**Daily Devotions**

**Feb 2024**

*02-01*

“They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.”

— Luke 6:18

Why do we come to Jesus? What brings us with the crowds to the lakeshore for healing? Every one of us has challenges in our lives. No matter how good we’ve had it, we all carry sorrows and scars; some of us carry trauma. Yet we know it’s not as though Jesus will wave a magic wand and all our pains will be removed and we’ll live happily every after, the way the Bible stories so often seem to go—the way some modern Christians promise us.

I go to that shore because I know Jesus will stand with my in my pain—experience it with me. Even Jesus felt abandoned by God; he knows what that’s like. Jesus walks with me through the long and non-linear process of healing from grief and trauma. Jesus’ love and solidarity help me when I am ‘troubled by (the) unclean spirits’ of my emotional challenges.

Maybe the best news of all is that we don’t even need to travel to the shore to meet Jesus. He’ll always meet us wherever we are, and journey with us wherever we’re going.

Why do I go down to the shore to meet Jesus?

*02-02*

“Just then a man from the crowd shouted, ‘Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.’ Jesus answered, ‘You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.’”

— Luke 9:38b-41

Sometimes Jesus has just had it. I think these little interludes where he grouses about his disciples’ lack of faith, curses a fig tree, insults a woman from another country, or flips over tables in the temple all point to his humanity. People sometimes just hit their limit. Because honestly, I think it’s a little harsh to insult his followers for being unable to cure a boy’s epilepsy when in general, Jesus is the only one who is actually able to remove such illnesses consistently if at all. How many modern illnesses are stubbornly incurable despite incredible advances in medicine and gobs of faith? People with faith the size of a mustard seed or even the size of a mountain still die of cancer, suffer from mental illness, or succumb to addiction.

Maybe this is just a reminder of human powerlessness, even if it seems to be delivered with anger. Yes, Jesus, the worker of healing miracles, was, in fact, fully human. But he was also fully divine, something the rest of us—even the most gifted surgeons—are not. Maybe he was just tired of carrying the burden alone, and frustrated that for all his love of people they could not, nor would they ever be able to do what really needed to be done to heal the world.

At the same time, maybe Jesus is right to be frustrated with us. Not about curing epilepsy, perhaps, but about caring for one another. I mean fully embracing our call to love and service to our neighbors—all our neighbors. We do have the capacity to work together, we do have the tools to communicate, cooperate, and embrace our interdependence. But we don’t. We keep building walls between “in groups” and “out groups” and utterly missing the point of all that he tried to teach us. I mean, I’m pretty frustrated with people about those things, too! Perhaps we ought to focus not on Jesus’ anger at us for what we can’t do, and learn from his frustration with us about what we absolutely can, if we only choose to.

Where am I failing to do what I’m capable of to heed Jesus’ call to love and service?

*02-03*

“In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And the man sprang up and began to walk.”

— Acts 14:8-10

Do we need faith to be healed? I’m skeptical of the idea that there’s a certain amount of faith, or a tipping point of prayer, at which God decides to step in and cure us from our physical or mental ailments. People of great faith get cancer. Children die even when multiple congregations full of people are praying for them. God is in the midst of it all, but I reject the belief that if the worst happens, it’s because of a failure on someone’s part to placate God.

Leaving aside medical ailments, though, I will say wholeheartedly from experience that we, individually, have a role to play in our spiritual ailment. The only real spiritual ailment is separation from God—that lack of connection that sneaks in and leaves us feeling that something is missing from our lives, that whispers the lies that life is meaningless, that nothing we do matters, that we are in some way broken and irredeemable. It’s not God’s fault—God never pulls away, never leaves us. It’s not necessarily our fault either—we are constantly pushed and pulled by circumstances which are often beyond our control. Rather than assign blame, I would extend an invitation, just as God does every moment. Stop. Pray. Meditate. Connect. Let go. Acknowledge that you don’t have to run the universe yourself—that God is in charge. Open your mind and heart to the profound beauty of creation. Recognize that God’s call to self-care and to love and service of others is the meaning of life, and if we start there, and keep that in focus, we are much more able to engage fully, and less likely to be pulled into despair.

Nothing is foolproof. Simple isn’t easy. But God so adores you and wants to be in close relationship with you each and every day.

How will I accept God’s invitation to fully engage with God and life?

*02-04*

“Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.””

— Mark 5:25-28

Main Idea: Sometimes, faith on the edge is faith enough.

Have you ever had to run through an airport? Maybe you hit traffic on the drive in. Maybe the security line took longer than you expected. Maybe the airline switched gates on you last-minute and you had to haul your luggage across an entire terminal, jumping on the moving beltways when you could and straining your ears to make sure you heard your new letter and number combination correctly. However it happens, squeezing through the door and into your (hopefully window) seat right before boarding closes always brings a rush of gratitude and relief—a letting go of all of the stress and logistics you know you’d have to deal with if you had missed this flight and had to work out an alternative.

This story from Mark has a definite “running through the airport” feeling to it. It’s saturated with suspense. And that’s because this story is actually two stories.

We open on Jairus begging Jesus to come heal his daughter who is on the brink of death. Time is of the essence here. They have a healthy distance to cover to get to Jairus’s house, and they can’t escape the crowds pressing in on Jesus, trying to talk to him, trying to hear from him and, undoubtedly, asking him for the miracles his public ministry had started to make common knowledge. So they’re moving, but not as quickly as they could be. We automatically begin to wonder: are they going to make it?

All of the sudden, Jesus stops in his tracks. He feels that someone has touched him; he senses some kind of power bleeding out from his body. He turns to the crowds to ask who is responsible, and his disciples respond as if he is crazy. “There are so many people here!” they say. “You’ll never be able to figure it out. Why would you even ask?” Perhaps what they were really trying to say was, “Can’t we do this later? You have a little girl to save. Let’s go!”

But the guilty party comes forward. The woman who had touched them hem of Jesus’s garment admits it and gives Jesus a bit of her backstory to build her case. The text says she tells him “the whole truth.” And Jesus takes the time to listen to her. To reassure her. To affirm her and care for her and formally name a new chapter for her.

Now it’s not the disciples who are feeling rushed—it’s us, as readers! This is nice and all, but why are we getting distracted from our mission? Why are we taking time for anyone but Jairus’s daughter? If we were in the airport right now, we’d definitely be missing our flight. And that’s exactly what happens. Jesus hasn’t even finished speaking with this woman who grabbed his cloak when a handful of town leaders find Jairus and inform him that he’s too late. His daughter has died.

And then, Jesus gaslights the crowd. “What do you mean?” he asks. “She’s not dead. She’s just sleeping.” He takes her hand and tells her to get up, and she does just that, seemingly healed of everything that has kept her bedridden for all this time.

The characters in this passage were living with stressors much more intense than a flight schedule. Jairus had a sick kid, and this unnamed woman had suffered from a life-altering hemorrhage for 12 whole years. Their desperation drove them to frenetic, impulse encounters with Jesus—encounters where they were on the edge. Encounters where their faith was on the edge. (The visual of the hem of Jesus’s cloak—the very edge of Jesus’s person—is so beautiful to ruminate on here.) And in both cases, that impulse is what brought healing. That impulse is what brought new life. Even if Jairus and this unnamed woman weren’t confident in their asks of Jesus, they asked anyway. And it was their asking that did something. It was their faith that brought wellness.

In both mini-stories that make up this bigger one, the end result is great. The unnamed woman is healed of her disease and Jairus’s daughter is brought back to life. But Jesus makes sure that we understand that these miracles are about the journey, and not the destination. Our good news this morning is that faith doesn’t have to look pretty. Faith doesn’t have to be composed. Faith can be visceral and messy and erratic. Faith can be desperate and awful. Faith can be grasping at straws and teetering on the edge. Because with a God as loving and merciful as ours, faith on the edge is faith enough.

*02-05*

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.”

— Psalm 131:1-3

I crave quiet and simplicity. I know not everyone does. Some people are truly called to a “big life”—to engage with lots of people, laugh loudly, and throw themselves into the world around them. As an introvert, I can pass for outgoing in such situations for a while, but sooner or later (and usually sooner) I need to retreat, regroup, recharge. I wonder if Jesus was an introvert. He certainly lived a big life, and was surrounded by people a lot of the time. But he frequently took himself off alone to pray, and I wonder if he wasn’t a little overwhelmed by everything. Maybe that’s why he kept telling people not to tell anyone he’d healed them. As if they could keep it in.

Even true extroverts need down time, though. We are all called into these sweet, intimate moments with God when we can calm and quiet our souls and lean into the arms of our Mother. This short little psalm is a wonderful reminder that God is always there, waiting to hold us and restore us.

Where and how do I recharge best?

*02-06*

“She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’”

— Matthew 15:27

What a woman! As a mother of special needs adult children, I can relate to her persistence. In my long history of navigating systems and advocating for services, I have not ever been called a dog, as Jesus does to this woman. But I have endured indifference, incompetence, uncooperativeness, bureaucracy, and reams and reams of paperwork. I put up with it because I have no other choice. So it was with this Canaanite woman. She had no other choice. She knew that Jesus could cure her daughter, and she would do whatever it took to make it happen.

But she didn’t just accept Jesus’ insult. In her cleverness and wisdom, she turned it around on him—calling him out as a bit of a hypocrite, actually. Talk about courageous! He could just as well have turned and walked away, and she would’ve had to watch her daughter suffer. But instead, he acknowledged her faith in calling him out. He saw her, finally. Not as a gentile, but as a woman of such love for her child and faith in God that she would go toe to toe with him. I imagine he was a little chagrined at his own behavior. (I’ve generally forgiven him, acknowledging his humanness and putting myself in his place—overwhelmed by people needing him all the time, and probably tired from his journey and maybe even hangry, but I don’t pretend he didn’t mean what he said in the moment, as some have proposed.) Regardless, she got his attention, and he responded by giving her what she wanted.

I, too, have had moments where I’ve had to be extra firm—even sassy, as she was—in my advocacy for my children. And I’ve been largely successful in getting what I want, which is what my kids need. The Canaanite woman is a role model for me. And she keeps me grateful to all the people in my life who have responded, even going the extra mile to help. I see Jesus in them (as I do in everyone) and I thank God for them and the often thankless and stressful work they do.

When have I had to advocate for someone in my life? What was the outcome?

*02-07*

“When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’”

— Luke 7:9

Jesus didn’t play favorites. He healed Jews and Gentiles, crossed boundaries to touch lepers and speak to women, spent time with Pharisees and tax collectors while still calling them out. This Roman centurion is no exception. He was a soldier in the army that was oppressing Jesus’ people. Yes, he had done lots of nice things for the people—helped build their synagogue, etc. But in our modern context, anything good he had done would’ve been disregarded because of his problematic position. Plus he owned slaves! That’s who he wanted Jesus to heal. He should’ve left the army, spoken out against Rome, freed his slaves, etc. His failure to do so should negate his positive action.

Jesus didn’t see it that way. Not only did the centurion “do nice things” in spite of his role, he approached Jesus with humility. And realism. He acknowledged that he didn’t deserve Jesus’ help, and asked it only for another person. In Jesus’ mind, this Roman soldier exemplified many of the qualities he was trying to teach—things that were lacking in Jesus’ own people.

One of our chief besetting problems in the present time is our inability to accept nuance. We want everything to fit into neat categories: this is “good” and this is “bad.” And if a person does one thing that’s “bad” then they go into that bin, regardless of anything “good” they’ve done. Where is the grace for our humanity? Where is the recognition of our inherent value? Can we learn anything from Jesus’ praise of this problematic figure? Above all, can we honestly look at ourselves and put ourselves fully into the “good” category? I would think not. I certainly can’t. This is why we need God, and why we should always be striving for accurate self-appraisal and humility. Jesus won’t deny us love and healing if we don’t live up to some kind of standard. Let’s have grace for ourselves and for one another, and leave the rest up to God.

When have I decided someone is “bad” without seeing them as a whole person?

*02-08*

“Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus’ feet and begged him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.”

— Luke 8:41-42a

We’ve been looking at healing stories this week. The Canaanite woman—a Gentile. The Roman centurion—also a Gentile, and a problematic figure (by our standards) to be sure! And now, Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. A good Jew, and one in a position of prominence. He goes right to Jesus for help, so clearly he knows who Jesus is and what he’s capable of. We can assume, then (though maybe we shouldn’t) that he’s not among the Jewish authority who wants Jesus eliminated at all costs. The way it looks on paper is that this is a “good” guy through and through—and he loves his daughter. The moment his messengers come to Jesus, Jesus drops everything and goes to help.

The other part of this story, though, is that Jesus actually stalls. He has to fight his way through the crowds, as always, but when a woman touches his robe for healing, he stops and gives her—someone completely lacking in the kind of power Jairus enjoys—personal attention. He didn’t need to stop. The healing was done the moment she touched his robe. But he did stop to see her. To tell her that she was loved and worthy. That her faith had made her well.

Only then does he continue his journey to Jairus’ house, where the man’s daughter has already died. But not so! Jesus assures everyone that the child is not dead, only sleeping. They laugh, but of course Jesus is right, and the little girl gets up and eats a snack.

Once again, Jesus’ healing doesn’t distinguish between rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, powerful leader or ordinary citizen. No one is excluded, no one is more important—or less important—than any other. So it is with us. May you live in gratitude for the knowledge of just how much you are loved.

Do I ever feel more worthy or less worthy of Jesus’ love?

*02-09*

“Then he said to them, ‘If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?’ And they could not reply to this.”

— Luke 14:5-6

This healing story isn’t about a “who”, but a “when.” A man at a meal on the Sabbath has dropsy and Jesus knows the Pharisees are watching to see what he would do. Would he heal the man on the Sabbath, which was against the law of Moses, as it was considered “work”?

Jesus calls them out preemptively. “If your kid falls down a well on the Sabbath, are you just going to leave them there until the next day?” In other words, it’s ridiculous to put that kind of saving, healing “work” into the same category as the kinds of “work” Moses forbade in the laws about the Sabbath. God loves God’s people, and their health, safety, and welfare come first. God’s laws are meant to be life-giving, not arbitrarily restrictive.

What’s at stake here is the way a community’s interpretation of a law which is meant to help people turns that law into one that harms people. We face this exact dilemma regularly in our modern context, for example, as the re-interpretation of the Constitution of the United States can suddenly allow one group of people to disregard the rights of another.

Jesus makes the claim that the welfare of the people comes first, and challenges us to let go of our rigid ideas in order to heed the call to love and serve our neighbors.

When has my interpretation of the “rules” caused me to fail to act in support of my neighbor?

*02-10*

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.”

— Luke 17:15-16

This last healing story for the week has a twist. It’s not about the healing, but about the response to the healing. As I’ve been saying this week, Jesus didn’t discriminate in his healing, nor let unjust laws stop him from performing these acts. Here he cures not one or two, but ten lepers, and sends them off to the priests to be declared ritually clean again. Their leprosy leaves them while they are walking toward where the priests are. Maybe they don’t all notice. Maybe they’re so shocked, they don’t quite believe what they’re seeing. Maybe they’ve been excluded from the community for so long, they can’t wait to get to the priests so they can get back to their homes and families and jobs. Whatever the reason, nine of the ten men healed keep going while the last one looks down, sees he’s no longer leprous, and is so overwhelmed with gratitude that he has to turn around and run back to Jesus and say “Thank you!”

The punch line, of course, is that the man who came back was a Samaritan. I always thought this was significant because it wasn’t the “good Jew” who was grateful, but the one the Jews rejected. The message I gleaned was that the Samaritan was really the “good” one and the others were “bad”. But now I see it a little differently. The fact is that it didn’t even matter to the Jews whether the Samaritan was a leper or not. Just by the fact of his being a Samaritan he was considered unclean anyway! Jews didn’t share utensils with Samaritans. Because of their disagreement about where God was to be worshipped—even though they pretty much agreed on everything else—Jews considered Samaritans persona non grata, if not straight up Gentiles.

So what, then, is the lesson to be learned from the Samaritan’s return to give thanks to Jesus? Maybe, since the Samaritan had nothing to lose from a religious standpoint, he was free to be grateful for the freedom Jesus had granted him from his physical separation from the community. He could go home without fear that he would spread his disease to those he loved. He didn’t need to worry about how he looked to others—his status, his standing, his worthiness. He could just enjoy his newfound freedom.

Do we find ourselves held back from just reveling in our status as beloved children of God because we want to make sure we look good to the world? Do we forget to thank Jesus for all his love and healing because we’re too busy trying to achieve “success” as defined by western capitalist society? Maybe we should look down at ourselves, notice what incredible miracles we are and have, and remember to throw up our hands and thank God for all of it.

What distracts me from gratitude to God for all that I am and have?

*02-11*

“He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

— Mark 8:29

Main Idea: The dazzling vulnerability of God is what shows us how to love each other well.

Sometimes, it can be harder to watch a loved one struggle than it is to struggle, yourself. When someone you know and care for deeply is in pain, there isn’t always a way to help. There aren’t always words to use that do their experience justice, or that show just how much you care.

It was probably excruciating for Jesus’s disciples to learn that Jesus was going to suffer. They had given up families, jobs, and homes to follow this man into his public ministry. They had grown close to Jesus, eating every meal with him and sharing every space with him and going to sleep and waking up next to him every single day. Now they learn not only that he is going to die, but that he is going to die a violent and terrible death.

Peter’s response to Jesus is understandable. Peter probably thinks that putting up a fight will show his love and his loyalty to Jesus. Peter probably wants Jesus to know just how much his safety and happiness matters to Peter and to the rest of the disciples. But Jesus doesn’t seem to hear any of that. On the contrary, he gets more upset and rebukes Peter right back. A sense of tension grows between these two friends. And perhaps the most important thing about the Transfiguration story is that in the transfiguration of Jesus, we see that tension break.

When Jesus brings Peter, James and John to the mountaintop, Jesus meets them in the most genuine form possible and on the most visceral level possible. They see a version of Jesus that he hasn’t shown before. While there is something intimidating about the idea of a beaming, transfigured Jesus who looks a bit like Edward Cullen, there is also something very vulnerable about it. This dazzling display seems to speak not to who Jesus can be in a supernatural sense, but who Jesus always has been in a foundational sense.

Peter’s response to this vulnerability is completely different than his response to Jesus in Verse 32. He offers to construct a dwelling place for Jesus. In this one little idea, Peter demonstrates a newfound humility. He commits intentional time and space to Jesus, emphasizing togetherness in the unfamiliar.

One thing Transfiguration Sunday can teach us is that, in talking about his struggles, Jesus didn’t need rebuking. Jesus didn’t need solutions. Jesus didn’t even need to know Peter’s opinions or perspectives regarding the things he was saying. In talking about his suffering, Jesus needed listening and understanding. Jesus needed compassion. Jesus needed his friends to try to understand his opinions and perspectives—in short, his reality. This is sharing a burden instead of trying to eliminate it. This is dwelling instead of fixing. This is what loving your neighbor looks like, and it is hard to do. But it is the single most important way that we can show up for our families, our friends and our communities. And showing the kind of vulnerability that Jesus showed is the single most important way we can allow our families, our friends and our loved ones to show up for us.

In the Transfiguration story, a voice that we assume is the voice of God comes down from the clouds and says to Peter, James and John, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” Our good news this morning is that God will keep reminding us to listen, especially as the harsh realities of Ash Wednesday and Lent are just around the corner. God will keep reminding us to listen to Jesus, to each other, to ourselves and to the spirit of dwelling.

*02-12*

“One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.”

— Psalm 27:4

Where is the house of the Lord? It’s all around us all the time! It’s the abundant and beautiful natural world! As Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Heaven is beneath our feet as well as over our heads.” We need not be in the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem to fully encounter God in all we see and experience. If we just stop, breathe deeply, and open our minds and hearts to God’s presence, we find that we are there, no matter our physical surroundings. How incredible is that?

Where do I most profoundly experience the presence of God?

*02-13*

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

— Mark 9:40

We don’t often hear this phrase of Jesus being bandied about. Usually it’s his statement elsewhere in the gospels where he unfortunately says that “anyone who is not for us is against us,” which I believe is patently false, and therefore question whether he actually said it or if he meant it as we all-too-commonly interpret it.

This twist on the concept—that whoever isn’t actively seeking to undermine us tacitly supports us—lends itself toward the idea of religious tolerance, and general acceptance of one another no matter what—that we can all live together in peace despite our differences. We can love and accept our atheist, Muslim, Jewish, agnostic, Hindu, Buddhist, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and absolutely all of our neighbors just as they are without any threat to our own faith tradition and beliefs.

But it can also be a strong challenge to us. Think of it this way: anyone who doesn’t actively speak out against injustice is complicit in that injustice. If we are not actively against oppressive practices, we are for them.

As with so many things in life, this is a both/and situation. We can both accept others differences and refuse to accept unacceptable practices. Luckily, God can help us navigate how to interpret each individual situation and ask accordingly.

What does the phrase “Whoever is not against us is for us” mean to me?

*02-14*

“Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’”

— Mark 9:36-37

Main Idea: God has named us as children, which means that God calls us to be childlike (not childish).

In Verse 32 of this story, the disciples feel embarrassed because they don’t understand the prediction of the Passion that Jesus is laying out. Again, in Verse 34, the disciples feel embarrassed, this time because they are confronted with the fact that they have engaged in some vain arguments.

Their embarrassment suggests that shame plays a very big role for the disciples as they struggle to understand who Jesus is and what he is on earth to do. Rather than putting energy into asking Jesus questions, identifying blind spots, or opening themselves up to some constructive criticism from time to time, the disciples put energy into saving face and appearing more mature than they actually are.

Jesus confronts these efforts head on and informs the disciples that if power is truly what they are concerned with, they will need to rid themselves of the concept of power that’s causing this kind of behavior—that’s feeding their particular brand of shame—in them in the first place. He tells the disciples that their definition of power is backward. He tells the disciples that they need to reprioritize. There is so much that preachers can do with the visual of Jesus calling the disciples to welcome a child here, but perhaps a good way to interpret it is to say that Jesus tells the disciples that they are acting childish. And to live a life of greatness in faith, they must become childlike, instead.

One of the best literary illustrations of the difference between adults and children—between people who are childish and people who are childlike, respectively—is The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint Exupery. In Chapter 4, the narrator is trying to describe to the reader why it is difficult for him to tell his adult peers about the time he met the Little Prince:

“If you were to say to the grown ups: ‘I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the windows and doves on the roof,’ they would not be able to get any idea of that house at all. You would have to say to them: ‘I saw a house that cost $20,000.’ Then they would exclaim: ‘Oh, what a pretty house that is!’ Just so, you might say to them: ‘The proof that the little prince existed is that he was charming, that he laughed, and that he was looking for a sheep. If anybody wants a sheep, that is a proof that he exists.’ And what good would it do to tell them that? They would shrug their shoulders, and treat you like a child. But if you said to them: ‘The planet he came from is Asteroid B−612,’ then they would be convinced, and leave you in peace from their questions. They are like that. One must not hold it against them. Children should always show great forbearance toward grown up people. But certainly, for us who understand life, figures are a matter of indifference. To those who understand life, [different details] would have given a much greater air of truth to my story.”

If we are childlike, we do not put on airs. If we are childlike, we don’t assume that we’re bigger, better or more important than anyone else. If we are childlike, we ask questions and admit our limits and look for help, for guidance. If we are childlike, we listen to details that might not otherwise seem important, and we might even work those details into the center of our worldview. If we are childlike, we reject childish structures of power and influence that serve individual people instead of communities, and we don’t give the time of day to willful ignorance.

Jesus makes it safe for us to be childlike. Jesus takes away the shame that we are tempted to feel when we’re confused, discouraged or pulled into self-centered pursuits. Alongside Jesus, God names us as children so that we are liberated to redefine greatness, again and again and again.

Today is Ash Wednesday, so we might need to lean a little extra into that liberation. We might need a reminder of that redefinition. We are entering into a season of anticipation and grief. But because we know how to flip the world on its head, we know that with that grief comes triumph and joy. Today, we start Jesus’s journey to the cross with him, pledging to be childlike all the way.

*02-15*

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

— Mark 9:42

I sometimes think I know everything. I mean, obviously I don’t, and I work to cultivate the humility to recognize my limitations. But I have an impatient streak, and in those unfortunate moments, I sometimes make unilateral decisions on the assumption that I’m right. And sometimes said decisions blow up in my face.

Not that I’ve ever walked up to someone who believed in God and told them they were wrong, or deliberately put someone in a position to blow it in terms of their faith. That would be extreme—kind of like the idea of putting a millstone around someone’s neck and throwing them into the sea.

Perhaps all this hyperbole is simply a reminder to us that we ought to be aware of what message we’re sending by our words and actions on a daily basis. Do we ever act in ways (out of pride or inconsiderateness) that would undermine another person’s faith? Do we, in our need to be right, feel it necessary to force someone else to question what they believe?

In any case, what another person believes about God or, really, about anything, is between them and God. It’s none of our business (unless it’s causing direct harm, in which case it’s our call to speak truth to power, but that’s not what I’m talking about here). We can trust that God is the one in charge, and accept that it’s not up to us to convince anyone to think or believe anything. Especially because we might just be “wrong.”

Have I accidentally or intentionally undermined someone’s faith by my words or actions?

*02-16*

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

— Mark 10:9

Some people use this text as a justification for the oppression of the LGBTQ+ community. They say that since Jesus points out that God made humans male and female and that marriage is the two of them as one body, God therefore excludes anything other than cisgendered heterosexual marriage from acceptability.

But that argument is invalid because Jesus isn’t talking about that at all. The Pharisees come trying to entrap him into speaking against the law of Moses, which allowed divorce and Jesus responded, as was his MO, by turning the question on its head. His answer—that divorce was wrong—was about protecting women, whose entire health, safety, and livelihood in his culture depended upon having husbands to take care of them. Jesus says, “Yeah, sure, Moses said you could divorce, because you were a bunch of jerks. But the reality is that way before Moses, God made the union between people sacred and therefore unbreakable. So if God says the union shouldn’t be broken, who did Moses think he was to disagree?”

What Jesus doesn’t offer is commentary on whether the position of women in said society was acceptable. He was a first century Jewish man so who knows if he just took it as a given (though he spoke out against so many “givens” that were anything but, it leads me to wonder if he wouldn’t have had some pointed words about the injustices of women’s place in society that just didn’t get recorded by the men who wrote the gospels. Yes, I know that’s probably pointless conjecture, but there it is anyway.)

The bottom line, I think, is that the laws or traditions a society puts in place can’t be justified simply on the basis of “Well that’s the way we’ve always done it." There are truths that precede and supersede societal norms, and these are the truths of love for God, self, and neighbor.

Where do I see Jesus’ words being used to justify injustice? What is my role in addressing this?

*02-17*

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

— Mark 10:15

I recently had an intense memory experience. I heard a song on the radio and all of a sudden, I was eight years old, sitting on the floor of my brothers’ room, playing a game on our Atari system. A moment later, I was in tears, and when I processed what had happened, it occurred to me that in that moment, way back then, I was perfectly happy—utterly safe, all my physical and emotional needs met, and completely free of responsibility. The realities of my present life, which (despite the fact that I am generally happy, safe, and have my needs met) sometimes overwhelm me, sometimes make me forget that God really does have my back. While I may not be free of responsibility in a day-to-day adulting framework, the fact is that I have very little power over anything other than myself, and God is the one who’s responsible for outcomes. If I can tap into that little girl on the upstairs floor, joystick in hand, I am liberated to experience real joy in my life knowing that I am deeply loved and thoroughly cared for. When I cling to my fears and need to control, I deprive myself from “the kingdom of God.” What is my choice to be today?

Do I let my stress and need to control block me from being able to experience the joy of God’s love and care?

*02-18*

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

— Mark 10:21-22

Main Idea: Jesus will do anything and everything to help us turn our focus from what we have to what we don’t—and from what we’ve done to what we could still do.

Back-to-back in this story from Mark 10, two different people assert to Jesus that they are at capacity—that they are doing the most they can possibly do and sacrificing the most they can possibly sacrifice to ensure their eventual salvation.

The first is the wealthy man, who handles the interaction rather gently. He asks Jesus what he can do to inherit eternal life, almost certainly assuming Jesus would answer by saying, “You’re already doing everything you need to. Well done!” Clearly, this man was craving some public praise. Instead, Jesus gives him a twofold imperative to sell everything he owns and then to follow Jesus.

The second man is Peter, who is more explicit and more defensive in posture after listening to what happened between Jesus and the wealthy man. “Look,” Peter tells Jesus. “We disciples have already done that. We’ve left everything and followed you.” Again, Jesus responds in a surprising and slightly unnerving way, essentially saying, “Well, if that is true, then you will receive your just reward.”

In both cases, Jesus plants seeds of doubt, not for the sake of trolling his followers, but for the sake of disorienting them and challenging them to set their expectations of themselves differently—in more subversive ways, maybe.

What the Spirit wants us to hear today is that if no one is good but God alone, then no one is the benchmark of good but God alone. Often, we are tempted to define “goodness” by what we have and what we do—in this case, Jesus calls us to define goodness as belonging to God, and to focus on what God has for us yet and what God is saying we have left to do. Because there will always be something!

In Jesus, the question of goodness is not a question of amount. In calling the wealthy man and Peter to look beyond their preset assumptions, Jesus was not trying to diminish or discredit the work they were actively doing in the name of the Gospel. In Jesus, the question of goodness is a question of centering. If we think that goodness somehow lies with us—with what we have and what we do—we will become stagnant and limited in our thinking. As a result, our impact on the world and our participation in kingdom-building will be limited, too. On the other hand, if we know that goodness is something we steward, and not something achievable by or inherent to us, we will stay rooted in God and seek to follow God all the days of our lives—centered in the possibility of the things we don’t have, and the mystery of the things we haven’t done yet.

*02-19*

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”

— Psalm 19:7-10

Law, decrees, precepts, commandment, fear, and ordinances. These are the things which, if they are from God, are more to be desired than gold; are sweeter than honey. Maybe it’s because I’m Gen-X, but I’m no big fan of laws, commandments, and ordinances, or the “fear” of authority. It takes work for me to step back and remember that God is not some arbitrary, punishing rule-maker who just wants to see how many hoops they can make humans jump through to prove their worthiness. In fact that’s the complete opposite of who God is and who we are in relationship to God, at least as I understand these things. Human laws, decrees, precepts, commandments, and ordinances may be (and often are) deeply flawed, despite their good intentions, and certainly don’t shine like gold or taste sweet on the tongue like honey. But God’s laws are. Because God’s law is love: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; love your neighbor; love yourself. As simple as they are, these laws are generally far harder to keep than human ones. But when we do, we find that, yes, they are definitely more to be desired than gold, and sweeter than honey.

When have I felt most aware and in tune with God’s law of love in my life?

*02-20*

“Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

— Exodus 20:1-3

God’s laws begin with the most essential. God is God. Period. If we find we are trying to run the universe on our own willpower, which, face it, we all do sometimes, it’s useful to remember this most basic commandment. Remember that God’s commandments aren’t about creating arbitrary rules we have to follow in order to earn God’s love, but are loving, life-giving guidelines that allow us to “have life and have it abundantly,” as Jesus said. Anytime I’m hitting my head against a wall because things aren’t going according to my plan, and its affecting my mood and my interactions with people, it’s an utter gifts of release and relief to remember that God is in charge, not me. I can let go of all my power-driving and settle into the loving arms of a God who I know has my back. I am then freed to focus only on the simple, next right action I need to take.

When do I most often find myself trying to take the place of God in my life?

*02-21*

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

— Deuteronomy 5:6-7

The Ten Commandments are so important that they’re in the Bible twice! (And slightly different each time). The readings this week focus on God’s laws, decrees, precepts, etc. because they come after the Sunday reading on Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who has faithfully followed all of these his whole life. And Jesus, hearing this, looks at the man and “loves him.” But following the Ten Commandments, and all the laws of Moses and all God’s precepts and decrees and so forth, isn’t enough in and of itself. What matters is what follows on after this faithful adherence to law—action out of gratitude. We are to receive God’s law as a gift which, if we observe it to the best of our ability, naturally results in our desire to be of love and service to our neighbors, and to follow in the way of Jesus. For the rich young man, this would have meant giving up all his possessions and following Jesus, which he was unwilling to do, and so God’s laws remained an end unto themselves, rather than the means to a life of happy engagement with community. Of course it’s not completely that black and white. But as you think about the Ten Commandments, perhaps you might wonder about how they are an invitation to a closer walk with Jesus, rather than a lists of “Thou Shalt Nots”.

Which of God’s commandments most engenders gratitude in me? How do I act on that gratitude?

*02-22*

“Why do you boast, O mighty one, of mischief done against the godly? All day long you are plotting destruction. Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth.”

— Psalm 52:1-3

Who qualifies as “godly”? One might rather ask why anyone boasts of mischief done against any one of God’s creatures regardless of artificial category into which our human brains inevitably place them? This psalm specifically calls out “O mighty one,” implying it’s about those with power oppressing others, and this is key in our modern context where some lawmakers are seemingly hell-bent on passing laws that oppress the LGBTQ+ community, women, BIPOC folks, immigrants, and more. But I, as a white, straight, cisgender, Protestant, economically self-sustaining individual exercise a fair amount of power in the world, often without realizing it (read: White Privilege). And the simple fact is that by participating in society, my actions or lack of actions are complicit in doing mischief against the children of God (which is everyone no matter what). I won’t go so far as to say that I “love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth,” but I will say that it can be hard to look honestly at my part in “the way things are.” So there is an effort, a commitment, to that self-honesty on a day-to-day basis, and to asking God and others when and how to take actions in my day-to-day living that are life-giving rather than oppressive.

How do my daily choices contribute to or work against oppressive systems?

*02-23*

“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.”

— Psalm 62:5-6

I used to want to be rescued. I think it’s a pretty common thing. Issues would come up in my life—interpersonal, financial, health-related, etc.—and I would be so frustrated by the work I had to do to deal with everything that I just wanted someone to swoop in and fix the relationship, pay the bills, heal the chronic ailment, and so forth. People often look to other people to solve their problems, and it seldom works, because unfortunately, people are people, and therefore unreliable. Sooner or later, everyone fails us. Our dependence can’t be on others. It has to be on God.

This is not to say that God will swoop in and fix the relationship, pay the bills, or heal the chronic ailment. Instead, God will walk with me through these things and guide me to the next right action—those things I didn’t want to have to do myself. God will also guide me to those people who can help in an appropriate way—counselors, medical professionals, and a network of healthy friends and family who can support me without the expectation that they’re going to bail me out.

For God alone my soul waits in silence—for my hope is in God.

When have I wanted to be rescued from a difficult situation in my life? How did it turn out?

*02-24*

“Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me, ‘Buy the field for money and get witnesses’—though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans.”

— Jeremiah 32:25

Sometimes faith in God makes no logical sense. “Jeremiah, buy this field even though the city is about to be taken over and you’ll lose everything, but put the deed in an earthenware jar so it lasts a long time, and then when the Chaldeans are gone, you’ll still own the land.” It was a way of saying that the conquest by the Chaldeans wouldn’t last forever. But it was still requiring of Jeremiah an act of faith which must have seemed ridiculous to him, who was the one predicting conquest by the Chaldeans! (I encourage you to read the entire passage on this one. It’s interesting!)

I have had moments in my life when I’ve needed to take an action that didn’t seem to make much sense in the short term. Laid out in front of me, it looked as though I would put myself into a position of hardship—financially and emotionally. But I could see that there really weren’t any other options, and I felt that God was saying to me, “Just do it. I’m here. This crisis won’t last forever, and on the far side, you will have what you need.” So, like Jeremiah, I “invested in a field,” which seemed ridiculous, but followed the prompts for long-term planning (such as keeping the lease in a jar), and in the end, my “investment” paid off. Trust (and lots of research and support) is a powerful thing. God knows what God is doing, even when we don’t.

When have I taken a risk that seemed to make no sense out of faith? What was the result?

*02-25*

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’”

— Mark 10:51

Main Idea: Jesus teaches us to lead through service and with a focus on the present.

Twice in this passage, the same question pops up: “What is it you want me to do for you?” The first time we hear it, Jesus is telling his disciples about his mission on earth—prophesying to them about his impending death and resurrection (and, simultaneously, about his identity as the Son of Man). Their immediate response is to let him know that they want something from him in his rising. So, Jesus’s question could very well be genuine: “What is it you want me to do for you?”

The second time we hear it, though, things feel different. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, hears that Jesus is nearby and shouts out to greet him. He is the one speaking to Jesus’s mission here. Unlike the disciples, he appears to have internalized exactly who Jesus is. And, again, unlike the disciples, Bartimaeus doesn’t preface his request to Jesus. He tells Jesus right away what he wants—mercy—and he seems to be talking in an immediate sense instead of anticipating Jesus’s resurrection.

Why would Jesus ask Bartimaeus the same thing he asked his disciples: “What is it you want me to do for you?” He already knows what Bartimaeus wants, so his motivation must be rhetorical. There are a few explanations, but perhaps the most helpful this morning is that Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants to set an example and drive home a point for everyone who was with him in that moment: “I am here to serve you. Right here. Right now.”

The disciples are thinking about glory—power—as something they can call dibs on since they are the ones following Jesus in his ministry. Ironically, that mindset proves that they aren’t really following him at all. If they were, they would hear Jesus’s message: “I am here to serve you. Right here. Right now.” And they would understand that true glory—true power—lies in serving others the very same way.

In this short passage, Jesus prophesies, teaches and heals. He embodies the very kind of servant leadership to which he calls his followers. And he does it with a focus on the present instead of just the future. God’s grace isn’t something we can put on layaway; God’s love isn’t something we can stockpile for future use. The true glory of God comes to life in the service we extend to our families. Our friends. Our neighbors. Our coworkers. Our enemies, even. Jesus isn’t a God of “Do as I say and not as I do.” Jesus leads by example and teaches us to serve—to meet the needs around us right here and right now.

*02-26*

“Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.”

— Psalm 34:13

One of my favorite ideas from 12-Step recovery literature is this: Gossip is a polite form of murder by character assassination. (Paraphrased from The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 67.) It’s so easy to tell another person’s story in order to feel better about ourselves, either by putting them down or by building ourselves up by association with them. It’s also easy, when telling another person’s story, to embellish it one way or another to further our own sense of self-righteousness. The psalmist reminds us that if we “desire life, and covet many days to enjoy good” (v.12) we should, basically, keep our mouths shut.

It's hard to do. Gossip is ingrained in our culture—even and maybe especially in church communities—as a way to express care for others. Everyone is in everyone else’s business ostensibly in order to be able to provide support for one another. But it has far departed from that noble idea in most cases. It truly is safer—kinder, more respectful, more healing—to stick to only one person’s story: your own. Unless you are specifically invited by another person to spread the word about a particular issue, of course. That’s what support is all about. Otherwise, though, the temptation is far to strong for our tongues to wander off into “evil” and “speaking deceit.”

When have I gossiped and regretted it?

*02-27*

“Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.”

— Psalm 111:2

STUDIED! I’m sorry. I always get a little geeked out when I find biblical (or nonbiblical) exhortations to study, to learn. I think about studying Biology in high school and college (it was my major) and how incredible that was. Digging deep into nature and life blew my mind over and over again and I would look up and shake my head and be like, “God… you are so unbelievably cool.” In other words, “Great are the works of the Lord.” And I studied them because I did delight in them! Nature captivated me from my earliest memories. Animals fascinated me. Plants and trees were my friends. Rocks and geological formations awed and inspired me. And water… lakes and rivers and creeks and ponds and even puddles mesmerized me. No one who knew me was surprised in the slightest when I declared my major in college.

Of course, one can find this kind of delight in the works of God across all fields. An educator sees God in the children she teaches. A mechanic sees God in the way parts fit together into a functioning whole. A caterer sees God in the way food brings people together. We all have opportunities to study the world and find all the ways God is present in it. How awesome is that?

What ‘works of the Lord’ do I most delight in? Do I study them?

*02-28*

“On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.”

— Mark 11:12-14

Even Jesus got hangry. I mean, how else can you explain him cursing a tree for not bearing fruit out of season just because he was hungry? The next day, the fig tree was withered and dead. What are we to take away from this? Especially when Jesus uses it as proof that whatever you pray for will be given to you, and then immediately follows on by saying that if you stand praying, you should pray to forgive others. But what about the fig tree???

I don’t know. Maybe this is just one of those stories we need to kind of shake our head over and shrug. Maybe it’s an allegory for the people not bearing fruit and therefore being cursed to die, although that seems out of whack with Jesus on his good days. Or maybe we can stretch it and propose that Jesus tried to make up for his tantrum by using it as a teaching moment about faith.

I guess what I propose for today is that we look at this as a reminder to not let ourselves become spiritually undernourished, so that we don’t expect the impossible from people or circumstances (like figs from a tree when it’s not fig season). If we stop to spend time with God and “fill our wells”, we are much less likely to demand that others do it for us, especially if they can’t.

When have I let my stresses and troubles cause me to lash out at another person?

*02-29*

“He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’”

— Mark 11:17

There is nothing inherently wrong with tradition. Our religious practices—the flow of our worship services, the sacraments, the structure of our community—are intended to all come together to enrich our spiritual lives and build our unity. I find joy and comfort in the rituals of communion, baptism, candle-lighting, children’s sermons, and even the passing of the offering plate.

The problem comes when the traditions and practices become an end unto themselves, rather than an aid to spiritual connection. It was probably like that in the temple. The Jewish practice of ritual sacrifice went back to the laws of Moses and before. It wasn’t convenient for people to bring animals with them when they traveled to Jerusalem, so they had to be able to buy the required animals when they got there. And they needed the local currency, so the money-changers had to be there, too. And yet, one wonders whether most people weren’t just going through the motions because “it’s just what we do” rather than seeing this practice as holy and sanctifying. Isn’t that what happens in our church communities? Especially when someone suggests we do something \*gasp\* differently?

Jesus came in swinging, with far more than a “suggestion” for doing things differently. I certainly don’t recommend that as a way to shake things up in your own congregation. But maybe it’s worth looking at where the traditions have lost the ability to help us grow spiritually and revisit them with an eye to the true end, which is connection with God.

What traditions does my faith community observe that I don’t understand or that aren’t helping me grow spiritually?