**Daily Devotions**

**June 2024**

*01*

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

— 1 John 3:2

Change is a constant. No matter how some of us try to keep things the same, to stay where and how we’re comfortable, the fact is that the world changes around us and we change in response to the world. Fighting change is a recipe for disappointment and depression. Embracing change, on the other hand, can bring great joy even in the face of uncertainty. This promise from 1 John is a reminder of this. At some point in our eternal lives, we will be fundamentally changed in some way. This body we’ve lived in will undergo something like the metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Sometimes I feel like this is a rejection of our embodiedness—that we have to somehow despise our bodies made of earth (adamah) and long to be different. Yet I know that’s not the case. God created us in God’s image—beautiful and whole and physical beings—and we need to cherish our physicality as much as our spirituality. They are inextricably linked. Maybe this physical form will pass away, but eternal life in God will come with its own physicality. And just as Jesus was embodied, and will return to us changed, so we will change to be like him. Of course thinking about this is an exercise in imagination only. We have nothing to base it on. So dream away, and be creative in your thought as God is creative. But know that our bodies here on earth are precious and beautiful to God, and so should be to us.

What do I imagine my future body to be like? Why do I think so?

*02*

“Father, hallowed be your name.”

— Luke 11:2b

Main Idea: In prayer, we name holiness as contagious.

Different parts of God’s church have different ideas of what it means to become holy—to experience sanctification—in a life of faith. Certain traditions and denominations claim that you become holy here on earth by choosing to live in the ways that Christ models. Others will say that holiness isn’t actually possible to attain in this realm, but rather, something that will be revealed and understood in the life after this one. Some describe holiness as happening in moments—almost like revelations—but not a permanent state of being here and now.

Whatever we think of holiness, we ask for it when we recite the Lord’s Prayer together. “Forgive us our sins” is another way of saying, “Help us do better. Help us be better. Give us grace today.” In teaching us to pray, Jesus was probably less focused on the soundness of our systematic understanding of holiness, and more concerned with what the request for holiness in our day-to-day life really means.

Asking for forgiveness means asking for a stronger connection with God. This connection is what some theologians and scholars call “vertical” grace—the grace that runs between God and each of us. The point Jesus is trying to drive home in this passage is that “vertical” grace never stands alone. It is automatically and intrinsically tied to “horizontal” grace—the grace that runs between people. The most important thing about a prayer to be holy is that it puts new energy into both those vertical and horizontal channels. It reminds us that grace is exponential.

*03*

“Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him.”

— Genesis 32:29

Names, in scripture, are powerful. They carry meaning. Many of them are word plays pointing to some circumstance of the person’s birth or, in the frequent stories of God changing people’s names, some action they’ve done. This story is a prime example. Jacob, after wrestling with a stranger all night, is renamed Israel.

No name is more powerful, more beautiful, more wonderful, than God’s name. So sacred is it that the people didn’t speak it. Yahweh was too holy to pronounce. Instead the people used Adonai or some other word, which is often translated “Lord,” but that doesn’t give the full picture.

Jacob wants to know the name of the person he’s been wrestling with all night. He suspects it is an angel, or even God themselves. Knowing someone’s name, or speaking it, gives you some power over them, or at least a level of familiarity. In this story, God’s name is too sacred to share with Jacob. The stranger won’t give it, instead blessing and re-naming Jacob, and therefore reasserting that, even though he lost the wrestling match, he is the one with the power to name.

When we say “Hallowed by your name” in the Lord’s prayer, we are reasserting the power of God’s name, and holding it sacred, re-committing not to use it falsely or for evil motives, but to speak it with respect and honor.

What does it mean to me that God’s name is holy?

*04*

“But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’”

— Exodus 3:13-14a

Here, at last, God gives a name. God was cagey with Jacob—it wasn’t necessary for Jacob to know God’s name. But Moses has a point. If he, who fled from his people years earlier, shows up and claims to be an emissary of God, they’re not going to buy it. He wants credibility. And a name will give him that. Names have power.

What makes me scratch my head is the mysterious name God gives Moses. “I am who I am.” Or, “I will be who I will be.” It certainly doesn’t roll off the tongue like “Daunte” or “Joaquin” or “Amanda”. It’s a statement of being that defies attempts to oversimplify or have power over. Do the Israelites know God by this name? Will they recognize it when Moses shares it with them? Or will they be just as mystified as I am? Will they believe because it’s not a simple name? In the story, they do believe Moses, so it must have worked.

God’s name is too holy to pin down. Too awesome to speak plainly. Too beautiful to express in human terms. “I am who I am” comes close—it inspires wonder, hope, and mystery. It invites a deeper walk. Wander with I am today.

What does ‘I am who I am’ mean to me as a name for God? What feelings or ideas does it bring up? Do I find it inviting or off-putting?

*05*

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”

— Exodus 20:7

Using the word “God” in expletives and expressions is so common it barely registers anymore. The initialism OMG or even OMFG (!) have been reduced to “Wow!” Or “Can you even believe this?!?” They have little or nothing to do with actual God or God’s name. We can be sad and frustrated about this all we want, but we can’t change it. How, then, can we come to some peace around it?

For me, it helps to realize that God’s name is not “God.” God is a description. Its capitalization just sets it apart from the many, many gods of the people living all around the Israelites. Capital-G-God is above all the lowercase-g-gods. But when we say “Hallowed be your name,” we are reaching for something higher, broader, and deeper than just “God.” There is Yahweh. There is “I am who I am.” There are ways to name God, like Hagar did: El Roi, or “the one who sees me.” As much as internet vernacular abuses the word God, we can reclaim the holiness of God’s name, and use it only with deep respect. We can’t make anyone else do it, of course. That’s between them and God. But we can make a commitment to following this commandment of God’s by speaking loving names for God in all that we say and do.

If I could name God as Hagar did, what would I name God?

*06*

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

— Matthew 28:19

Here, God’s name is an action. It’s not the name of a being or a description of some passive “it.” It is a means by which God claims us, draws us to God’s self, and equips us to live out Jesus’ Way of love and compassion in the world. Here, God’s name is a trinity: Father/Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not simple. Not limited. Once again, the holiness of God’s name, the power of it in this action of baptizing, is awesome and beautiful. When we say “Hallowed be your name” we are speaking of this incomprehensible trinity, this power to transform utterly. We are reminded that through this name we are claimed by God as God’s own child. What a powerful thought!

How does God’s name connect me to my baptism?

*07*

“Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

— John 16:23b-24

Jesus is God. So Jesus’ name is God’s name. Or one of them, at least. And here, we are told that if we ask something from God in Jesus’ name, we will receive it. But lots of people pray for lots of things and say, “In Jesus’ name” and then don’t get what they’ve asked for. A cure for their illness. A better job. A loving partner. The temptation is to use Jesus’ name as a kind of wishing talisman. And when it doesn’t work, where does that leave us in our belief about the power of God’s name?

I’m sorry but I don’t have any wisdom about this that won’t sound hollow to someone dying of cancer or who lost a child to tragedy or who can’t put food on the table. All I do know is that when I pray in Jesus’ name for guidance, for God’s presence, for courage and serenity, and pray in Jesus’ name that God would be God and I would turn over my pain and my grief and my fear, God does, in fact, answer. God shows up. Or, rather, God makes God’s presence known, for God is never elsewhere. It’s small comfort to someone whose need is far deeper than any I have experienced. But it’s all I have.

Do I believe that praying in Jesus’ name is more potent than any other prayer?

*08*

“Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.”

— Philippians 2:9-11

Praising God is an exercise in humility. When we sing hymns to God, like this beautiful “Christ Hymn” from Philippians, we proclaim with our voices that God is God and we are God’s beloved creation. We recognize that only God has the power to run the universe, and we can simply concentrate on being the best we can be one day at a time. We celebrate God’s beauty and love and commitment to us, not from a place of groveling self-hatred, but from a place of being called to co-create with God, to be God’s presence in the world to one another. We can bend the knee in respect and love without losing any of our dignity. And we can sing God’s name with the confidence that we are keeping it holy when we exalt it for what it is.

What is my favorite hymn and why?

*09*

“Your kingdom come.”

— Luke 11:2c

Main Idea: Imagining and yearning for God’s kingdom is what will ensure that we can be a part of building it here on earth.

What comes to mind when you think about manifestation? What kind of things do you associate with visualization? Maybe you go to your TikTok “For You” page, where an influencer is explaining their spiritual practices. Maybe you’ve been in a therapy session where imagining a specific place or item was an important part of a guided exercise. A quick Google search for “visualization statistics” or “how important is manifestation?” will produce study after study claiming that if you articulate your goals fully and consistently, you have a significantly higher chance of meeting them than if you don’t. How does the old adage go? “If you can see it, you can be it.”

The notions of manifestation and visualization continue to be interpreted, reinterpreted, co-opted, commodified, in some cases diluted, and, in a nutshell, stretched by a lot of people with a lot of different agendas to cover a lot of ground. In teaching us to pray, Jesus gives us one interpretation that we can depend on.

Jesus thinks we should ask for the coming of God’s kingdom every time we pray. This isn’t because God’s kingdom is a kind of polished, packaged reality that we’re hoping will arrive someday for us to consume. It’s because God’s kingdom is something that God imagined would require and be beautified by our participation. God’s kingdom is something we’re called to build with each other and for each other. And that means that we need to give it our attention. We need to give it our imagination. We need to see it so that we can be it! In prayer, we have the opportunity to grow and rededicate ourselves to our understanding of the kingdom of God.

*10*

“But the Lord sits enthroned for ever,

he has established his throne for judgement.”

— Psalm 9:7

What kind of kingdom are we praying for when we say “Your kingdom come?” If we look honestly at it, the image of a “king” is (a) male and (b) has all sorts of human characteristics of men with absolute power (hint: most of these aren’t good). Here in Psalm 9, we are given the image of a king who sits on a throne and sits in judgment over everyone. Is this a comforting image? Do we see it as someone who executes justice on behalf of those who are oppressed and in need? Does it lead us to self-righteousness, where we see it as someone who will allow us to finally “get even” with everyone we don’t like or don’t agree with? Or does it kick up fear of being judged by God and not measuring up? Of being punished? Even eternally???

How we pray the prayer Jesus taught us depends on how we envision God’s kingdom, or God’s “reign” if you prefer a term that isn’t necessarily masculine. We can hardly be genuine in our exhortation for God’s kingdom to come and will be done on earth if we’re afraid of what that will mean for us. The truth is that we can’t know for sure, but if we dig into scripture and discernment, we might get comfort and clarity that will allow us to ask this of God from a genuine place. Perhaps this would be a rich topic of conversation in a Bible study group, or among friends in your congregation.

How do I envision the reign of God? Do I really want it to come to pass?

*11*

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,

the world, and those who live in it;

for he has founded it on the seas,

and established it on the rivers.”

— Psalm 24:1-2

God is qualified to rule because God made all that is—it all belongs to God. When we pray “Your kingdom come,” perhaps we can lean into creation imagery, and envision a time when the health and wholeness of all creation will be fully restored. Rivers and lakes and oceans will be free of pollution, habitats will be lush and thriving, all life will flourish together, and God will maintain the balance. That’s a kingdom I would definitely love to come!

How do I envision God’s rulership over creation?

*12*

“He shall judge between many peoples,

and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;

they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,

and their spears into pruning-hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more.”

— Micah 4:3

In God’s reign, there is peace. Not a lot of earthly kings can claim this, and most of those whose nations enjoyed a level of peace did so at the expense of freedom. The Romans, for example, were notorious for killing anyone who presented a potential uprising against them. In this Micah text, the focus is on peace as the lack of warfare. But peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice. Which means that the oppressed, the downtrodden, those in need, the marginalized—these will all be fully liberated in God’s reign, and every one of us will accept and love every other one of us, no matter what. When we pray “Your kingdom come,” are we ready for this kind of radical welcome?

How do I benefit from the oppression of others? How do I envision a world in which everyone is fully equal?

*13*“He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’”

— Matthew 13:33

Jesus tried to help us understand what God’s reign is like. In the series of parables here in Matthew, he seems to be more concerned about helping people understand that the reign of God is desirable above all else and spreads through the people than he is about explaining what things will be like in some eventuality when God is in charge. In other words, he doesn’t say what the reign of God is, just how it behaves. It assumes, I think, that the people have some idea of what God’s rule will be like—or at least that they know how they’d like it to be. And maybe that’s because his audience was so oppressed and downtrodden—the least and the lost, the hungry and the marginalized. They knew that in God’s reign, they would be made whole. But what they needed from Jesus was hope that this was actually going to happen—and soon! He told them that the kingdom had arrived (in him) and was rapidly growing up among them. When we pray “Your kingdom come,” we can, in part, be grateful that it already has—any time we see love and justice winning out over hatred and oppression.

Where do I see evidence that the reign of God is already happening?

*14*

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’”

— John 18:36

The world sees “kingship” in specific terms. For Pilate (and pretty much everyone at the time), being a king was about having absolute power. If Jesus was, in fact, a king, he would be able to command an army to fight for him. He would have territory, possessions, political clout. Jesus’ accusers complained that he was styling himself the king of the Jews, but Pilate could see no evidence of this. He was understandably confused, and kept pressing Jesus to clarify. Are you a king or not? Jesus tries to set him straight: Yes, I’m a king, but no, not in terms you understand. For Pilate it’s clear as mud. “So you’re saying you’re a king, but you’re explaining it in ways that tell me you’re not a king at all.”

Many modern Christians are just as confused about this as Pilate was. We conflate Jesus’ reign with some image we have of God enforcing our own personal interpretations of God’s “rules” (and always in our own favor) and insist that these interpretations be enforced through the same kind of violence the Romans once used to create “peace.” We would all be wise to re-read this interaction with Pilate and be reminded that God’s reign is beyond our ability to comprehend and certainly beyond our desire to control it.

What role do I think human governments should play in enforcing religious ideals?

*15*

“And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

— Revelation 21:5a

God creates and re-creates. This is what it means to reign over all creation, to be the one we pray for when we say, “Your kingdom come.” There is so much hope in this simple sentence. No matter how terrible things seem, no matter the destruction, the trauma, the degradation, God, who created everything in the first place, will make all things new. Some of this is already happening, as God’s reign breaks into our daily lives any time love and justice are manifest. Some of it we can continue to strive for in our lives. And some of it we have to accept we have no control over, do our best to change what we can, and trust that God’s got this. God’s kingdom does come and is coming and we can hold out hope that one day we will see all things made new.

Do passages from Revelation make me nervous or give me hope or both?

*16*

“Give us each day our daily bread.”

— Luke 11:3

Main Idea: When we pray for daily bread, we pray for a deepening of the dependence so central to a life of faith.

The idea of “daily bread,” harkens back to Exodus 16:1-18. God’s people have just made it out of Egypt, and they are tired. Struggling. Hungry. Almost immediately, God springs into action, covering the surface of the desert with flaky manna and offering just one condition: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs.” If people try to gather and hoard more than that, the manna rots and dissolves.

What could be the reason for this rule? Scripture tells us that God devises it as a test. But a test of what? It’s definitely not a deprivation exercise. It’s very important to God that people end up full and satisfied.

Here’s the thing: God is feeding people who have lived for generations as slaves. God is feeding people who have been taught that dependence is suppression. In manna, God is reminding the Israelites that dependence is the very crux of God’s shalom—God’s vision of holistic peace—for the cosmos. In manna, God is asserting that dependence is not supposed to be a weapon.

Dependence is supposed to be an expression of God’s love. Dependence is supposed to be safe for the giver and the receiver. And that’s our good news this morning. We have a God who helps us reframe and redeem the notion of dependence. We have a God who wants us to ask for what we need—and who is already giving it.

*17*

“When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.”’”

— Exodus 16:15-16

Daily bread is just that: daily. It can be so hard to let go of future tripping—of worrying about what might happen at some unknown point in the days, weeks, months, or years ahead. It’s honestly difficult to believe that we will have what we need one day at a time, especially when we see so much evidence of poverty, which is caused by injustice which, if we’re honest about it, arises from this same fear of scarcity. God held the Israelites’ hands in the desert, giving them what they needed and commanding that they only take enough to feed them for a single day. Anything beyond that rotted.

And what of us? My life is busy. I need to make sure my kitchen is stocked so I’m not forever running to the grocery store. Is this a bad thing? I need to put future plans in place for my special needs adult children who will (if all goes well) outlive me. Is that a bad thing? I don’t think so, as long as I’m aware that anything that happens beyond today is not up to me. I don’t control the future. I can’t see the future. I need to turn over everything in my life to God each and every day, trusting that God will provide me with “daily bread” to sustain me physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Do I struggle with future-tripping? Or am I content living one day at a time?

*18*

“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

— Deuteronomy 8:3

Daily bread is spiritual. Yes, it’s also literal, as God gave the Israelites manna to sustain them physically in the desert. But the exercise of receiving that sustenance one day at a time was to develop in them a deep trust in God, and a desire to seek daily to be in communion with God. I know that for me turning over my life to God every day in prayer is foundational to my ability to focus on what is in front of me, and to keep me in close contact with God throughout my day.

Manna was a surprise to the Israelites in the desert. They had never seen anything like it before (in fact, manna just means “What is it?” which always makes me giggle a little). Likewise God surprises me sometimes with the way God shows up in my life. I think I know what’s best for me and everyone around me and, of course, I don’t. There are moments of serendipity and grace when and how I least expect it, and if I just kept trying to plow forward on my own steam, I might miss them. I know that I do not live just by eating food. I live because God lives in and through me.

How do I see “daily bread” as spiritual?

*19*

“The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

— Matthew 4:3-4

Daily bread is always available to us. Jesus was wandering in the desert, fasting, for who-knows-how-long (“forty days” in the Bible was not literal, but just meant “a long time”) so of course he was hungry for food. But when Satan reminded him that, as the Son of God, he had the power to turn stone into bread, Jesus responded, “That’s not the point.” The point was to commune with God. The point was to be nourished by what God has said to us, and promised us—and what God continues to say to us and promise us. That nourishment is always at hand, if we but reach for it. Those who fast generally do so for spiritual purposes, as Jesus was doing. He could not be tempted away from his fasting—especially not by the use of his own supposed power to do miracles. For him, and for us, nourishment is right there with us in the presence of God in and through us.

Where do I find God’s nourishment available to me each day?

*20*

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

— Matthew 6:31-33

Daily bread is a by-product of God’s justice. Jesus understands the needs of the people coming to him for spiritual nourishment. He knows they are poor, hungry, sick, oppressed, tired, and marginalized. And, he reminds them, God knows it, too. He encourages them to set aside, as best they can, their physical needs, turning them over in trust that God will provide for them, and attend instead to “striving for the kingdom of God,” which means working for justice.

It seems a little insensitive by modern standards. After all, someone who is chronically malnourished or in pain or mentally ill may literally not have the capacity to do this work. To have someone who is in dire need come to you for help and then to tell them not to worry about their physical needs but just seek after God… well that’s just not helpful.

For someone like me—middle class, dominant culture, etc.—this message is far more applicable, I think. Jesus is telling me, “Stop trying to ‘figure it out’ all the time. Instead, focus on your relationship with God—put that first—and the rest will take care of itself.” That has, in fact, been my experience for years on end, through a lot of serious challenges in my life. But also, Jesus is telling me to “strive for the kingdom of God”, which means working for justice for those who are in need. If everyone were to do this—to look past their own (often selfish) needs and see the whole—then certainly “daily bread” would follow for all God’s children.

How does make me feel to be told to “strive first for the kingdom of God”?

*21*

“Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled.”

— Matthew 14:19b-20a

Daily bread multiplies when love is involved. I’ve heard more than one recent sermon on this text change the focus from the idea of Jesus performing a miracle (and somehow multiplying enough food for maybe 5 people into enough food for five thousand) to the idea that maybe Jesus’ action inspired others to share what they had brought with them with those who had brought nothing, thus “multiplying” the initial offering into a communal experience of mutual care. I’m not sure how I feel about it, honestly, having grown up in the church believing that, well hey, Jesus was God after all and who’s to say he couldn’t have done such a miracle? But I do like the idea that when we follow in the Way of Jesus, miracles do happen—not necessarily the way we’ve always interpreted miracles to be instances of “magic” in some way, but simply by the definition “an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment” from Merriam Webster. When we reach out in love to support others with their daily needs, we can and do see lives transformed.

Does my interpretation of this story affect my experience of miracles in my life?

*22*

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

— Luke 24:30-31

Daily bread reveals Jesus’ presence among us. I don’t know about you, but in spite of all my spiritual practice, I still sometimes forget who the source of my daily bread is. I still, after all these years, sometimes think it’s me. When resources are scarce, I go into fear and “figure it out” mode, which sometimes comes out sideways onto the people around me in less than pleasant ways. But then I find that when I pour out my fears and frustrations, as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus with Jesus, I open myself to recognize just how God shows up in ways I might not have expected. In the help of others (like my incredible parents, who helped me buy a new car after mine was recently stolen). In unexpected opportunities. In my own giving of help and support to others and experiencing their moving from fear to faith. Anytime we give or receive help, if we open our eyes and hearts to it, we encounter Jesus.

When have I encountered Jesus in the sharing of resources?

*23*

“We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

— 1 John 1:4

Main Idea: The proclamation of Jesus Christ is what completes our joy. In him, we have come to experience God who is for us, and sharing this good news with others is its culmination.

Did you know that typos existed before keyboards? It’s true! We even have typos from before we had, well, typeface! Ancient scribes might not have been prone to hit the wrong key, but the act of copying texts by candlelight for hours at a time led to a whole host of problems. This led to the problem of encountering a text with a possible error and wondering whether or not making a correction was warranted, or if “fixing” the text would break it. Talk about a conundrum!

There are lots of examples where such scribal decisions created divergent text traditions, and we encounter one here in 1 John 1. In the NRSV, verse 1:4 reads, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” Some ancient sources for this passage from 1 John render it “your joy” rather than “our joy,” a mistake as easy to make in Koine Greek as it is in English. We can see why some bleary eyed medieval scribe might have thought the choice of “your” was a mistake. After all, isn’t the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to complete the joy of others? How could sharing this news be something which completed the author’s own joy instead?

While the translators of the NRSV had to make a choice as to which textual variant to follow, there is something true about both ways of rendering this passage. It is true that sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is meant to bring joy to others, there is a way in which our own joy would not be complete if we did not share this news also. Think of a moment in your life when you encountered something that was truly wonderful, not just for yourself but for others also. How much fuller was your joy when you shared that news with others? When I was a graduate student and learned that a student organization was putting on an event with free food for anyone who came, it was my right, my duty, and my joy to text everyone I knew with the glad tidings of where they were going to get their dinner tonight. Something would have been missing if I had kept that news to myself, and I certainly couldn’t have faced my roommates if they learned I’d held out on them.

The author of 1 John makes it clear that this is the sort of situation we find ourselves in. For Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world” (2:2). The good news we have been given is not only for us but for all creation. Joy—both the world’s and ours—finds its completion when all have heard of God’s love and received the good news that they too are children of God.

*24*

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.”

— 1 John 1:1-2

We are powerful witnesses for one another. We have all had moments in our lives when God has shown up, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically and powerfully. We have all had opportunities to recognize the way God is working among us, in our communities, in our nations, in our world—even though we are daily drawn into despair by the media’s focus on catastrophe. And because we are so inundated by “proof” that a God who is love cannot possibly exist in our current context, we especially need to share with one another “what we have heard, what we have seen with out eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” If we keep it to ourselves, we will inevitably begin to doubt our own experience. But when we share it with others and they share with us, suddenly, we find so much evidence of God’s presence and action we cannot possibly doubt. We need this hope. We need this witness. Do not hold back.

Have I had an experience of God showing up in my life that should be shared with others?

*25*

“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

— 1 John 1:3

We are invited into community with God. As I discussed yesterday, witnessing is an enormous part of this. When we share our faith experiences with one another, we find commonalities that bind us together in ways that aren’t found in other contexts—not at the office water cooler or on the pickleball court or over the neighbor’s fence. Fellowship with our Christian communities is fellowship with God (of course I could make the argument that any fellowship with others is fellowship with God, as God is present in every single one of us, but nowhere is this fellowship more powerful than in a place where open sharing of faith is encouraged and nurtured). When we declare to one another what we have heard and seen, and listen to others do the same, God shows up: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20) Notice how I italicized the word “listen” above. This is the part where some of us have a tendency to miss the boat. We might be great and sharing our own experiences of God, but do we create a space for others to do likewise? When we do, we may find an even more powerful experience of God’s presence. Fellowship with one another is a joy not to be missed!

How do I create space for others to share their spiritual experiences with me and the community?

*26*

“We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

— 1 John 1:4

Joy:

1a: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires : DELIGHT

1b: the expression or exhibition of such emotion : GAIETY

2: a state of happiness or felicity : BLISS

(Meriam Webster)

I don’t know about you, but I find these definitions of joy to be wildly insufficient to the actual profundity of the word. Definition 1a smacks of capitalism or selfishness. We have joy when everything is going well for us or we know we’re going to get what we want. Definition 2 equates joy and happiness, and yet I think there’s a distinct difference between them. For one thing, it’s so hard to define what, exactly, happiness is—it varies so much from person to person and context to context. It’s source is elusive, and it’s experience is often ephemeral.

Joy is so much more than happiness. So much more than a feeling of success or good fortune or getting what we want. Joy endures even through pain—it can exist alongside even extreme challenges. When I was 18 months in recovery, I had a powerful epiphany. I realized, one morning, that all the serious difficulties that I thought had driven me to use food to self-comfort, were exactly as they had been when I walked in the doors (severe marriage issues, kids’ behavioral issues, a friend’s dying child, a church community collapsing, etc.) and yet… and yet, I was experiencing joy in my life. I was finding such enduring strength and goodness in my developing relationship with God, in my fellowship with other addicts, in my being clean from sugar and volume eating. This joy became a foundation for my life, and while there might have been times I did not see it as clearly (even 20 years into recovery, I still have challenges, after all) it is always there waiting for me, and I always get back there.

This, I believe, is the kind of “complete” joy the writer of 1 John is talking about. It’s a joy that finds its source not in worldly experience at all, but in community with God. We are invited into this joy.

What is my experiences of joy in my life? Is it different than happiness? How?

*27*

“But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

— 1 John 1:7

Fellowship in Christ is a powerful restorative. Mind you, it’s not as though Jesus doesn’t cleanse us from sin if we’re not in a Christian community. Jesus’ sacrificial act on the cross was universal. End of story. BUT, if I may draw on my recovery experience again, I can tell you from experience that having a fellowship of people working a spiritual program with me goes a long way to connecting me with God in relation to dealing with sin, or as we sometimes refer to it in recovery, “character defects.” There is such a wonderful mutual acceptance of the fact that being human means we will fall short, that we are always in need of grace, and that we are always called to be completely honest about our missteps and willing to make amends for them.

I don’t know how this would work within a congregation. I suppose the weekly practice of confession and forgiveness is good as far as it goes, but I suspect most of us are only partially aware of what we’re saying in that part of the liturgy. Are there opportunities for us to “walk in the light” together and mentor each other as we work, with God’s help, to release those persistent twists of personality that get us in trouble in our relationships? Something to ponder.

Do I have a way to engage in meaningful confession?

*28*

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

— 1 John 1:8

Self-deception is not to be taken lightly. Many of us are absolute geniuses at it. As a recovery addict, I have been challenged repeatedly to look honestly at my motives in every interaction that did not go so well, and often in advance of any action I might need to take in the future. Even when my motives appear absolutely clean, I sometimes find that underneath wanting to do what is best in a given situation, I’m really acting selfishly to make my own life easier rather than taking myself out of it and being of genuine love and service to another person. So I guess what I’m saying is that in those moment when I think my years of disciplined spiritual practice somehow qualify me to be unreflective about my actions—or, if you will, if I say I have no sin—then I am self-deceived. And even if, in the moment, all comes off well and no one is hurt, ultimately remaining in a state of dishonesty erodes my serenity and will eventually push me into even further self-deceit in order to hide the truth from myself, which, as you can imagine, compounds itself over time. In all things, it’s best to be completely honest with ourselves and with God, even it’s just to admit that we’re not sure our motives are 100% clean. Asking God for help goes a long way toward moving us into a state of willingness to be honest.

How do I recognize when I am being dishonest with myself about my motives in a given situation? How can I be more aware?

*29*

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

— 1 John 2:1-2

I don’t think anyone gets to a place where they “may not sin.” I don’t subscribe to the notion that human beings are evil at their core due to some flaw in creation. God created us good, beautiful, fully embodied and fully spiritual. But, for whatever reason, we are also imperfect. We fall prey to instincts which, in their correct proportion, are helpful and life-giving, but which, when indulged beyond their original intent, drive us to hurt one another. We fall prey to fears which, again, probably arose from our primitive survival instincts, but which now drive us to take actions that are not life-giving for us or anyone else. So it’s not a matter of “if anyone does sin” but rather “when we sin” that we can take great comfort in knowing that we have an advocate in Jesus. Jesus gets it completely. Gets us. Was us. Stands with and for us. Went to hell and back for us. There is absolutely nothing we can do that Jesus cannot and does not forgive us for, that will make Jesus stop loving us. Not that we should sin flagrantly, but that we should always be grateful to know that our imperfections are not who we are, but just something we do, and something that can be fundamentally changed in us without diminishing our character or personality. Jesus does this for us.

Do I feel that I can be forgiven for absolutely anything I have done?

*30*

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

— 1 John 3:1a

Main Idea: Being a child of God means being a little Christ. Looking to God to see ourselves is not meant to be a judgment; rather, it helps us notice where God is at work in our lives to make us more like God in our love for one another.

Barely is a child born before everyone begins to play the game of claiming who they look like. While I am convinced that all babies really look the same, others seem confident that they can detect all the details of their parents in them. Each respective set of grandparents is sure they are the spitting image of the parent on their side of the family, while friends and relations are more measured in making sure they can find something of both mother and father in the face of the child. As personalities emerge, the game takes on a new form. Whose habits do they have? Is their laugh yours or mine? And so on. While at times it can be a frustrating game—every child will be their own person—there is a certain charm in seeing ourselves in someone we have raised and loved.

Being a child of God is no different, for God or for us. Here, we see that it means we are a chip off the divine block, waiting for the revelation of how much we are like the one who has claimed us. “Beloved, we are God’s children now;” the author writes, “what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him,” (3:2-3). God has called us children as an act of love, and this declaration is a source of hope, one which purifies us to make us more like God.

These words are essential to understanding what follows in this chapter. Absent this analogy, we would read verse 4 and following as a threat. The latter half of today’s reading seems to suggest that, if we sin (and we all do), we are not the children of God we thought we are. They seem to make our status as children conditional on living up to the standard set by God as our parent. But the analogy of being a child helps us to resist this reading. Like a young person, we are still growing and developing, learning how to walk this new life we have been born into. When we do what is right, we shine not with our own righteousness but with the righteousness of God (3:7). When we sin, we have in Jesus an advocate who will forgive us our sins and cleanse us of unrighteousness (1:9-2:1).

What the author is describing here is not a litmus test to judge us as a final product but a description of how God’s love works in us to grow and change us. We are given stark descriptions of what it does and does not mean to abide in God not so that we could strive to be like God through our own efforts but so that we could distinguish the work of God in us. These words serve as a mirror, helping us watch ourselves grow and see in our own lives the love of God which conforms us to God’s image. The righteousness of God in Christ has been imputed to us; sin is being taken away.