebrew). On the 10th day of Nisan, each Jewish family was to select a year-old lamb without blemish from the flock, and keep it until the 14th day of the month (Ex. 12:3). Each family was to become personally attached to their lamb, so it would no longer be just an ordinary lamb but their very own pet (v 5). This would deeply impress upon them the costly nature of the sacrifice – an innocent lamb was to die in their place. The lamb was to be killed the night of the 14th, roasted without the removal of its internal organs, and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Any of the meat that was left over to the next day could not be eaten, but was to be burned. The sacrifices could only be performed in a specific place prescribed by God (for Judaism, Jerusalem, and for Samaritans, Mt. Gerizim).

Non-Jews are often confused about the term “Passover”, because it is celebrated each year. It is important to remember, however, there was only one Passover in history. All Passover celebrations since that time have been memorials to that first event in Egypt. It took over 3,000 years before Jews began to utilize a traditionalized Passover service. The first such services began to appear about 200 years before Jesus’ time. It was called the Seder, from the Hebrew word meaning “order”. It remains much the same today as it was in Jesus’ time.

Can you begin to imagine Jesus’ feelings as he moved to that Upper Room to partake in the meal with his disciples, including the one who would betray him, and mark him as God’s designated sacrificial lamb? What was different 3,500 years later from the first Passover? In Egypt, each family had to provide their own lamb to be killed – this time, God provided the “lamb without blemish or spot”. Somehow, the unnamed woman of yesterday’s reading sensed something different about Jesus, different about this Passover, different about God’s designated Messiah. So she anointed Jesus, and as the oil flowed over him, he sensed a significant feeling of appreciation for what the woman was doing. At the same time, he surely sensed the call of sacrifice, the call of the cross, the call of dying. Very, very mixed emotions, to put it mildly.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your willingness to be the “Lamb of God” – our sacrifice. Amen.

Questions: 1. What do you think were Jesus’ feelings at the Passover Meal with the disciples?
2. What do you feel when you take the “bread” and the “cup” into your life?

Thought: If you were just a few hours from a betrayal, trial and a cross, what kind of prayer would you pray? "God, get me out of this mess" might be a good place to begin. As you read today's verses, what did you find Jesus praying for? You find him discussing with God his role and work as "God-in-the-flesh". Then, just hours from the cross, he asks God to "glorify him". What do you think he expected God to do? Then, in the same breath, he says he is going to glorify God – on that same cross.

Reflect on the past three years of Jesus' teaching. He talked, again and again, about a kingdom, his kingdom, God's kingdom. In spite of the fact he had no army, no weapons, no money or wealth, no political ties, no magic to use, no religious affiliations, he asked God to "glorify him", and he would do the same in return.

Who is this Jesus? Tell me, my friend, what you tell others about Jesus. Do you tell them the truth about Jesus, that he, on a daily basis, toppled cultural traditions and mores of his time? Do you dare to tell them who he thought he was – that not only was he the Son of God, but he was God-in-the-flesh? Is it any wonder that the disciples, as they approached that last meal and night, could not have told you who Jesus was/is, after spending three years with him? How could anyone believe the Nazarene, then, or now? It would almost seem as if we need faith a lot bigger than a mustard seed!!!

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke U. was asked by a student if she had to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a Christian. "No," said Willimon, "you don't." He went on: "But if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there's no telling what we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we'll try to persuade you that the meek will inherit the earth, that it is better to give than to receive, that your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, that it's not nations or empires, not even the United States, but God who rules the world. We start you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, then work you up to even more outrageous assertions."

How was Jesus' prayer answered. He asked God to "glorify him". Make a list of some ways you think Jesus was glorified by God through the crucifixion experience. _____

Next, make a list of ways Jesus "glorified God" during his death on the cross. _____

Whether you've known Jesus for three days, three months, or three decades, what captivates you about him? What is so exciting about his reality to you that you can't keep quiet about it, and want to tell others? And if you don't find him exciting, real, active in your life, why not?

Prayer: Jesus, help me when I have trouble believing you are actually living in me – now. Amen.

- Questions: 1. How real is Jesus to you today?
2. When, and how can you begin to tell others of your relationship with Jesus?

Thought: Towards the end of this reading, there's a lot of talk about love – loving God, God loving Jesus, Jesus loving us. As Jesus moved closer to the cross, his concern was that we get the “love” messages right, i.e., love God; love each other; love him – and *be* loved by God, by Jesus, by others.

What chance did Jesus have of getting across his “love” messages just before the cross? Then again, what chance does Jesus have of getting across his “love” messages to the people of the world today? One observation might be that when you're running at break-neck speed while obsessed with acquiring as much of the world's wealth you can, and deluded by the myths and lies of an entertainment industry – love doesn't have a chance.

The Anacostia section of Washington, DC, sits on a bluff overlooking the capital city – just across the river from the imposing Capitol itself. It is a ghetto of hunger, crime, drugs and hopelessness. None of Washington's power brokers, nor the media ever cross that natural divide. One balmy June morning in 1981 provided the exception. Black limousines and TV camera trucks lined the curb in front of the old red brick Assumption Catholic Church in the heart of Anacostia. Soon after the cameras and reporters were in place, a small group of nuns and priests arrived, clustered about a wisp of a woman in a white muslin sari. She waved at some nearby children, but ignored the reporters.

This celebrity had somehow managed to, in a city that thrives on pomp and protocol, sneak in the back door. The person was a 70 year old Albanian nun named Teresa Bojaxhiu – better known as Mother Teresa. She had won the Nobel Prize the year before and was now world famous. She could have commanded limousines and attracted thousands in one of the city's great cathedrals. Instead, she went as inconspicuously as possible to a troubled and neglected corner of the city to establish an outpost for nine of her Sisters of Charity. The press, a bit in awe of this tiny old lady pressed the cameras and questions. “What do you hope to accomplish here?” “The joy of loving and being loved,” she smiled, her eyes sparkling in the face of the camera lights. “That takes a lot of money doesn't it?” She shook her head and said “No, it takes a lot of sacrifice.” This baffled the press, they didn't ask another question – and left.

How did Mother Teresa come up with such an answer? She knew John 15: 1-11 “by heart”, as we say. Did it take a lot of money for Jesus to love those he spoke about just before the cross? No. It took a tremendous sacrifice – his own life. What did it cost God to love Jesus who would soon be the sacrifice for the world? No money. Instead, God suffered through the agony of being torn apart from his very self as Jesus died on the cross. Ah yes, God sacrificed, too.

If God and Jesus paid huge “prices” to love each other and humanity, what is the cost to you and me to love each other? Does it take a lot of money? Perhaps there might be a lot more love in this world if it did. No, for us to love each other takes some kind of sacrifice – yes, every time, in every case, in every relationship. There is no cheap grace; there is no cheap love. Do you love “each other” as Jesus suggested, regardless of the price tag?

Prayer: Jesus, please show me how to love like you love. Amen.

Questions: 1. Who are the poor, hungry and homeless in your own Anacostia?
2. How does your own love for others compare with God's love for you?

Thought: As Jesus moved closer to the cross, he was more resolved than ever to give God's one message to humankind – "I love you." We talked about loving others yesterday. Today we concentrate on the God who loves. In The Message, John 3:16 reads: "This is how much God loved the world. He gave his son; his one and only son..." When God came in the person of Jesus, he had one message for us – "I love you." As Jesus walked those dusty roads of Palestine, much of his time was invested in loving people. Consider:

- Jesus loved the dirty, smelly little children so much that he gave them his time – to sit and talk and play with them.
- Jesus loved his disciples so much that he forgave them – in advance – for their desertion.
- Jesus loved the lepers so much he touched them, and was not contaminated – instead, the lepers became clean. (AIDS is the modern-day leprosy, says former Surgeon General C. E. Koop. "I know of one AIDS patient who traveled eleven hundred miles to be with his family in Michigan for Thanksgiving dinner. He had not seen them for seven years. The parents welcomed him warily, and when dinner was served everyone got a heaping portion of turkey and all the trimmings on the best Wedgwood china plates – except for their son the AIDS patient, who was served on a plastic plate, with plastic utensils.") Jesus' love was real.
- Jesus so loved an immoral woman who washed his feet that she went away both forgiven and transformed.
- Jesus loved Judas so much he called him "Friend" as he betrayed him in the garden that night.
- Jesus loved the disciples so much he washed their very dirty feet at dinner that night.

The list could go on for many pages. Augustine said "God loves each one of us as if there is only one of us to love." When you think about God, is the first thing you think about God's love for you? I've not found one person to say "yes" in answer to the question. How about what God is not? What would you place on a list of things you are sure God is not? In pondering this question for some time, I finally concluded that I'm glad God isn't an accountant!!! I breathe so much easier when I realize that God doesn't keep precise, detailed records of the wrongs that I've done in a 24 hour period – or in a week, or whatever period of time I might choose.

After all, if God loves you and me so much that even a cross can't eliminate such love, how can I possibly think God is an accountant, keeping records of my mistakes? It was good old Peter who suggested that "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Love doesn't just cover one mistake. It covers them all. God's love for us not only covered our sins, it actually paid the price to completely remove them.

The horrors of the crucifixion were God's message to us that "I love you". God told us that a long time ago. Five years ago, I challenged readers to rejoice in God's love for them, and respond by saying – "I love you, God". I've learned most are hesitant to say those words. But as we continue our walk to the cross – a walk that's about love – why not whisper (or shout!) "I love you, God"?

Prayer: Jesus, I love you. Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you express your love to God?
2. How does God show love to you – on a daily basis?

Thought: Not long before the Gethsemane, trial and crucifixion experiences, Jesus dwelt on the subject of unity. He wanted his disciples to know first-hand of the love and unity that existed between the Father and Son. He also tried to rivet their attention on the need for unity among his disciples – and all of the generations of followers to this very day.

What is unity? *Oneness* is a good, brief definition. Would you not agree that it's comparatively easy to feel good about "being one" with God when one's life journey is not bumpy, disturbing, or worrisome? But what happens to my feelings of unity and oneness with God when everything seems to be going wrong?

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye keeps up a running dialogue with God, giving credit for the good things but also lamenting all that goes wrong. In one scene he sits dejected by the side of the road with his lame horse. "I can understand it," he says to God, "when you punish me when I am bad; or my wife because she talks too much; or my daughter when she wants to go off and marry a Gentile, but ... What have you got against my horse?!"

In reality, it wasn't many hours after Jesus prayed about the disciples and unity when his hopes and expectations for his followers were shattered. The "oneness" of their last meal together, the first communion experience, the leader washing the feet of the disciples – all these signs of unity were quickly dashed when the disciples disappeared or deserted Jesus when he most needed someone to support him. The demons probably rubbed their hands together in glee, and said "So much for unity".

Most of you who are traveling this journey to the cross attend a local church. Rate your church on the subject of unity. Does your church exist to carry out the content of Jesus' prayer for unity? Would it be a "ten", which would mean there is total harmony and commitment to a vision? A five? A one?

Of course your church is not a "10". I've never been in a church that was a "10". One of the reasons for that, of course, was because I was there! Unity comes about when the very different and often very separate parts (persons) figure out how to deal with their differences, and function effectively together while giving full evidence to their community they are in sync with God.

If churches could discover how to love God, and love each other in the same ways Jesus was talking about in his prayer, communities would break down the church's doors to become a part of such a "divine" encounter. God's love is meant for every individual, every family, every small group, every committee, every board, every pastor, every child, every teenager, every young adult, every middle-aged adult, every older adult – both inside and outside of the church!!!!

How do we learn about God's hopes and dreams for ourselves, our churches, our communities? "My secret is a very simple one: I pray," wrote Mother Teresa of Calcutta: Prayer is simply talking to God. He speaks to us: we listen. We speak to him: he listens. A two-way process: Speaking and listening."

Prayer: Jesus, help me be a unifying person in your church and world today. Amen.

Questions: 1. Rate your church on how it is living out Jesus' call for unity in John 17.
2. How can you/your church be more in tune with God's purposes in the world today?

Thought: Finally, the moment of betrayal has become reality. As he was leaving his agonizing prayer experience, he was almost immediately confronted by a crowd. They came with torches, lanterns, clubs and weapons. Who were “they”? Not the Romans. If they had sent a cohort, it would have consisted of about 800 soldiers. This was a small cohort of the temple police.

Mark tells us that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Why this manner of identifying him to the police? Since it was night-time, and the shadows cast by the torches and the dimly lit moon would make it difficult to know exactly who they were after, they needed someone to point a finger at the accused. Judas took care of that with the kiss. “I am the one you want”, Jesus said, “...let these others go.”

The captain motioned, and guards moved towards Jesus, most likely with chains or ropes. Suddenly Peter swung his sword above his head, and lunged towards the closest person, the high priest’s servant, Malchus. Instead of splitting his head open, he managed only to cut off the right ear. At that point, Jesus rebuked Peter, and immediately restored the severed ear. In retrospect, it’s probably a good thing he did – for the sake of Peter, as well as the other disciples. If the temple police perceived a fight was going to take place, most of the unarmed disciples would have been killed, and perhaps Jesus, also. Once again, Jesus saved the day – so that Scripture could be fulfilled – yes, he was going to die on a cross – for us.

Judas will most likely always be remembered as history’s most famous traitor. Despite all the advantages he enjoyed as a close associate of Jesus, the promising young disciple became filled with evil. Perhaps the most important learning from Judas’ actions is that association with godliness is no guarantee that one will become godly. Faith and belief has never “rubbed off” on another person. Each of us is accountable for our own relationship with God; there are no substitutes.

Why did Jesus persist in his determination to follow through with death on a cross? At that moment, he still could easily have escaped the trap, slipped away – he’d done it before. My co-travellers to the cross, this is what you’ve been reading about in the Scripture verses of the past several days. It is all about love – love for every human being who has ever walked the face of this earth, or who ever will. He was the personification of love: for God, his Father; for the entire human race –which meant he would be the “lamb without blemish”.

Mother Teresa probably summed it up as well as anyone could when she said: “Someone asked me: What will you do when you are not Mother General any more? I replied: I am first-class at cleaning toilets and drains. It is not what we do, but how much love we put into the doing. If I belong to Christ and at that moment he wants me to clean the toilets, or take care of some leprosy patients, or talk to the President of the USA, it is all the same; because I am being what God wants me to be, and doing what he wants me to do. I belong to him.”

And as they led him away, Jesus loved God with his entire being, enough to take him to the cross.

Prayer: Jesus, your unbelievable commitment to God’s will – show me how. Amen.

Questions: 1. When they led Jesus away, if you had been there, what would you have done?
2. How does your “love for God” compare to “Jesus’ love for you”?

Thought: Abandoned! Few of us know the full meaning of the word, since such a reality has never happened to us. At the beginning of today's reading, Jesus was abandoned by one he had called to be a disciple over the past three years. At the end of the passage, Jesus was abandoned by the other eleven disciples. In only a few minutes, he was abandoned totally by his support group, the disciples.

There were six confrontations with authorities, some conducted by the Jews and some by the Romans. During these sessions when a variety of charges were brought against Jesus, not one witness rose to his defense. No disciple rose to defend him. No leader had the nerve to speak out against the injustice of what was taking place. Jesus made no attempt to defend himself. And if it has escaped your attention, throughout the ordeals, God, the Father, said not a word.

Why didn't one of the lepers who was cleansed speak out to his good deed? Where was Lazarus, whom Jesus had brought back from the dead? Where was the woman who was healed when she touched the hem of his robe? Thousands of hungry people had been fed by his hand – not one of them said a word in his defense. Where was Zaccheus, the tax collector whose life was changed completely because of Jesus? The list is long. **NO ONE** spoke out in his defense.

Leading up to these moments of interrogation, Jesus was under tremendous emotional, mental physical and psychological stress. One cannot wrestle with God as Jesus did, and not be emotionally exhausted. One doesn't agree to let life go at age 33 without being totally drained. One doesn't contemplate crucifixion, the most painful and humiliating form of capital punishment known to humankind, without shuddering inwardly at the thought.

Pierre Van Paassen tells in his memoirs of the years before World War II of an act of humiliation and abandonment by Nazi storm troopers. They had seized an elderly Jewish rabbi and dragged him to headquarters. "In the far end of the same room, two colleagues were beating another Jew to death, but the captors of the rabbi decided to have some fun with him. They stripped him naked and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath in the synagogue. The rabbi asked if he could wear his yarmulke, and the Nazis, grinning, agreed. It added to the joke. The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver in a raspy voice his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazis, and all the while hearing the last cries of his neighbor at the end of the room."

Humiliated. Alone. Defenseless. Abandoned. Roman citizens were beheaded, not crucified. Jews shared their revulsion for crucifixion. After all, doesn't it read in Deuteronomy "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse"? The Jews preferred stoning when they carried out an execution. Have you wondered what God's feelings and thoughts were during the hours of Jesus' total humiliation and abandonment? We can only imagine what God might have cried out. Jesus became "a curse for us", Paul told the Galatians. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us", he told the Corinthians. We know how God feels about sin; the sense of abandonment likely cut both ways.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive us when we tend to forget the price you paid for our sins. Amen.

Questions: 1. Of Jesus' sufferings, which do you think were the most difficult?
2. How do you extend love and care to some of today's abandoned people?

Thought: “Father, forgive them...” Tell me, my companion on the way to the cross, how easy is it for you to forgive? When was the last time you forgave someone? If you had been there that afternoon, would you have had feelings of forgiveness for the cruelty on display? Or, would you have wished for revenge? “Make them pay for what they have done to our Jesus”, might describe most of our feelings.

Forgiveness is difficult today, too. In her book, *The Love Revolution*, Joyce Meyers tells this story: “It was out of the question. . . simply too much to ask. How could Bill Ebarb forgive the man who killed his brother in cold blood? Bill Ebarb and Charles Manuel were two strangers whose lives would be forever intertwined in a split second – the moment Charles pulled the trigger and murdered Bill’s brother, John. From that moment on, Bill could think of nothing but revenge.

Bill’s heart was full of rage and anger, and he was convinced that no punishment had the ability to wipe away the loss. After John was killed, there wasn’t a day that went by that Bill didn’t think about the killer.

The intense hatred was eating him alive. This obsession soon cost Bill his job and his marriage. He knew that if he continued down this destructive path, it would soon cost him his life.

That’s when Bill experienced a change in his life that was even more powerful than the day he lost his brother. Bill experienced the forgiveness of Christ. This was something supernatural and beyond any forgiveness that a human could manage alone. God removed the hatred – He removed the anger.

Bill’s heart was so miraculously transformed that he began to think the impossible. He realized that if the Lord could forgive him for all of the things he had done in his life, he must also forgive Charles. And he must tell Charles that he had forgiven him for murdering his brother. At first it was an act of obedience, but then it became a matter of the heart. And so eighteen years to the day of John’s death, Bill and Charles sat across from each other in a meeting that confirmed what God had already done in both their lives. God had set both of these men free through the power of forgiveness.” (pp193-194)

Lewis Smedes details the process of what he calls “spiritual surgery”. “When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it. You disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him ineradicably as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory. You think of him not as the person who hurt you, but a person who needs you.”

As Jesus looked around him as he hung on the cross, he saw every soldier who had hurt him as a person who needed his help. He saw the religious and temple authorities lingering at a distance, and felt sorry for their conditions, and truly regretted they had missed the truth in his teaching. He saw the curious onlookers, and wished he could help them understand what it was really all about. He looked beyond that afternoon into the centuries yet to unfold, and forgave all who would reject, punish, and crucify him – again. He saw you – and me – and forgave us.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for showing us how to forgive; for showing us how to set even extreme feelings aside, and genuinely forgive others. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are the first steps you can take towards forgiveness?
2. Make a list of those who need your forgiveness. What is the first step to take?

Thought: Just who is the young man hanging on that cross? At age 33, why is he ready to die? In moments, he would say “Father, I place my life in your hands.” In three short years, what had he said or done to bring him to his crucifixion? Which do you think apply?

- He was born in a stable where animals from the inn were kept.
- His parents were poor working people.
- Almost nothing is known of the rest of his life.
- His formal education was in the local synagogue school, and ended when he was twelve.
- He never owned a cell phone.
- His only writings were finger tracings in the sand.
- He spoke Aramaic, and some Greek and Latin.
- He never traveled more than a hundred miles from home.
- His family thought he was mad when he started teaching and preaching.
- He never owned or used a computer.
- His friends were mostly as poor as he was – fishermen and peasants.
- He mingled with the forgotten and “alone” people.
- He knew no social barriers.
- He never had a steady job.
- He said people were important, not institutions.
- He said “God is love”, not a deity to be feared.
- He walked towards lepers, not away from them.
- He never checked out Wall Street reports.
- He cried because people rejected his Father.
- He raised Lazarus from the dead.
- He healed blind people; made the lame to walk; helped the bent-over ones to stand straight.
- He criticized the Temple and its leaders.
- He never had an organization of any kind.
- He was never on TV.
- He thought children were important, the make-up of the Kingdom of God.
- He claimed that God and he were one.
- He commended a widow for giving two pennies in the offering.
- He chastised those who gave large amounts.

Celsus, a Roman historian, tried to explain the strange power of Christianity in his day, and said “The importance of Christianity is the excessive value it places on every human soul.” Look again at the Christ on the cross, and catch a glimpse of what he sees. He isn’t looking at how people are dressed; how well they are taking care of their bodies; where they live; how much they are “worth”; what their title might be; nor what they own. He is looking at their hearts and souls – that’s what Jesus was all about while he hung on the cross; that’s what Jesus is about today.

Prayer: Jesus, guide me so that I value most what you deem to be most worthwhile in life. Amen.

Questions: 1. What does Jesus value most highly in your life today?
2. What are your feelings about the “Christ of the cross” today?

Thought: What do you think of the cross? What does the world think of the cross? Thieves crucified on either side of Jesus gave the only two responses that can possibly be given. One poked fun at the powerlessness of Jesus: “A Messiah who can’t even save himself?” The other recognized a different kind of power: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom”. It appears that this dying thief saw more clearly than anyone else the nature of Jesus’ kingdom.

Two thousand years later, there are no other responses that can be given. Either God is perceived to be irrelevant and/or powerless, or God is the Saviour of all humankind. There is no other choice.

It was doubly important to the Jews to observe their ritual requirements since not only was it the Sabbath, it was the day of Festival, as well. The breaking of the legs of those being crucified was not part of the actual act of crucifixion. It was merely a way to hasten death. In this case, it was important to the Jews that Jesus be buried before sundown. Sometimes, for the Romans, it was merely a matter of getting the job done so they could get out of there. It was the Roman preference that dead bodies remained on the crosses until they rotted. Others, however, could request to have the bodies removed. Crucifixion victims were usually thrown into a common grave for criminals, and were not to be mourned publicly after their deaths. In Judaism, burying the dead was an important duty as well as an important act of love; being unburied was too horrible to be permitted even for criminals.

Both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were members of the Sanhedrin. Although a secret disciple of Jesus, Joseph became bold to pay his last devoted service to Jesus. Nicodemus brought a lavish gift of myrrh and aloes. It was about seventy-five pounds in our weight system today. Myrrh was used for embalming the dead, and aloes was perfume. Although it appears to be a huge gift, at that time it was not unusual for disciples to lavish such devotion on a beloved teacher.

John mentions the Jewish custom of burial. Jews did not burn dead heroes, as did the Greeks and Romans. Neither did they mutilate their bodies for embalming, as did the Egyptians.

Joseph didn’t have much time to purchase the linen which was customary for burial. Since he was a person of wealth, we can assume that the tomb was cut from virgin rock – those were viewed as the best. A large disk-shaped stone could be rolled in a groove over the mouth of a tomb, making entry difficult, if not impossible. After a body had been prepared for burial, it would be left to decompose for one year. Then the eldest 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. As we all know, this last step would never be needed.

Prayer: Jesus, we are well beyond the tomb, but we can never forget the events that brought you to that place. Thank you for being our sacrifice. Amen.

Questions:

1. Where do you think the disciples were during these final events?
2. Having walked with Jesus to the cross in this way, what words best describe your feelings about all that transpired?

Day Forty Six

Saturday, April 5, 2012

Crying

Wondering

Despair

Hopelessness

Worrying

Waiting

So it went, that Saturday. An anonymous American poetess put it this way:

**"I heard two soldiers talking,
As they came down the hill,
The sombre hill of Calvary,
Bleak, and black and still.
And one said, 'The night is late,
Those thieves take long to die.'
And one said, 'I am sore afraid,
And yet I know not why.'**

**I heard two women weeping,
As down the hill they came;
And one was like a broken rose,
And one was like a flame.
One said, 'Men shall rue
This deed their hands have done.'
And one said only through her tears,
'My Son! My Son! My Son!'**

**I heard two angels singing
Ere yet the dawn was bright;
And they were clad in shining robes,
Robes and crowns of light.
And one sang, 'Death is vanquished.'
And one in golden voice,
Sang, 'Love has conquered, conquered all,
O earth and heaven rejoice!'"**

Day Forty Seven

EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, April 6, 2012

The band of the tomb was broken. The clutches of the temple leaders were broken. The Roman dominance was broken. Death, itself, was torn apart.

What happened that Sunday morning reminds me of a story out of Amherst College. Researchers experimented with a squash seed that had been planted in fertile, rich soil. Eventually the seed produced a squash the size of a soccer ball – and it was growing fast. Then the researchers placed a steel band around the squash. Attached to the steel band was a device for measuring lifting power. The purpose of the experiment was to determine the lifting power of the squash. As the squash continued to grow and stretch the steel band, it reached a lifting power of five hundred pounds. Within two months, the lifting power went up to fifteen hundred pounds. A month later it was two thousand pounds. It was not until the lifting power had reached an unbelievable five thousand pounds that the squash's rind broke. When they opened the squash, they discovered that it had built up a whole network of tough fibers to fight against the pressure that was binding its growth. When they traced the roots supporting the squash, they discovered that the roots had reached out some eighty thousand feet in every direction, search for more and more nourishment to strengthen the fibers.

Death was the steel band the spirits of evil and the power of the Roman Empire used in an effort to kill and suppress forever the person named Jesus. But as we well know, there was no power capable of keeping Jesus confined to a tomb forever. Neither is there any power in the world capable of stamping out what Jesus accomplished that Friday on the cross. You and I are part of his ever-expanding Kingdom. Celebrate with me the risen, living, loving Jesus!

HALLELUJAH!!!!

HE IS RISEN, INDEED!!!!

YOUR REFLECTIONS



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