**Daily Devotions**

**July 2022**

*07-01*

“When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins.”

— Exodus 22:16-17

Translation: If a man rapes an unmarried woman, he either marries her or pays her father compensation. Such was life in the patriarchal society of the Israelites, and it’s not okay. In our modern context we need to struggle with these ancient, culturally bound texts, because like it or not, they have a profound influence even now on how women are valued and treated in our society. Attitudes about a woman’s rights—including the now-overturned right to have control of her own body—are shaped by these patriarchal notions that many people still believe ought to be the norm: that women should be subservient, sexually available, and the property of men. And this is not okay. Let me say it again: Not. Okay.

God, who is not male, created humans male and female as coequal partners in the stewardship of creation. God, who is not male, but often relates to God’s people in traditionally feminine ways, honors and upholds a woman’s autonomy. God, who is not male, surely did not endorse any laws of Moses that directly diminished the full personhood of any individual.

We are to struggle with these laws, to wonder where God is in the midst of them, to question their validity, to dig deep into how to discern which of Moses’ long, long, list of (more than 600) laws were actually from God’s lips to Moses’ ear, and which were the organizational efforts of one man or a group of men trying to create a society that benefitted them.

God bless you in your struggle, and remind you daily that our God is a God of wholeness, grace, creativity, and love, whose desires for us do not diminish our personhood, but embrace and celebrate it, regardless of its unique expression.

How do I discern God’s voice in challenging scripture texts?

*07-02*

“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing.”

— Exodus 23:1-2a

Ooh. I’m so sorry. I know I’m not supposed to get political in these devotions, but I can’t help thinking of the January 6 hearings going on right now around the “Big Lie” when I read this law of Moses. Or of the state of discourse in our nation, in which seemingly enormous numbers of people absolutely believe a series of malicious falsehoods that wreak havoc on the well-being of this country and its people.

God calls us to be people of discernment. For me in our modern context, that means having dialog with others, listening to experts about things I am not trained in (like epidemiology and climate science, for example), and always erring on the side of honoring the personhood and rights of my neighbors, no matter who they are.

When I hear about not following a majority in wrongdoing, I think of the old saw our parents frequently used to respond to our desires to cave into peer pressure: “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?” I feel at times like we as a society are standing on the guard rail of a bridge over a raging river, and so many of us are ready to jump based on the advice of a few people who, themselves, would never dream of jumping. It’s distressing if I think about it too much.

So I lean back into the arms of God. I acknowledge that there are things I am powerless over (most things, actually) and that my job is to keep my side of the street clean and to be of love and service to God and neighbors in any way I can. The rest is none of my business and up to God who, by the way, is standing on that guard rail with all the potential jumpers, holding them in grace, mercy, and love, regardless of whether they choose to take the leap into oblivion.

How do I navigate the current challenges in our society with my faith and sanity intact?

*07-03*

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

— Exodus 20:17

Main Idea: God’s commandment not to covet invites an attitude of gratitude and happiness.

I remember years ago I would often drive through wealthier neighborhoods than mine longing for the homes with giant planters and impeccable landscaping. On many occasions I said aloud, “I’m coveting… I’m coveting!”

It may seem harmless, to want something someone else has. But it is far more insidious than at first glance. Coveting is not just about wishing for more. At its core, coveting is about failing to see all that God has already given us, and an ungratefulness for what is ours. As long as my mental and emotional energy is being directed toward what I do not possess, I cannot direct that energy into living a life of gratitude for all that God has done for me already. Sadly, coveting can turn into taking, and when someone takes another’s possessions or home or spouse, the consequences to all involved can be devastating. The long-lasting effects of betrayal trauma, for example, will change a person irrevocably. That is not a choice the coveter/taker should be allowed to make for another.

Just over 12 years ago, a minimalist movement began creeping into our culture. The idea is that people can make do with far less than media culture says people need. (I vividly remember seeing my first tooth-whitening TV commercial and thinking “I never knew I needed that!” Until the commercial, the color of my teeth had never ever crossed my mind. Now, yellow teeth are a sign of poverty or at best laziness.) Now, while a minimalist lifestyle is not for everyone, it certainly highlights our culture’s very strong need to start needing less—to start coveting less. We have come to a place where coveting is woven into our culture’s fabric. It’s time to stop. It’s time to listen again to God’s words, “You shall not covet.” Learning to live with less stuff and more gratitude is hard work—it’s a lifelong practice. But it’s also a key to satisfaction and happiness that is often overlooked. God’s laws were not designed to make us miserable, but to liberate us from the things that prevent us from living full, grateful, happy, connected lives.

*07-04*

“Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread.

You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.”

— Exodus 23:14-15a, 16

Partay! Life is hard work. Survival as a community takes elbow grease, commitment, and is often challenging. God desires more than simply our survival; God desires our flourishing. In order to flourish, we need to party! We need to come together and celebrate. Eat, drink, dance, play, rest, and above all, remember. Honor the God who delivers, the God who causes the ground to produce, the God who sustains until the next growing season.

I love the rhythm of my life, which includes regular festivals. Easter and Christmas are, of course, full of anticipation and joy. But there’s also the three weeks I spend every year at my family cabin in Michigan—a place my grandfather bought in 1951, when my dad was 8. (I’m there right now, which is why this is on my heart and mind.) It’s not a big, festive celebration, like Christmas and Easter, but it is time set aside to be in nature and commune with God in deep gratitude for this place and for a life which, although often challenging, still holds space for this time of serenity and relaxation. So, yeah, maybe these are my three annual festivals observed in gratitude to God: Easter, Christmas, and Michigan. Gratitude indeed.

What are the regular festivals that bring joy and flourishing to my life?

*07-05*

“When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.”

— Exodus 23-24

It’s hard to read this violent, xenophobic language, but what is it really all about? If we strip away the war-like language, God is calling the Israelites to stand firm in their own identity. Know who you are, and know whose you are. If you follow after other gods, which are not God, you will inevitably be let down, and left wondering about everything.

Knowing your own identity is important. Not necessarily your genealogy or other worldly markers of legal identity, but actually who you are. For example, I am a cisgender straight woman, an introvert, a writer, a mom, a Christian, a musician, and someone who needs 9 hours of sleep a night. This is just a sliver of the whole of who I am, my full personhood, which all adds up to being a beloved child of God, full stop. Knowing who I am (and whose I am) lays the foundation for everything I do.

There was a time in my life when I had no idea who I was. I thought I did. I acted as if I did. But my life was an unmanageable mess and a lot of it came down to the fact that I wasn’t being true to myself and therefore wasn’t meeting my actual needs. Changing this required figuring out who I was and what my needs were in the first place and that took a lot of time and effort, all well worth it.

Today I am comfortable in my own skin. And as a result, I am comfortable with you in whatever skin you inhabit. I honor your full personhood wherever you are in your life, whether you know who you are or not. This is the love and grace God gives each of us, and why God is so insistent that we come to know who we are. No violent conquest required.

Who am I? Am I comfortable in my own skin?

*07-06*

“Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”

— Exodus 24:7-8

Personally I prefer the “blood of the covenant” that was in the wine at the last supper. Waaaaaay less gross. But it’s instructive to read this passage in Exodus and recognize that Jesus was using this language intentionally. And, like he did with everything else, Jesus turned it on its head. It was no longer about dashing animal blood against an altar and throwing it on the people, but about partaking in wine as a reminder that ultimately Jesus’ blood was shed out of profound love and solidarity with our humanity.

Either way, it is a covenant—a contract or vow between two people. I will do this, you will do this. God will be our God and we will be God’s people. This was true when Moses was splashing blood on people and when Jesus passed the cup at the last supper. It’s still very much in keeping with the theme of these past few devotions, about honoring our whole personhood, and being grateful to God for that personhood.

How do I remember the covenant that God is my God and I am God’s child?

*07-07*

“Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.”

— Exodus 24:9-11

Have I ever really “seen” this before? I know I’ve read it, but obviously it never sank in because I think I would remember so vivid an event: with all the language in the bible around how seeing the face of God mean instant death, here we have more than seventy people seeing God and then eating and drinking to celebrate. Um…what?

I guess I don’t have much to say about this from a devotional perspective, except that no matter how many times you read it, scripture can surprise you. Sometimes pleasantly, sometimes unpleasantly, and sometimes…well…bewilderingly, like this one. I continue to be so grateful to be in these texts, reading and pondering, digging and discerning, just waiting for God to surprise and challenge me all over again. It’s just awesome.

When have I been surprised by something I’ve read in scripture?

*07-09*

“You shall make a table of acacia wood, two cubits long, one cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high.

You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. You shall make the seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it.”

— Exodus 25:23, 31a, 37

Such specific details about every little thing to be found in the temple! Being someone who doesn’t really think God had anything to do with asking people to build God’s temple to spec, I wonder who came up with all of this? Why a table? Why acacia wood? Why seven lamps? Because of the seven days of creation? Seven (along with twelve and forty) comes up a lot in scripture, and I don’t know that I’ve ever learned exactly why these numbers are particularly significant.

Frankly, I love me some symbolism. If I were to design a house for God, I could come up with all kinds of really cool things I would include. Now that I say that “out loud,” I feel like I need to go do that—what a fun exercise that could be! Maybe you want to join me.

If I were to build a place of worship, what would it look like? What elements would be included? What would they mean?

*07-10*

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials.”

— 1 Peter 1:3-6

Main Idea: God acknowledges our suffering, and promises hope that we can live in peace and love.

As a child I learned that the things of God were difficult to come by. A faithful life was one of deprivation, self-control, and constant contrition. I don’t know why we teach our kids that God is like that. I was terrified of making a misstep. I lived in a strange juxtaposition between fear and love of God, and a big fat heap of self-loathing.

On first read, this letter of 1 Peter rings similarly. Yes, you’re suffering now, but it’ll all be better in the end. Yes, you must refrain from enjoying the things of life, but it’ll be worth it when you get to heaven.

I no longer believe God works this way—demanding self-restraint for the prize of salvation. No, the things God asks of us are not for deprivation or flagellation, but are designed to make our lives better, not worse.

The people 1 Peter addressed were already living in fear and danger. 1 Peter’s words of the hope of grace in the days to come would have landed as hope and healing. For us, living in a world of abundance and opportunity, these words sound like a recipe for deprivation. But God’s hope for us (as for 1 Peter’s readers) is that we all survive and thrive through the difficult times so that we can live with gratitude, abundance, and hope. Yes, “all flesh is like grass.” That doesn’t mean our time in the flesh is worthless. It means God wants our time here to be fruitful, even as we move toward an eternal future that is just, peaceful, abundant, and filled with love and the presence of God.

*07-11*

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

— 1 Peter 1:3

It hadn’t occurred to me to think about hope as living or dead. What would a dead hope be? Maybe hope in something that can and will never come to pass. Except how could we know for sure? I look at the state of my country and I still want to have hope in our future, but it sure is hard. Do I call that a dead hope? Or does that mean I don’t think with God all things are possible? It’s a conundrum.

On the other hand, maybe it’s as simple as this: a dead hope is a hope in anything that isn’t God. It’s putting my trust in people or things or addictive substances. It’s wishful thinking and grandiosity parading as hope. Whereas a living hope is complete trust in God that, come what may, even if the absolute worst happens, ultimately we’ll be okay. Because God in Christ loved us so ridiculously much that God endured the worst we could ever face in solidarity with us, and opened the way to eternal life with God.

With that kind of living hope, we can’t help but be transformed, and inspired to live our lives to God, asking what God’s will for us is, and taking joy in carrying it out.

What does “living hope” mean to me?

*07-12*

“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”

— 1 Peter 1:8

The human incarnation of Jesus is no longer here for me to see. Or is he? I subscribe to the notion that Jesus is, in fact, alive and well in every single human being. That, having shared embodied humanity with us and gone to hell and back in solidarity with us, Jesus now resides at the very center of the personhood of each and every one of us. Even the people we don’t like. Maybe especially the people we don’t like.

Having accepted that Jesus resides in the personhood of each of us, and loving him with an indescribably and glorious joy, then it follows that I can and should love every single person I encounter (and those I don’t) with the same completeness.

Except I don’t, of course. Just because Jesus is present at the center of my being doesn’t make me Jesus. I’m still human, still flawed, still frustratingly judgmental of others who disagree with me or treat me poorly or don’t use their turn signals… Yeah.

It’s a goal, to be sure. A state of being to aspire to. A living hope, if you will. May God open my eyes to the Christ-centered personhood of all people that I might respond with love.

Where do I see Jesus in my day to day life?

*07-13*

“It was revealed to [the prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.”

— 1 Peter 1:12a

Being a prophet is not a self-serving task. Even when the prophets proclaimed words of hope to the people, words of reconciliation and wholeness, they themselves often would not live to be the recipients of such hope. Here the writer of 1 Peter talks of all the prophets, long dead, whose words presaged the total transformation of humanity’s relationship with God and ultimate salvation through Jesus.

So, whether bringing good news or haranguing the people to change their ways, a prophet did not benefit from their vocation. And the same is true today. We are, all of us, called to be prophets—to speak God’s words of justice and wholeness into a deeply troubled reality.

Actually this makes me think of my dad. For decades he taught political science and Peace and Justice Studies at Fordham University. He has been active in Bread for the World, among other causes, for as long as I can remember. He has worked for economic justice for those in poverty his whole life. As he approaches 80, I sometimes wonder if he’s disappointed that things haven’t changed for the better on a large scale despite all his work. But I guess he is a prophet. He speaks God’s words of justice and wholeness into the world, regardless of whether the people receive them. He isn’t doing it for his benefit, but that maybe at some point, his words will be borne out in reality for future generations. That’s kind of cool.

When have I felt called to act as a prophet? What was my motivation for speaking out?

*07-14*

“Do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.”

— 1 Peter 1: 14b-15

To be holy means to be set apart. God is holy because God’s ways are not our ways. God calls us to be holy—to set ourselves apart from the trappings of society—as God is holy. Some folks have taken that literally, becoming hermits or entering a holy order, but I don’t think that’s for everyone.

I think the primary ingredient of becoming holy in our modern context is honesty. It would be easy to think of the hermit or monk or nun and decide “well I could never do that,” and just side step the whole notion of holiness. But if we look honestly at our lives as we are living them on a day to day basis, we are bound to see plenty of ways in which we are caught up in unhealthy and destructive patterns dictated by our society, which cause us to simply go with the flow rather than stop and question it. We are indoctrinated from an early age to believe that wealth is the ultimate goal and is to be attained at all costs, to value material possessions and thinness, and so forth.

Being holy doesn’t mean being a hermit, but it does mean setting ourselves apart from the falsehoods our society teaches us—the “desires you formerly had in ignorance.” That way we’re far more able to hear what God is calling us to do, and to take joy in doing it.

What worldly ideas and attitudes present a barrier to holiness?

*07-15*

“Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.”

— 1 Peter 1:22-23

Love one another deeply from the heart. I love this. In fact, I feel a strong connection with any scripture passage that exhorts us to have true, unconditional love for one another. It’s such a cliché to say “love is the answer” or “all you need is love” but the reason it’s a cliché is that it’s true. I’m not talking romantic love or just having positive feelings for people who are like us. I’m talking about love as a radical, transformative action. This kind of love calls us out of our comfort zones and into open dialog and compassion. It calls us to sacrifice our selfish wants and share all we have and all we are. When we’re in that state of love, we build deep, meaningful connections with our neighbors, which can only result in joy. Who wouldn’t want that?

How do I define “love”?

*07-16*

“For ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ That word is the good news that was announced to you.”

— 1 Peter 1:24-25

It’s mayfly season here at the cabin. These fragile ephemera live less than a day, their shimmering wings carrying them through their mating rituals then covering the ground in an iridescent sheen. Few things more sharply bring home the transient nature of life.

Yesterday I was talking with my parents about my ancestor, Francis Fergus, who emigrated from Ireland to the U.S. in 1770. I have a relative who has thoroughly researched the genealogy of his family in the states, but when she has gone to Ireland to try to go further back beyond Francis, she has found nothing. Too many Presbyterian churches and all their records burned over the years. No matter how long a person’s legacy might endure, eventually, it falls into obscurity and vanishes to time.

Depressing? Only if you don’t read the second part of this verse: “the word of the Lord endures forever.” Only if you don’t believe that, as a beloved child of God, you are part of God’s word, and your legacy with God is eternal. You matter, regardless of whether your church records were destroyed and no one remembers you. You are born again of an imperishable seed, and will dwell in the house of God forever. That word is the good news that is announced to you.

What do I imagine my legacy will be?

*07-17*

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.”

— 1 Peter 2:11-12

Main Idea: The blessing of God is not just in attaining, but in striving for a better self.

Upon reading this we come across a troubling text. “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” There is nothing about a loving God that suggests that people who are beaten should remain willingly and quietly.

So, let’s look at this in the context of the greater text. This chapter suggests that, having been chosen by God, we also are given the awesome responsibility of building within ourselves a foundation of faith and spiritual purity. One who builds upon a strong foundation will create a structure that is sound.

For God’s people, the foundation was to present to the world a community that was united in faith, justice, and holiness. For individuals, the foundation is to fully embrace the autonomy we have been given over our own reactions to the things the world throws at us. God gives us the power to own our own presence in the world.

For those enslaved whose circumstances were unlikely to change, God gave autonomy to stand strong in the face of that challenge, whether easy or harsh. God reassures them that no one can take from them their self-worth, their response to their situations, or their integrity, even when others try to beat it out of them.

What this means for us is that we are invited to build a foundation for our lives on integrity, autonomy, strength, faith, and holiness. Such a foundation can withstand the long-lasting effects of abuse and suffering. Yes, of course, if you can get out, get out! And then upon that foundation of God’s living stone, rebuild a life of compassion, self-compassion, humility, confidence, a sense of self-worth, and love.

God’s invitation is not to endure suffering needlessly and without a fight. God’s invitation is to build a life—your life—upon a foundation that can withstand anything, even suffering, and can then be built stronger than before.

*07-18*

“Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

— 1 Peter 2:1-3

God, our Mother, provides what really matters. Babies don’t act with malice, guile, insincerity, envy, or slander (no matter how much it feels like it when you’re walking in circles in the middle of the night with a colicky child—just sayin’). Babies need one thing, from which everything else flows: love. When you love a child, you want nothing more than that child’s flourishing, and so you will give it the milk she requires to grow and thrive, the attention she needs to feel secure, the interaction she needs for her brain to develop, and all the other trappings of making sure her needs are fully met.

This is what our Mothering God does for us if we just let her. But since we’re no longer infants, we reserve the right to make ridiculous choices that lead to all sorts of negative behavior which, in turn, leads to conflict and chaos. We would do well to relax into the loving embrace of our God and allow ourselves to be nourished on what really matters.

In what ways do I feel nourished by God?

*07-19*

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

— 1 Peter 2:4-5

I collect rocks when I’m at the lake. This 12 x 4 mile expanse of clear, blue water kicks up a cornucopia of color and pattern onto our narrow strip of beach. I spend hours just staring at them, waiting for my eye to be caught by a particular hue or the way powerful forces have made this or that stone perfectly rounded or delightfully striped. I use these treasures to make picture frames in which I put…wait for it…pictures from up at the lake. Each stone is lovingly chosen, precious in my sight.

And so we are in the eyes of God, who sees in us a delightful riot of color and pattern, who recognizes the way the forces in our lives that batter us also shape us, who chooses each of us lovingly as a precious treasure to be used in building a spiritual house—a community of infinite beauty and variety, mutually supportive, in which God is fully present.

What does it mean to me to be a living stone that is part of a spiritual house?

*07-20*

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

— 1 Peter 2:10

It’s easy for me to isolate. Even pre-pandemic I preferred to keep my own company, with occasional forays out for coffee with a couple of friends. I’ve been a self-employed, work-from-home person for a lot of years, and it works for me.

But in spite of that, this introvert needs to belong. I know how critical community is to emotional and spiritual well-being. And sometimes I just get downright lonely. I, all by myself, am not “a people.”

God calls each of us into community. We are invited to become not just “a people”, but “God’s people”, holy and beloved. In that community God nurtures us as we nurture one another with the grace, compassion, companionship, and joy we all need to flourish. Also in that community, God reminds us again and again that we are to go forth and reflect God’s love and light into the world, acting lovingly and decisively on behalf of our neighbors, so that we all might flourish.

No one is mean to be alone, though many are, often not by choice. May we live out our call to be God’s people by welcoming our neighbors into that beloved community every chance we get.

Do I prefer to be alone or with people? What does community mean to me?

*07-21*

“As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.”

— 1 Peter 2:16

The concept of “freedom” has become insanely contentious in the U.S. There is a increasingly vocal group of people who seem to define “freedom” as the right to do absolutely as they please without regard to anyone else’s needs, and who seem to delight insisting that any attempt whatsoever to hold them responsible for even common decency is an act of oppression on the part of the government. It would be laughable if it wasn’t wreaking so much havoc.

As a beloved child of God, filled with the Holy Spirit and redeemed by the total self-emptying love of Jesus Christ, I am free. Free from Sin (with a capital S) and death. Free to reject the human institutions that would cause me to turn from God’s call to work for justice for all people. Free to live and love and flourish in God’s incredible creation. But that freedom is not to be used to justify acting out in ways that infringe upon the rights and freedoms of others. I may consider myself not subject to earthly authorities (ultimately speaking), but that doesn’t mean I run red lights with impunity.

Freedom in God actually carries a ton of responsibilities, as I’ve already alluded to, above. Freedom means I am obligated to work tirelessly so that everyone enjoys the same freedom—even people I don’t agree with. Especially them. Freedom means I may have to set aside what I want so that everyone can have what they need. It is the polar opposite of the kind of selfishness implied in “freedom” as it is bandied about in political arguments. Yet that freedom is far more freeing than any we could make up for ourselves. There is such joy in a life that takes meaning in being of love and service to others. That’s the kind of freedom I want.

How do I define “freedom”? How is freedom in God different than worldly freedom?

*07-22*

“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.”

— 1 Peter 2:18-19

Nope. Just nope. I feel like I shouldn’t even have to dignify this with a devotion. But here it is and if nothing else I can take it as an opportunity, once again, to struggle with this so often beautiful yet so often jaw-droppingly wrong-headed document I still consider to be the Word of God.

After all, God can’t be contained in a book. All of creation from its inception to now is driven by constant change, and God (though unchanging Godself), dances along with the changes, embracing humanities evolving understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. And while much of scripture is timeless and open to interpretation based on context, some of it is, in my opinion, a snapshot of a much crueler time and place.

Slavery is wrong. It really is that simple. No human being should be considered the property of another. And, by the way, women and children were also considered the property of their husbands/fathers and therefore, though the roles might have been slightly different, also slaves. Just because the context in which this was written accepts slavery doesn’t mean slavery is okay with God.

Yesterday’s devotion was all about living as free people in God, for crying out loud. I believe with all my heart that it is God’s desire that every single human being is a beloved child of God deserving of autonomy and flourishing. If that means I’m “cherry-picking” the Bible, so be it.

How do I make peace with this passage and others like in the Bible?

*07-23*

“If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval.”

— 1 Peter 2:20

God does not approve suffering. It’s not like God stands back when you’re being wrongly abused saying, “Way to go!” In Christ, God fully emptied Godself and shared our place 100%. God does not approve suffering. God stands with us, sharing our place, and suffers with us.

At the same time, God calls us to engage in place-sharing with others, creating safe and loving space for them to process and address their suffering. And God calls us to action in behalf of the suffering to stand up to those who inflict it and demand change.

There are so many people who are suffering unjustly in my country, at the hands of police violence, a so-called justice system that disproportionately penalizes some people over others, from unjust laws that discriminate against women, BIPOC folks, LGBTQ+ folks, and from the general abuses of the white supremacy that seems to drive all of this. We simply cannot stand by and say, “You’re being abused for doing what is right—good on you!” God is right in there getting their hands dirty. So should we be.

When have I gotten in trouble or suffered because of something I did right?

*07-24*

“Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.”

— 1 Peter 3:1-2

Main Idea: God asks us to cultivate the best within ourselves so that we can allow room for others to do the same.

Poopy pants. I’m not gonna lie. Being myself a “woman as the weaker sex,” this is a tough text to unravel. I clearly do not agree that women are weaker, or that women must refrain from braids to be better versions of themselves. A braid is, after all, an incredibly effective way of keeping hair out of your face while you’re constructing your she-shed or removing a storm’s fallen branches with a chainsaw.

All joking aside, I don’t think it’s time well spent to talk about what the text isn’t saying. (Or shouldn’t say.) Instead, let’s look at what the text does say.

Firstly, the text suggests that women refocus their energies away from outward appearances toward being the best version of themselves that they can be—especially since our best selves have the capacity to encourage others to be their best selves. I can get behind this. Whenever I’m focused on proving to others that I am beautiful, smart, or competent, I am not spending energy actually being beautiful, smart, or competent. And when I’m living into my best, smartest, most competent self, then I allow room for those around me to become their best selves. That cannot happen if I am judgmental (toward them or toward myself), defensive, or fake. Others can only be their most authentic selves when I am comfortable in my own skin and let them know they can be, too.

Secondly, the text says that husbands are to honor their wives, too. In the time of 1 Peter, this meant respecting, supporting, and treating with kindness the women who often did rely upon them for their food, shelter, and clothing. Today, that may look different for husbands and wives. It might mean that husbands respect that, even in marriage, no means no. It might mean that husbands also cultivate their own beauty, wisdom, and competence so that there is room for those around them to do the same. It might mean realizing that the successes of their wives do not diminish, but can enhance their own successes.

If we look through this lens, that God’s words are always designed to lift up, rather than put down, then the rest of today’s text shines. “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse.” Yes! “Do not fear what they fear.” Of course! “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” Amen, sister! We can live our lives so that when we are asked to be accountable, we can stand tall, strong, and with dignity, and honor God with our being.

*07-25*

“Rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight.”

— 1 Peter 3:4

Leaving aside the egregious sexism/misogyny inherent in this portion of 1 Peter (if you can…) there is something to be said about inner vs. outer beauty. I actually think of the song “Stupid Girls” by P!nk, in which she rails against those who seem only to care about impressing men through physical appearance (and sexual availability). She sings “Outcasts and girls with ambition—that’s what I wanna see!”

There’s also something to the old adage that “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” If you really want to convince someone of something, coming at them with (metaphorical) guns blazing may not always be the best option.

Then there’s what I’ve learned in the rooms of recovery—that you can’t push someone else until they’re ready; that you can only share your own experience, strength, and hope; that the kind of gentle and quiet spirit the writer of 1 Peter describes is fully attainable in the profound peace that comes with recovery. But this isn’t just for women. Everyone—male, female, trans, nonbinary. It’s not about acting within a patriarchal framework of submissiveness. In fact, a gentle and quiet spirit can be intensely powerful and subversive.

There are definitely times and situations that call for direct action—now more than ever—but there is a great deal that can be done to change the world through leading by example.

Do I feel I have a quiet and gentle spirit? How can this help me effect change?

*07-26*

“Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.”

— 1 Peter 3:7

Um. How is this honoring your wife? “Oh, yeah, you’re a second-class citizen and, actually, just a piece of my property, because, you know, you’re weak and otherwise less-than, but I guess since you’re alive God must love you and so should I.” Yikes.

Let’s talk about the word “weak.” There are no fewer than ten definitions in Merriam Webster’s online dictionary and almost all of them have at least two sub-definitions (some up to four) bringing the grand total to twenty-three different things “weak” could mean and only three of them have anything to do with physical strength which one has to accept is generally greater in men than women (yes, I know there are plenty of physically strong women and women who are physically stronger than men, but biologically, males of the human species are generally physically stronger for evolutionary reasons.)

And I don’t want to get into an argument by claiming that women are emotionally stronger than men, or physically stronger in terms of pain tolerance (childbearing anyone? Not for the faint of heart), or intellectually stronger or whatever. The point is that you cannot wholesale decide that 51% or so of the population is less than you in some sense or another and condescendingly deign to “honor” them because of it.

God created humans in God’s image—male and female God created them (biologically). No hierarchy. No assignment of greater or lesser value. Husbands, if you want to honor your wife, acknowledge her equality to you in every way that actually matters, so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

Growing up, was I socialized to believe women were weaker than men in some way? What has my experience shown me?

*07-27*

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing.”

— 1 Peter 3:8-9a

Unity can be confusing. Sometimes I think people define unity as the state in which everyone agrees with everyone else about everything. And I don’t think that’s the case at all. I love the writer of 1 Peter’s language of “unity of spirit,” because it implies that you can have unity in one area without necessarily having to get along perfectly all the time in other areas.

I think unity is more about a total commitment to the flourishing of self and neighbor. Different people may need different things to bring about their flourishing and that’s okay. What matters is that we’re all open to listening to what others need and working toward that end. It includes the sympathy, love for one another, tender heart, and humble mind the author writes about. It includes compassion and grace for those who act out in ways that hurt us—with healthy boundaries, of course, but not retaliating in kind.

Scripture is full of calls for us to be of one mind and one spirit, but rather than as a homogenous monolith, as a beautiful, diverse community of individuals who live to honor the flourishing of everyone.

How do I understand the concept of unity? Do I think everyone has to agree with me?

*07-28*

“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”

— 1 Peter 3:13-15a

Fear is the single most damaging force in all of human existence. I would say with confidence that every act of violence or hatred—whether individual or societal—comes down to fear. In the rooms of recovery I was taught that every so-called “defect of character” we exhibit comes down to one of two fears: the fear of not having enough or the fear of not being enough. Try it for yourself. Think of a time you were angry or controlling or acted in a less-than-stellar manner and ask yourself why. Not just on the surface—"well, I was mad because she did X!” Go deeper. Why were you mad that she did X? What did it trigger in you? If you go far enough and deep enough, you’ll eventually find that you were mad because her action made you feel “less-than”, took away something you had, or threatened to prevent you from getting something you wanted.

Lots of people say that the opposite of fear is faith. I disagree. The opposite of fear is actually love. Love is an action that dispels fear. Love of God, self, and neighbor, diligently striven for, can quiet our fears of meaninglessness. When we find ourselves subject to the bad behavior of others, we can remember that it comes out of fear and that we don’t need to “fear what they fear” or “be intimidated,” but can cling to the love of God in Christ Jesus and act out of that love in the world.

When have I behaved in a negative way out of fear?

*07-29*

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”

— 1 Peter 3:18

I don’t know about you, but I certainly can’t claim to be righteous. Not for lack of trying, of course. I have my moments where I think I know everything about everything and if the universe just followed my orders, all would be utopia. It’s good for me to come up against some stark, spiritual reality sometimes. God is righteous. God, in the embodied person of Jesus, is righteous. And Jesus’s love for us was (and is) so incomprehensibly enormous that he chose to experience the most painful and humiliating sort of death possible in order to clear Sin and Death out of the way for our (the unrighteous’) rebirth in the spirit.

In other words, I was never gonna earn salvation through my own merits, so God handed it to me, fully aware of my deficiencies and in spite of them. How humbling is that?

How do I interpret Jesus’ act on the cross? What leads me to that interpretation?

*07-30*

“And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”

— 1 Peter 3:21-22

Hmm. I’m not sure on the theology of this one. Baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience? That sort of sounds like baptism is no guarantee of salvation, but merely makes it possible for us to try to earn it. Maybe that’s not what the writer of 1 Peter is saying here—I didn’t major in systematic theology at seminary; I’m a Children, Youth, & Family Ministry gal. So, you know, set me straight if you have more insight on this.

And what’s this stuff about Noah being saved from the flood prefiguring baptism? Noah didn’t get wet. And the water killed absolutely everything that wasn’t on the ark. I suppose if we concede that everything that died in the floods was evil/corrupt, then we might be able to say that baptism kills all the parts of us that are evil/corrupt and leaves us newly reborn as who we were created by God to be. I kind of like that. Yeah, I think I’ll go with that today.

How do I interpret the connection between the flood and baptism?

*07-31*

“You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.”

— 1 Peter 4:3

Main Idea: God invites us to cultivate healthy living as a gift from God.

A text like today’s runs the risk of suggesting that a Christian life is a more difficult life, fulfilled only with self-restraint and deprivation. But if you speak with anyone who has recovered from addictions including alcohol, sex, or gambling, this text lands quite differently.

God’s words do not intend to make our lives more difficult, but less. There is nothing easy about battling addiction (or even, for that matter, simply living with the consequences of licentiousness, passions, or drunkenness). Immersing oneself (in addiction or overuse) in these things does not and cannot lead to fulfillment. It can temporarily satisfy an itch. But the consequences of all of these will inevitably make life harder.

Addictions and overuse can lead to multiple health problems including liver disease, weakened heart, cancer, stroke, depression, brain damage, and so much more. They can lead to relational problems including infidelity, domestic violence, and divorce. They can lead to financial problems including money spent to fight DUI’s, treatment centers, and the losses that come with gambling addiction. They can lead to problems including self-doubt, loss of self-worth, isolation, despair, depression, and dissociation. And to make matters worse, these illnesses are contagious—those around you begin to suffer physical, emotional, financial, and self-esteem issues, too.

So, does any of that sound appealing? I thought not. No good can come of indulging or overindulging in the things of the flesh.

God invites us to step away from the dangerous behaviors and learn to cultivate healthy ones. The absence of these behaviors isn’t deprivation—it is the spiritual nurturing of the blessings that come from living with health, integrity, selflessness, faith, and love.