



FollowMe

Matthew 4:19

Written By
Dr. Philip McVay and Rev. Matt Langford

Follow Me

Table of Contents

Ash Wednesday	1
Beginning the Journey	2
Prayer.....	2
Scripture	3
Quiet Time.....	4
With Others	5
Learning from Others	6
Sharing with Others.....	7
In Mission with Other.....	8
Using Gifts with Others	9
Complimentary Gifts.....	10
Building the Body of Christ	11
The Message.....	13
God in Three Persons	14
Human Condition of Sin	15
Evil	16
Prevenient Grace	17-18
Justifying Grace	19
Sanctifying Grace	20
Transformation	21
Conversion	22
Reconciliation	23-24
Redemption	25
New Wine New Wineskins	26
Holy Spirit	27
Fruits of the Spirit	28
Becoming More Like Christ	29
Faith and Mustard Seed	30-31
Forgiving 70x7	32
Loving Your Enemies	33
Take Up Your Cross	34
Hope Through Suffering	35
Seek the Kingdom	36
Serving Christ	37
Humility	38
Obedience	39
Presence	40-41
Witness	42
Giving	43
Gifts	44
The Triumphal Entry	45
Cursing the Fig Tree	46
Cleanse the Temple	47
First Supper	48
Last Supper	49
Garden to the Cross	50-51
Waiting	52
He is Risen.....	53
Notes	54-56

Ash Wednesday

Repentance

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15 (NIV)

Making a U-Turn

My mind was on something while I was driving in North Okaloosa County. In the Covid Year, I had not been on this road in quite some time. As I looked up, I had driven past the road I was supposed to make a turn. When I came to my senses, I must have been 10 miles off course. There was only one option. I needed to make a complete U-turn.

Today is Ash Wednesday. Have we been distracted over this past year? Covid? Personal matters? When we come to our senses today, we may feel like we have been heading in the wrong direction. Maybe it is time to make a U-turn?

Repentance is a word that means literally changing one's steps. A U-turn if you will. In this turn, we turn away from our sin and distractions and toward Jesus. On this first day of our journey, I invite us not just to turn to the left or the right a bit but rather turn fully toward Jesus. This turning may not happen all at once but can happen gradually over the next 40 days. The FOLLOW ME plan will help us day to day make this U-turn.

We will not reach perfection on day one. Instead, I suggest we seek to be a little more like Jesus each day. If we do this, our 40-day journey will lead us to great growth as a disciple of Jesus. Let us begin our Lent with a turn to FOLLOW ME (Jesus') direction. Let us now set our sights on FOLLOWING JESUS for the next 40 days and beyond.

Action:

What sin in my life do I need to turn away from? After identifying the sin, confess to God and receive forgiveness. Then, make a decided turn Godward! Finally, live in the Good news of Jesus!

Prayer:

God, forgive me for my sin, living distracted, and traveling in the wrong direction. Help me turn around today and FOLLOW JESUS a little more each day. Amen

Beginning the Journey

Prayer

“This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:9-13 (NIV)

Reviewing an Old Prayer List

I opened my prayer journal from 2017 for the first time in a long time, I was shocked! Almost every item on my prayer list had already been answered. God had surpassed my expectations with even some of the bold requests. In fact, one of the prayers important to me in 2017 was not answered. I'm so glad. Time and life made this prayer request look silly years later. However, there were a few answers to prayer with substantial faith-building progress. Anyway, all I can tell you is God answered my prayers from 2017 beyond my expectations.

In our 40-Day plan, prayer is a good starting point for each new day. We are beginning a “Follow Me” journey to become a little more like Jesus each day for 40 days. Prayer is an obvious place to begin and continue in this journey.

The invitation today is to form a prayer list. JOY is a good format for making a prayer list. The “J” is for Jesus. What can I place on my list to become more like Jesus? The “O” is for others. Who are the people I need to pray for today? Family? Friends or others? Finally, the “Y” is to pray for you.

In the coming days, find the time and place to pray every day. You do not have to pray long to pray through. Also, compile a list so that you can keep up with how God is providing you an answer. The answers are likely to be either immediate, in progress, not yet, or no. The no answer is likely going to lead to other open doors!

Action:

Make a prayer list to keep your prayer journey for the next 40 days. Include some bold prayers too!

Prayer:

Dear God, teach me to pray and pray more like Jesus each day. Amen. Prayer the Lord's Prayer too.

Beginning the Journey

Scripture

“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” Psalm 119:105 (NIV)

Luke Loves Any Reason to Use a Flashlight

My grandson, Luke, loves to play with a flashlight. So when I needed to check on the sprinkler one night, Luke saw me heading out the door with a flashlight. He wanted to know what “MAC, MAC” was doing, and most of all, he wanted to GO! So as Luke put his shoes on, I told him he could carry the flashlight, but I had one requirement. My requirement was I wanted the flashlight on our feet so that we could see where we were about to step. He was so excited to hold the flashlight on our feet so we could see our steps on the grass.

The Bible is a light for our feet during the day. There is so much unknown as we walk into each day. The habit of reading the Bible daily shines some light as we take each step. In the 119 Psalm, we read God’s Word is like a flashlight for our darkness. As in walking with a flashlight, we may not see the entire journey, but we can see the light one step at a time.

As we continue to live more like Jesus one day at a time, add daily Scripture reading to your schedule. You have a scripture to read in this FOLLOW ME 40-day plan each day. Let this become part of your habit for each day. As we go through the day in joy, disappointment, hope, despair, clarity, and confusion, let the light of Christ guide us through.

Let God’s word be as available to you as a good flashlight.

Action:

Read the assigned Bible verses each day and add the light of Scripture to your daily steps.

Prayer:

Lord, lead me to walk in the light of Jesus each day so that I can see through my uncertainty and darkness. As the hymns say, “I want to walk as a child of the light! I want to follow Jesus.”

Beginning the Journey

Quiet Time

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

³⁸ Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” ³⁹ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Mark 1:35-39 (NIV)

Quiet Please

Walking the grounds of Blue Lake Camp, near Andalusia, Alabama, is one of my favorite things to do. The lake is blue and nestled in a picture-eske setting in the Covington Forrest. Multitudes of people have come to know and follow Jesus in this quiet setting. Why? It is so quiet.

In addition, cell phone signals are weak at Blue Lake. Most people do not carry their cell phones. After all, this is a retreat setting, and the daily background noise of TV, emails, Facebook, etc., comes to a screeching halt. In our 40-day journey, we need to schedule some quiet time. We cannot always be in a retreat setting, but we can organize some quiet time in our daily schedule.

Quiet time is something even Jesus placed in His schedule. In today’s reading, Jesus took some quiet time, even when His disciples were looking for Him. If Jesus can do it? We should too. This is another way we FOLLOW JESUS. We set aside some quiet time each day. As we continue this 40-day journey of FOLLOW ME, one essential is finding a quiet place and time each day for the daily devotional. This is more than a “time alone.” It is “time alone with God.” Also, take at least fifteen minutes apart from your cell phone, computer, and television. This quiet time will likely become your favorite part of your day. May the Lord bless you as you identify a time and place that will work for you.

Action:

Set aside time and spend some quiet time each day. For this FOLLOW ME journey, you may want to identify a specific quiet place in a back corner at home or outside.

Prayer:

Lord, help me take time each day for “quiet time.” As Jesus found a quiet place, help me find a time and place each day too. In the quiet, I pray to hear You above the noise and distractions.

With Others

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus Heals the Sick

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. Matthew 4:18-25 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

With Others

Learning from Others

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend. Proverb 27:17 (NLT)

Growing up, playing basketball was always the highlight of my school year. Whether that was peewee basketball or on up into varsity, it was always a joy to get to play! My best friend in school was Cam Norman. We were lovingly known as the “Twin Towers” because neither of us made it to five feet tall before the 8th grade. However, this did not hinder us from working hard to be the best basketball players we could be. We practiced in the driveway together, in the gym during summer workouts, went to camps together, and continued to push each other day after day.

Finally, in seventh grade, it was time to try out for the JV team. Of course, there were over 25 people that tried out for the 12-15 spots available, and we wanted them! Well, we did it! At 4’8” and 4’10”, we made the team! And knowing that our height would be a disadvantage for quite some time, me more than Cam, we worked with one another to be the best we could be. At practice, we ran harder. In games, we played tougher. In one of the last games that we would ever play together, Cam broke the record for the most 3-point shots made in a single game with 8, I think it was, and I broke my personal record of most assists in a game with somewhere around 14.

Sometimes natural skill is a gift that you have received. Sometimes the natural ability and height make all the difference. Other times, it takes a friend you are willing to work with, learn from, and help grow. For the “Twin Towers,” we needed all the help we could get, and what we found was relying on each other was just the ticket!

I wonder who God might be putting in your life right now to walk beside you to help you grow and learn. Someone who will push you to do your best and to work hard. Someone who will call you out on your sins and at the same time walk with you through them? Iron sharpens iron, says the proverb. So, who is that person for you?

Action:

Today, take some time to answer the question: Who is pushing you to grow in your faith, and who are you pushing to grow in theirs? Then, write down a few of these people, reach out to one, and offer a word of encouragement.

Prayer:

Almighty God, you have created each of us uniquely and wonderfully. You have given us gifts and graces, skills, and abilities, and for that, we are thankful. Today place someone in our life that will push us to grow in our faith. Someone willing to listen and share, but also willing to step in and offer correction and help. And may we, too, find that same person to offer them the friend they need to grow in faith today! Amen.

With Others

Sharing with Others

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Acts 4:32-35 (NIV)

What an incredible story. People taking all their belongings, money, and possessions and giving them to all those who were in need. This is sharing with others in a way that we can only hope for one day. It always seems that little children have figured out how to share in a most selfless kind of way. While yes, at times, they may shout, "That's mine!" I have also seen glimpses of sharing that would bring some to tears, with laughter or with joy.

One day at the playground, my wife Anne Claire was subbing for our preschool and explaining to me after her long day that there are hidden treasures that the average adult has no idea about. She began to explain how there are levels: Grass is hard to find but easy to give up. Leaves are more sought after but can be given quite freely as gifts. However, when you make it to sticks, these are rarely shared between the children as they are even harder to come by. And I was told about the most prized possession of all on our playground, here at Shalimar, the acorn! Yes, these delicacies to our children are like bars of gold to you and me! And Anne Claire told me about just her first day. Well, she began to explain to them that she would only be there for a few weeks while another teacher was out, and finally, her last day arrived. As they were leaving the playground, one little kiddo ran up to "Miss" Anne Claire and, with the biggest smile on his face and one acorn in his palm, gave her his most prized possession as a parting gift. And followed was every child frantically searching for an acorn to share with their teacher who was leaving soon!

I wonder what we could share. What are the prized possessions we have that we think we must keep to ourselves? This first church in Acts knew the power of God's work among them, and they saw it the way they cared for one another. They saw it in the way that they shared with one another. To grow in our discipleship is to grow in the ability to share with others what we might hold as dear.

Action:

It's time to share! What do you have lying around the house someone else might need? How about paying for a meal for the person behind you or sitting at the table next to you? Today find a way to share something that means something to you with someone else so that they can feel the love of God.

Prayer:

Almighty God, you have blessed us in ways that we do not deserve. You have given us the most when at times we have not given to you what you truly deserve. So, help us this day to know that all that we have is a gift. Create in us a spirit of sharing that we may begin to give to others in a way that shows them the love that you have given us. Amen.

With Others

In Mission with Others

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. Acts 9:26-28 (NIV)

There are many famous pairings in the Bible - David and Nathan, Joseph and Mary, Jacob and Esau, and many more to name. Paul and Barnabas follow suit with a quite interesting pair of folks on mission together.

I am drawn to thinking about other famous pairs that formed that made a difference for one another. More than just being friends or being together, but when parried up, working together, and seeking the same mission, it seemed always to get accomplished. Like Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen, Kobe and Shaq, Sonny and Cher, and Han Solo and Chewy. What about Batman and Robin, Shaggy and Scooby, Benson and Stabler, and the list continues both real and cartoon. Finding that partner, friend, or neighbor who would walk with you to make a difference in the world.

In 2011, I was asked to go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic with my friend Tyler. We were Juniors in high school, and we had a great time. We wanted to continue the work that we had seen and started while we were away when we got back. So together, we decided to gather donations of clothes, and baseball and softball equipment for six teams to send back. Together, we did it. We were just a couple of kids in high school, but together we had recourses, families, friends, different churches, and groups that all came together to help a cause much bigger than just a week-long trip. So, Tyler and I could accomplish this goal that we set together, relying on one another.

This journey of faith is tough; it's just a fact. We need people who are committed to walking through it with us. We rely on them; they rely on us, and together we can begin to accomplish much more. Having someone in your corner like Paul had in Barnabas was essential in him preaching and teaching to thousands. So, it is with us. We need someone in our corner, and we need to be in the corner of another!

Action:

When was that last time you truly invited someone to worship with you? I would invite you today to think of someone who has not been to worship in a while or someone who has never been to worship before and offer them a genuine invitation to come with you. Pick them up, take them to lunch after, whatever it might be, start the conversation to be in someone's corner!

Prayer:

Almighty God, you live in perfect harmony with the Son and the Spirit. Together you all create and move; together, you all love and serve, and together you all order and shape. Help me work this day to model that connection with those around me. Let me offer my prayers, support, a listening ear, and encouraging words for another. You have always been in my corner, and today I pray that I might be there for someone else! Amen.

With Others

Using Gifts with Others

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-12 (NLT)

One of the strengths that I think I have is the ability to get the perfect gift for someone. While I am sure I have flopped from time to time, I try to take all the steps to ensure that I am doing all I can to get someone the best, most personal gift. This is, of course, great when you know who the person is and where you are to give the gift!

One such occasion (that always gives me pause) is when I go to a "Dirty Santa" gift party over the holidays because what I have learned is that until you have been with the group playing the game, you have no idea what to bring. Do they mean a nice gift that someone would want, a nice gift that is funny to open, a joke gift that no one wants that is hilarious, or an incredibly close to inappropriate gift that everyone laughs at for years to come? You don't know until you give it a shot, roll the dice, and hope for the best.

In Greenville, I went to one such party of a "seasoned" or "wise," we will say Sunday school class. I brought a very nice picture frame with a beautiful bible verse printed across the front! I spent time and effort seeking and finding this gift. By the time it had gotten to be my turn to go, we had opened camouflage Crocs, a reversible pair of pants that was both denim and fleece, an adult Peter Pan costume, and a book entitled "Why Do Men Have Nipples." I realized that my gift was truly inadequate for the setting in which I had found myself! I was almost laughed out of the circle by the time they opened the bible verse picture frame, but it was probably needed at that point!

Similarly, God has worked tirelessly to pick out for us the best gifts that we need. Not the gifts everyone else has and not the gift that everyone else expects, but God has given you and me the gifts he knows we need. We often begin to compare and say, why don't I have that one or this one? But God reminds us that we are all different, with unique gifts chosen just for us. So, whatever gift you have, own it, believe in it, and grow to use it for the Kingdom of God!

Action:

Write down a list of your strengths and the gifts you feel God has given you. Then, take some time and take an inventory. Once you get your list, begin to pray and ask God how you might use this for His glory.

Prayer:

Almighty God, we give you thanks for the gifts you have given us. Create in us the ability to know them and begin to use them. Work to grow them and increase their opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those around us. Let us not compare our gifts to others that they have versus our own, but rather let us have confidence in who we are and whose we are. Amen.

With Others

Complimentary Gifts

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also, Philip, Procerus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)

The first church meeting! A problem arose and was solved with a quick decision, but more than that, it was noted that two individual ministries needed attention and care. The church could not have everyone doing both of them well because one of them would suffer. A solution was gained when they expressed the need for both ministries to have the same attention, care, and concern to further the mission of Christ in the world.

I hear more than you would think some version of, "I just feel I am not doing enough when it comes to church." And almost every time I hear this, I search to listen to what is truly being said. So, I start with, "Well, what are you doing already?" People will say, "Well, I attend, I give financially, I volunteer with the youth. I go to Wednesday nights when I can, and on occasion, I help with clean up after dinner." And I look at them, and I say something like, "You are truly using the gifts you have in a wonderful way." Then here it comes the big one that everyone goes for, "Yea, I know, but I'm just not helping people personally. I'm not teaching the classes, preaching the sermons, starting new ministries. I'm just doing the little things that anyone can do."

That sentence is the one that hurts a bit. The truth is that it takes all of these parts of ministry for a church to work and grow. It takes the behind-the-scenes and the on-stage parts for people to feel welcomed, loved, and accepted. Without one part, the church is not complete. Both matter! It mattered in the first church, and it matters today. As I have been saying all week, you have gifts and graces for ministry. Use them any way you can to help further the ministry of Christ here in the world. No job is too small, and no job is insignificant. We need you!

Action:

Nothing is too small! What is a new way to begin to share your gifts with others? From stuffing pens in the back of the chairs at worship to praying at home for others all the way to the start of a new ministry, what can you do today to join with those around you?

Prayer:

Almighty God, by your grace, you have called us to serve. You don't tell us that we have to know everything or be able to do everything; you tell us to humble ourselves and serve those around us. So, we pray that we might begin to find ways to do just that. That we would join in with the saints who have gone before, the people in our communities, and know that no job is too small to share your light and love. Amen.

With Others

Building the Body of Christ

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts forms one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 1 Cor 12:12-14, 27 (NIV)

Each part of the body is important. There is no need to argue with this. The brain works as long as blood is flowing from the heart. The eyes help us see but would not really matter if the lungs did not allow us to breathe. Feet help us stand to get to our place of work, where our hands take over most often. Our mouth is not only used to speak but to eat, and without the stomach, it wouldn't matter how much we ate. Of course, we all know this, but I wonder how often we truly believe!?

For me, I always think about worship each Sunday morning and the many moving parts that make it happen. On the surface, one might say that all that has to happen is some music and a sermon. But let me tell you, there is so much more. We have slides that have to be made, songs that have to be selected and practiced, lights that have to work, lyrics that have to be scrolled, announcements to be delivered. Not to mention chairs to set up, coffee to be made, and of course, prayers to be prayed. It takes every one of these parts to make worship happen and many more that I have left out before we even get to the sermon. In the same way, so it is with the entire church of Jesus Christ.

It takes everyone coming together to make the church a place that welcomes and loves people. Children, youth, adults, and everyone else is necessary to make the church a place that reaches out to the community. And much like worship or our bodies, when one part is not functioning to its fullest potential, it causes the whole thing to suffer! So, as we continue on this journey of following after Christ, I would invite you to ask yourself how you are doing at the part that you play in the Kingdom of God. Are you growing and working at it, or are you letting it pass you by hoping someone else picks up your role? The whole is only as good as the sum of its parts, and I would go as far as to say that when all the parts are working together, the “whole” may just be even greater than the individual parts!

Action:

Today, reflect on how the church has been there for you in a time in your life, a loss or celebration, and think through what was most helpful during that time? A card, a call, a sermon, a hug, a visit, a song. Then I would ask can you offer that same encouragement as part of the church to someone today?

Prayer:

Almighty God, you are the creator of all that is good. You have knit together this church before the foundation of the world, and your Spirit continued to move in this place. As you ascended to the Father, you left the church as the new incarnation of the love of God in the world, and we are grateful for the opportunity to continue to be a part of it. So now we pray that you would give us strength to play our role, grace when we may fall, and encouragement when we need it most. Help us be the hands and feet of your Son, the church, today! Amen.

The Message

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke 4:14-21 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

The Message

God in Three Persons

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. John 14:16-17 (NIV)

To Whom Do You Pray? God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit?

One of the questions I have been asked through the years is: To whom do you pray? God? Jesus? Or Holy Spirit? I was asked this one of the first Sundays of 2022, just before worship. It is a good question and a practical question.

In the message of God revealed in the Scripture, God has been revealed in three persons. We know these three persons as the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit. In one of the greatest mysteries of all that defies mathematics - God is fully in three persons. This mystery is never fully realized by us. The Trinity illustrates why God is transcendent of our understanding.

The mystery is God is three in one and one in three. Or look at it this way the one central message is communicated in three persons. The same message is revealed in three persons. Take my wife, Karen, for example. My wife Karen can also be a mother and a grandmother. The central person Karen is revealed in all of these identities. She is known in all three ways. Her message is much the same in all three roles.

God's message is revealed to us through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The message is the same. Jesus even said when you have seen Him, you have seen the Father. (John 14:9) So the answer to the question, to whom do you pray? It does not matter. Pray to the one that makes you most comfortable. I am comfortable praying and mentioning all three. The main thing is to seek the message of God in Jesus, which is FOLLOW ME. And yes, we need the help of the Holy Spirit to follow.

Action:

In addition to the messages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, focus on the message FOLLOW ME.

Prayer:

Dear God, help me focus more on the message of Jesus today to Follow Him. I do thank you that you have a message of Good news revealed in three messages, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Message

Human Condition of Sin

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:23 (NIV)

The Gospel According to the Hot Wheel Track

My brother Paul, a Methodist pastor, and I were typical brothers growing up. As I was six years older than Paul, I was larger, faster, and stronger. Paul was not able to respond when I picked on him. One day Paul used a hot wheel track like a whip and slapped me. You might remember those hot wheel tracks long orange strips which connected so that toy cars could roll on them. Anyway, when I picked on him, Paul started slapping me with the hot wheel tracks, so I had to stop.

As I got tired of getting slapped, I hid the hot wheel tracks one day so that Paul couldn't hit me anymore. That frustrated Paul until one day he found my hiding place! Once Paul found them, he was ready to bring justice! He came running around the side of the house with a hot wheel track prepared for revenge. He caught me off guard and dead in my tracks. He reared back to hit me. The only thing I could think to say was, "Paul, if you hit me, it will be a sin." Paul responded, "EVERYONE SINS!" And he let me have it!

The message of God is everyone sins. We are all sinners. There are two types of sinners: those who know it and those who do not know it. The remedy for this sin is also in the message. We have forgiveness through the death of Jesus on the Cross. It is good news for all sinners. Christ died for us! We can be forgiven.

One final note, we are not forgiven, so that we continue in sin. Not my brother Paul but the Apostle Paul says, "shall we continue to sin so that grace may abound? God forbid!" (Romans 6:1-2) We are to turn from our sin and FOLLOW HIM!

Action:

What sins are in my life? Have I asked forgiveness for my sins? Do I live in this Good news that I am a saved sinner?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for sending Jesus to die for my sins. Forgive me. Thank you for the Good news of forgiveness of my sins. Help me turn from my sin and FOLLOW YOU.

The Message

Evil

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Ephesians 6:10-18 (NIV)

Living the Good News and Keeping Our Eyes Open

One of the additions of Shalimar United Methodist Church over the last few years has been a security team. We have a Deputy Sherriiff and security team to help keep our congregation safe. As Deputy Self describes what he does, "he is the sheepdog protecting God's sheep." We are grateful for those who offer a shield of protection against potential evil.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus prays, "protect us from the evil one." This is a part of our FOLLOW ME as well. We must keep an eye open to danger that may be lurking around us. The evil one seeks to steal, kill, and destroy what God does. We counter the evil one by keeping our eyes on the Good Shepherd Jesus. We also have protection and preparation for this spiritual warfare. We are encouraged to put on the armor of God: which includes prayer, the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, and the helmet of salvation. We are to be prepared each day! Disciples prepare for the worst but hope for the best!

As we seek to FOLLOW JESUS, let us keep our eyes open for any threats of the evil one. These threats can come in sneaky forms such as gossip, lies, and deceit. As disciples of Jesus, we are always aware of the evil one trying to undo the good God is doing. Our eyes are open to the guiles of the evil one, but we keep our eyes on Jesus.

Action:

Today, open my eyes to how the evil one may be tempting me away from following Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, help me keep my eyes on Jesus and be open to the possible attacks of the evil one. Help me to put on the full armor of God.

The Message

Prevenient Grace

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So, he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. Luke 15:11-31 (NIV)

The Message

Prevenient Grace

(Continued)

The WOO

Trooper, our pet Chihuahua, sometimes will start searching for something under a sofa or bed. He is active until he finds what he is looking for. Of course, we do not know what he is doing, but he remains persistent in his search. After a while, Trooper eventually will retrieve his long-lost ball! When he finds the ball, there is a celebration!

The good news of the message of the Prodigal Son tells us God is pursuing us all of our lives. We may not be aware of what is going on, but God is seeking to “WOO” us to Him. God will not stop until we respond.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, the son squanders his father’s gifts and makes a mess of his life. The son begins to feel the “WOO” to go back home, even as a servant. Finally, he comes to himself and wants nothing more than to be home. He will be a servant if that is the only way to go home. The father longs for his son to come home. As the son approaches, the father runs to greet him and orders a celebration. His life is a mess, but his father longs for his lost son to come home.

This is good news for us. God is WOOING us home to celebrate. We call this “wooing” prevenient grace. The grace that goes before us is “WOOING” us home. Even before we turn to God, God is reaching out to us. This is good news and brings a celebration to the Kingdom!

Action:

Have I been running away from God’s good news? Is God “WOOING” me to a new life? Can I come home today?

Prayer:

Lord, like the prodigal, my life has sometimes been a mess. Thank you for WOOING me back home. Amen.

The Message

Justifying Grace

⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." 1 John 1:7 (NIV)

Whoa

God's message of pursuing us through Prevenient Grace is His initiative to us. Our response is to put the brakes on and stop running from God. WHOA is your will. Our response is to stop our lives and receive this gift of grace. The Apostle Paul says it like this, "For it is by grace we are saved and not works lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) Jesus' death on the cross is God's grace offered for us.

The good news means when we make a mess of our lives, God can restore and make us right again. The process of making us whole again is known as Atonement. If we take this word in syllables, we see the meaning as becoming one through AT-ONE-MENT. Christ's death restores the breach between God and us. Christ's death makes us one with God again.

Jesus' death bridges the chasm created by sin from us to God. Jesus' blood cleanses us from all sin. This is good news! As we say during communion, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, and this proves God's love for us."

Prevenient Grace is the "WOO" of God pursuing us, Justifying Grace the "WHOA" moment when we respond to God's initiative of Grace. In Christ, we can have complete forgiveness and reconciliation through the cross. This is good news! And tomorrow, the good news of God's grace will get even better!

Action:

How do I need to stop and pump the brakes today? Have I received this good news of forgiveness through Jesus? Am I ready to be made one with God again? With others?

Prayer:

Lord, help me, though broken from sin, to be made one and whole again through the blood of Jesus.

The Message

Sanctifying Grace

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Matthew 5:48 (NIV)

The WOW

God's Prevenient Grace is the "WOO," and God's Justifying Grace allows us to stop and be justified. This, I call the "WHOA" to the "WOO" of God. It is not the end of God's Grace. Instead, the "WOO" and "WHOA" help us prepare for more good news, the "WOW" of Grace. This WOW Grace is the grace to grow for the rest of our lives. The grace to grow that shape us the rest of our lives.

Have we ever heard the phrase the best news is, "God is not finished with us yet?" This is absolutely true. Just when we think the good news cannot get any better. God "WOOS" us and saves us in our response to God the "WHOA" moment. God then prepares us for a life of "WOWS" growing in His grace.

We grow as a disciple all our lives. God is constantly doing a renovation job of growth known as Sanctifying Grace. We will never finish God's construction in our lives. And guess what? This produces one WOW moment after another WOW moment of God for the rest of our lives. In growing in God, we see God in our everyday lives. These moments are God sightings! God reveals Himself to us in small things and large ways. All of these God moments inspire us to grow more like Jesus!

We are saved to become more like Jesus every day. This grace to grow is Sanctifying Grace. Every time I read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; I realize I have so far to go. The good news is while I am not all I can be yet; I am not who I used to be. God is not finished with me, and I am under constant construction.

Action:

Take a moment and identify where God is nudging me to grow. Then, what steps will I take to grow in FOLLOWING JESUS?

Prayer:

Dear God. Thank you for helping me grow to be more like Jesus. Help me see my blind spots and deficiencies so that I can be more fully like Christ in every way and every day. Amen.

Transformation

Jesus Predicts His Death

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Matthew 16:21-28 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

Transformation

Conversion

For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything. ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!" He answered, "Yes, Lord." ¹¹ The Lord instructed him, "Go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying." ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³ Ananias countered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem." ¹⁴ He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name." ¹⁵ The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. Acts 9:9-18 (NIV)

In high school, the thing to do was to make your own stereo. Yes, this was a huge deal for me growing up, and we always had to make the next best portable stereo. So, what would happen is people would take coolers most often, cut holes in them and place car speakers on the sides. Then, they would get a golf cart battery to power them and even place an amp inside the cooler to be all portable. Do you need music? Just roll your cooler up to the spot and hit play.

Well, one day, my friends and I spotted an old plastic phone booth that someone had taken off of a wall and stored away. We saw it, and immediately we knew the potential of taking that old thing and turning it into something special. So, we did just that! We placed a subwoofer in the bottom, speakers on the sides, a car radio in a hidden compartment at the top, and of course, found a way to secure the golf cart battery for power. It was incredible. We even attached wheels to take this thing anywhere we wanted. It was incredible, from an old plastic phone booth to a newly renovated portable stereo. A true conversion story!

When I think of Saul becoming Paul or even my old phone booth becoming an awesome stereo, I think about the life we have all been called to as Christ-followers. When Christ tells us to come and follow him, he does not want us to look the same as when we first started this journey. Instead, he wants us to grow and adapt, change, and be made new. Your story might not be as drastic as Paul's or the phone booth, but I bet some somethings have changed along the way as you have grown in Christ. And if you feel as though you have not changed, I encourage you to begin to ask what are you holding on to so tightly and why?

Action:

When was the last time you thought about the true conversion moment in your life? John Wesley has his heart "strangely warmed," and Paul had the scales fall from his eyes; what was your moment? Think today of your conversion story.

Prayer:

God, help us to change to be more like your Son. Who has given us the model to live by in sending your son, so today, help us seek after him daily? Let us cast aside those things which entangle us and let us run after Christ pursuing him above all else! Amen.

Transformation

Reconciliation

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. ¹⁷ So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! ¹⁸ All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹ In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 (CEB)

Reconciliation, so says Webster's dictionary, is simply the restoration of friendly relations. I think this captures it. I remember, throughout my childhood, my mom would make me go "makeup" with my sister. I think this was the childhood equivalent of reconciliation. My sister and I were only 15 months apart, so fights and arguments were quite a running theme in our house. Anne Blake would be watching TV, and I would run in there and change the channel or pester her as she was watching. It would lead to her getting upset with me, a pillow being thrown, and of course, Mom walking in at the right moment! She would say, "Stop fighting, and you two make up!" We would give it our best shot and try to watch something together. I think all of us have been here when it comes to reconciliation. A quick I am sorry, no I am sorry, let's just be friends again. I think there is more to this reconciliation than we might know if we look hard enough.

I noticed another definition that says, "the act of making one view or belief compatible with another." Now, if we take both of these definitions and the words of Paul and hear again that Jesus has reconciled us to himself, I think we might have a deeper appreciation for what reconciliation truly is.

Christ looked at us, and instead of seeing sinner and failure, Christ chose to see beloved and worthy! Reconciliation is more than "kiss and makeup." It is careful attention to one another, choosing instead to see the person for who they could be and forgiving them for what they have done. It involves loving acceptance as well as recognition for mistakes and shortcomings. It takes two people willing to make amends. Christ has chosen to reconcile us all to himself no matter how bad we think we might be. I am curious if we might be willing to begin the reconciliation process with those that might have hurt us as well?

Transformation

Reconciliation

(Continued)

Action:

Are there people that you need to reconcile with? Are there people that have wronged you, hurt you, and made you feel unworthy? If so, start by naming these people aloud and working today and this week to call, text, or meet them to extend reconciliation just as Christ has reconciled you to the Father.

Prayer:

Almighty God, you look at us and see children and disciples. You look at our sin and blemishes, shortcomings, and failures, and you see a worthy Child. God, many might have hurt us, and we pray today that we might begin this process of reconciliation with them. That we might be willing to accept them, and they might be willing to accept us. We pray that we can admit where we have let one another down, as we have let you down to God. And we pray that we can become people who show love in the world.

Transformation

Redemption

But I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the end he will stand on the dust. Job 19:25 (CSB)

HORSE is a great game. It is fun to play with a bunch of people or a few people. You can play real basketball, water basketball, or over-the-door basketball. There are no limits to having fun when playing horse. In fact, Philip and I will often walk over to the FLC gym for a quick midafternoon game of HORSE. We will warm-up for a moment then it is time to play. We shoot three-pointers, lay-ups, the occasional trick shot until one of us gets all five letters from missing the shots. However, the way we play allows for “Redemption.” In HORSE, this means that you get to shoot two free throws at the end, and by making one, it removes a letter. I don’t like this all the time because I win with difficult shots, then Philip just makes his free throws, and he is still in the game. When I have redemption, I can never seem to make mine, and I often lose because I can’t make a shot!

As it relates to our faith, redemption is similar to this. When we have messed up when we have missed a shot, God is there just to give us a few more shots. It is up to us if we make them or not. So, redemption is dependent on if we can make the bucket. However, the reality is that God is our Redeemer, as we are reminded in the book of Job. After all the bad that happened to Job, God Redeemed him and his family, life, and joy. So, redemption is this notion that we must make up for all that is bad in our life or all that we have done, but rather living as a transformed follower of Christ, we might be led to experience the redemption that Christ has already shared with us. Christ opens the door for us to walk through and give us a chance to take a shot. But the true blessing is that we don’t just get two free throws; God is offering us redemption daily to live out our faith as we continue to follow him.

Action:

Redemption, at its core, is God’s grace taking the place of sin in our life. Redemption reminds us that the current hardship is not the final state of being for those who seek Christ. Remind someone of this today! Share grace, love, hope, and encouragement with someone else so that they might know that this hard moment is temporary, and a life redeemed by God is eternal.

Prayer:

God, you have poured out grace upon grace. While each of us deserves your wrath, we have been given your grace. You redeemed us as you redeem the world in its entirety. From the fall in the garden to the flood with Noah to the sending of your son and the incarnate church in the world, you are redeeming us. So, help us feel and experience this grace so that we might be able to share in your redemption by sharing grace with those around us. Amen.

Transformation

New Win New Wineskins

John's disciples and the Pharisees had a habit of fasting. Some people asked Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but yours don't?" ¹⁹ Jesus said, "The wedding guests can't fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they can't fast. ²⁰ But the days will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. ²¹ "No one sews a piece of new, unshrunk cloth on old clothes; otherwise, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and makes a worse tear. ²² No one pours new wine into old leather wineskins; otherwise, the wine would burst the wineskins and the wine would be lost and the wineskins destroyed. But new wine is for new wineskins."

Mark 2:18-22 (CEB)

This week has all been about transformation and maybe none more clearly than today's text. We have to change. You cannot put the new in the old and the old in the new. It just does not work. We are to change and changing means doing something new and different.

I did not play baseball long, but I played long enough to know the feeling of finally getting your glove broken in. I played second base in baseball for years growing up. I had the same glove for quite some time. The oil on it, broken in nicely, the thing would close without trying. It was held together with love and hope the way a baseball glove should be. Then I moved up to the last league I was in; I was finally moved from second base out to center field.

Along with that change came a new team, a new position, and yes, a new glove. I was told I had to get a bigger glove that my small infield glove would no longer cut it out in the center field. For a while, I refused to believe it. My glove had gotten me through so many outs. Why would it let me down now? Then we shopped and looked and finally found one, but of course, it didn't close yet. It was not worn down and worn in. This glove still could hold its shape; it was not anything like that old glove that sat in the top of my closet.

The reality is that it wasn't really about the glove, as you might have guessed. It was about change. It was about a new team and a new position. It was about a new coach and a whole new league. I agree the glove I had was not the right equipment, but it was the only thing that was still constant. See, often Christ is calling us to live in a new way. Christ calls us to new heights new excitement, but we are refusing to change and give up what we hold so tightly. If we want to be transformed truly, we have to give up those things holding us back and get the new tools we will need!

Action:

What have you been holding onto that you know you need to put away? What are you keeping from your life before knowing Christ or seeking Christ fully that you seem not to want to part with just yet? I would challenge you to give them up for the rest of Lent at least, and hopefully for years to come.

Prayer:

Almighty God, we confess that change is hard. Change causes us anxiety, fear, stress, and worry because we do not know what is coming next. We know that you are with us. We know that you go before us, but it is often hard to change because we like to know everything about everything. God, we pray that as you continue to change our hearts, we might truly be able to let go of what we hold onto too tightly and seek new tools in our life as we grow to follow you more! Amen.

Transformation

Holy Spirit

Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8 (CEB)

The central verse for the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit is the one who gives power. The Holy Spirit is the one that will take the good news of Christ from the innermost circle to the outermost region. So, the Spirit is active and involved in the book of Acts, and if we want to be transformed people, then the Spirit needs to be active and moving in our lives.

There have been several times where I have felt the Spirit move in my life in a way that is even hard to explain. You just seem to know that the Spirit is there. One such occasion happened when a conversation led to a much deeper discussion. I talked to a church member one day, and everything was like always. We talked about our usual small talk of college football, music, and of course, the best food in the area. He was about to leave the conversation, and something came over me that was hard to explain. I felt the Spirit speak to me almost audibly, "Wait, there is more." It was such a unique experience that I had to keep the conversation going. He had gotten a new truck, and I said, "Hey team, I'll follow you to check out your new ride." As we walked, I asked a few more questions and what happened next was evidence of the Spirit at work. With one gentle prompt, the next thing I know, he was sharing some very tough things that he has been going through. I was able to listen and pray. I did not provide any kind of superpower for him, just a listening ear for a conversation I would have missed without the power of the Spirit pushing me to listen deeply!

This is one small example of the way that the Spirit moves. It may not be in a loud voice or in the moving of the wind. It may not be in a prayer that makes the lame walk. It might be a simple feeling in your stomach to ask a friend one more question, which is just as powerful and meaningful. The Spirit is moving. Are you listening?

Action:

How do you feel the spirit move in your life? Today begin to notice where the Spirit is at work. So, I challenge you on your lunch break and again before you go to bed to look over your day and notice where the Spirit was at work that you might have missed! If you notice, in the moment, well, that is just bonus points!

Prayer:

God, we know that you are constant and moving. We pray that we might begin to feel the power of Spirit fresh in our lives. You call us onto the dark places to share light. You call us into the lives of the captives to set them free. You call us to the ends of the earth to share your good news. We need your help and your power to accomplish these great tasks. Make yourself known to us, O God, as we long for the power of your Spirit! Amen.

Transformation

Fruits of the Spirit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Galatians 5:22-23 (CEB)

What is the evidence of a transformed believer? What does one look like who is taking to heart all that we have talked about this week and will continue to next week? Great question, team! The answer: A transformed follower of Christ will begin to show the fruits of the spirit in their actions, words, and attitudes.

When my sister was growing up, a character on a children's TV show called Rugrats was named Angelica. She was the bossy older sister who made sure all babies stayed in line. She was fierce and intense at best, and many, like Mom, thought she was rude and mean. After a few times of Anne Blake being uncharacteristically rude and disrespectful to my mom and some deep detective work, Anne Blake was no longer allowed to watch the show. She began to imitate what she saw on TV and became Angelica in real life to her best ability.

Psychology also has something to say about this. For example, some suggest that you are the average of your five closest friends or at least the five largest influences that you have in your life. What they mean is simply that you will begin to pick up traits, mannerisms, sayings, and other habits that those who are around you most have. (Team!).

To me, these both point to a reality that if we are truly transformed, we will be pursuing Christ with all that we are. And if we are doing just that, then we will naturally begin to respond with the fruits of the Spirit. As we work to follow Christ, our disposition will change from anger, jealousy, and greed to love, joy, peace, and patience. Following Christ is seen in the fruits of our labor!

Action:

Take a deeper look at the list of the fruits of the Spirit. Which one do you find comes most easily to you? Which one needs the most work? Then, take some time today to add a practical step to help you work towards putting that fruit into action!

Prayer:

Almighty and loving God, thank you for being a God of love. You care for us when we do not deserve it and call us to go and do likewise. The fruits of the spirit are hard, and we acknowledge that, but we also know that these are what you have called us to show and share with the world. So, we pray that as we grow closer to you that you might reveal to us more and more how we can learn peace and patience, joy and kindness, love and faithfulness, self-control, and gentleness, so we can continue your work of reconciliation here on earth!

Becoming More Like Christ

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ² To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. ⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:1-14 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

Becoming More Like Christ

Faith and Mustard Seed

“They discussed this among themselves and said, “It is because we didn’t bring any bread.”

⁸ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? ⁹ Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹¹ How is it you don’t understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” Matthew 16:7-20 (NIV)

Becoming More Like Christ

Faith and Mustard Seed

(Continued)

Faith

A few years ago, we offered our congregation a way to make their faith tangible. We encouraged our congregation to offer "deeds of shalom" to our community. As a result, one of the members, Mary Jane Robertson, began conceiving "Blessings for Children."

Soon, this clothing and supplies for children became more than an idea but a reality. Members of our congregation donated, volunteers were secured, and the rest is history. In the last four years, this ministry of Shalimar United Methodist Church has enriched the lives of hundreds of families with children. All of this started with faith of a mustard seed. Mary Jane put her idea into action.

When we put our faith in Jesus' action, we see wonderful things begin to happen! Faith requires us to step up and step out. When we FOLLOW JESUS, we take action with our faith. Small things can make a great Kingdom difference!

Is there an idea that God has placed in your mind? What would happen if you stepped out and did something with the idea? For example, Jesus taught that you could move a mountain with the faith of a mustard seed. What idea is God planting in your heart today?

Action:

Write out the idea that God has placed on your heart and mind. Then, what is the first action step to put your faith into action?

Prayer:

Lord, help me grow in my faith and help me to step up and out. Help me trust the mustard seed moments that make a difference for the Kingdom. Amen.

Becoming Like Christ

Forgiving 70x7

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.
Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV)

A Seven Pack of Forgiveness

In growing up in the country, I heard my friends say when they were about to fight someone, "I'm carrying around a six-pack of whip their you know what's, don't make me use it!" This six-pack seems pretty common today. People are ready to fight and be hostile to one another at the drop of a hat.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive, I'm pretty sure this is not the answer he had in mind. Likely, Peter tried to justify his propensity to want to lash back at people. Nevertheless, Jesus' answer opened a whole other layer of Kingdom teaching.

Today, we are more like Peter. We are long on remembering and short on forgiveness. Anger can escalate, too, and people just yell and fight with one another. Jesus teaches there is a better way.

Jesus said we should not only carry a "seven pack of forgiveness," but this forgiveness is unlimited, even 70x7. Wow. Jesus stretched our assumptions about forgiveness with this Kingdom teaching.

If I am going to FOLLOW JESUS, I need to carry forgiveness and not a spirit of getting even. Who do I need to forgive today? Who have I written off? Jesus teaches forgiveness of others is part of our forgiveness from God. So, use today as a great day to offer forgiveness. Life is too short to hold grudges.

Action:

Step #1 - Forgive the person you have not forgiven. Give their response to God.

Step #2 - Make an appointment with that person and forgive them.

Prayer:

Lord, as you have forgiven me. Help me to forgive others.

Becoming more Like Christ

Loving Your Enemies

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Matthew 5:43-47 (NIV)

Warning If You Thought Yesterday Was Tough

Yesterday, we focused on a most difficult subject, forgiveness. Today, we take it up another notch with a teaching to love our enemies. Love those who cuss us. Speak evil of us. Really? It is perhaps Jesus' most challenging teaching, Jesus says, love your enemies. This is hard.

This is a teaching of FOLLOWING JESUS I would love to forget. In my years as a pastor, I have had people tell lies about me, work against me, and at times undermine my leadership. The last thing I want to do is love them. Jesus, can I do everything you teach but this one? No. I know the answer. This is just a harder teaching, but Jesus knows the value to His Kingdom of loving enemies.

Yet. If I am going to FOLLOW JESUS, I must take to heart these harder teachings. How can I love my enemies? I can pray for them, bless them, and seek to serve them when possible. If I do this it not only brings love to others but does something very good within me. Ultimately those who do not like us and work against us are not our forever enemies. The real enemy is the evil one.

In the Christ-like response of love, enemies can even, in some cases, become our friends. Redemption and reconciliation are always possible in Christ. As much as it depends on us, we can love our enemies. Love of our enemies does not mean agreement with non-Kingdom values and certainly not abuse. Love does not mean acceptance of bad behavior. Love is our response, and we trust God with the rest.

Action:

List one person you consider as an enemy and pray for them today.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to love everyone, including my enemies today. Yes, Lord, I am willing to rethink loving my enemies. Help me, Lord. I need the Holy Spirit to do this.

Becoming more Like Christ

Take Up Your Cross

“Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” Luke 9:23-24 (NIV)

Oxymoron and the Kingdom

Oxymorons are fun. Opposite meaning words are used in the same sentence. They are pretty ugly! When a person has little chance, both "fat chance" and "slim chance" apply. The wings were "awfully good." Funny to use such words together.

Jesus' teaching on losing life and gaining life is a bit oxymoronic. So, what are we to make of this teaching? What did Jesus mean?

Have you ever watched TV lately without a remote? It is excruciating to me for some reason. I like to know I have control if I want to watch something else.

In seeking to follow Jesus, are some of us still wanting the remote control to our life? Like the old preacher said, "Lord, I will follow you as long as you are going my way!" 😂

Following Jesus completely requires us to relinquish control of our lives. This was harder two years ago before Covid. Now, I think we realize we never had the control over our lives we thought we did. Amazingly, when we give Jesus the "remote," we will find life better than we thought it could ever be! The ultimate oxymoron is to give up life, and we find it! Even when we take up our cross, our lives take on more meaning and a higher purpose for Jesus.

Action:

What has control of me that I need to relinquish? Can I give God control instead?

Prayer:

Lord, help me find the joy of finding life when I give up control to YOU.

Becoming More Like Christ

Hope Through Suffering

“suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” Romans 5:3b-5 (NIV)

Suffering and Hoping

My wife and I had a most difficult year two and a half years ago. In the midst of some church conflict that made ministry almost seem impossible, Karen was diagnosed with cancer out of nowhere! This led both of us to a place of suffering both physically, and mentally. The circumstances seemed unbearable. What we did not know fully is these are the moments God brings His redemption.

Karen made it through her cancer with courage and is well now. The Church is in a much better place, and redemption came through the suffering. Make no mistake about it; what we went through, I would not wish on anyone. I take away that God uses suffering for good and higher redemptive purposes.

This passage for today means a lot to me, and I hope for you.

"Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, character produces hope, and hope never disappoints." The Apostle Paul knew a great deal about suffering from both his "thorn in the flesh" and being in prison for the Gospel. His words are redemptive for us as suffering leads us to hope all the more in Jesus.

Friends, whatever hard time you are going through, hang in there! God's redemptive purposes are always at work. There is always hope.

Action:

Identify something in your life you want God to redeem. He will. There is hope for you.

Prayer:

Lord, bring your redemption of circumstances and hope to those who suffer today. Amen

Becoming More Like Christ

Seek First the Kingdom

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."
Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

Who is Number One?

Ten years ago, when Auburn basketball was not very popular, I was a season ticket holder. At the time, I lived forty-five minutes away and attended every game I could, and it was a bargain. The season tickets cost very little. Now, tickets are in such high demand one game would cost what my season ticket cost a decade ago. Auburn basketball matters now! They have even been ranked number one this year. Ticket holders make AU Basketball a priority. What a story! What is our greatest priority now? Sports? Stock market? Leisure? Well, none of those are bad unless they become the greatest priority of our life. When these become our ultimate priority, we will be disappointed. Our sports teams will not win all the time. The stock market will dip. We do have worries and problems that take the fun out of leisure.

Some of our quests for happiness are like "cotton candy." Cotton candy looks so good at a distance. We crave a taste, and it is good for a moment! But, after a moment, cotton candy melts in the mouth. Satisfaction is very short-lived. Sports, money, goals reached can be great for a moment, but there is only one priority that will quench our taste forever. This priority is Jesus and the Kingdom.

The Kingdom will never lose, never dip, and will lead us not to worry. Jesus teaches us to seek first the Kingdom, and all things will be added to us. This is good news! Even better than being a season ticket holder! The Kingdom is forever!

Action:

List your greatest priorities in life. Place Christ and His Kingdom at the top of the list. Live this priority.

Prayer:

Lord, may I seek first the Kingdom and let my other priorities fall into the proper place. Amen

Serving Christ

A Living Sacrifice

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. Romans 12:1-8 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

Serving Christ

Humility

It is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2:5-11 (NIV)

When we begin to serve Christ, it is important to keep the need to be humble at the forefront. Christ has freely given to us all that we could need: love, grace, pardon, reconciliation, atonement, and more, and for that, we should be grateful. Often though, we lean to thinking that we have done something to merit God's favor, which creates a sinful demeanor of pride.

I have told this joke before, but it just works so well. It is a story about scientists who got together and said they no longer needed God. They said that after they thought about it, they could do everything that God could do. From cloning people to creating new plants, they no longer needed God. So, they sent one of their leaders to inform God of this decision. God was very gracious to listen to the man explain his case after telling God he was no longer needed, and after it was over, God finally had a chance to speak. God said I understand your thoughts, but can we just have one last man-making contest before I go? Let's do it like I had to do it the first time. The scientist agreed (a bit put out and even arrogant that they were challenged to such a duel) but was ready to begin. So, the scientist bent down and began to dig up the ground and grab some dirt, and as he was doing it, God interrupted him and said, "No, No, No. You get your own dirt!"

A great and very funny example of something we do quite often. We think we have gotten to a place where we no longer need God. God, I can do this all by myself. God, I have learned this, and there is nothing else to know. God, I have been here before and know how this will go. We become proud instead of humble, and as a result, we don't end up serving God at all; we just serve ourselves! Humility is so critical as we begin this work on serving. If we do not remember the reason that we are called to serve in the first place, we cannot truly serve the community to which we have been called.

Action:

Today remember that Christ did not think of himself more highly than anyone else. He was willing to get down and wash the feet of his friends. Look for opportunities today to do the tasks that many think is below them. Be humble and seek the job today that doesn't get the glory!

Prayer:

Almighty God, you humbled yourself and walked this earth. You came from heaven and glory into the world where we find ourselves. You went from there to being placed on a cross and killed by those who you came to save. No greater moment can capture humility than your willingness to live, teach, and take on the cross. So, help us, we pray, to be humble as you are humble. Help us keep you at the center of our lives so as not to be proud and boast for selfish ways! Amen.

Serving Christ

Obedience

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. John 14:15 (CEB)

This marriage thing is quite new to me. I have only been married a little over a year, and I have already learned that there are certain "chores" around the house that are uniquely mine. While yes, we share many of the responsibilities, setting the coffee pot, cooking the meals, cleaning the majority of the house, and more, I have learned that there are some things that Anne Claire has to do. I also have learned that there are some things that I have to do that we have made a deal on, including taking out the trash and unloading the dishwasher.

We have made some trades along the way. I know now that my two main jobs around the house are trash and dishwasher. So, I make it a priority to make sure these get done. Do I forget? Of course. Do I find that I wish I were doing something else? Absolutely, but the reason that I do them is because I love my wife. I push through when I don't want to because of the love we have, the respect we share, and the care we show to one another. I don't mind taking out the trash because it is a small but tangible way I can remind Anne Claire, I love her.

This is a simple way that Jesus says to his followers to be obedient. Why they ask? Jesus says, because if you love me, you will show it with your actions. Actions speak louder the words most times, and Jesus says keeping my commands being obedient is a testament to your love for me! As we continue this week looking at service, I am reminded that love has to motivate me to keep the commands and be obedient. Anything else, and we will fail. Whether money, fame, glory, recognition, attention, easier life, more blessings, or anything else, if that becomes the motivation for being obedient to God, we will fail. Love however, the mutual love of God for you and your love for God, is the primary motivator for obedience.

Action:

Add a new habit that will help you grow in your walk with Christ. Chose a more difficult task knowing that only the love of God will motivate you to keep it and add it to your Lenten fast!

Prayer:

Dear God, you created us from nothing. You have our purpose and meaning, family and friends, and for that, we are grateful. You gave us careers and opportunities, blessings, and resources. Today help us to be drawn to remember that your love motivates us to serve you in the world. Help us not be led to obedience for money or fortune, blessings, or glory, but simply because you love us, and that is enough. Amen.

Serving Christ

Presence

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"²⁶ Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"²⁷ He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."²⁸ Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."²⁹ But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death."³¹ Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.³² Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.³³ A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.³⁴ The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.'³⁶ What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"³⁷ Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."
Luke 10:25-37 (CEB)

There is an old joke among the clergy that says in the Bible Job's friends were the best example of pastoral care until they started talking! While we most often equate the ministry of presence with worship attendance (and don't miss-hear me; that is always important), there is much more to being present as a way to serve Christ! Another saying that I have learned along the way is that sometimes good theology is not good pastoral care.

Both of these sayings working together is a way to simply offer that sometimes showing up, offering a listening ear, a non-anxious presence, and a hug as you leave is doing effective ministry for the kingdom of God. One of the most famous excuses of all when it comes to serving Christ in or out of the Church is "I don't know what to say!" Well, team, I am here to tell you that sometimes nothing needs to be said, or maybe everything can be said by choosing to show up at a trying time in someone's life.

In the most famous parable in the New Testament, the Good Samaritan, we see a story of the ministry of presence. While I will admit that he bandages his wounds, puts him on a donkey, and pays for his hotel, I also see glimpses of just being present. How about him noticing that he was injured in the first place. What about his willingness to come back and check on him later? What about jumping down in the ditch with him from the start? You have to know that they need your help to do anything for another. This takes showing up and being present!

Serving Christ

Presence

(Continued)

Action:

Do you find yourself wanting to do something for others more than just sitting and listening? Today I would invite you to try to listen deeply to someone. Do not try to solve their problem or fix their life; just show up or call and listen. Ask open-ended questions and be willing to be present with someone even in silence if it could help them.

Prayer:

Dear God, you are ever-present. You are Emmanuel God with us. Therefore, teach us today to be truly present with others and that in so doing, they might feel the power of your Spirit! Amen.

Serving Christ

Witness

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." Matthew 28:16-20 (CEB)

A not so funny story is that it was only recently that "Witness" was added to our membership vows in the UMC. In fact, if you were to open up a hymnal and look for yourself, you would not find that word printed in the hymnal that we all know and love. I think this is a small example of a cultural problem that has arisen regarding witness.

For starters, witness has a bad connotation right of the start. If you are like me, you see this word witness and think about that guy who stands on the corner. The one with a big sign that hangs over his shoulders that said, "Go to church or the Devil will get ya!" You might think of others who walk door to door passing out these flyers containing all things necessary for someone to "get saved." You might tell my disdain as I write, but full confession, I get mad sometimes when witnessing gets boiled down to shouting about Jesus or handing out flyers.

The true meaning of witness, I think, is explained by my old pal, Steve. Steve was a guy that would do absolutely anything for anyone. He would buy my lunch and let me use his truck. I could even stay at his house if I needed to. He taught me how to fix air conditioners and let me even use his pressure gauges. (Which didn't end that well) Steve is just a guy who has decided to live his life full of joy and happiness. A guy that you don't have to ask if he is a Christian or a Christ follower. You simply know that something is different

At Shalimar, we have an award to honor such people, The David Dale Award, given as you know to someone who seems to radiate Christ wherever they go! Serving Christ through witnessing is not about shouting the Gospel or passing out a flyer. Instead, witnessing is the way in which we live each day so that when someone sees us, they might see a glimpse of Christ.

Action:

Witnessing is found in the ordinary everyday tasks of life done with a smile and with some extra joy. Today, witness your love of Christ and the love he has for you by doing a random act of kindness for a friend or even a stranger!

Prayer:

Almighty God, you have called us to be your witnesses in all the world. You have shown us what it means to follow you by how you taught and lived. You went to sinners and ate with them. You went to tax collectors and shared stories with them. Help us model this form of witnessing that as we walk in this world others might see us as a reflection of your son. Amen.

Serving Christ

Giving

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:21 (CEB)

If you want to know what someone truly values look at their bank account. That is what anyone will tell you. We make time, give energy, and find the resources to do things we love! In the same way, giving to God must be a priority as we grow to be like Christ.

Ben and I once went to a gas station on Beal Parkway in Fort Walton Beach. I had never stopped at this store in my life, and from the outside looking in and being super judgmental, which I have asked forgiveness for, this was not really a place I wanted to stop then or ever again. I quickly got in line with the things that I needed because Ben and I were on a mission. I stood behind this guy dressed in work clothes who had clearly been working all day long. Sweat and dirt poured off of him, and behind him, I stood in dress pants and a blazer. He asked me if I was a lawyer, and I said no, just a preacher. As he was paying cash for his items, he kept turning around to talk to me about Church. He explained that he had not been in quite some time and did not know if the Church would let him come in because he usually was dressed like this. I did my best to assure him that he was always welcomed at any church I was the pastor of, and Shalimar UMC had a seat waiting on him. He thanked me, and as he was leaving, he got his change back from the attendant, headed for the door, stopped, looked at the \$2.27, and looked back at me. He then walked up to me, handed me the money, and said, "This is not going to cover all that I owe, but make sure this gets to the church."

An incredible story that I will never forget. Interpret it how you wish, but I saw a man who knew the importance of giving, and while maybe he just needed a reminder, he knew that what he had belonged to God. So, he gave that \$2.27, and I believe it could be the start of a transformation for him!

Action:

We are called to give as Christ has given to us. So today, give to a local organization in our community. Let's get very practical today. Chose a nonprofit and give a gift, whether \$2.27 or \$227; the amount is between you and God; the act of giving is a call to transformation.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to give as you have given to us. Help us to place you at the center of our lives so that our money, time, and energy can be given to you. We pray that as we work to share your love in the world, we can give our whole selves over to you. Keep us in your grace as we share with those we meet. Amen.

Serving Christ

Gifts

And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts. ¹¹ Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To him be honor and power forever and always. Amen.

1 Peter 4:10-11 (CEB)

Using your gifts for serving the Lord can come in many different shapes and sizes! As many of you know, Ben Savage is our worship leader for the Freedom service. He played guitar, sang, and led worship for over 20 years. One day I got a call from a church member. She had been at the Dollar General here in Shalimar and met a man who had a guitar. He was just sitting outside the Dollar General and asked everyone who went in and out if they knew how to tune a guitar. Well, they called me, so I called Ben, and we rode over to check out the situation.

We saw the gentleman and realized he had gotten a new tuner but did not know how to use it when we got there. So, Ben showed him how, tuned the guitar, and played him a quick tune. Then what happened next was great. He looked over at Ben and said, "Do you know I saw the light?" Ben gave it his best shot, and that man started singing as loudly as he could. The whole parking lot could hear it, and I think a few people even joined in. Just a simple gift of knowing how to tune a guitar was a bright spot for our new friend. It even led to a worship service at the Dollar General.

We all have been blessed with gifts. We all have been blessed with different gifts, and I am here to tell you that not one single gift is better than the next! It takes all people, with all the unique gifts they have been given, to come together to make a difference for the Kingdom of God. So often, I hear, "my gifts aren't good enough" and I just want to ask what would be good enough. That man that Ben met that day did not need to be preached to or taught a bible study. He didn't even need to be sung to or brought to Church. Instead, he needed his guitar tuned, and in doing so, I think he felt the love of God extended from our Church. That is what sharing your gifts is all about!

Action:

We all have been blessed with gifts. What are some of your gifts? How might you use them for the church? Take some time today to write a few of them down!

Prayer:

Almighty God, you have blessed us with the greatest gift of all, salvation found in Christ Jesus. For that, we are truly thankful! We pray that we would not take the gifts that you have given us for granted, but rather be able to work at them and grow them to help build your Kingdom here on earth! Amen.

Holy Week: The Triumphal Entry

Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it.

³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

⁴⁰ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” Luke 19:28-40 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

Holy Week

Cursing the Fig Tree

"This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.'

Matthew 6:9-13 (NIV)

What Does a Preacher Say When He Hits His Hand with a Hammer?

Years ago, I was assembling a swing set for my children. One part would not slip into place, and I tried tapping with a hammer. I became frustrated and attempted to hit the metal harder. Unfortunately, I missed and hit my finger. The next few moments, I danced through the yard writhing in pain! After I calmed down, I noticed my neighbor had seen the whole episode. I asked him later why he watched, and he said, "I wanted to know what a preacher said when he hit his hand with a hammer!" Some things are better left unsaid!

Today, we read of Jesus cursing the fig tree. This is one of the sternest teachings of Jesus. In the midst of Holy Week, Jesus stops and condemns a poor fig tree. The symbolism is the tree had the right appearance but not the fruitfulness. Religion without discipleship is the same. Our journey to FOLLOW JESUS is more than being religious. This journey is being a disciple. John Wesley warned years ago the greatest danger of the Church was having the form of religion but not the power of God. This is Holy Week, a time to clearly walk as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus said the greatest sign of fruitfulness is to be a disciple and make disciples. This is our greatest challenge as the Church of today, to be more than members and to be disciples of Jesus. We need not only the appearance of religion but the fruits of discipleship!

Action:

Bear some fruit of discipleship today. Put into action love, serve, and encourage someone for the Kingdom today.

Prayer:

Lord may my dedication for you not be in appearance only but confirmed in fruitfulness. Help me bear fruit today.

Holy Week

Cleansing the Temple

"On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹ When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city." Mark 11:15-19 (NIV)

Turning the Tables

What does it look like to be more like Jesus? We would live into the Beatitudes, bless those who are poor in spirit, be merciful, and be peacemakers. We would love those who are overlooked, forgive those who are condemned, and especially exalt the humble. The FOLLOWING OF JESUS takes a lifetime. Jesus' teachings are so lofty for us to aspire to in both love and practice.

Today, we see another dimension of Jesus to follow Holy Anger. Now, this is a tricky teaching, for we are not Jesus! This does not permit us to blow a fuse. Our temper can be our worst virtue and nothing more than a tantrum. Holy Anger is more sanctified and controlled with an eye toward justice for the poor.

Jesus became angry because religion was being used to benefit religious people, not God. The selling of sacrificial offerings was at exorbitant prices. The poor could not afford it, and the rulers were lining their own pockets. So, Jesus chose to do housecleaning or "Kingdom Cleaning."

As the cursing of the fig tree yesterday, Jesus has no patience for the appearance of religion but no fruitfulness. Add today's teaching is worse - the appearance of religion with corruption. God has no patience for this, nor should His disciples. Therefore, Holy Anger must be accompanied by the love and sanctification of Christ.

Action:

Ask yourself, are there any pretenses in me? Can I serve the poor today and make sure the Kingdom is within their reach?

Prayer:

Lord, help me see not only the ones in the church but those outside the church, particularly the poor.

Holy Week

At the Feet of Jesus

³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?"

⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

⁶ "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Mark 14:3-9 (NIV)

Jesus' Kingdom is Not Penny Pinching

Yesterday, we saw Jesus turn over the tables, outraged that worship practices exploited the poor. Today's teaching expands teaching that the Kingdom is not about "penny-pinching." When a woman pours expensive oil on the head of Jesus, some are outraged. The oil could have been sold for a year's wages and given to the poor. This sounds religious, but Jesus sees right through the hypocrisy and condemns the hollow response for the poor. Again, the issue is the appearance of religion but other motives underneath.

Jesus indicates that this woman's compassion is to be commended and has nothing to do with giving to the poor. In this Kingdom of Jesus, there is a time to give to the poor, and there is a time to anoint. In Jesus' Kingdom, there is a time to fast, and there is a time to feast. In this case, being with Jesus and sparing no expense was the greater Kingdom lesson. The heart is right.

Our FOLLOWING JESUS involves variety. Different situations call for different Kingdom responses. We will both serve the poor, and we will offer costly acts of love on other occasions. Some days we are obedient through fasting, and other days we feast. This message of the Kingdom is about serving others, giving Jesus our best, and learning at the feet of Jesus. These are all ways we FOLLOW JESUS, whether it be fasting, feasting, serving, celebrating, preparing, and learning at His feet. Following Jesus involves a variety of responses. Our heart leads us to know which response is most needed at the time.

Action:

What have we offered Jesus today of great cost?

Prayer:

God, help me offer Jesus my very best today and be a disciple learning at His feet. Amen

Holy Week

Last Supper

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. Luke 22:19-20 (NIV)

The Last Supper

The feast of the Passover had come. The disciples of Jesus had arranged preparations in the Upper Room. This supper would be the culmination of three years of teaching, witnessing the power of Jesus, and a growing tension of religious people. The disciples were about to be devastated and scattered. Even though Jesus had warned them, they did not grasp what was about to happen.

As they gathered at the table, one (Judas) had already plotted to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Along with the tension, the emotion in the room was charged. Jesus would soon be betrayed and denied. Jesus would wash the feet of the one who would deny Him. In the midst of it all, Jesus honored the Passover and expanded to what we know as The Lord's Supper. Jesus would say, "Take eat, this is my Body, broken for you. Then the cup is my Blood shed for you." The disciples did not know at the time what they were doing would be a sacrament for the coming of the Church.

As we FOLLOW HIM, Holy Communion is a way of remembering and receiving Jesus' Body and Blood shed for us.

In our world, much like the first Upper Room, tension and drama unfold; when we gather at the table, the bread and cup represent Jesus' grace to reconcile our brokenness. Holy Communion draws us to Christ and makes us one with Christ, one with the world, and one with each other. As we think about our world, nation, community, and Church: we need this sacrament of Jesus now as much as ever!

Action:

When you receive Holy Communion this Maundy Thursday, remember the Body and Blood of Christ shed for you and give thanks!

Prayer:

God, thank you for the message of the Passover that you set us free and for the Lord's Supper. As Israel was freed in the Passover, we thank you that we can be made free in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Holy Week

Garden to the Cross

Gethsemane

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³ He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴ “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” Mark 14:32-42 (NIV)

The Only Direction to Resurrection Is Through the Crucifixion

In preaching one night of Holy Week at a predominately African American congregation, my sermon was on the Garden of Gethsemane. The Holy Spirit touched the sermon, and I will never forget the lines of the sermon that became anointed.

- Sometimes we pray, and sometimes we pray those Gethsemane prayers—Lord not my will but thy will. The congregation repeated back out loud!
- Lord, sometimes we pray the cup will pass, but the cross is just ahead. The congregation repeated out loud.
- There is only one direction to the resurrection, and that is through the crucifixion. Once again, the congregation repeated out loud.

These phrases have impacted my discipleship for years. If we FOLLOW JESUS, we sometimes must pray those Gethsemane prayers. We pray for God's will, not ours. We have to drink from cups we do not want to drink. There are no shortcuts, no cheap grace, and we have to go through suffering with obedience and bear our crosses.

The path of a disciple is not always easy. FOLLOWING HIM is not always an easy road. Yet we follow, for we know something better is coming!

Holy Week

Garden to the Cross

Gethsemane

(Continued)

Challenge:

What is my most difficult prayer today? Pray about it and through it. What must I do that is not easy today? Seek the strength of God to do what may not be easy but is for the benefit of others and myself.

Prayer:

Lord, help me through the difficult steps of my discipleship as well as my glorious ones.

Holy Week

Waiting

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man,
⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of
Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for
Jesus' body. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the
rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was
about to begin.

⁵⁵ The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and
how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But
they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. Luke 23:50-56

Lord, Give Me Patience Now!

Waiting is a part of our lives. We wait in lines. We wait to hear the report from the doctor. We wait for packages and repairs? When we are young, we cannot wait until we are older. When we are married, we await children. When we work a long time, we await to retire. How much of our life do we spend waiting?

Most of us are not patient in waiting at all. Most of us live into the old saying, "Lord, give me patience now!" We want things to be complete or finished. Unfortunately, our world has very little patience. Yet, patience is part of our role of FOLLOWING HIM. Jesus even instructed His disciples to wait for Him following the resurrection.

The most significant time of waiting in history was the three days between the cross and the resurrection. How long must those days have seemed for the disciples? The disciples really only waited in hindsight. In the moment, they feared, doubted, were confused, and even abandoned what Jesus taught them.

How do we handle waiting on the Lord? Do we abandon our faith? Run? Deny? Betray? Waiting is difficult for all. We cannot go back, and it is not time yet to move ahead. Patience is difficult, if not impossible. Yet, God teaches us in times of waiting.

Isaiah 40:31 teaches us, "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength they shall mount up with wings as eagles they shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not faint." We wait today. It is difficult. Yet, God always shows up in due time!

Challenge:

How can I spend my day waiting to renew myself in the Lord?

Prayer

Lord, help me to wait and be patient. Not too slow, not too fast. Help me to wait until you show up and rise up!

He Is Risen

Jesus Has Risen

¹ On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. Luke 24:1-12 (NIV)

Sermon Notes:

Notes

Notes

Notes:

