

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



JANUARY – APRIL 2023



Bible Reading Fellowship

**Eternal God,
Your word is always a light for our way;
Open our eyes and enlighten our spirit that we
may understand your truth in all its power and
holiness.**

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives
and enable us to grow more and more into the
image of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

Amen

The Journey is a daily Bible reading program which covers the Bible every five years. Each month addresses a book of the Bible or a Scripture theme.

Each day's reading consists of a 10-15 verse Bible passage followed by clear, helpful commentary. A reflection and discussion question and applicable prayer are also included. The passage of Scripture should be read just before studying *The Journey* commentary.

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

1. Commentary on Scripture to aid in better understanding the passage (as distinguished from devotional material based upon Scripture)
2. Presented in a relational way (i.e., what does this say about how God wants me to live?)
3. Easily adapted to group study (the "Reflection and Discussion" questions at the end of each lesson can be used for group discussion)
4. Special readings for Advent and Lent

We sincerely hope that you will find this resource a valuable companion on your "journey" through productive Bible reading for many years to come.

Published by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380
Winter Park, Florida 32790-0380

(407) 628-4330
www.biblereading.org

Printed in the U.S.A.

The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

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The Bible Reading Fellowship is deeply grateful to all who have so generously contributed to this issue of *The Journey*, especially the writers: **Harry C. Griffith** (Luke: Chapters 1-11); **Donald M. Hultstrand**, **Alan Avery**, **John Harris Harper**, and **Terry Sweeney** (Lenten study: Decisions, Decisions!); and **David C. Lord** (The Holy Spirit). The Sabbath Times for 2023 are taken from the writings of Father Andrew, SDC (unless otherwise noted).



Luke

Chapters 1-11

Sunday, January 1

Sabbath Time

Read: Philippians 2:9-13

Holy Name

Because today is the feast day of Holy Name, we have a special Sabbath Time writing as we prepare to begin our study of Luke.

On the eighth day after his birth every Jewish boy was circumcised and named. So it was with Jesus, as we will read in our study. It was God, through the angel Gabriel, who named Jesus (Luke 1:31, 2:21). Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, meaning “the Lord saves.”

Our passage for today reverences the name of Jesus. “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow.” In reverencing the name, Paul is adding another dimension to it: Jesus is Lord. The title by which Jesus was known in the early church was *kurios*, which meant master or owner, was applied to the Roman emperors and the heathen gods, but—most of all—was the name by which the Hebrew *Jehovah* was translated in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. Truly Jesus was and is King of kings and Lord of lords.

“Jesus Christ is Lord” was the first creed the Christian Church ever had. To be a Christian was to confess Jesus Christ as Lord (see, for instance, Romans 10:9). It was a simple creed, but it was all-encompassing.

In worship services in times past (and still in some places today), people bowed their heads whenever the name of Jesus was mentioned. Today Jesus’ name is heard almost as commonly in disrespectful ways as it is in reverential ways. As we enter this new year, it is a wonderful time to commit ourselves—in our actions, speech and demeanor—to the Holy Name of Jesus.

R&D *Take a few minutes to meditate on “Jesus Christ is Lord.”*

Prayer: *Lord of our life, we praise your Holy Name.*

Monday, January 2

Introduction

The Gospel according to Luke is uniquely both the gospel for us and the gospel of prayer.

Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, was a Gentile writing for Gentiles. The Theophilus (meaning “Beloved by God”) to whom the gospel is addressed may have been a high official in the Roman government: thus, a Gentile. Luke is not greatly interested in the life of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. He is not writing primarily for the Jews, but for people very like ourselves. As a result, Luke is considered the easiest of all of the gospels to read.

This gospel is also especially the gospel of prayer. At all of the great moments of Jesus’ life, Luke shows him to be at prayer. Only Luke tells us that Jesus prayed for Peter in his hour of testing (22:32), and only he gives us the prayer parables of the friend at midnight (11:5-13) and the unjust judge (18:1-8). But, perhaps even more than that, it is the gospel of Luke that contains the three great hymns of praise that have warmed the hearts of God’s people throughout all generations: the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:68-79), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32).

Because we will be studying the “gospel of prayer” as our primary study in *The Journey* this year, you are encouraged to use a meditative approach to your daily reading and study. Realize that the passage you are reading was written for you. Hear the words as though they were being spoken to you by God. Reflect upon the ultimate importance and value of what is being said in each passage. Acknowledge that God can speak to our deepest needs at this very moment through the words of Scripture.

R&D *What method of prayerfully approaching this study is likely to work best for you?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You can speak to us at the deepest levels of our being through Scripture, and we pray that You will do so in the days ahead.*

Tuesday, January 3

Read: Luke 1:1-4

Solid Foundation

The self-revelation of God through Scripture is an ongoing story, but here we are at a new beginning. In the past, God's revelation has been through the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament); now the "good news" breaks through.

Theophilus probably had a sympathetic but incomplete interest in the Christian faith. In that regard he was typical of many people of his day. Luke wants to give him a true picture of the origin and content of Christianity.

To do this he had to set forth the significant facts of Jesus' life. Luke did not know them firsthand; he had to rely on the original eyewitnesses and on the accounts of previous writers (primarily Mark). Therefore, he is very specific in saying that his material is based on a careful study of the available sources, and that he is arranging it in an orderly manner so that it may best be understood and believed.

A reading of the Gospel of Luke shows clearly that his purpose is more than the simple imparting of reliable information. Luke is not content to record the facts, and let the facts speak for themselves. He is concerned with the meaning of what is said and done, not simply with the speech and actions alone. He writes as a convinced Christian, with the intention of drawing his readers to share his faith. Luke lays a solid foundation on which faith can be built. He will be fair and honest, but he will not be impartial.

R&D From Luke's introduction, what do you have to look forward to in studying this gospel?

Prayer: Thank You, Father God, for the faithfulness of Luke and his accuracy in telling us of the life of Your Son Jesus.

Wednesday, January 4

Read: Luke 1:5-25

Bringing Good News

In this passage, Luke combines the best of history and drama. He ties the events to a particular time ("in the days of Herod,

king of Judea,” v.5), and he will continue to do this in subsequent verses. And he tells the story of a devout couple who, late in life, are promised their first child, a son whose life will profoundly affect many.

The drama is heightened by the fact that Zechariah was a priest married to a “daughter of Aaron.” A priest was required to marry only a woman of pure Jewish lineage, and Elizabeth was especially qualified, being also a descendant of the priestly line. Yet, despite the fact that “they were both righteous before God” (v.6), they were without child. In their day this was a domestic tragedy, and unquestionably the subject of much prayer for them. Before the morning sacrifice and after the evening sacrifice in the Temple, incense was burned on the altar by a priest. But there were as many as 20,000 priests in Israel at the time; thus, it was quite possible that a priest would never have the privilege of burning incense in the Temple. On this day, however, the lot fell to Zechariah.

The combination of devout lives by Elizabeth and Zechariah, their prayers for a child, the opportunity to burn incense on the altar, and—perhaps most of all—hearts open to obey God, resulted in the miraculous visit of the angel Gabriel and the promise of a special son. Perhaps we can identify with Zechariah in finding it all a little hard to believe, with the consequence of his being silenced until the birth of the child.

R&D When have a combination of circumstances worked together to produce a profound result in your life?

Prayer: Timing is in Your hands, Lord God, and we rejoice when You demonstrate Your sovereignty in remarkable ways, to Your glory and our benefit.

Thursday, January 5

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Handmaid of the Lord

Now Gabriel has an even more important message to impart, and another devout person to whom to give the message. But she’s just a young girl, a virgin. And the message is the most important one in the history of the world! What if Mary says no?

Frederick Buechner expressed it this way: “She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he’d been entrusted with a message to give her and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this story is Mary’s immediate acceptance of this incredible situation. It doesn’t require much imagination to realize that her position would be extremely difficult. She would be the object of suspicion and gossip for the rest of her life. Yet she gave herself wholly to the will of God and committed the situation totally to Him.

It is only through such abandonment to God’s will on our part that His glorious work in the world can be accomplished. In a sense, we are all to conceive and bear Jesus; the Christian mission is to bear Jesus to the world. “For with God nothing will be impossible” (v.37).

R&D How do you feel about the commission God has given you to reveal Jesus to the world? What are you doing about it?

Prayer: Make me, Lord Jesus, a witness to those around me of what you mean to me.

Friday, January 6

Read: Ephesians 3:1-12

Epiphany

Epiphany commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the first instance of which was the visitation of the Magi to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12). In today’s passage, we are considering the words of Paul, the great “Apostle to the Gentiles,” as he reflects on his calling by God to that ministry.

Paul marvels at the “mystery hidden for ages in God” (v.9) that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (v.6).

Jesus was not the savior of the Jews only, but of all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike. Most of us reading these words do not come from a Jewish background, so we know how important this revelation is to us!

Paul knew he had a very special role in bringing this revelation to fruition. He was aware of the grace that had been given him to fulfill this ministry. As William Barclay said, "It is one of the great facts of the Christian life that we have been given the precious things of Christianity in order to share them with others. It is one of the great warnings of the Christian life that if we keep them to ourselves, we lose them."

As Paul was called by God to his vital ministry, so is each of us called today. Our gifts and our opportunities to share them may be very different from Paul's, but our responsibility is no less.

R&D What opportunities have you recently had to manifest Christ to someone else?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the revelation of your life as a guiding path for how we are to live.

Saturday, January 7

Read: Luke 1:39-55

Blessed

It is not unusual to feel closer to our Christian friends than we do to nonChristian members of our own family. That is because our shared relationship with Christ is stronger than our blood relationship with our family. In our passage for today, we have an example of the kind of relationship which can exist when there is spiritual as well as family bonding. In response to the Holy Spirit's prompting within Elizabeth, Mary pours out her great hymn of thanksgiving.

It is easy, because of the familiarity and beauty of the Magnificat, to become mesmerized by the words and to overlook the message to us that is contained in them. The hymn begins as the tender exultation of a young woman in the greatest hour of her life. But, as she continues, drawing upon Scripture (compare 1

Samuel 2:1-10), she announces the arrival of a new time when the standards of the world will be reversed.

That is the challenge presented to us in the Magnificat. The important people in the community are not necessarily the “rich and famous,” but those who serve. This, Mary tells us, is not just an expectation, but a reality. God “has regarded the low estate...has done great things...has shown strength...has scattered the proud... has put down the mighty...and exalted those of low degree...filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.” These are new values which we reject at our peril. A new time has come wherein things will be reversed; it is those who are obedient to God who will count.

R&D Consider a close relationship you have with a Christian member of your family.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for those who are both our brothers and sisters by flesh and by faith; help us to reach all of our loved ones for Christ.

Sunday, January 8

Sabbath Time

They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. Romans 3:24-25a

We can write over the manger, “So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” and that ought to have been sufficient. But since it was not sufficient to write those letters in the whiteness of the innocence of Christ, they had to be written in the redness of the agony of His sacrifice, God using that precious blood that He took for love of us and that our sins caused to flow, to underline the declaration of His love for us.

Monday, January 9

Read: Luke 1:56-80

John Named

The birth, circumcision and naming of a son was a cause for celebration. Naming a male child was considered especially im-

portant. The name might describe an event surrounding the birth (as in the case of Esau and Jacob, Genesis 25:25-26); it might have to do with the appearance of the child (Laban means white or blond); or it might be an expression of the parents' appreciation to God (Saul and Samuel both mean "asked for").

In this case, it is first Elizabeth who says that the child is to be named John ("Jehovah's gift" or "God is gracious"). The friends and neighbors question that, necessitating Zechariah's confirmation of the name. A spiritual breakthrough occurs as a result, leaving the onlookers in awe and inspiring Zechariah to say what we call the Benedictus.

As with the Magnificat, the Benedictus is a hymn of such profound beauty that we may miss its practical message. Not only does it announce who the one we refer to as John the Baptist will be, but what his essential role will be in the future of the world. Furthermore, the last five verses of the Benedictus give us a wonderful preview of what the Christian life is all about.

There is preparation (v.75); we are called to holiness and righteousness as followers of Christ. There is knowledge (v.77); it is in Jesus that we learn what God is really like. There is forgiveness (v.77b); God wants to be in relationship with us and has proved that He will go to any length (John 3:16) to accomplish that. And there is peace (v.79); peace in this sense is not just freedom from trouble, but all that makes for our highest good. Through Christ we are enabled to walk in the way that leads to abundant life (John 10:10).

R&D *What, for you, is the most important word or phrase in the Benedictus? Why?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those times when Scripture lifts us up above the routines of life with words that are profound, beautiful and life-fulfilling.*

Tuesday, January 10

Read: Luke 2:1-20

A Savior Is Born

Once again, we have both history and high drama joining hands in this passage. “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” And the love of God came down to earth in human form in a manger!

On the first Christmas day, God came to be with us in a unique way. There was no great fuss; it all happened very quietly. On a winter’s night God slipped into the world He had made as a baby. We don’t even know the exact date; the world was too busy with the practical affairs of a census, and the inn was full. While emperors reigned in splendor, the King of kings lay in a manger, greeted by shepherds. While the mighty of the world were busy with more important things, the humble were granted the privilege of being present at the greatest of God’s wonders.

The shepherds, however, had to respond to the gracious invitation they had received from the angel. If the glory they had experienced while in the fields was to come to fruition in their hearts, they had to “go over to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened.” So it is with us all; it is only as we respond to God’s gracious invitation to new life that we can experience the glory of God within.

“But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (v.19). Just a reminder that the gospel of Luke affords us a wonderful opportunity to approach Scripture meditatively, that we may all ponder these things in our hearts.

R&D To what extent are you succeeding in meditating on these passages of Scripture in Luke?

Prayer: Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth.

Wednesday, January 11

Read: Luke 2:21-40

Simeon’s Song

In the opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel, we encounter a remarkable group of people: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and

Mary, and now Simeon and Anna. They display a genuine piety and an insight into the purposes of God unmatched elsewhere in Israel. Deeply versed in the Old Testament and filled with the Holy Spirit, they are foundation stones upon which God's redemption of His people will be established.

Through Simeon, we are treated to the third of the three great hymns of praise, the *Nunc Dimittis*. Drawing upon Isaiah 40-55, Simeon introduces two themes in his words about Christ that few others would have linked with the Messiah: the inclusion of the Gentiles and suffering. These chapters describe God's servant who is to bring the knowledge of God to the nations (42:6, 49:6) and undergo great suffering for the sake of others (50:6 and 53).

“Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against” (v.34b). This is a hard saying, but truth is often painful. Jesus will be the cause of division, as people must choose for or against him. As William Barclay has said, “It is not so much God who judges a man; a man judges himself; and his judgment is his reaction to Jesus Christ. ...Towards Jesus Christ there can be no neutrality. We either surrender to him or are at war with him. And it is the tragedy of life that our pride often keeps us from making that surrender which leads to victory.”

R&D Thinking about Anna and Simeon, where there are vital, spiritually renewed churches, there is perhaps always a history of one or more saintly souls who prayed patiently for years that life would come to the parish. Is your congregation the result or in need of such prayers and such “pray-ers”?

Prayer: When we are in pain or in need, Lord Christ, help us to remember to give thanks for those who are praying for us in your name.

Thursday, January 12

Read: Luke 2:41-52

School Days

Few of us are without curiosity about Jesus' life between his circumcision and the beginning of his ministry, yet this vignette is the only story we have of his youth. Thus marks the difference

between a biography and a gospel. A gospel does not detail extraneous information as interesting as it might be. A gospel is about redemption, and therefore only that which bears directly upon God's act of redemption is of real concern.

Twelve was the age when a Jewish boy assumed for himself the obligations to which his parents had committed him at his circumcision. This brief picture shows Jesus as a lively and intelligent boy, captivated by the opportunities afforded him to be among scholars in Jerusalem. Already he was exhibiting the quality of mind which later made his teaching penetrating and vivid. Already he showed a consciousness of God as his Father which was to be the foundation of his life and ministry. His first and last recorded words speak of God as his Father (2:49 and 24:49).

We need not suppose that Jesus, at twelve years of age, fully understood what it would mean for him to be the Son of God. It would have been difficult indeed for a child to bear such a weight of responsibility. Jesus' understanding of his vocation developed as he matured (v.52).

R&D If you could, what would you like to know about Jesus during the missing years? Why?

Prayer: Father God, just as Your hand was on Jesus from his birth, Your hand is also on us. You are with us through Your Holy Spirit to guide us each step of the way if we are attuned to that guidance.

Friday, January 13

Read: Luke 3:1-14

Fruits of Repentance

Once again Luke sets the time and place. He is writing to a world in need of God, and, by giving us this specific dating, he is putting the gospel in the context of world events. The story he is about to tell has significance far beyond the setting in which it took place.

That environment was Judaism, but a Judaism which had in many respects lost its vision. It had become ineffective in serving God. Called to be a light to the nations, the Jewish people were a weak witness to God in their midst. It was time for a renewal of

faith as John the Baptist came upon the scene. John came preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins (v.3). Luke gives us more details of John's teaching than the other gospel writers. John uses strong language indeed! The Jewish people considered themselves to be in a preferential position with God; descent from Abraham meant God's automatic favor. What a shock John's message must have been to them. An unfruitful Israel was in danger of being "cut down and thrown into the fire" (v.9).

John says to "bear fruits that befit repentance" (v.8). It is just as much a message for us today. If we worship the church rather than the Lord, we can be just as guilty of unfruitful religiosity. If we insulate ourselves against the need and the pain in the world around us, if our lives do not reflect repentance and a willingness to follow Christ wherever he would lead us, we too deserve "the wrath to come" (v.7).

R&D *How can we "bear fruits that befit repentance"?*

Prayer: *The events of the day, the distractions of life, can so easily lead us astray, Lord, unless we stay focused on You and Your plan for our lives.*

Saturday, January 14

Read: Luke 3:15-22 [23-38]

Good News?

The people begin enthusiastically to wonder if John is, in fact, the Messiah who was to come. John, however, clearly understands that his ministry is to prepare the way for the one who is to come. John saw the Messiah as one who would bring both salvation and judgment; he would separate the wicked from the righteous. The method of winnowing used in that day was to toss the mixture of chaff and grain into the air; the wind would blow the chaff away but not the grain, which would be gathered into storage.

There are two things to note about Jesus' baptism. The first is that he who was sinless was willing to be baptized at all. The reason was for identification with the people, a trademark of Jesus' ministry on earth. Secondly, the Father from heaven speaks words

from Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1; Isaiah 42:1-4 describes a gentle and humble servant, the kind of Messiah Jesus was to be.

There are also two special messages for ourselves. The first is that there is, in all of us, grain worth being gathered and chaff that needs to be blown away, and that is what Jesus wants to do in us. And the second is that, in verse 18, these harsh exhortations of John the Baptist are referred to as “good news.” The reason, of course, is that it is much better for us to be warned of our sinfulness and our apathy than to be allowed comfortably to remain in ignorance and death.

R&D *What “good news” have you reluctantly received from the Lord?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as your disciples, we need discipline. Help us to be grateful for what we must learn the hard way if we are to learn at all.*

Sunday, January 15

Sabbath Time

We love, because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

He would not weaken a will by making things clear and easy for it; He would not bribe a will by some glittering promise of reward; He would not frighten a will by some threat; He would not break a will by force, or warp a will by something less than truth; He would win a will by the revelation of His love, love that was tested by hatred and stayed true, love that was tested by faithlessness and stayed faithful.

Monday, January 16

Read: Luke 4:1-13

The Temptation

At his baptism Jesus had been called God’s Son and had received the Holy Spirit. He was conscious of the ministry to which he had been called and of God’s power at work within him. At his baptism there was the hint that his ministry would be one of servanthood. We now begin to see what sort of Messiah Jesus will be.

As he faces Satan’s onslaught, Jesus clearly rejects three ways of pursuing his ministry. He will not allow physical needs to prevent his meeting people’s spiritual needs; man does live by bread, but not bread alone. He will not use power in such a manner that

the end justifies the means; his power will be exercised through obedience to God. He will not work miracles in order to gain the admiration of others; the miracles he works will be of healing and reconciliation.

There are some special messages for us in this passage. One is that Jesus relied on Scripture to thwart Satan; we need to be able to do that as well. And, it should be noted that Satan quoted Scripture in the course of the confrontation (vv.10-11); we need to know the Bible as a whole so as not to be misled by “proof-texting” (pulling verses out of context to support preconceived notions).

We can also learn from this passage that Satan strikes when we are at our most vulnerable point, just as he came to Jesus following a long period of fasting. Because he waits for those opportunities, people involved in Alcoholics Anonymous know never to make a decision when they are hungry, angry, lonely or tired.

R&D When did you last experience a confrontation with Satan? What happened?

Prayer: We pray for Your special protection, Lord God, when we are most vulnerable.

Tuesday, January 17

Read: Luke 4:14-30

The Time Is Now

Although Matthew and Mark record the sermon at Nazareth later in their gospel accounts, Luke chooses to place it at the start of Jesus’ ministry and to describe it to a greater extent than the others. In this manner he sets it as the foundation on which Jesus’ ministry will be built.

As Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2, it is with the understanding that he has been called to fulfil that prophecy. He has come to bring “the year of the Lord’s favor,” the year of jubilee when property is restored and slaves are freed (see Leviticus 25:10-24), which had become a symbol of salvation for the Jews. Jesus had come to bring freedom, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

At first Jesus’ words were well received (v.22). He could not honestly accept the praise of the people, however, without letting

them know exactly what these “gracious words” meant. God’s plan was much larger than simply taking care of the Jews. His grace was to extend to the Gentiles as well, and Jesus gives two illustrations to make it clear that that had been God’s plan all along. This, of course, infuriates the crowd and they seek to do away with Jesus.

We can all identify with situations in which we have impressed our friends, relatives or others with what we have said, but realize that there is more that needs to be said that will not be so well received. The temptation is to “quit while we’re ahead,” perhaps rationalizing that we will be able to deal with the real issue later. That is not what Jesus did, and he is our example.

R&D When has God wanted you to say the unpopular thing at a time when it would have been easier to let it go until another time? What happened?

Prayer: Give us courage, Lord Jesus, to speak your words when they need to be spoken.

Wednesday, January 18

Read: Luke 4:31-44

Spiritual Reality

Several aspects of Jesus’ ministry are revealed in this passage. He speaks with authority, he casts out demons, he heals and he preaches, yet—in all of it—he demonstrates a reluctance that his messiahship be clearly known.

Jesus’ authority was hard to miss. In his teaching he followed a pattern very different from the rabbis of his day. They used repetition and elaboration of the words of previous teachers. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke directly, often with contrasting viewpoints from earlier teachings.

It is in the episodes with demons, however, that Jesus’ authority is most clearly shown. Not only that Jesus could so easily control these spirits, but that they were immediately fearful of him and recognized who he was (“the Holy One of God,” v.34; “the Son of God,” v.41), evidence that what goes on in the spiritual world is at a level often missed by people of Jesus’ day and in our day. The speed with which he silenced the demons shows Jesus’

reluctance to be recognized as the Messiah too early in his ministry. There were too many preconceived, false notions of what kind of Messiah God would send; Jesus needed time to demonstrate what the real Messiah was like.

An essential issue for us in this passage is the reality of the spiritual world. The only thing that separates the Christian Church from social service organizations is its spiritual dimension; the only thing that separates the Christian Church from other faiths and cults is Christian spirituality centered in the Messiah revealed to us in Scripture. These are essential differences!

R&D *How aware are you of the spiritual world?*

Prayer: *Unless we are wearing the “whole armor of God” (Ephesians 6:10-18), Blessed Lord, we are vulnerable to the evil one. Thank You for this protection.*

Thursday, January 19

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Disciples

This passage tells us some things about discipleship and mission. Luke shows the disciples sharing in Jesus' mission. The characteristics of discipleship are obedience and learning. Here we see Peter making his boat available to Jesus that he might teach from it; the people were pressing “upon him to hear the word of God” (v.1) to such an extent that it was necessary to get some distance from them in order for them all to be able to see and hear him.

The disciples are given the benefit of a teaching even more powerful than the words Jesus had spoken. In a sort of acted-out parable, Jesus leads the expert fishermen to an abundance of fish! If what he had said was not enough, this demonstration was sufficient to bring Peter to his knees and Peter and his partners, James and John, into the mission of “catching men” instead of fish.

Just as the disciples were called, the Church is called to the dual role of discipleship and mission. We are to learn and we are to serve. Discipleship and mission go hand in hand: it is as we are able to tell our own story of faith that we best come to understand it

ourselves; it is in loving others for Christ's sake that we truly come to know the meaning of God's love.

R&D *What do discipleship and mission mean to you?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for trusting such as us to carry your mission forward in the world.*

Friday, January 20

Read: Luke 5:12-26

Healing Touch

We are still early in the Gospel of Luke and already Jesus is doing things that cannot help but alienate the Jewish authorities. A person with leprosy was considered ceremonially unclean, “untouchable” (see Leviticus 13), but Jesus touches him. Only God could forgive sins, but Jesus says, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.”

Here we have two stories of great faith, with miraculous outcomes. The leper says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” In the case of the paralytic, it is the friends who demonstrate unshakable faith, overcoming several obstacles to bring their friend to the feet of Jesus.

Knowing that only God can forgive sins, the lawyers reached the conclusion that Jesus was usurping the authority of God. The opposite conclusion—that Jesus was acting under the authority of God—was too startling for them to consider seriously.

There is much that we can learn from this passage. God calls us to administer His healing touch in a desperately needy world today. On the one hand, we are to reach out to those who might be considered the “lepers” of our day; on the other, we are to administer God's healing grace that they might be brought to that wholeness that He desires for them. Likewise, when we are not able to bring healing ourselves (as in the case of the paralytic), we should be willing to “carry” our neighbor to the healing place: to the resource to meet that person's need.

R&D *Who, to you, are the “lepers” of our day, and how can they be brought to Christ's healing touch?*

Prayer: *Father God, You impart gifts of the Holy Spirit through which your disciples today can carry out the ministries that Jesus performed during his time on earth. Help us to recognize those gifts within ourselves and to carry out those ministries for the benefit of the “lepers” and other needy persons in our day.*

Saturday, January 21

Read: Luke 5:27-39

Confrontation

Jesus’ words and actions continue to build opposition among the religious authorities of the day. Here he is confronted for being too generous and not religious enough. The people of Nazareth wanted to kill him because he talked of extending the grace of God to the Gentiles; here the objection is that he is extending it to tax collectors and sinners. The point, of course, is that it is only those people who recognize that they are sinners who are open to his message of repentance and forgiveness; people who think they are righteous cannot see the need for a savior.

The criticism that Jesus is not religious enough comes from the fact that his disciples do not practice the religious austerity demonstrated by the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus makes no reply to the charge. Instead, he defends his disciples on the grounds that his presence with them makes them like guests at a wedding. Rigid discipline would simply be out of place. Jesus is doing a new thing. He uses two mini-parables to illustrate the problem of trying to combine the new with the old. Generosity and joyfulness do not fit well into a strait jacket of self-righteous legalism.

Another point should be noted, however. Jesus speaks of a time when the bridegroom will be taken away, and that that will be a time to fast. Even though Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit, it could be argued that we are in such days of fasting today. An “anything goes” culture and relative affluence (and the apathy they produce) are working against the spread of the gospel in our day. Perhaps it is time for fasting and prayer that the power of God’s love might be made manifest in these difficult times.

R&D *What needs to be done to bring “generosity and joyfulness” more fully into your fellowship of faith? Into your own life?*

Prayer: *We have so much to be grateful for in this life in Christ, Lord God; awaken us to the joy within.*

Sunday, January 22

Sabbath Time

“And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

John 8:32

Humility arises from one’s knowledge of the truth about oneself, and charity from one’s knowledge of the truth about God.

Monday, January 23

Read: Luke 6:1-11

Sabbath

Confrontation again. To the Jews of Jesus’ day, little was more sacred than the Sabbath. It ranked with circumcision as a mark of Jewish national identity. To allow its importance to be eroded would be to run the risk of falling into paganism. With these factors in mind, it is not surprising that the Pharisees found Jesus’ actions to be outrageous. They were correct in regarding him as dangerous; going his way would mean an end of their understanding of religious observance. What they failed to see was that it was God in Christ who was bringing the revolution.

Jesus used two very different approaches in defending his actions. The first was to use the Pharisees’ own method of argument, relying on the Old Testament to justify the eating of grain on the Sabbath by his disciples. The second defense is the more vital one, however. The keeping of the Sabbath had been carried to the ultimate extremes. No room had been left for compassion. If a religious principle has become so restrictive that it prevents people from acting in love on behalf of others, then that principle is wrong. Among priorities, none is higher than human need. The degree of anger shown by the Pharisees demonstrates how far apart they were from Jesus in setting priorities.

The attitudes of the Pharisees can be learning experiences for us. It has been said that rules are good servants but bad masters. Blind obedience to them at the expense of God’s love is to return

to the spirit of Pharisaism. Likewise, if we are busy looking for a way to attack another, we cannot be in a godly frame of mind; we will miss the opportunity to learn and grow.

R&D Give an illustration of a good principle being carried to a bad end.

Prayer: God of love, keep our focus on Your priorities and principles and not on the ways of the world.

Tuesday, January 24

Read: Luke 6:12-16

Calling the Twelve

Faced with an increasing popularity on the one hand and mounting opposition on the other, Jesus takes a milestone step in his ministry. Following a period of intensive prayer, he selects from his disciples twelve who will be apostles, meaning “ones sent with a special commission,” Jesus’ authorized agents or representatives. He chose twelve to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel (22:30); the Church would later be referred to as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

We really know very little about the twelve. Their names even vary to some extent between the Gospel accounts. We do know that they were basically ordinary men. At least four of them were fishermen and one was a tax collector. The contrasts even within this small group are amazing. Consider, for instance, that Simon the Zealot was pledged to overthrow the Roman authorities by force and Matthew, as a tax collector, had been an agent of the Roman government. Consider also that, despite their often-erring ways, some of the apostles clearly loved Jesus and pledged that they would give their lives for him while another, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him. And these were the ones commissioned by Jesus to bring the most important message the world would ever hear.

It is comforting, perhaps, to realize just how human, and how diverse, these twelve actually were. They were the nucleus of the Church. As we look at our own parish situation today, the parallels should be obvious to us. We see such diversity, and often such disagreement, in our own congregations. How can people such as

we continue to bring the good news of Christ to the world around us? Until empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles were not very effective; but once they were so empowered, they turned the world upside down. That empowerment is available to us today. Even people such as we can be God's instruments for radical change.

R&D *Who are the apostles of our day?*

Prayer: *Give our Christian leaders clear vision for the plan you have for us all, Lord Jesus.*

Wednesday, January 25

Read: Luke 6:17-26

Sermon

Here begins Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He does not want them to be under any false illusions about the cost of discipleship. Acceptance and popularity cannot be expected; they will be rejected just as Jesus is being rejected by the religious authorities. Those who have truly followed God's will for their lives have always been rejected. Jesus points out that this was certainly true for the prophets (vv.22-23).

Jesus' followers must expect such treatment because their very existence is a threat to the status quo. People whose concept of life is to live it to the fullest here on earth will set goals of wealth, indulgence and fun. These are not the goals that God calls His people to pursue. Those who look solely to worldly goals will eventually realize their mistake and find that, in spite of the comforts of life they have, they are basically poor, hungry and sorrowful (vv.24-25). Disciples, on the other hand, are to recognize that the worldly goals are false and are to be willing to experience poverty, hunger and sorrow in exchange for the kingdom of God.

While it is true that, in Matthew's understanding of the beatitudes, poverty and hunger do not refer solely to physical needs ("poor in spirit," 5:3, "hunger and thirst for righteousness," 5:6), serving Christ can clearly result in physical sacrifice as well. It is a matter of priorities. If our goals are in accord with God's purposes

for our lives, we may also, in the process, attain some comfort and affluence; but those results will be incidental. What we can depend on are sacrifice in order to help meet the needs of others, a hunger that others may know the saving love of Jesus Christ, and sorrow over those who do not understand and will not follow Christ, as well as the pain of identification with those who suffer.

R&D *What poverty, hunger and I or sorrow have you experienced as a disciple of Christ?*

Prayer: *The good news is that life in Christ is worth it. Thank You, Lord.*

Thursday, January 26

Read: Luke 6:27-38

Point of View

As Jesus continues to teach his disciples, he is demonstrating to them love without limits. He wants them to be governed by such generosity that they may reflect the love of an all-giving God.

Jesus gives a series of illustrations that contradict the usual way in which the world works. His examples seem impractical. They are not to be taken absolutely literally, but to point a direction, to show generosity in action. Jesus is trying to help his followers understand how to see things from God's point of view. The Spirit of God runs counter to the world's way of looking at situations: pray for those who abuse you, go the extra mile, follow the golden rule.

Lest the teaching not be sufficiently clear, Jesus goes on to point out that there is no merit in doing those things that we would normally be expected to do. Of course, we love those who love us and are willing to lend to those whom we know can repay; anyone will do that. No, more is expected of the followers of Christ: unlimited love.

Again, Jesus is trying to demonstrate how to look at things from God's point of view. We aren't here on earth to get our rights, but to serve. When someone wrongs us, God doesn't get angry with that person; He grieves because that person is out of step with Him. He also understands what is going on within that per-

son that caused him to act that way. When we begin to care about others in that way, and to be so guided in our response to them, we have entered the kingdom of God.

R&D *When has God given me the opportunity to “turn the other cheek”? What happened?*

Prayer: *Your way is always the best way, Lord. Help us to see with Your eyes.*

Friday, January 27

Read: Luke 6:39-49

Tough Love

It is easy to read these words of Jesus and say, “What a different world this would be if only people were willing truly to hear and obey what Jesus taught!” That, of course, is where the problem comes in. Jesus is demonstrating tough love in these verses. He is not telling us how to judge the actions of others; he is telling us how he wants us to live. “Lord, revive thy Church, beginning with me!”

Jesus would not have us be as the blind leading the blind; if we are to be his disciples, there are things we need both to learn and to put into practice in our own day-to-day lives. In every difficult situation we face, we are to look for the lesson in it for ourselves rather than concentrating on the fault of the other. By our fruit we will be known. We can cry, “Lord, Lord,” all day long, but if we do not do what the Lord would have us do our words are just sounds signifying nothing.

The meaning of Jesus’ words could not be dearer, if we are willing to hear. We human beings have a tendency to criticize in others the very things which we do not see in ourselves. If we can see how Jesus’ teachings apply to someone we know, it may well be that they apply at least equally to ourselves. It is important to recognize, however, that we are already accepted and loved by God. He is not asking us to achieve some degree of moral excellence that He can approve. He just wants us to build the foundation of our lives on Jesus Christ which we can do by being disciples: learning from and obeying him.

R&D *What does Jesus want to show you about yourself right now?*

Prayer: *We often are our own worst enemies, Lord. Help us to say sincerely, "I was blind but now I see," and "I believe; help me in my unbelief."*

Saturday, January 28

Read: Luke 7:1-10

Such Faith

As Jesus returns to his public ministry, we are immediately into this wonderful story of Jesus reaching out to a Gentile who shows more faith than Jesus is finding in his own people. There are several characteristics of the centurion's faith and sensitivity that should be noted. First of all, he cared enough about one of his slaves to humble himself into asking an itinerant Jewish teacher to heal him. Secondly, he not only had faith that Jesus could heal the slave, but that he could do it without being physically present. Thirdly, in expressing his understanding of Jesus' authority (vv.6-9), he demonstrates true humility; instead of saying, "I am also one in authority" he says, "I am a man set under authority." He understands that whatever authority we have comes down from above (his from Caesar, Jesus' from God). Finally, he seeks to avoid the embarrassment that could well have come to Jesus by going into a Gentile house (especially one belonging to a Roman officer).

The importance of this incident to Luke is at least two-fold. For one thing, it shows again that Jesus came not for the Jews alone, but for all people, one of the primacy themes of this Gospel. For another, it gives Luke the physician an opportunity to evidence another of the various ways in which Jesus could heal.

For us, the story is at least of two-fold importance as well. First, there is much we can learn from the example of the centurion. Second, it calls us to take Jesus' healing ministry more seriously in our own day. Jesus said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (v.9). It has been said that there is more faith that God can heal in Twelve-Step Programs than in Christian churches today. These people know God's power to heal; many in our churches do not.

R&D *What characteristic of the centurion is most meaningful to you? Why?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for Your healing power at work in Your Church today; may it manifest itself more powerfully in the days ahead.*

Sunday, January 29

Sabbath Time

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1

We have to remember that we shall never have this life again. We shall pass to other conditions, but in this life we have a unique opportunity of serving God and our neighbor in a particular way, and that will never come to us again. It is well for us to remember that we have our opportunity here and now to witness to God in this world and to do our part as well as we can while there is time. This life is the opportunity of faith. When we can see God, we shall be able to give Him our worship and our love, but we shall no longer be able to give Him our faith. That belongs to our period here.

Monday, January 30

Read: Luke 7:11-23

Prophecy Fulfilled

It has been said that Jesus never came within three feet of a person he didn't heal. Luke gives us one more remarkable example of Jesus' healing power. His compassion for the bereaved widow leads him to action. The incident reminds us of two similar stories in the Old Testament. Elijah and Elisha both raised young men from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:18-37). The reaction of the crowd that Jesus is a great prophet resulted from his having worked a miracle like those of Elijah and Elisha.

People were apparently beginning to get an idea of who Jesus really was. John the Baptist, however, had been locked up in prison and seemed unsure whether Jesus was the Messiah. Perhaps he also had mistaken ideas about what kind of a Messiah God would send. Thus, he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was, in fact, the one who was "to come." Jesus understood John's

dilemma, but he would not make things too easy even for John. John had to make up his own mind based on the evidence of Jesus' ministry. The evidence cited is composed of those very things prophesied by Isaiah which Jesus had told those in the synagogue in Nazareth were being fulfilled (see Luke 4:16-30).

If we who are Christ's Church in this day believe that we represent the truth about God, we must provide the evidence that justifies that conclusion. If the power of God is truly at work within us, there will be enough evidence for people to see it for themselves.

R&D To what extent is the power of God manifested in your congregation? In your life?

Prayer: Make yourself known through us, Lord Christ, to a very need world.

Tuesday, January 31

Read: Luke 7:24-35

The Forerunner

“A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet” (v.26). It was no small matter for Jesus to refer to John the Baptist as a prophet. Prophecy had died out in Israel. It had been hundreds of years since anyone had spoken the word of God with authority. The return of prophecy was seen as one of the signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus makes it clear that John is more than a prophet. His real significance is in his being the one who prepared the way for Jesus.

For Jesus, the life of John the Baptist marked the transition point between the old and new order (see 16:16). That is the reason that Jesus could say that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John. He is not, in any way, downgrading the importance of John; he is simply saying that the kingdom he is introducing is that much greater than the old covenant.

Having identified the significance of John and the even greater significance of the kingdom of God, Jesus notes that some people are unwilling to accept either. John was austere and demanding; Jesus is open and loving. Both brought the word of God,

but some people were not attracted to either. They are like spoiled children who are bored of any game offered to them. They are simply disinterested. Jesus is saying that there are some people who just don't want to see the truth in whatever manner it is presented. Yet God's wisdom (in providing a variety of ways in which to ascertain truth) is proved right by all who respond.

R&D What variety of opportunities for people to come to faith in Jesus Christ are available today?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for the many ways in which I was led toward life in you.

Wednesday, February 1

Read: Luke 7:36-50

Forgiveness

Simon, the Pharisee, obviously had an interest in Jesus. It was being said that he was a great prophet (v.16), and Simon wanted to judge for himself by having direct contact with Jesus. So, he had invited him for a meal. However, he greeted Jesus with a formality that lacked the warmth of real hospitality. His attitude was one of caution, even suspicion. When Jesus allowed the woman to minister to him, Simon undoubtedly thought his suspicion to be justified.

Contrast this with the woman's attitude. She ignored formality and caution in her desire to shower her affection upon Jesus. She showed absolutely no shame and made a spectacle of herself. She obviously had heard Jesus teach or had had other contact with him which convinced her of his inherent goodness. She knew that, in him, she faced not judgment but forgiveness. All she wanted to do was express her gratitude in the only way she knew how.

"Simon, I have something to say to you" (v.40). Jesus has something to say to you and me when our thoughts are judging others. The Pharisee invited Jesus in but was cautious, suspicious. The woman (known to be a sinner, v.37) was openly affectionate. Like her, we are rewarded by our affection for God rather than for our caution/suspicion. Our reward is the nature of our relationship with Him. If we are openly affectionate, we have a bond of

trust between God and us and we know we are forgiven. If we are reticent, that trust level—and our ability to learn, grow and accept God’s forgiveness—is thwarted.

R&D *Can you accept that the greater your sense of being forgiven by God the greater love you have for Him? Why?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I want the kind of unbounded love the woman showed to you in this gospel account.*

Thursday, February 2

Read: Luke 8:1-15

Seeds of God’s Love

In this passage there are three things to note, and then the special teaching of the parable. First, note that large crowds of people were now flocking around Jesus; their motives were perhaps very mixed, making a good occasion for this particular parable. Second, practical things; Jesus and his disciples obviously needed some sort of a support system, and this was provided at least in part by a congregation of women who had experienced Jesus’ healing power and who wanted to be there to help.

Third, Jesus’ brief remark about parables (v.10) sounds as though he is saying that he talked in parables just to keep reality secret from those who were not the in-crowd. On the contrary, the obvious purpose of parables was to make the message understood and remembered, though only to those listening with open hearts and minds, those with “ears to hear” (v.8b).

The parable of the sower has so many applications that it seems limiting to mention only one, but that is probably its primary teaching, and has to do with “the world, the flesh and the devil.” As we consider the fact that we are all called to share our love of Christ with others—what we may call evangelism—we see three situations in the parable: those whose opportunity of faith is stolen by the devil (the “footpath people” who would rather follow the god of this world than the real God); those who are tempted away by the world (the “rootless ones” who so easily fall away); and those who succumb to their fleshly desires (the “choked-by-thistles” crowd who decide that they prefer the pleasures of this

life to life eternal). God would have us learn how most effectively to minister to each of these groups of people that they might ultimately fall into the fourth category: those “good seeds” that produce abundant fruit.

R&D How can you most effectively witness to those who might otherwise be seduced by the world, the flesh and the devil?

Prayer: Make us mindful, Lord Christ, of the needs of others to come fully into life in you.

Friday, February 3

Read: Luke 8:16-25

Testing

Today’s lesson begins with a series of more or less disconnected sayings that reinforce the parable of the sower. For the good soil to produce a harvest, faith must be open and shared with others rather than hidden under the bed. Sam Shoemaker once said that faith is like a bicycle; if it isn’t kept moving, it flops over on its side. When faith is “given away” to others, we gain more faith; when it is not shared, it dries up within us. Likewise, those who really “hear the word of God and do it” (v.21b) are those who are sisters and brothers to Jesus.

Then we have the miracle of the stilling of the storm. Here Jesus’ authority over the powers of nature is shown. According to the biblical writers, mankind has no control over nature; man and nature are integrally related, interdependent. To them, our rebellion against God had its counterpart in the natural order: in disease, in the demonic and in the turbulence of the sea. God curbed the chaotic powers of the sea as a part of creation (Psalm 104:5-9), but the sea remained a symbol of hostile forces resistant to the authority of God and needing to be held in check. The book of Revelation’s picture of the new creation shows the sea (and its chaos) to have been abolished (21:1). Here Jesus shows that he is in control of the waters, and the implications are of immense importance.

Jesus rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. He is one who can calm the storms of life. Through His Holy Spirit, God continues to do this for us in our day.

R&D *What storms in your life has God recently calmed?*

Prayer: *You work Your wonders in the world today, Lord God, in ways we cannot always comprehend, but we are grateful that You, a loving God, are in control of all.*

Saturday, February 4

Read: Luke 8:26-39

Awe

Jesus was a master diagnostician. He could best minister to a person's needs by knowing exactly what the problem was. In this case, Jesus deals directly with the demons (v.30) in order to determine what to do with them. We can only imagine the awe that was experienced by the people who witnessed the events in this passage of Scripture. An encounter with the satanic is frightening enough! Here there was not only direct confrontation of evil by Jesus, but an awesome display of power by Jesus as the spirits are cast into the pigs which then self-destruct. The people were very fearful of the demoniac; but the power of God as manifested in Jesus so frightened them that they asked him to leave.

The power of God to heal can be frightening to Christians in our own day. Too often we accept a watered-down image of the faith in exchange for its power-filled possibilities. I knew a priest, for instance, who baptized a dying baby only to feel the fever immediately leave the child who then fully recovered. The event struck such awe/fear in the priest that he would not share the story with others.

Although in prior instances of healing, Jesus cautioned the recipients of God's healing power to "tell no man," here the demoniac is told to stay among his people and share his story. The reason seems to be that, whereas when Jesus was among the Jews, he believed that the stories of healings would build up opposition to his ministry, here he was among Gentiles who needed to hear the good news of God's healing power.

R&D *What recent instance in your life has been filled with fear/awe?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for manifesting Yourself in powerful ways in our day, if we have the eyes to see them.*

Sunday, February 5

Sabbath Time

He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. John 1:7

It is only when we can say from the depths of our own conviction and in the power of our own experience, “Lord, I believe,” that we make our first step into the light of the everlasting dawn.

Monday, February 6

Read: Luke 8:40-56

Inconvenience

What is urgent on the part of people is not necessarily what tops God’s agenda. God may have in mind that we be available to go another way, to do another thing than that which sits on the top of our priority list.

In our lesson for today, Jairus is quite understandably dealing with an urgent situation. His daughter is on the verge of death, and the only one he knows of who might be able to do something about it has been over across the lake. When Jesus agreed to go to his daughter, Jairus may have experienced some relief, but he also was undoubtedly extremely anxious that Jesus get there as quickly as possible.

And then the interruption comes. A woman has touched Jesus in the midst of the crowd, and he has experienced power going out of him. Jesus stops—we can be sure to the frustration of Jairus—to find out what has happened. He wants to know what act of faith has caused healing power to go forth from him; he ignores the inconvenience of the interruption because he wants that faith to be professed openly so that the greater healing (of the soul, not just the body) can occur.

Although Jairus’ urgency may now have reached the point of panic, Jesus remains calm even in the face of the message that the child has died. Jesus’ ministry to the child is unaffected by the timing. How much more effective might our ministry be if it were

not thwarted by unnecessary urgencies on the one hand or our unwillingness to be inconvenienced on the other?

R&D *Do you believe that power flows forth from Christians when they are ministering to others? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Thank you for showing us, Lord Christ, that interruptions are often opportunities to minister to the needs of others.*

Tuesday, February 7

Read: Luke 9:1-17

Sent

In today's study we learn something more about ministry. Despite the fact that Palestine was geographically a very small area by our standards today, Jesus could not minister throughout the area alone. The need was great and the time was short. It was time to commission others with power and authority to go into the villages to preach and heal. Several factors concerning Jesus' instructions to the apostles should be enlightening to us as well.

First, they were to travel light. A wise bishop told a young married man interested in going into missionary work, "On the day you buy your furniture, that is the day you have made your decision not to go."

Next, they were not to waste their time arguing about the faith with unresponsive people. Statistics in the United States indicate that the majority of the people believe in God, but only a small percentage attend weekly worship services. Perhaps instead of spending our time trying to convince atheists to accept Christ, we would do better by sharing our faith more effectively with those who say they believe in God but are not worshipping on a regular basis.

If we are faithful, when there is a need God meets it. It only took five loaves and two fish to feed the multitude. Today, we would be better ministers if we spent more time seeking God's will for our lives (His priorities of need) and less trying to amass things to meet our own desires.

R&D *How might God send me out to minister today?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, we tend to talk about getting out priorities in order when we really need to find your priorities for our lives.*

Wednesday, February 8

Read: Luke 9:18-27

“Who Am I?”

People were trying to decide who Jesus really was. The disciples had seen a side of him that others only partially glimpsed. They had themselves shared with him in the ministries of preaching and healing. They recognized that the authority manifested in him exceeded even that of the prophets. He was, in fact, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. The disciples were beginning to understand this, at least to some extent. Thus, Jesus begins his teachings about suffering.

Despite their often-errant ways, the disciples were clearly committed to Jesus. It was now time for them to begin to understand what effect his ministry would ultimately have on them. Having mentioned his own suffering, Jesus speaks of the cross his followers must bear. Suffering lay ahead, and the person who sought the safe road would miss the kingdom; not all the security the world has to offer is worth that. Jesus also knew that his popularity would soon wane with many, and those could not be expected to be recognized as true disciples of the kingdom.

The term “Son of man” probably comes from Daniel 7:13 in which “one like a son of man” is presented before God and given dominion, glory and kingdom—the kingdom of God. Verse 27 probably means that those who had faith in Jesus would recognize the signs of the coming of the kingdom among them.

R&D *In what ways do you “deny yourself and pick up your cross daily” and follow Jesus?*

Prayer: *Thank you for that day when I recognized you as the Messiah, Blessed Christ; everything changed for the better.*

Thursday, February 9

Read: Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration

As noted, the disciples were awakening to the truth of Jesus' Messiahship. Here an intimate circle of followers is given a graphic example of it.

The account of the Transfiguration is filled with Old Testament allusions. Moses had asked to see the glory of God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 33:17-23; 34:29-35), and he had been transformed by the event. Elijah had heard the voice of God on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:12). These two now appear with Jesus in this transforming mountaintop experience. The glory of God is a visible manifestation of His presence. God's glory was always visible in Jesus (John 1:14), but this close circle of followers was now able to see it in an unmistakable form.

"A cloud came and overshadowed them" (v.34). As we individually seek God's will as His followers in our day, we are sometimes overshadowed with clouds of doubt or uncertainty or distraction. In those instances, we, like the disciples, may be afraid. But God speaks to us through those clouds: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" As we follow the Lord, and deal with the situations of life as He would have us deal with them, our fears disappear, and we can more clearly see God's will.

R&D *What "clouds" your following of Jesus today?*

Prayer: *This life in Christ is not without its challenges, Lord. Help!*

Friday, February 10

Read: Luke 9:37-50

Disappointment

"And they were astonished at the majesty of God" (v.43). It is thought that Luke used this terminology as a way of tying what happened after coming off the mountaintop with the Transfiguration itself. (The only other time the term is used in the New Testament is in 2 Peter 1:16-18, referring to the experience of the Transfiguration.) Luke is telling us that the transforming glory

of God so evident on the mountaintop is reflected in the life and actions of Jesus in the valley of everyday living.

Four situations are recorded which show the disciples in a most disappointing way. First, they failed to be effective instruments of God's healing power despite the fact that they had been able to do this in the past (v.7). Second, they still did not understand that Jesus must suffer (vv.44-45), although he had clearly told them so (v.22). Third, pride is blinding them to truth (v.46) which Jesus must deal with by using a child as an example to them. Finally, their intolerance caused them to fail to recognize and encourage the helpful activities of others (v.49).

The work that Jesus did, his followers were to do also. Jesus had been transfigured, manifesting the glory of God. Yet, the disciples continued to be disappointing because of their faithlessness, thickheadedness, pride and intolerance. As Jesus' followers today, we can be guilty of the same, blunting the effectiveness of God's work in the world.

R&D *Why, in your opinion, did the disciples continue to be such disappointments to Jesus?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit within us, free us from our faithlessness, thick-headedness, pride, and intolerance that we may be more effective disciples of Christ.*

Saturday, February 11

Read: Luke 9:51-62

Jerusalem

Decision time! Jesus has "set his face to go to Jerusalem." There is no turning back now. "But the people would not receive him..." There are those who will no longer "receive" us once we have "set our face" to follow Jesus wherever he may lead.

A new stage has been reached in this Gospel. The recognition of Jesus' Messiahship and the Transfiguration mark the climax of Jesus' early ministry. The teachings about the suffering of the Messiah have been introduced. Thus begins the journey to Jerusalem "for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (13:33).

Until the entry into Jerusalem this Gospel consists mainly of the teachings of Jesus as he travels. Luke is not concerned with the details of the journey; it is the destination that is of supreme importance. Over and over, he reminds us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (17:11, 18:31; 19:11, 28). Jerusalem is the city in which the Gospel begins and ends (1:9, 24:52).

James and John (the “sons of thunder,” Mark 3:17) are ready to call down fire from heaven as Elijah had done (2 Kings 1:9-16) to clear the road to Jerusalem. Jesus shows a new way to deal with old prejudices: realize that only those who are deeply committed to the cause will be able to understand and to follow.

R&D When have you been inclined to want to blast people out of the way who seem to be impeding the kingdom of God?

Prayer: Give us patience, Lord, when others fail to see what You are doing in the world today.

Sunday, February 12

Sabbath Time

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” John 20:29

Great faith is not the faith that walks always in the light and knows no darkness, but the faith that perseveres in spite of God’s seeming silences, and that faith will most certainly and surely get its true reward.

Monday, February 13

Read: Luke 10:1-16

Two by Two

There is a joke in evangelism circles: “Why did Jesus send them out two by two? Because they wouldn’t have gone otherwise!” There may be some truth to that. We need both affirmation and accountability in ministry. We need someone beside us to lift us up when we are down; and we need someone to keep us from running away from our responsibilities.

In this particular passage, Luke is showing us Jesus’ concern for the worldwide mission of the Church. Luke alone records the mission of the seventy. The figure seventy in Jewish tradition

meant all the nations of the world. Thus the sending of the seventy represented the universal scope of the gospel. The seventy were instructed to work under the same conditions as the Twelve when they were sent out. Nothing was to hamper the sharing of the gospel (v.11); they were to move quickly (v.4); they were to understand how important a message they carried (v.16). The kingdom of God was a present reality. Because Jesus had come, God's reign was to be demonstrated and accepted in a new way. The vital question was whether people would perceive what was happening or would continue in their old patterns.

These seventy were not the Twelve, but they had a very important mission. They were sent out under the authority of God because they were sent by Jesus who could convey the authority of God. These people were ambassadors of the kingdom (1 Corinthians 5:20). We Christians are Christ's ambassadors in the world today. To us has been committed the same mission.

R&D *In what specific ways are you an ambassador for Christ?*

Prayer: *You have entrusted us with your mission, Lord Christ. May we not fail you.*

Tuesday, February 14

Read: Luke 10:17-24

Lay Ministry

Because they have acted under the authority granted to them by Christ, the seventy have conducted a very successful campaign. Jesus rejoices in the effectiveness of their triumph over evil, but he has to caution them not to take confidence in their newly found powers nor to take credit for them. Their confidence should rest alone in the fact that they belong to God.

Jesus has been communicating and demonstrating things about the authority and power of God. Now he wants his followers to understand about the knowledge of God. Christ was sent by God and, in that authority, he sends others. Likewise, Christ knows and is known by the Father, and he wants to reveal that knowledge to others. In Scripture, knowledge is personal knowledge. It has to do with intimacy; heart and will are involved as well as mind. Jesus

knows God in this personal way, as a son knows a father. He wants to convey to his followers that simplicity of faith—not worldly wisdom or university degrees or IQ—is the key.

Jesus wants us to have this knowledge of God as well. He also wants to send us out as laypeople to do his work in the world. We cannot do that work effectively unless we have a lively relationship with the God whom we are attempting to serve. We have many opportunities through the church to know God in worship, prayer, Bible study and fellowship, to name a few. Furthermore, God imparts spiritual gifts to His people (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4) to do His ministry. The authority and the knowledge are there for us just as they were there for the seventy.

R&D *Do you know your spiritual gifts? If not, why not?*

Prayer: *As we yield ourselves to you, Lord Jesus, you train us to do the will of the Father; but an essential part of training is putting into practice what we are learning. May we not fail.*

Wednesday, February 15

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Neighbor

One technique that Jesus used very effectively was answering a question with a question. The purpose this served was forcing the questioner to think rather than just giving him a pat answer. The legalistic Jews of Jesus' day, on the other hand, had a habit of wanting everything "in black and white, with no shades of gray." So, these two characteristics run head-on into one another in our lesson.

The lawyer's question is typical of the legal approach. The law wants a definition; what does the word "neighbor" mean? The lawyer wanted the boundaries of his obligation clearly understood. That way he would know "in black and white" what he had to do and what he did not have to do.

Jesus refused to deal with the issue on that level. He was not going to define "neighbor." Instead, he told a story about what it would be like to be a neighbor to someone in distress. In the

particular story, being a neighbor meant inconvenience, risk and overcoming racial and religious prejudices. In another situation, it might have meant something different, which is just the point. We cannot determine in advance exactly what our course of action should be in a particular instance. We simply need to be sensitive and open to the need for help, on the one hand, and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the other.

R&D *In what situation recently were you a neighbor?*

Prayer: *Help me to be more sensitive to the needs of those around me, Lord.*

Thursday, February 16

Read: Luke 10:38-11:13

Prayer

Our study for today is an extremely important one on prayer, and there are at least six aspects of prayer that it presents to us:

1. We need to be attentive to Jesus (10:41-42). We need to “sit at his feet” rather than just running around doing things. This is simply a teaching on the importance of listening to God; in our busy age, it is easy to find excuses for not giving God time to speak to our needs through worship, prayer and Scripture.

2. Jesus is our example concerning the priority of prayer (11:1). Not only did the fact that Jesus took prayer so seriously cause his disciples to ask him to teach them to pray, but it reminds us that if he prayed, we should pray.

3. We are given a model prayer that has (at least in its longer version) become the standard of worshipful prayer for all Christians for all time (11:2- 4).

4. Importunity or boldness in prayer is encouraged (11:5-8). The Lord knows exactly how we feel, but He wants us to care enough about our relationship with Him that we can be honest and open in telling Him just how we feel.

5. Perseverance in prayer is encouraged (11:9-10). We ask, then we seek, then we knock. We don’t give up. We show God how important the matter that we are praying for is to us.

6. We are reminded of the graciousness of God in responding to our prayers (11:11-13).

R&D *What new thing have you learned about prayer, or what new commitment to the discipline of prayer have you made as a result of this study?*

Prayer: *You are an accessible God. Thank You, Father, for providing an open line of communication with You. That is awesome!*

Friday, February 17

Read: Luke 11:14-28

Spiritual Warfare

Having looked at six of Jesus' teachings on prayer, perhaps it would be helpful to look at six things we can learn from this passage about spiritual warfare:

1. The healing of the man who could not talk is depicted as an exorcism, which it may well have been; Jesus clearly had command of evil spirits, which leads to the confrontation in this instance (v.14).

2. It is by the finger of God that Jesus casts out evil spirits (v.20). That is evidence that the kingdom of God is at hand. It is God's authority that is being manifested.

3. Jesus acknowledges the strength of Satan, while pointing out that he (Jesus), through the authority of God, is stronger (vv.21-22). C.S. Lewis has said that the two greatest difficulties we get into concerning Satan are taking him too seriously and not taking him seriously enough!

4. "He who does not gather with me scatters" (v.23). As disciples called to make disciples (Matthew 28:19, 20), if we are not "gatherers," are we then "scatterers"? It is an important thought for each of us to consider.

5. Just "cleaning house" is not enough (vv.24-26). We not only need to "resist the devil and he will flee" (James 4:7), but we need to make plenty of room for the Holy Spirit to fill our lives to so great an extent that there is no room for harboring evil.

6. Jesus rebukes the woman for having a condescending attitude (vv.27, 28). Jesus is not trivializing his own mother, but

trying hard to make people see that the kingdom of God is at hand. Lip service won't do; we need to listen and act.

R&D *What is your view of Satan?*

Prayer: *Give us discernment, Blessed Holy Spirit, to recognize evil in our midst and to act accordingly.*

Saturday, February 18

Read: Luke 11:29-36

A Sign

The desire for a sign undoubtedly came from the fact that the people wanted to have certainty without going through the moral and intellectual effort of arriving at their own decision. Once again, Jesus refuses to do people's thinking for them.

The only "signs" Jesus would give were the preaching of Jonah and the wisdom of Solomon. Jonah called the Ninevites to repentance; they concluded that he was speaking the judgment of God to them and obeyed. The queen of Sheba decided that Solomon's wisdom was of sufficient value that she travelled far to sit at his feet and learn from him. No one decided for the Ninevites or Sheba; they had to reach their own conclusions and act on them. Something greater than Jonah and Solomon is going on here, Jesus tells them, and you are going to have to make your own decision about it.

The teaching in verses 33-36 is also of vital importance. Jesus was, of course, a preeminent psychologist. He knew a lot about the darkness within people; in the people he encountered, he was facing it every day, in an infinite variety of forms. We are to be bright shining lights for the Lord (Matthew 5:16), but we cannot if there is undealt-with darkness within. There is work for us to do on ourselves if we are to be the people God calls us to be.

R&D *To what extent do you sometimes wish for signs from God?*

Prayer: *Lord, it is easy to make excuses or to rationalize in our thinking in order to avoid doing what You would have us do. Forgive us, Lord, and help us to follow Your plan for our lives.*

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13

The end of devotion is attained when the complete taking of all things meets with the complete giving of all things. Death, the great taker, is defeated when he meets Christ, the great giver. The supreme devotion of our Lord’s life was consummated as He laid down His life for His sheep and yielded His spirit in perfect faith to His Father. The true end of devotion is the gift of ourselves and all we have to God.

Monday, February 20

Read: Luke 11:37-54

Woe

Today we have a collection of Jesus’ sayings about the Pharisee and lawyers. They were not necessarily said at the same time, and verse 41 is obscure. Nonetheless these sayings are important because they point to attitudes of which we can be guilty.

In giving tithes of garden herbs, the Pharisees went beyond what was strictly necessary (v.42). An enthusiasm for the trivial at the expense of the essential is deserving of condemnation. Touching a grave resulted in ritual defilement, and graves were clearly marked for that reason. The Pharisees had a reputation for holiness but, in fact, much of their influence was destructive from a spiritual point of view. People were defiled by their contact with them without realizing it.

The thought behind verses 47-48 is that, in the minds of the lawyers, the only good prophet is a dead prophet. They were very willing to memorialize prophets of the past, but don’t give them a living one! He would so disrupt their structured religious practices that he would get the same treatment their ancestors had meted out to the prophets of old. Abel is mentioned because he was the first martyr, and Zechariah was the last in the Hebrew canon of Scripture. The rejection of Jesus would follow the pattern of rejection experienced by God’s messengers throughout Israel’s history.

The Pharisees and lawyers were the people especially singled out for Jesus' indignation. We have always known them to be the villains in the gospel story. Many of them clearly were guilty of confusing people; and thus leading them astray. Yet, undoubtedly, many of them also meant well. This is indeed a warning for us as well.

R&D *How can you stand for gospel truth without becoming a modern-day Pharisee?*

Prayer: *In matters of faith, Lord, help us to look at the essentials and not get caught up in the periphery.*



Decisions, Discisions!

Lenten Study

Tuesday, February 21

Introduction

Years ago, a major polling organization did a study of mainstream denominations that was representative of churchgoers in our country. One of the findings was that only 15% of members read their Bible daily and 33% read it seldom or not at all. More alarming, perhaps, was that, when asked if they used the Bible for guidance in making major decisions in their lives, 59% said, “No!” The study also showed that there was a sizable gap between what people profess about their faith and what they actually did. Consider whether another survey today would likely show any improvement.

Lent is a time for self-examination. In view of the findings set forth above, it seems a good idea to devote our Lenten study to examining the kinds of decisions we, as Christians, face each day, and how Scripture speaks to those issues. Hopefully, we will come through this Lent with a better understanding of how the Bible can help us make decisions that are more consistent with God’s will for us.

The study is divided into four categories of decisions, with one writer covering each category. There are ten lessons per category. The categories are (in the order in which they are considered): Sexual Responsibility and Related Issues, General Christian Responsibility, Civic Responsibility, and Personal Issues.

R&D To what extent do you use the Bible to guide you in making decisions?

Prayer: Lord, guide us through this Lenten Season with a focus on how You want us to live.

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Sexual Responsibility I

In a parable, Jesus Christ taught about the pearl of great price, that for which you would give everything you have in order to possess it. If you really understand how valuable it is you would not hesitate to discard your property, position, popularity, or your very life in order to have it. This pearl is the temple of the Holy Spirit. For Paul everything is as valueless as a manure heap in comparison to this glorious treasure, life in Christ. That life, that pearl, is already within us through the Holy Spirit.

The most valuable thing you have, or could ever have, is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you. This is the consecrated place of worship in spirit and in truth. Consider the implications of this in terms of the use or abuse of your body or the bodies of others! For one thing, what does this have to say about the desecration of temples? What a shocking horror it would be if someone took the chalice off the altar and in front of the congregation swore at it and crushed in under his feet. Yes, shocking, even though this was a humanly made object, valued as it may be because of the sacred things it stands for. How infinitely more horrifying to desecrate the actual dwelling place of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, whether it be in yourself or in someone else!

What dimensions this puts upon our bodily actions and attitudes! God's inviolable holiness is within us. "So glorify God in your body."

R&D What are your thoughts in light of this commentary, on the attitude which says, "Physical relationships of any kind are fine as long as they are done in love!"?

Prayer: Help us to take more seriously, Lord, the fact that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit with us.

Read: John 14:18-20

Sexual Responsibility II

We have seen that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must glorify God in our bodies. It is the basis for sexual morality. Today's Scripture shows us that this is not simply a Pauline teaching. John's Gospel is explicit regarding the revelation that through the Holy Spirit we are in the constant presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Problems in morality arise when we forget who we are: Christ carriers. We experienced new birth in Christ in our baptism. New birth is not a mere figure of speech. It is reality. In him we are new creatures, born again in him through the Holy Spirit.

This is even more than the work of the Holy Spirit; it is the Holy Spirit within us, the Holy Spirit who is God. Baptism is Pentecost for each one of us. There was but one gift promised by Jesus Christ at his ascension. That was the Holy Spirit. Shortly before this he had said that his Father "shall send you another Comforter" (v.16, KJV). They didn't really want another Comforter! They would only be satisfied with the Jesus they knew, the Jesus they loved. But then he quickly added, "I will come to you." Through the Holy Spirit he would be the indwelling Christ in them and in every baptized person to come. He would be the living Lord to make his home in us always, not just to walk with us from time to time, but to be himself the very "way" within us; not just to eat and drink with us as an occasional visitor, but to be himself our very food; not only to converse with us now and then, but himself to be the very Word within us; not just to give us a wistful hope of eternal life, but to be the Eternal One within us.

The temple of the Holy Spirit is the Holy One within us. Our bodies and minds are not ours to do with whatever we crave to do. He is in us and we in him.

R&D In light of our moral behavior, what is the difference between viewing morality as a response to a legal code and morality as an outcome of our relationship to the indwelling Christ?

Prayer: *Give us “ears to hear” this guidance of the Holy Spirit within us.*

Friday, February 24

Read: Romans 6:12-23

Chastity

Chastity, as the Scripture teaches, restricts sexual gratification to marriage, and even limits it there. The secular attitude, now being borrowed by some members of the Church, is that chastity is a poison; it frustrates natural desire. If this desire is not exercised, they say, it will fester in the mind and cause neurotic behavior. The New Morality allows sexual intercourse with any person one deems that one “loves,” without benefit of marriage or regard to sexual orientation.

Recent times have once again highlighted the wisdom of God in requiring us to be chaste. He knew all along that unchastity is not freedom but slavery: slavery to sin, sickness and death. Out of His deep love for us, He desires for us a higher, healthier, holier way.

When the HIV epidemic arose, people were suddenly aware that unchastity actually can kill you. “The end of those things is death.” There is no edification in the secular teaching that one must, therefore, practice “safe sex.” Safe in what way? Even discarding the fact that these “safe” methods fail many times, the crucial question for the Christian is, “But is it safe for the soul?”

We come right back to the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are not simply dealing with gratification of desires or consenting adults; we are on holy ground. This is where true freedom is, to yield our bodies, minds and spirits to Christ and his liberating grace.

R&D *Can you think of a time when you were set free by following the hard right instead of the easy wrong?*

Prayer: *We to remember, Lord, that You are here to protect us, not to spoil our fun.*

Read: Mark 7:14-23

Sexual Ethics

Jesus Christ, in this passage from Mark's Gospel, emphasizes the inner nature of our faith. Christianity is more than an ethical system. Rules of living could be changed from one generation to another by adjusting them to "what everyone is doing." However, we live by the Spirit, not only the guidance of the Spirit, but the power of the Spirit.

Without the Spirit our outer behavior becomes a reflection of our inner confusion, self-centeredness and lust. However, in the Spirit we are in Christ. Paul was not merely using a figure of speech when he said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). And again, "For to me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). Nor was John mouthing platitudes when he recorded the words of Christ, "You in me and I in you" (14:20). It is not a God "out there" whom you may admire at a distance from time to time ... or ignore. It is a God "in here."

We don't have to struggle, or climb, or break through to "the God out there," for the indwelling Christ is the Son of God and he is immediately present, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, to the Godhead. "For to me to live is Christ," but you could say of any certain acts, "For to me to pray is Christ; for to me to obey is Christ; for to me to live a pure life is Christ." This is Christianity! This is how God's image is being formed anew in us. It is sheer grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

These are not just the good thoughts of God aimed toward us. Our inner life out of which emanates our outer life is the ocean of God's own inexhaustible life.

R&D In what ways has Christ expressed his real presence to you?

Prayer: You care for us, Lord. Help us to take better care of ourselves for Your sake.

“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.” John 6:27a

If we bring the loaves and fishes to Christ and are content that they should be broken as well as blessed, they become means of union, uniting us with God and one another. If we can but surrender ourselves, our possessions, our talents, our business, our trade, wholly to God, then He can bless the gift, however little it may be, and make it food for the many.

Monday, February 27

Read: Mark 10:1-12

Divorce

No entity knows better than the Church about the difficulties people go through in marriage. The load of counselling is immense on marital problems of cruelty, infidelity, desertion, adictions and infinitely more. Every person must be met with compassion and understanding in these circumstances.

Yet the Church can never abandon Christ's will regarding marriage. His wisdom is out of the heart of the Eternal. It is unthinkable to accept as normal and wholesome the fact that one out of every two couples getting married today will end up in divorce. This is definitely not the Lord's plan for a better world. His plan is to deal with the reality of brokenness with the divine graces of love, forgiveness and healing.

If divorce looms, it would often be a wholesome Christian admonition rather to “divorce your romantic dreams.” Sever yourself from that unspoken desire to have a more ideal mate in marriage than you have now. Then love that spouse as Christ loves you...just as you are. Marriage is a relationship in which there exists not only the best we have in ourselves but also the worst.

It is a compliment to a truly Christian marriage that in that relationship a man and a woman dare to show their less-than-perfect side to one another. The marriage vows are so wonderfully realistic. They speak of marriage as being “for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

R&D *Look at the marriage vows again. What values do they highlight that modern, easy divorce practices ignore?*

Prayer: *O Holy God, bless Christian marriages today that they may witness to Your love by reflecting a genuine love for one another.*

Tuesday, February 28

Read: Ephesians 5:21-33

Holy Matrimony

How wonderful to have a Christian marriage! Paul says, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” There is no competition in Christian marriage to see who will have the upper hand. Christian marriage is not a contest; it is a sacrament. Once again, we look to the inner and spiritual grace of the indwelling Christ.

The key to Paul’s counsel is in these words: “out of reverence for Christ.” We must love the ever-present Christ not just singly but together. We must do all that we would do for one another as unto Christ himself. The simplest things of daily life—conversation, courtesy, helping, encouraging, listening—are to be done as unto Christ.

Only then does the first part of Paul’s counsel make sense, where he says, “Be subject to one another.” If this were a merely human operation, we wouldn’t know what this means. The apostle says that marriage is like Christ’s relationship to the Church. How does Christ relate to the Church? He gives himself for the Church. He comes among us as one who serves. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

To be subject to one another, then, means to love one another in Christ’s name, in Christ’s presence, in Christ’s intercession and in Christ’s life. That kind of love is an atoning love, a love that loves us while we are yet sinners. It is passionate love, which means love that is willing to suffer for and with another. This sounds more demanding than the world’s way, but the world’s way, as is easily seen, does not work. The way of Christ is resilient, forgiving, healing and true joy.

R&D *What does the word “love” (agape) mean to a Christian in contrast to the everyday secular uses of the word?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for good marriages.*

Wednesday, March 1

Read: Matthew 13:33; Mark 8:15; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8
Influences

Wherever the word “leaven” is used in a symbolic way in the New Testament it refers to influences, either for good or for evil. “Beware the leaven (influence) of the Pharisees,” Jesus said. A more familiar word for leaven is yeast. It takes only a little yeast to influence a large lump of dough. Today we seldom mention the sin of causing other people to stumble as a result of our behavior. “I can do as I please. It’s nobody else’s business.” However, it is still just as true as it was in times past that one corrupt life can corrupt the lives of many others. The wisdom of the ages abounds in leaven-like observations. We discovered the literal truth of the saying, “One rotten apple can spoil the barrel,” when we tried to store our bounteous apple harvest last fall. The message is simple: my way of life influences the lives of others whom my life touches. I am responsible for the effects of my way of life.

In our Scripture readings for today we also learn of another leaven, the leaven of Christ. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven.” We know that the kingdom of heaven is none other than the kingship of Christ. Where Christ reigns, there is a new influence. Where holiness lives, holiness breathes out a holy contagion upon every atom of our being and then extends beyond ourselves to others. Thus the truth of the saying, “Christianity is not so much taught as it is caught.”

Now we can understand this text: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.” In other words, “Repent your sinful ways and be entirely open to the renewing, the making-whole, ferment of the indwelling Christ.” Then we can also comprehend the Easter portion of this text: “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven

of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” This may be paraphrased: “Because of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, new life is open to us. We can truly celebrate an ongoing Easter when we have repented of our old life which was full of tragic influences. By sincere repentance and surrendering to him who is truth we await on tiptoes the life-changing presence of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

R&D *What have been the influences in your life?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Heavenly Father, for the good influences on my life that have come from faithful disciples of Christ.*

Thursday, March 2

Read: Matthew 4:1-11

Temptations

Christ teaches us that it is not sin to be tempted, for temptations are all around us, but it is sin to yield to temptations. Our Lord’s temptations in the wilderness describe our own greatest temptations: temptations of the body, temptations of the mind, and temptations of the spirit.

The temptation to turn stones into bread symbolizes our temptation to worship mammon, to sell ourselves out to the fleshly life. Fasting in Lent takes on obvious meaning when we realize what we are tempted to do with our bodily life: eating more than we ought, indulging in substances which alter our normal functions, failing to exercise, pushing ourselves beyond our store of energy and nervous stability, succumbing to sheer lust. Scripture reminds us about the sacredness of the body which God has made. Again we go directly to the recalling of the person who we are; our whole body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The second temptation, in which Satan sets before Christ the prospect of throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and landing unharmed, speaks of temptations of the mind. The mind is where the ego lives, the egotistic mind which is so enthralled by the false gods of success, popularity and pride. The errant mind seems to be an echo of the ancient fall of man that declared independence from God and the setting up of ourselves as

the center of the universe. Yes, the mind is God-given but it is also meant to be God-centered. Brilliance comes not from our own thoughts but from the Word living in us and shining through us.

The third temptation, as described in Satan's declaration that Jesus could rule over all earthly kingdoms if he would fall down and worship Satan, is the temptation of the spirit. It is in that most inner place that we can go most subtly wrong. Here is where we, as Christian people, fall to the temptation of being judgmental, or unforgiving, or being fussy about nonessential details of churchiness, or of merely going through the motions of worship. We are called to surrender our spirit to the Holy Spirit.

The message is straightforward: discipline the body, fill the mind with God's truth (the Word), and surrender the spirit to the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit.

R&D What would you say to a person who told you that temptation was an old-fashioned idea?

Prayer: I am so easily tempted, Lord; when it happens, turn my mind to You and Your guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Friday, March 3

Read: Matthew 15:10-20

Foul Language

The Epistle of James adds further thought to the use of speech, referring to it as "a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who are made in the likeness of God" (3:8-9).

Four language seems to be increasing in epidemic proportions in our day. Words that were never heard in movies or on television have become much more common. What had been shocking language has become acceptable in polite society.

There would be those who would say, "How prudish to care what kind of crude language people use." That is to say, it doesn't really matter how they speak because basically they may be decent people. Does it matter? In today's passage our Lord tells us that it does matter: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man."

It might amaze those who are careless with speech that the third of the Ten Commandments is concerned about how we speak. Can it be that important? Apparently, it is because our speech reveals our relationship with God. One who uses God's name as if it had no value at all reveals that he has no love for God. If one can curse the people around him, this, also, sadly, reveals that one has no love for those made in God's image. If one simply uses foul language for the sake of effect, this, also, sadly, reveals that one has no respect for his own soul.

It often happens that people speak the way they do because their parents spoke that way. It is not only bad speech that has been passed down but a disregard for God and for humanity. In all of these we come back to the truth of the inner life of the Spirit. The language of God is the language of the Holy Spirit. We become reflections of that inner relationship. The life of prayer is even more than our speaking to God; it is God's speaking to and through us. Obviously, we are concerned about something more than having correct language. We want to have the Word within us.

R&D How has speech affected your life (i.e., things that have been spoken to you or that you have spoken to others)?

Prayer: Help us to speak words of love, peace and joy to the world around us, Lord, and to refrain from words that hurt or shock others.

Saturday, March 4

Read: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

New Creations

In the past nine studies we have looked at many aspects of human behavior: sexuality, marriage, influence, temptation, speech. For the Christian these and all other human expressions are more than personal choices; they are "in demonstration of the Spirit" (v.4). We are new creatures in Christ Jesus who are "taught by the Spirit" because we "possess the Spirit" (v.13). "The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (v.10). As the apostle Paul points out, the people of the world have difficulty in grasping this great truth. They are so infected by the rulers of this age that spiritual things seem foolish to them. However, what to them

looks stupid and weak is joyfully perceived by the spiritual person as the unfathomable wisdom of God and the unlimited power of God.

We may momentarily forget this and trip in our behavior, but the knowledge of the Spirit is still fundamentally there. We know where to turn. A worldly person will wade right into the murky waters of sin and eventually drown, but a Christian is like a cat with wet feet who can't wait to shake off its paws and to get on solid ground.

What the New Testament teaches us is that by the Holy Spirit, through whom we have direct access to the indwelling Christ, we are, amazingly, being remade in the image of God. More and more our actions and attitudes conform to the will of God, not because we have become smarter, but because we are becoming more whole (holy). It is not a passive role on our part because the graciousness of God is such that He allows us to be conscious participants in His plan: through repentance, prayer, Scripture, sacred study, and the fellowship of His Body. More and more we can rejoice with the apostle Paul that being precedes doing and that behold I live, and yet not I but Christ lives in me.

R&D *What disciplines assist you in spiritual growth?*

Prayer: *I thank you, Lord Jesus, that I am growing in you even though I have a long way to grow.*

Sunday, March 5

Sabbath Time

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 1 John 4:7

As long as we are going to get anything out of what we are doing, there comes in a certain measure of self-seeking. But when in complete darkness we choose love, when in the midst of happiness we choose what is right at the cost of happiness, we are somewhere near the Lord Who for love of us endured utter darkness.

Read: John 10:1-15

Parenting

Parents' visions for their children and Jesus' for his followers are the same: guiding them to "find pasture" where they can "have life, and have it abundantly." Thus, parenting is essentially a pastoral matter as seen in the "good shepherd" passage.

Jesus' pastoral role in his earthly ministry is carried out in the Church through the risen Christ—Jesus' cause continues. Parents become good shepherds as they find their model in Jesus. "The sheep hear his voice" because he knows them and they know him.

On his ranch in Oklahoma, Granddad called his cattle for feeding, "sic-bah, sic-bah." They heard his voice and came. One morning I slipped out early, calling out the same words, same inflection. None came. I did not know them by name. Granddad did. I was like a hireling, not a shepherd.

The daughter of a friend had a disastrous second semester of her freshman year in college. However, the prospect of facing her father seemed even worse. With the news eventually out, the two of them sat in a heavy silence. The father stifled feelings of anger and set aside his own sense of responsibility for her failure. He knew her gift. "If you had to find work today, what would you do?" "I'd work with children." He replied, "Then, can you do the academics?" Their eyes met. "Yes. I can." The father whispered into his daughter's ear, "I know you can." They held each other. She had heard his voice. Glimpses of pasture and abundant life. Parents are good shepherds. The risen Christ lives on in all who hear his voice.

R&D How can you model the "good shepherd" in your care of children?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for the gift of children. The time we spend with our children is our best investment in the future.

Read: Galatians 3:23-28

Womanhood

“In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

Addressing womanhood on the basis of male sources is risky business. Teilhard’s thinking is a notable exception. He affirmed the idea that “God’s relationship to creatures is, in its infinite fullness of perfection, as much ‘maternal’ as ‘paternal.’” Thus do we give woman essential dignity—a Christian vision of women’s rights.

Paul writes that all, male and female, are united in Christ, equal partners in community and mission. He points to baptism as a sign of the inclusiveness of our “new nature” (Ephesians 4:24), which breaks with the old covenant’s patriarchal structures. “Christianity in its origins was not a patriarchal religion, but one that gave place to women in its vision of salvation as full and equal partners” (S. Fiorenza). Jesus called women and men to the kingdom of God in a discipleship of equals.

Sharing in the birth of a child is a great joy of my priesthood. While mother and child are still in the hospital, the family gathers for the Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child (BCP). The Spirit moves most powerfully as we all recite the Song of Mary. When I hear our voices say, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” my heart rejoices in this hymn of liberation.

In seeking to glorify God, both as “maternal” and “paternal” in the example of Mary, Christ’s vision sets us free to be his disciples, male and female. We are unique, yet equal witnesses to his grace!

Now, whose turn is it to cook dinner?

R&D What psychological forces or deeply held traditions block your full embrace of women as equal partners in discipleship, in church and society?

Prayer: You made us uniquely different but equal, Lord. May Your Church grow in this partnership of faithful women and men.

Read: Matthew 14:13-21

Compassion

John the Baptist is dead. Jesus faces a new stage in his life. He retreats to a lonely place, apart from the crowds. Grief, sorrow, the pain of others tempts him to withdraw. Raw feelings seek sanctuary in isolation. When this happens to us, we no longer feel, for ourselves or others. Insensitivity sets in, not by design, simply for solace.

But the crowds followed as Jesus went ashore. He saw them. Compassion begins with seeing. Insensitivity is overcome by eye contact. Jesus “had compassion on them, and healed their sick.” For the disciples enough was enough. “Send the crowds away”—they wanted time with their Master.

Jesus had seen the crowds. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” He breaks down their insensitivity, not by arguments, rather by command— “Do something.” How well we know the rest of the story. A miraculous feeding— “Taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.”

The eucharistic movement breaks through the disciple’s insensitivity and ours—take, bless, break and give. Whatever you have will be enough, for Jesus goes with you. His love reaches through you into the world. Miracles still happen wherever there are bread-bearers for the world, a ministry of presence.

In his book, *Gracias, a Latin American Journal*, Henri Nouwen described Jesus’ ministry of compassion and ours. “More and more, the desire grows in me to simply walk around, greet people, enter their home, sit on their doorstep, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them.” Jesus refused to send the crowds away. He sat down with them. “They all ate and were satisfied.”

R&D *Someone out there needs you to “sit” (be) with them. Can you see his or her face? How will you respond?*

Prayer: *Guide us, O Holy Spirit, to those who are waiting.*

Thursday, March 9

Read: John 11:21-27

Death

Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus hasn't come. Martha confronts him when he finally arrives, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." At death we confront our God, who is the author of life. Only God can bring a peace that passes understanding.

Martha has accepted, as an article of faith, the Pharisaic belief in a general resurrection on the last day. Yet, it is remote. Consolation requires a personal presence. She will find that through faith and affection for Jesus, the Christ "who is coming into the world."

The future breaks into the present. Jesus' words startle Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." She hears and responds: "Yes, Lord, I believe." Can you hear her voice speaking from within? The general resurrection is already present for Martha and for all those in fellowship with Jesus Christ. He comes, in diverse ways.

In the closing days of her life, I became priest to my mother-in-law. She knew the Lord would come. She insisted on receiving holy unction using oil blessed by a bishop. We began, with prayer book, stole and holy oil. At bedside. The two of us. At confession, I paused. Silence. Then I placed my thumb, covered with oil, on her forehead. Her eyes closed. I signed the cross, pronouncing the forgiveness of sin in the name of Jesus Christ. The lines of stress on her face faded, as if untold regrets were banished forever. New light shined in her face. Joy filled the room. Jesus had come. "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me...shall never die."

Her physical body gave up weeks later. In those last days she appeared more alive than ever before. And why not? The Lord came. Martha knew. She knew. The last enemy is vanquished. Alleluia.

R&D *Reflect on an incident of death which has had an impact on your life.*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who have gone before us and are now in Your greater presence.*

Friday, March 10

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:4-27

Community

The Nielsen ratings are everywhere, even in the Church today. It's like Big Brother in Orwell's *1984* watching over the community. What if Paul were to visit a typical Christian community today observing how people are involved, everybody striving to be number one. He would throw up his arms in despair, "Did you not understand what I said to the Corinthians? There are no rating systems!"

Paul's criterion for community involvement in the Christian community was this: "It is the work of the Spirit of God to bear witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ" (C.K Barrett). There is one body with a diversity of gifts, each given by the same Spirit. Members will differ from each other in natural make up and spiritual gifts. Uniformity lies in the Spirit who gives and the Lord who is served. No one has all the gifts, neither is one gift more important than another; yet, Nielsen's way isn't easily banished.

Our task is to be faithful in identifying and using our gifts, whatever they are, for the common good. Elizabeth O'Connor gives a striking example. She tells the story of an old woman who joined the community. A group of people were discerning her gifts with her. She believed she had none at all. The others were trying to comfort her: "Your gift is your presence." But that wasn't enough for her. Several months later she discovered her gift; it was to carry each member of the community by name before God in a prayer of intercession. When she shared her discovery with the others, she found herself essential to the community. The others knew that they somehow needed her and her prayer, if they were to exercise better their own gifts.

R&D *What gift do you need to offer, since there is no rating system?*

Prayer: *Holy God, we are grateful that You entrust us with Your gifts to empower us to do the work Christ did when he was on earth; may we use these gifts only to Your glory.*

Saturday, March 11

Read: John 13:31-35

Racial Prejudice

Jesus is author of a strange kind of love. He loved those who were different from the accepted religious establishment. Again and again he held up the Samaritans, who were looked down on by the religious leaders of his time, as examples to be emulated. Instead of loving those who are different from us, we have a tendency to love those who are most like us, who share our values and lifestyles. It's like loving a reflection of oneself. Soul mates need not be commanded to love one another. Jesus' love, on the other hand, involves an act of will. "I am to care as much for another's interest and welfare as for my own" (William Temple).

I held tightly to my small grandson's hand as we watched a large gathering of young black men engage in a "friendly" basketball game at the park. The child was fascinated with their play. I was frightened. They were passionate and physical. Their voices rose high above the giant oaks when they argued face to face over fouls. Bodies touched bodies, but never was a blow struck. They played with abandonment—more carefree than others I've observed who gather for an afternoon game. The play of these folks looked different, not a reflection of myself. We can see differences between all races. The challenge by Jesus is to love others, just as they are. Thus do we learn to value our differences.

Until we do, love will remain in the domain of like-minded communities while racial strife continues.

R&D *Where are you willing to begin loving those who are different from you?*

Prayer: *Help us to learn, Lord God, that love has no barriers.*

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

Gold is tested by being put in a crucible and letting the fire prove it to be gold. God willed that we should test Him on Calvary, and the fire of hate and sin wrapped round the Body of God as He hung there on the Cross, but nothing came forth from Him but love.

Monday, March 13

Read: Luke 2:25-32

Growing Old

Catherine was one of those rare persons through whom the light of Christ shines like glistening sunlight on the morning dew. Her long, graying hair lay softly around her ivory complexion as she sat rocking on the porch at her Georgian home. We talked of things most people only read about.

One day she startled me: "I hope to see my Lord face-to-face before I die," she said. No one had ever mentioned that to me before, a deep longing to "have seen thy salvation." In her sharing and my listening, God was revealing a future in which she would not be forsaken.

The divine life of Jesus would be the power of Simeon's life. Because his soul foresaw the future which was dawning in this child laid in his arms, old Simeon could sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. The deepest longing of the soul was being fulfilled. Catherine knew such a longing. God does not forsake us!

Rosy's body is weakened by the relentless progression of multiple sclerosis. Each day she lived for the future and was visited by longtime friends, family, and a host of grandchildren. The mantle in her bedroom was lined with angels—wooden, porcelain, metal and of all sizes and shapes—physical reminders of the host of angels surrounding her. One day she shared this vision with me. "Would you believe the Lord visited me? It was Jesus. Over there by the mantel. I reached out my hand. 'Is it time?' He said, 'Not yet.'" There was a peace in Rosy's eyes that passed understanding. She had not been forsaken. Like Simeon, her "eyes have seen

thy salvation.” I wanted to weep save for the joy that filled the room. Then I understood Catherine’s hope. Sharing and listening. Moments of divine revelation.

R&D *What do you hope for in your old age?*

Prayer: *As our bodies and minds age, and we experience the results of that aging, may we grow ever closer to You, Lord God, in the midst of it all.*

Tuesday, March 14

Read: Matthew 15:1-9

Honoring Parents

The Pharisees questioned Jesus about the disciples not keeping “the tradition of the elders.” He counters with a question accusing them of using the traditions of the elders as justification for breaking the commandments of God. The Fifth Commandment laid down basic duties in the community: “Honor your father and your mother.” The oral tradition allowed a man to dedicate his possessions to God, freeing him from obligations to support his parents. Thus, in the name of piety, one could evade direct responsibility to obey God’s commandment.

The issue Jesus raises is not discipline of children or their need to respect the greater wisdom of parents, but rather what they learn from the example of their parents. Is it lip service or a religion of the heart?

How are aging parents honored or dishonored today? As physical or mental health of a parent diminishes, families face agonizing decisions: nursing home placement, live-in care, moving in with the younger generation. Families may make the best choice based on economics and practical considerations yet forsake the cost of sacrificial love.

Mums spent the last year of her life living with her daughter and family. The eldest son’s room was given to his grandmother as he took up residence in a makeshift basement room. For ten months he grumbled about the inconvenience. At the same time he watched as his mother lovingly cared for Mums. In his youth

the son lived out the cost of honoring “your mother.” Mums died while he was at camp. The chaplain told him. He wept.

Blessed are those who honor their parents. It’s a gift given to the children...whenever it comes from the heart.

R&D How can we honor our parents from the heart, not merely from the lips?

Prayer: Thank You for loving parents, Lord, who taught me how to love.

Wednesday, March 15

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Neighborliness...Now

If we want to avoid the truth, we simply avoid asking the right question. Truths usually bring us up short. In this age of coverups it’s hard to find anyone asking honest questions. The conversation between Jesus and the lawyer illustrates the difference between self-justifying questions on the one hand and hard, probing questions on the other, the difference between ethics of law and ethics of love.

The lawyer seeks to justify himself by setting limits on duty, showing he fulfilled it. Not being satisfied with Jesus’ response, “Do this and you will live,” the lawyer furthers the argument by asking, “Who is my neighbor?” As the parable and dialogue unfold, so does the right question, “To whom can I be a neighbor?” The respectable people, priest and Levite, keep the law, but avoid a response that leads to life. Yet, the Samaritan, a foreigner under no legal obligation, goes beyond the requirement. He goes “beyond enough.” In him we see true neighborliness.

The message is clear. “Neighborliness is not a physical fact or legal obligation. It is an opportunity” (W. R. Bowie). My neighbor is one who needs me now.

Large city riots stir up conflicting ideas about neighborliness. Some believe more federal spending alone could get to the root causes of the problem. Others blame those responsible for law enforcement—either that it was too brutal or that there needed to be more of it. Some communities from other regions brought

relief. Few looked to their own neighborhood as an opportunity for compassion. It's safer to focus on some other place experiencing problems, conveniently limiting our duty to those closer around us. Can anyone find a true Samaritan these days?

R&D Take a different route to work, pretending to be a Samaritan. You may be surprised by what you see. Seize the moment!

Prayer: Make us ever mindful of the needs of others, Dear Lord; especially those close around us.

Thursday, March 16

Read: Matthew 25:31-40

Social Ministry

Where is the heart of a community to be found? Not in knowledge amassed, fame achieved, or fortune acquired. You will find the heart of a community in the people who are “the least of these my brethren.”

I remember a song from my youth with the lyrics, “Little things mean a lot.” When my two-year-old grandson visits, we walk together to the park. I sing “Zippa-dee-do-dah, Zippa-dee-aye.” He looks at me impatiently and says, “Say Mr. Bluebird on my shoulder.” The joy I know in those moments passeth understanding. In the simplest things we find the way to God’s glory. In simple gifts to the poor, the weak, ill, captives and the insignificant, even like children, we see the hidden face of Jesus. In fact we see Jesus.

Jesus’ parable of the great judgment is vivid; its message is crystal-clear. God will judge us in accordance with our reactions to human need. The judge’s sentence is either, “Come into your inheritance” or, “Depart from me.” What do you hear?

Jean Vanier, founder of the world famous L’Arche community for the mentally handicapped and their helpers, writes about the gift of the poor: “In L’Arche, assistants discover that they are called to announce good news to people in need and to reveal to them the immense love God has for them. Sometimes those assistants truly lead people with a handicap over the threshold and into

faith. But once over the threshold, people with a handicap truly lead the assistants deeper into faith; they become our teachers.”

The poor teach us how to live the gospel.

R&D *Who are the poor, the weak and the insignificant people in your world who are teaching you about the gospel?*

Prayer: *Lord, no matter how affluent we may be, we are all in need of what we can learn from those who love You with a simple faith because they know how dependent they are on You.*

Friday, March 17

Read: Romans 13:1-5

Authority in General

Rebellion against authority is a spiritual problem. Paul makes it clear in this passage that authority comes from God. That does not mean that the exercise of authority is necessarily godly but that God has so ordered our world that civilian authority is necessary for the ordering of society. In that sense all authority comes from God and we as Christians are to submit to it.

Scripture teaches one exception to this principle: when authority requires us to do something that is contrary to the will of God for us. In Acts 5 we read that Paul and the other apostles had been ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus, and Peter replied, “We must obey God rather than men!” (v.29)

Our submission to civil authority is an opportunity to check where we are spiritually in our submission to the lordship of Jesus in our lives. If we are being disobedient to lawful authority, we are probably being rebellious against Jesus’ lordship.

One of the simplest ways to check our submission is in driving within the speed limit. Lawful authority has established the speed limit. We may not agree with it but we are to submit to it. Disobeying the law for our own convenience represents a willful attitude of rebellion against authority.

Paul says we submit to authority because of conscience. Is it possible that in some areas of our lives we have been rebellious to authority so long that our hearts have become hardened by that rebellion? In the development of Christian character, we need to

develop a Christian conscience. That conscience should be pricked whenever we are being disobedient to authority.

R&D *In what areas of your life are you being rebellious to authority?*

Prayer: *Total obedience is tough for us sinful creatures, Lord; give us better minds and hearts to serve You and follow Your expectations of us.*

Saturday, March 18

Read: Luke 16:10-12

In the Marketplace

Two words come to mind here: virtue and vanity. In the marketplace the vanity of man “desires to live an imaginary life in the mind of others and for this purpose he endeavors to shine. He labors unceasingly to adorn and preserve this imaginary existence and neglect the real. If he possesses calmness, generosity, truthfulness, etc., he is eager to make it known. He is so presumptuous that he would wish to be known by all the world, even by the people who shall come after, when he shall be no more” (Pascal).

A virtuous man is not measured by his efforts but by his ordinary life. Christian virtue can be summed up as Christian love. That love is to be shown first in the home and then in the marketplace.

An acquaintance, who is admired by many for his great success measured by wealth and leadership, valued as a loyal friend, respected for his honor and esteemed for his honesty, has just left his wife. The “virtues” he presented with effort to the public were, in truth, his imagined imagery of himself: vanity, not virtue.

In the “ordinary” life he failed. Unsuccessful in marriage, valueless as a loyal husband, dishonor for his wife, dishonesty in their relationship, broken vows made before God and His Church signaled evidence of true character. Greater value was placed in the marketplace and lesser on the home front.

Private immorality has public consequences! Whoever is dishonest with little will be dishonest with much.

R&D *Where are you trying to shine? Is it virtue or vanity?*

Prayer: *It is in being true to You, Lord God, that we can be true in all other aspects of our life.*

Sunday, March 19

Sabbath Time

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1

If we really believe that the Man Who was nailed to the Cross of Calvary is our God, and hung there for love of us, we cannot wish that our following of Him should not be a very costing thing.

Monday, March 20

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Use of Money

Money is a test. How we use it is a test of what is in our hearts. Money is neither good nor evil. It is morally neutral. The Scripture does teach us that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10).

The acquisition of money and the use of it are necessarily connected. In acquiring it, we run a risk about which Jesus warned us: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Luke 16:13).

Money can be a deceiver. We can become deceived in thinking that if we just had enough of it we really would have peace and joy and all would be right with our world. If, in seeking after it, we begin to serve it and not the Lord, our use of it will also be unholy.

Many people have fallen in love with money, and they sacrifice their families in the process. Then they try to use their money to buy the love that they never gave. Love is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. Some “pierced themselves with many griefs” from the love of money.

One of the tests for knowing whether we have the right attitude toward money is how we use it. The first fruits belong to God. How much? Scripture and mainstream churches say the tithe

(10 percent) is the minimum standard of giving. A lack of commitment to tithe or to work toward a tithe reflects an underlying spiritual problem. Which master are you serving?

R&D *How are you using your money to bring glory to God?*

Prayer: *All we have is Yours, Lord; thank You for what You let us keep.*

Tuesday, March 21

Read: Luke 12:35-48

Public Service

How many times have you heard, “All politicians are just alike!” insinuating they are crooks? Gathering them all under one negative banner reminds me of a quote: “The greater the intellect one has, the more originality one finds in men. Ordinary persons find no difference between men.”

A public official is not unaffected as the scrutinizing public spotlight shines not only on the public service but the private lifestyle. Thereby Christians and non-Christians are judged worthy of office by the voters.

So, why do people fall short and into sin? St. Augustine said, “The answer is usually one of two things. Either we want to obtain something we don’t have or fear losing something we have. Sin arises when things that are a minor good are pursued as though they were the most important goals in life. Sin occurs when money, affection or power are sought in disproportionate, obsessing ways. Sin is magnified when for the lesser goals we fail to pursue the highest and finest goals.”

When God created man perfect, He gave him free will to make choices. With the original wrong choice in the garden, man’s perfection was stripped away but his freedom of choice remained intact so that for his lifetime he would be free to choose right from wrong, good from evil. We each have those choices today, whether it be the electorate or the elected. The character of a person reflects the character of the office.

R&D *When assessing a politician’s character and convictions, which is more important and why?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, guide us in the decisions we make so that they reflect God's will for us in all things.*

Wednesday, March 22

Read: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Freedom of Religion

As Americans we cannot help but be grateful for our constitutional right of freedom of religion. To be free in this country means to enjoy personal rights, to not be enslaved or controlled or confined by any external power. We have the independence to worship as we choose whatever god we choose, subject to laws protecting the rights of others.

God, the creator of mankind, is the creator of freedom, freedom of choice, freedom of religion. He permits mankind to associate with all kinds of gods and religions: Buddha, Mohammed, Mormonism, Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, the gods of money, power, prestige, lust, and self. Or mankind can choose to worship the God who is the Father of Jesus, who is revealed only in the Holy Bible. Wherever man's greatest concentration of thought is, therein lies the god of that man. Whether he be the one true God or a false one is the imparted free determination of man.

Freedom brings by its nature consequences. With every free choice there is a consequence. An effect is put into motion with the freedom of every choice; sometimes immediately, sometimes decades later, sometimes blessings, sometimes curses, but always consequences!

For those who have chosen Jesus, Scripture instructs the more knowledgeable Christians to be careful that their freedom in Christ does not become a stumbling block to others less knowledgeable. Freedom in Christ is never to be a religious license for pridefully preposterous pontificating or painfully penetrating presumptuousness. This passage today says, "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak consciences, you sin against Christ."

R&D How do you speak the truth in love in the religiously diverse society in which you live?

Prayer: *Thank You for the freedom we have, Gracious God; help us to preserve it.*

Thursday, March 23

Read: Romans 13:6-7

Taxes

For anyone who has ever been audited by the Internal Revenue Service it is difficult to think of the IRS as “God’s servants!” That is precisely what Paul calls them. Paying taxes is just one of the ways we demonstrate whether or not we are submissive to authority.

The root meaning of the word “authority” is “right based on origin.” The authority of God is based on His identity as the divine author and creator of the world. Civil authority derives from Him and for that reason Scripture teaches us to be obedient to that authority.

John, in one of his epistles, gives us a simple definition of sin: “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Sin is the result of a disease. When someone has a fever of 100 degrees, the fever is not the disease. It is a symptom of the disease. Sin is not the disease. It is a symptom of a disease.

The disease that manifests itself as sin is our rebellion against God. One of the ways that rebellion exhibits itself is in our disobedience to lawful authority. Tax evasion is just one form of that rebellion, but it is unique in this sense. When we cheat on our taxes, it is usually done in private. No one is aware of it except the tax evader and God. Secret rebellion reveals the true nature of a person’s heart. And, what does God think about it?

Proverbs tell us six things that God hates. One of them is “a heart that devises wicked schemes” (Proverbs 6:18). Sin as manifested by rebellion against authority acts as a cloud between us and God. When we repent—and by repent I mean not just being sorry when we get caught, but a genuine turning away from our rebellion with an intent never to do it again—the way is opened for God to truly bless us as He wants to do.

R&D *In what ways are you limiting what God can do in your life by rebelling against Him or His lawfully established authority?*

Prayer: *Heal my rebellious heart, Lord, and keep my life in order... Your order.*

Friday, March 24

Read: 1 Peter 2:18-21

Employer/Employee

The principles that Peter teaches about the relationships between slaves and masters apply equally to employees and employers. The employee is to submit to the employer with all respect. In the New Testament the word “submit” means “stand under another to serve in love.” For the Christian employee to submit to the employer is to actively choose to place oneself as a servant, actively to serve that person in love.

Submission is not obedience. The Christian is obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ and to him alone. Therefore, to submit to an employer is not blind obedience. It is a choice. In all things required that are in conformity to the will of God, I choose to serve that employer in love.

Our whole attitude toward work should be molded by Scripture. We should celebrate work because it is part of being an image bearer of God. Animals do not get up and go to work in the morning; only image bearers of God do. In fact my dog sends me to work in the morning or else she would not eat!

Work is not the result of the fall of man in the garden. Adam worked before the fall. He tended the garden. If we approach the workplace with an attitude that it is an honor to work, we will take the first step toward serving our employer in love.

Some bosses and some employees are hard to love. Remember though that we do not love with human love but with God’s love, for “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5).

For the hard-to-love boss or employee, I would suggest continual prayer. As we continue to pray for someone over time, our

attitude begins to change about him or her. Sometimes God will even reveal to us some of the reasons why people act as they do.

R&D What specifically could you do today to demonstrate God's love for your employer or your employees?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the opportunity to work for a living and for those I work for and those I work with.

Saturday, March 25

Read: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Government

St. Thomas Aquinas stated, "If by nature men are to live together, then the group they form must be ruled. With many individuals each seeking what suits himself, the mass would disintegrate were there not one power or unifying force within it caring for the common good." He says, "People fall apart by their private interests and come together by their common interests. Of diverse things there are diverse causes, therefore a ruling cause is required." "Where there is no governor, the people will scatter" (Proverbs 11:14).

The Christian, in thinking about his or her relationship to governing authorities will want to consider the following:

1. Laws are needed to ensure the smooth operation of any government, thereby preventing unrestricted rights. Security is banished and everything is uncertain when people are cut off from law and depend on their own will.

2. Whereas authority may be established by God, authority may not always stem from God for two reasons: it may be defective either in its origins or in its exercise.

3. Laws can be unified in morality, yet diverse in justice. The prohibition against stealing is one of God's laws—agreed with-in nations to be wrong—yet the punishment may vary depending on a variety of factors. A theft that results in a "slap on the wrist" (perhaps because it is a first offense) in one country can result in the hand being cut off in another.

4. For the Christian, God's laws are unified both in morality and in justice. In God's court, a plea of situation ethics is not

admissible. One's situation, however justified in one's mind, does not change God's law, command or authority. In submitting first to His authority, we then submit to the governing authorities, unless the command is contrary to the will of God for us.

R&D *Are submission to authority and honor for government connected? If so, how do we return these virtues to our society?*

Prayer: *Disciples need to accept discipline and to be in order... Your order, Lord.*

Sunday, March 26

Sabbath Time

"You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" Matthew 7:16

It is our behavior in life, not so much what we do as how we do it, not so much what we suffer as how we take it, that marks us as the disciples of the Divine Master.

Monday, March 27

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

Justice and Law

Being wronged by another person is never an easy pill to swallow. The injustice often lodges in the throat until melted through forgiveness or regurgitated in retaliation.

Being wronged by a close friend or family member is far more intense. A spear of disloyalty goes straight through the back to the heart of a trusting comrade or kinsman. How much more severe the anguish, if that one who forms the weapon that pierces the unsuspecting heart is a Christian. Should they not know better? How could they do such a thing!

Initially, devastation, disillusionment, sorrow and anger will rush through the mind of the wounded one as the eyes are painfully opened to see the aggressor. Needless to say and more often than not, the pain of the wound becomes secondary to the pain of knowing the perpetrator.

In the heartrending hours and days that follow painful revelation, significant decisions are made. It is not the wrongs that we receive by which we are judged by God but our reaction to those wrongs.

Resulting from and compounding to our pain begins another pain, a painful probe into our soul (the mind, will and emotions) of a child of God by God Himself. He waits to know how the wounded heart and soul will respond. Our reactions to wrongs reveal the deep hidden depths of our true character. Is our faith securely anchored to the God of this universe or is it a shallow facade easily shattered by the shocks of this world?

Herein lies the test. Do we believe God when He says, “Vengeance is mine,” or do we believe vengeance is ours?

R&D Is there vengeance in your heart against anyone? Now is the time for repentance and forgiveness.

Prayer: Only when love is the basis of our life in Christ can we deal effectively with our disappointments with others and with ourselves.

Tuesday, March 28

Read: Deuteronomy 1:9-18

Democratic System

In our passage today Moses is retelling the story of how he shared the responsibility of government. He proposed and the people agreed that wise, understanding and respected men be appointed to have authority over the people.

In Moses' day those with authority were appointed by Moses. Under our system most of those designated to have authority over us are elected. Our obligation as responsible participants in the democratic process is to seek out and vote for wise, understanding and respected men and women to serve in positions of authority over us and to hold them accountable for the public trust granted to them.

Public responsibility should be viewed as a trust from God, a stewardship of justice for the sake of all of society. As participants in the democratic process, responsibility is placed on all Christians to see that our governments (federal, state and local) are just.

The democratic system provides for civil justice for the Christian and the non-Christian. As questionable as our civil laws may sometimes appear, they are appointed to protect our freedom of worship and to promote the general tranquility. God

has ordained civil authority ideally to make just judgments. We also should remind ourselves regularly that biblical revelation shows government to be one of the means of God's self-revelation. Government is part of God's overall plan for creation and should be honored as such.

R&D In what ways can you as an individual contribute toward justice in our governments?

Prayer: Lord, You would have us recognize that, just as we have obligations to one another in other aspects of our lives, we have the obligation as Christians to hold our leaders accountable to the general public. That means keeping informed and voting accordingly.

Wednesday, March 29

Read: 1 Peter 2:11-12

Honesty

I recently took a microwave oven to a repair shop for an estimate. Later that morning my wife called to tell me the cost. The repairman did not think we should have the microwave repaired, and he said he would be happy to keep it, and not charge us for an estimate. At first, I thought he was kind not to charge anything, since all others whom we called said they charged for estimates. Then I began to wonder if he were being honest with us. Or was he giving me an inflated estimate so he could keep the microwave, repair it cheaply and either use it or sell it for a great profit? Was he being honest or was I overly suspicious?

Scripture teaches that honesty is our testimony to others about our faith and beliefs. However, it does seem that honesty as a virtue is under scrutiny. We're fed a steady diet of government officials from presidents, senators, mayors, and police chiefs who are caught in scandals; sports superstars, clergy, doctors, stockbrokers, local merchants—you name the vocation—and the virtue of honesty in word or action has come under a cloud of suspicion.

Be aware of your behavior, Peter teaches, because then, when accused, they can find no fault with you, and your honesty glorifies God. The temptation is to do what others are doing—to

slip into deception and fraud. The little lie, the half-truth no one will find out, or will they? Certainly, the Lord knows.

R&D *How can we work toward a more honest society?*

Prayer: *Our consciences, guided by the Holy Spirit, let us know when we are fudging the truth, Lord. Help us to do things Your way when tempted to do otherwise.*

Thursday, March 30

Read: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Vulnerability

Paul carried a thorn in the flesh, a physical ailment, that gave him distress. He was afraid this thorn would be seen as a weakness and affect the way his authority was received. After all, he was not tall and strong, but unimpressive, small and frail, and the thorn was just one more aggravation to deal with.

Paul asked God to take the thorn away; not once, but three times he asked. God answered with a knockout punch to Paul's pride, but he did it to enable Paul, not to slow him down. Before Paul could be strong, he had to know about weakness, so God kept Paul's focus on His divine help, not Paul's human strength. Paul feared rejection and humiliation. He was afraid his thorn would render him less powerful. He feared a handicap; God gave him supernatural strength.

Being vulnerable to the Lord and those around us is not always an easy chore. Being open to hurt is often unpleasant; showing our weakness is fearful. We often hope to plow or fake our way through life. But the Lord reveals His special blessing to us as he did to Paul. The blessing has to do with true strength. In being vulnerable, God gives us strength.

R&D *To whom would you find it the hardest to be vulnerable? Why?*

Prayer: *We are indeed vulnerable creatures, Lord; make us strong in Your strength.*

Read: James 3:3-12

Gossip

Imagine that someone comes to you and in hushed tones of secrecy tells you a juicy story which the person has just heard about someone. With piqued curiosity you listen to every detail and soon after find you are in a conversation claiming that you can't believe what you've just heard. Often, we claim that we'd never do something like that. Gossip is hot stuff. It fuels the fire of what may be the truth, but it also puts us on the judgment seat, which is not ours to sit on.

James "pulls no punches" when it comes to talking about the tongue and the damage which we can do with it. He talks about how a very small thing can sometimes have great influence, out of all proportion to its size, and gives the bit in a horse's mouth and the rudder of a ship as examples. The tongue is the object of his concern. It can be like a raging fire burning out of control.

Of course, there are many ways in which the tongue can do irreparable harm. We can lie, we can slander, we can manipulate, we can seduce, and we can gossip. Perhaps some would think that gossip is the least sinful of these misuses of the tongue, but is it? What is more important to a person than that person's name, reputation? Gossip is an even more insidious way of destroying a person's reputation than lying about or slandering that person, because a direct accusation might simply be dismissed as untrue and requires commitment on our part. But gossip can be spread so secretively; we can plant the poison and when it has done its deadly work, no one will remember who started it all.

R&D What should I do the next time someone tries to tell me some gossip?

Prayer: Help us not to rationalize our thinking, Lord, so that we think we are being helpful in repeating something that is damaging to someone else.

Read: Acts 17:16-34

Advertising

We are a consumer society. Listen to any radio station, watch any TV channel for an hour, read any newspaper or go to any shopping mall. It's pretty evident, from cars to blue jeans to bathroom tissue. Madison Avenue wants to persuade us to buy its products. It stands to reason that not every product is the best, but it's hard to sort through the claims of value, precision and durability. Some of us are left frustrated over having to choose between seven shelves of canned corn, and others love the challenge of it all.

I recently had the opportunity of sitting in on a youth group meeting and overheard a conversation about other religions. The kids were wondering which religion they should buy into. In Athens, Paul saw a city full of idols, even an inscribed altar to an unknown God. Their question was: Which one should we choose? He spoke to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in ways that met their search for a living God, not a god made of stone. Paul knew how to speak to people "where they were," and show them a better way—honesty in advertising.

I've met many who are searching for a God who makes a difference. When we see someone "shopping" for ultimate answers in life, how do we point to Jesus and say, "This is what you are looking for?" He is the real thing.

R&D *What advertising is appropriate? Inappropriate?*

Prayer: *Lord God, our most effective and authentic advertisement for Christ is the story of how he came into our lives, how our lives have changed as a result, and how they are changing for the better every day.*

Sunday, April 2

Sabbath Time

"Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit." Matthew 12:33

Life is a great vocation, and Christ's disciples will put into it all they can of sacrifice, love, and labor. The Christian character is the flower of which sacrifice is the seed.

Monday, April 3

Read: Matthew 16:24-27

Greed

The conversation began, “I’ve spent my entire life making money. The more I had, the more I wanted. I’ve got everything. The doctors tell me my heart is in bad shape; I have a slim chance of coming out of surgery tomorrow. I’m afraid.”

All of us have needs for comfort and security. Sometimes those needs run wild and become the focus of our lives. Society says be successful—no, mega successful. That’s where it’s at. Buy, collect, acquire everything you can. What you own and have in the bank is the measure of your worth. Is it?

There is nothing wrong with having nice things. Having money in the bank is prudent. But what is life if it is dedicated to holding onto or acquiring things while our spirits are left unnurtured? A professor of mine once said that our resurrection bodies are being formed a little each day. Today is an opportunity to prepare for eternity with the Lord.

I can spend all day trying to make material profit. I can dedicate myself to a good bottom line, like the man in the hospital whose heart was giving out. How does my spiritual bank account compare to the material? Do I have a zero balance in one, and find the other won’t help?

R&D *How is your spiritual bank account?*

Prayer: *There’s nothing static about the Christian life, Lord. You give us plenty of opportunity to grow...in the right direction.*

Tuesday, April 4

Read: Mark 10:35-45

Ambition

I’ve recently read *Friday Night Lights*, a story about West Texas high school football. The story follows the ambition of the Permian High School Panthers to be the best in the state. Young men would suffer through grueling practice just to wear the black Permian jersey. Their dreams would be to play for big-name schools

like Texas A&M or Nebraska. Their ambition was to make it to the pros.

For many of these players there was no sacrifice too great, no pain too insurmountable that could curb their ambition. The flame of fame burned deep in many of their hearts. Yet, most would be left with memories of the past and sit with spectators watching the next generation of hopefuls batter it out. One injury and today's star is tomorrow's forgotten person. There was always someone quick and eager to take your place.

James and John wanted to sit on either side of Jesus in glory. In case you want to let them off the hook on the theory that there was no selfish ambition involved, just a desire to remain close to Jesus, you need to note that Jesus went on to deal with the problem of ambition. "Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (v.44). That, incidentally, does not mean we should have the ambition of "outslaving" everyone else in order to earn our way into heaven. It has to do with mind-set: Are we focused on ourselves and what we want to get or on God and His plan for us?

As in the case of the Permian Panthers, ambition can be a dead-end street. It is not wrong to believe in hard work or to want to take care of your family. But if you are your own goal, you will never find true satisfaction in life. As the slogan of the East African revival says, only "Jesus satisfies."

R&D *What are your ambitions? How do they glorify God?*

Prayer: *Make me ambitious, Lord Jesus, to follow you.*

Wednesday, April 5

Read: Genesis 37:1-24

Jealousy

Joseph had eleven brothers who were jealous of him because he was favored by Jacob, their father. Sharing his dream of sheaves bowing down to him and stars circling him did not help matters. His brothers hated him and made every effort to show it.

Joseph had something they wanted: as much of their father's love as he was getting. That's a reasonable thing for any sib-

ling to want. Unfortunately, their desire for love turned hateful. Jealousy is like that: it gets uglier and uglier.

In the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the brothers plot to get rid of Joseph and sing a song with a line that says, “The dreamer’s gotta go!” And go he did. This jealousy led to conspiracy and eventually they sold him and shipped him off to Egypt to some unknown fate. They simply got rid of the competition. The writer of the Song of Solomon (8:6) says, “Jealousy is as cruel as the grave.”

Joseph’s brothers’ actions were cruel. They sinned against their brother and their father. I’m reminded of the general confession, “Most merciful God, we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone...” Jealousy can cause us to sin in maligning thoughts, in cruel spoken words, and hateful deeds. God, have mercy upon us.

R&D *Once we’ve identified it, what can we do with our jealousy?*

Prayer: *When we have life in you, Lord Jesus, why be jealous of anyone?*

Thursday, April 6

Read: Acts 5:1-11

Covetousness

Scripture teaches that covetousness is greed, a source of evil and something never satisfied. It’s like an itch that can’t be scratched, an addiction never satisfied. Never happy with what you have, secretly wanting more.

Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and secretly kept a portion of the money. They told Peter they were giving the whole amount to the church. They appeared to be more generous than they really were. It was their choice to sell the land, and their choice of how much to give to the church. Sad to say, their covetousness turned what could have been a loving and generous gesture into tragedy.

When confronted with the truth they both dropped dead. The wages of sin is death. For Ananias and Sapphira their wages were literally dying. Their greed caused them to hold back and

lie to the church. It is very shocking to realize how serious God regards sins like covetousness. It's equally shocking to realize that He knows our hearts as well as our actions. Let us pray that He cleanses our hearts and guides us to actions that glorify Him and His Church.

R&D How do I hold back from the Lord? How does He feel when I do that?

Prayer: Rather than seeking to have, Lord God, help us focus on seeking to give.

Friday, April 7

Read: Malachi 2:1-9

Truthfulness

Many of us have been hurt by lies, and some of us have hurt others by lying. Sometimes we doubt what we hear or read because of the source. Other times we believe with conviction, we say it's the truth, and in one way or another forge our lives around what we believe to be true. What we believe to be true is seen in how we live and what we say.

Malachi speaks God's judgment on corrupt priests, whose wicked practices are leading the people astray. They are neither teaching God's truths nor are they living in the truth; and, as a result, many people are led to do wrong.

This passage makes it clear that priests, teachers, leaders and others in positions of responsibility especially need to be truthful. Their influence goes far beyond their own lives. But it is so for all of us that the sources of what we believe to be the truths will not only affect our lives but the lives of others. Young children are like sponges. Young families want the truth to make sense out of children's lives. Older persons need to know their lives have had meaning.

Truth is like a valuable possession entrusted to us. We have a responsibility to guard and protect it. This is particularly so with regard to the truth we know in Jesus Christ.

R&D How does the truth set us free and how does a lie bind us?

Prayer: *Truth is beautiful in Your sight, Lord God; help us to value it and guard it.*

Saturday, April 8

Read: John 18:36-38

Deception

I was told that treasury agents are trained to detect counterfeit money by studying real currency. They learn what real money looks like, so, when presented with a counterfeit, they can spot the phony. The principle behind this is to know the real thing so well that no degree of deception can pass without detection.

One of the most memorable verses in Scripture is Pilate's rhetorical question, "What is truth?" Let me expand the question. What is true, honest, really real, something we can always trust? The answer is God's promises found in Scripture. The more we get to know what He told us, the more we'll know Him.

Satan tried to deceive Jesus after he was baptized. Jesus knew the Father and could not be deceived. The evil one is a liar and a deceiver, not to be trusted for a single second. How then do we spot him? How do we detect his tricks and stop him short? By knowing the real thing. It is only by spending time learning about the Lord and being in His presence that we become able to spot the phony.

R&D *In what ways are people frequently deceived in our day?*

Prayer: *When we would be deceived, may the Holy Spirit within us alert us to truth that we may follow the pathway life in Christ lays before us.*

Easter Sunday, April 9

Sabbath Time

And he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2

All of us have our parts to play in building up the New Jerusalem. He, who came down from the mountain of prayer, had to ascend the mount of sacrifice. The apostles had to realize that, if it was a wondrous thing to see him transfigured on Mount

Tabor, it was an even more wondrous thing to see him disfigured on Calvary.



The Holy Spirit

Monday, April 10

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10

Introduction: Seven-fold Gifts

Many of us put a great deal of spiritual energy into Lent in preparing for Easter, then perhaps have a sort of spiritual let-down. It occurred to us that, instead of such a let-down, we should now spend the Easter Season joyfully preparing for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has been called the “missing Person” of the Trinity, and Pentecost has taken a back seat to Christmas and Easter (perhaps because the secular world has not learned how to commercialize it). This 33-lesson study of the Holy Spirit will continue through *this* issue of *The Journey* and into the *next* one (May-August 2023), ending with Pentecost. Appropriately, we begin a study on the Holy Spirit with a look at the prophets. While the Holy Spirit was well known to the people of the old covenant, his work was restricted. Only certain, chosen people were anointed by the Spirit—kings, priests, and prophets. Even in these special people, his work was far from perfect, for their human faults remained present, in spite of their divine calling to serve God and Israel.

Isaiah speaks of one who will not simply be an anointed person, but the Anointed. He will be of the royal house of David, but more than a king. He will bring justice and righteousness for the poor and the meek of the earth. The “root of Jesse,” the new life springing from the old stump of the royal tree, shall not only produce a just and gracious government, but he shall inaugurate a renewed creation. The lovely poetry in verses six through nine looks forward to the redemption of the creation, where even the animals will live in peace.

The Anointed One (Messiah in Hebrew) will have the Spirit of the Lord resting on him. In this passage, we have the beginning

of what tradition calls the “sevenfold” gifts of the Spirit. “Thou the anointing Spirit art, who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart” (Hymn 503). Here the gifts are coupled in three pairs—wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, and knowledge and fear of the Lord. A seventh, piety, was added in the Vulgate version of the text.

R&D *How did Jesus the Messiah fulfill this prophecy?*

Prayer: *Gracious God, You provide for us in so many ways. We praise You for this Easter Season and for Pentecost to come.*

Tuesday, April 11

Read: Ezekiel 36:25-38

A New Spirit

In Ezekiel, we hear of a new relationship that will be created between God and His people. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God will so transform His people that they will be given a new and righteous life, fulfilling His holy and righteous will.

First, there will be a cleansing with water, the washing away of sin and its stain. Then, God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit within us. The heart and spirit refer to the whole of the inner personality—the mind, the emotions, and the will. While they were once stubborn, hardhearted and unwilling to accept God’s love, now their new hearts will be open, sensitive and filled with His love.

Christians see the promise of conversion and new birth in these passages, the elementary experiences of the faith journey. The new covenant is very different from the old, and radical in the extreme. Nothing less than a change of one’s life is promised. There will be a change of attitude, a change of feeling, and a change of devotion, all brought about by the miraculous intervention of God. Not human effort, but divine grace is the foundation of the new covenant.

Then, God promises to put His own Spirit within us. The Spirit will cause us to become obedient to all the revelation of God’s will in the commandments and the teachings of Scripture. What fallen humanity cannot do, God promises through the Spirit, to

so change us from the inside out, that we become His faithful, obedient people.

R&D *How has your life changed since you believed in Jesus?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, you equip us to be the people God calls us to be.*

Wednesday, April 12

Read: Joel 2:28-29

On All Flesh

Looking forward to the “day of the Lord,” the time of the fulfillment of God’s promises to restore His people to their land, and bless them with abundance, Joel predicts an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh.

Up until this time, the anointing of the Holy Spirit had come only to prophets, priests and kings. The Holy Spirit enabled them to fulfill a ministry to the whole people of God, and to act on God’s behalf toward them. Now, Joel predicts a change, a profound change in each individual’s relationship to God, and in each one’s ministry to his neighbor.

The Holy Spirit will one day be given to young and old, male and female (a departure from exclusively male ministry), masters and slaves. No matter what one’s station in life, the Holy Spirit would descend and empower the person for the work of ministry. Here’s one of the first intimations of “every member ministry,” now so familiar in renewed churches.

The ministries include prophecy, an inspired speaking of the Word of God in the form of teaching and exhortation rather than prediction of the future. Dreaming dreams and seeing visions calls forth the deeply spiritual insights given by the Holy Spirit, insights into the nature of God and His purposes for humanity. Every person receives an outpouring of the Spirit, and is empowered for a ministry. The prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when every member of the Church received the Holy Spirit and was anointed for ministry.

R&D *What ministries has the Holy Spirit given you?*

Prayer: *Equip us, Lord, for every good work You have for us to do.*

Thursday, April 13

Read: Matthew 3:1-12

Baptize with Spirit

As the last of the prophets of the old covenant, John the Baptist pointed to the coming of the Messiah and the inauguration of the new covenant. He was a voice “crying in the wilderness” preparing the way of the Lord by urging people to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins. At the Jordan River, throngs flocked to hear John and to be baptized by him in the waters. John knew, however, that his water baptism was only preparatory. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v.11). Repentance—a confession of sin and a willingness to change the direction of one’s life—prepares the way to receive something more. The something more must await the arrival of the “coming one,” who alone would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not explained by John the Baptist. We remember, however, the prophecies of the new covenant that promise the gift of the Spirit and a change in one’s ability to obey God. ‘I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in all my statutes...’ (Ezekiel 36:27). Water may cleanse away the stain of sin, but only the Holy Spirit can cleanse the heart and the mind. The “coming one” will purify the soul with his winnowing fork and burn the chaff of sin by the fire of the Spirit.

R&D Discuss what the sacrament of baptism bestows upon us.

Prayer: Cleanse our hearts and minds, Holy Spirit, that our focus may be on the things of God.

Friday, April 14

Read: John 1:19-34

He Who Baptizes

John the Baptist was prepared to recognize the Messiah/Christ by the vision of the Spirit descending and remaining on him. God had told John such a person would be the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. How thrilled John must have been when

Jesus rose from the water and the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove from heaven, and remained upon him! John's ministry of preparation reached its conclusion as he pointed to Jesus and proclaimed, "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (v.34).

Notice that Jesus submitted to the identical initiatory rite that all subsequent Christian believers would follow. Entry into the Christian way begins with baptism in both water and the Holy Spirit. The water cleanses from past sin. The Spirit empowers a new quality of life and ministry. As the divine Son, Jesus did not need baptism of either water or the Spirit, but accepted it to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Jesus is the pioneer and captain of our faith, blazing the path all must follow.

The same two-stage entry into the Christian life remains. In the primitive church, baptism with water and the Spirit took place at the same service, dramatically offering a preparatory bath and a life-changing infusion of the Holy Spirit. Recently, our denomination restored the integrity of Holy Baptism wherein we receive both a baptism in water and in the Spirit.

R&D *What impact has your baptism had on your life?*

Prayer: *As we praise You, O Lord, from whom all blessings flow, may we open the door of our heart that Your blessings may flow from us to the benefit of those around us.*

Saturday, April 15

Read: Luke 1:26-37

Conceived by the Spirit

We have been reading of the prophecies of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Now, we look at the role of the Spirit in the life of Jesus.

When the angel Gabriel announced that Mary had found favor with God and was about to conceive and bear a son to be called Jesus, she wondered how it might be, since she knew not a man. Gabriel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (v.35). Jesus

was born not only of a virgin, but of the Holy Spirit. The point is made clear so we may know that Jesus came into the world by an act of God, not by any human effort. Further, Jesus possesses divine life, and so, can bestow new life by the Spirit.

Did you know we can share a similar birth by the Holy Spirit? When we come to Jesus by faith, he enables us to be “born again of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). We share the life of the Son of God, and the same power of a holy life that dwelt in him now dwells in us. The indwelling Spirit redirects our hearts and minds, so that we desire that which God commands. The indwelling Spirit transforms our minds and our attitudes change. By his divine presence Christians are gradually being changed into holy, loving, righteous people.

Jesus is the pattern we follow. Our Christian life begins with a new birth, a new life bestowed by the Spirit.

R&D *Why did Jesus say, “You must be born again”?*

Prayer: *Whether we use the term “being born again” or “living this new life in Christ,” it is a glorious experience, Lord, to realize the change that the Holy Spirit brings into us.*

Sunday, April 16

Sabbath Time

“And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” Matthew 28:20b

We may be in the most sinful surroundings and have purity in ourselves, or in the most depressing surroundings and have hope in ourselves. In all places and at all times Jesus is near us, and to such as are ready to receive Him His word is ever: “It is I; be not afraid.”

Monday, April 17

Read: Matthew 3:13-17

Baptized in Spirit

No wonder John the Baptist protested, “I need to be baptized by you.” Jesus, the sinless one, had no need for John’s baptism in water. Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus came for baptism in obedience to the Father and in walking the path he would expect every disciple to follow. He is our great example. Jesus identified himself with sinful humanity, and accepted what we sinful humans need—a baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

When Jesus arose from the waters, the Spirit descended upon him. He was anointed for the work of ministry, empowered and authorized to act on behalf of his heavenly Father. He was born of the Spirit. He was full of the Spirit from his conception. Why did he need to be baptized in the Spirit? Jesus received the Holy Spirit “to fulfill all righteousness.”

The baptism of Jesus in water and Spirit establishes the pattern for Christian initiation. In John, chapter 3, Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” The water washes away the stain of sin, but the Spirit transforms the heart and soul of the believer. Both are necessary for the Christian life.

In my denomination, baptism and confirmation are the sacramental signs of the gracious gifts of God to every believer... forgiveness of sins, and the power of a new life.

R&D How does the Spirit help us “fulfill all righteousness”?

Prayer: Righteousness has to do with being in relationship to You, Lord God. When we are baptized in water and the Spirit, that relationship is sealed.

Tuesday, April 18

Read: Luke 4:14-30

Anointed to Preach

Here we have Jesus’ own explanation of the purpose of the anointing, or baptism with the Holy Spirit. Quoting from Isaiah, he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” The baptism of the Holy Spirit equipped for ministry, to carry out the mission of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom, demonstrating its presence with power, and offering forgiveness and entrance into the kingdom to everyone who believes.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus spoke the word of God. By the same Spirit, he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind and enabled the lame to walk. By the Spirit, he released those bound by the demonic powers of habitual sin. The anointing of the Spirit was essential in his ministry for it was by the Spirit's power and authority that Jesus accomplished his work.

In the Old Testament, priests, prophets and kings were anointed by the Spirit so they might act on God's behalf in ministering to His people. One day, however, they expected someone who would be not "an anointed one," but "the anointed one, the Messiah/Christ." Jesus identifies himself as the one of whom Isaiah spoke, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus gives the same Holy Spirit to those who become his ministers, both lay and ordained, so they may be empowered and authorized to do the will of God. Christian ministry consists in God working through us by the power of the Spirit.

R&D *How does the Spirit enable ministry today?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, help your disciples in our day realize the power of the Holy Spirit within them to do what you would do if you were physically present here on earth.*

Wednesday, April 19

Read: John 3:1-14

Born of the Spirit

Nicodemus misunderstood the word Jesus used, "unless one is born anew." The word does mean again or a second time, but it also means from above. Jesus answered Nicodemus with a clarification: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

The twin elements of water and Spirit are obvious references to the sacrament of baptism. The water symbolizes repentance, forgiveness and cleansing. The Spirit symbolizes divine inspiration and enablement to begin a new way of living. How gracious of God not only to forgive our sins, but to grant us His own Spirit to assist us in changing our lifestyle! What we find impossible on

our own strength, to live righteously, He promises to help us do by His strength.

Jesus spoke of two kinds of birth: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The first is our natural, human birth. The second is the new birth given by the infusion of God’s own Spirit, making us into new persons. Obviously, the new birth can only be granted by God.

Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The same Holy Spirit who moved over the waters at creation, now moves in the waters of baptism and creates us new persons with a new passion for loving and serving God in Christ.

R&D *Have you experienced a new birth by water and the Spirit?*

Prayer: *Awaken us, Lord, to the miracle of life in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and ever-accessible to You in prayer.*

Thursday, April 20

Read: John 4:7-15

Drink of This Water

In the hot, dry, dusty climate of semiarid Palestine, water is a precious commodity. Water not only refreshes the weary traveler, but it brings forth life. When the early and the latter rains fall, the barren landscape bursts into life, green grass and wildflowers adorning the hills.

When Jesus offered living water, he was speaking not only of running water as opposed to that in a cistern, but of water that brings forth new life. “Everyone who drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The new life he will give is eternal, a word that means not simply never-ending, but having the quality of heaven, of the glorious life of the coming kingdom of God.

The water is not explained in this section of the gospel. The explanation comes later, in John 7:39: “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive.” Yes, the

Holy Spirit is like rain falling upon desert. The Spirit brings forth new, vigorous, beautiful life, the life of the kingdom of God in the heart of the believer.

Many of our lives are dry and dusty, barren as the wastelands of Judea. Some of us are thirsty, yearning for affirmation, love and meaning in life. To us, as to the woman of Samaria, Jesus promises a drink of water that will produce an inner source of continual refreshment, water that wells up to eternal life.

R&D How does the Holy Spirit renew and refresh you?

Prayer: As Your rain from heaven brings life to the parched earth around us, thank You, Lord God, for the refreshment and life that the Holy Spirit rains upon us, Your parched children.

Friday, April 21

Read: John 7:37-44

Rivers of Living Water

At the feast of Tabernacles, water was poured from a silver flagon into a basin on the side of the altar. The water was an act of thanksgiving for the water God supplied from the rock during the Exodus, and a prayer for rain to enrich the crops. The words of Jesus need to be seen against this background: “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.”

In the next verse, Jesus explains his analogy: “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” You drink by placing your faith in Jesus. He not only quenches your thirst (“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”) but enables you to be a source of refreshment and renewal to others.

John unlocks the mystery further by explaining, “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” Everyone who comes to Jesus and has faith in him shall receive the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit, one’s own thirst for righteousness will be quenched, but by the same Spirit, the believer becomes a minister of God’s righteousness to others.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh awaits the day of Pentecost. First, Jesus must be glorified, die for our sins, be raised for our justification and ascend into heaven. From heaven, he pours out the Spirit and rivers of living water will flow into and out of the faithful community of Christ.

R&D *Discuss why Pentecost must follow Christ's glorification.*

Prayer: *Your blessings upon us, Dear Lord, are not for us alone but for those with whom You give us the opportunity to share it.*

Saturday, April 22

Read: John 14:12-21

Another Counselor

In his last meal with his disciples, Jesus solemnly promised that those who believe in him will do the works he does, and even greater. The works refer to the work of evangelism, of preaching the gospel and bringing people into the kingdom. Miracles may be included, but they seem ancillary to the main task of conversion.

The ability to do the works is granted by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus calls “another Counselor.” Sometimes translated “Comforter,” the original Greek word “*paraclete*” refers to one who encourages you, stimulates you and inspires you. The “other Counselor” will take the place of Jesus with his disciples, and become their teacher and guide.

Notice, however, the emphasis on love and obedience. “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” The Spirit is given to those who demonstrate their love by their faithful observance of all that Jesus has taught them. Remember that the last of his commandments was, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” If we love Jesus, we will obey his command and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, go and make disciples.

The greater works the disciples of Jesus will do consist in the greater number of persons gathered into the kingdom of God. Jesus will return to the Father, but his Church remains in this world, continuing his work. Beginning at Pentecost, the disciples brought in three thousand people, and the story goes on through the years until today.

R&D *How does the Holy Spirit help us do the work of evangelism?*

Prayer: *The harvest of souls is there for us, Lord Jesus, if we will be obedient to you and make disciples of all nations.*

Sunday, April 23

Sabbath Time

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18

There is no enemy to prayer like pride, and spiritual pride is the death of spiritual prayer. God's mercy will always humble us while He leads us, for the ascent of the soul to the highest is conditioned by the descent of the self to the lowest. Our Lord's spiritual ascension was manifest in earthly action as He washed the feet of sinful men and died at the hands of sinners on a cross in the dark night of Calvary.

Monday, April 24

Read: John 14:25-31

He Will Teach You

The New Testament is a witness to the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would teach the disciples "all things." Not only did the Spirit enable them to remember the life and ministry of Jesus, but he also helped them comprehend the meaning of his passion, death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the gospels and epistles revealing truths about the faith and its practice for all future generations to follow.

The same Holy Spirit continues his teaching ministry in us, as we open our hearts to discern the truth of Holy Scripture. Meditative reading will cause words or phrases to leap into one's mind. Focusing on those words and phrases can lead to a deeper understanding of the revelation of God in Christ. And the Spirit can speak to us in our own contemporary situation as we listen prayerfully to the writings.

Paul wrote, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). Those inspired Scriptures are

essential for our development as Christians as is also the work of the Spirit to help us apply them in our lives.

The Holy Spirit remains with the Church as its teacher and guide. By study and prayer, the Holy Spirit will guide the faithful through the confusion of the modern world.

R&D Reread today's passage and ask the Spirit to teach you.

Prayer: Lord, we need the best teaching we can get in the "confusion of the modern world." Thank You that we have the best teacher imaginable in the Holy Spirit.

Tuesday, April 25

Read: John 15:18-27

Bear Witness

The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ. You will notice that the Spirit never draws attention to himself. Few are the prayers or the hymns addressed to the Holy Spirit, for example. The Spirit "glorifies" the Son, makes him known in all his splendor. The Son "glorifies" the Father, revealing His loving nature. Here we have a glimpse of the role of the members of the Holy Trinity, to serve one another in mutual honor and love.

After Jesus has departed from the world, the Holy Spirit comes to continue to bear witness to him. The Spirit bears witness through the holy community, the Church, as its members show forth the Christ and his love. The Spirit bears witness to the hearts and minds of those who hear the Word of God proclaimed, convincing them of the truth.

In order to be a witness, one must have had personal experience. Hearsay testimony, learned from another, is inadmissible in court. The Holy Spirit can bear witness for he knows the Son of God and can reveal the truth about him. But Jesus also adds, "You also are witnesses," speaking to the disciples. They have been with Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry, and they will be eyewitnesses of his death and resurrection.

How can we be witnesses today? By having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and experiencing the renewing, saving power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

R&D *How have you been able to witness to Christ?*

Prayer: *We are your disciples, Lord Christ, such as we are. Empower us by the Holy Spirit to reveal you to the world today.*

Wednesday, April 26

Read: Acts 15:36-41

Feast Day - Saint Mark

Mark is a man to whom, in our day, we would give the award for an outstanding comeback. He is assumed to be the writer of the Gospel which bears his name. John was his Jewish name, but he also used a Greek surname and was referred to as John Mark.

The earliest Christian community met at his mother's house in Jerusalem. He was a cousin of Barnabas and accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. However, he left them at Perga for some reason not reflected in the records. Thus, Paul refused to take John Mark along on a subsequent trip, causing a split between Paul and Barnabas.

Later, however, he was with Paul in Rome when Paul was imprisoned, thus having restored himself with the great apostle. A reference in 1 Peter indicates that he was an interpreter for Peter. Thus, it is assumed that the Gospel of Mark is based on Peter's recollection of Jesus. (See Acts 12:12; 16:27ff; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13).

R&D *Who, in your life, has been a "comeback kid"?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for your servant Mark and the Gospel You inspired him to write.*

Thursday, April 27

Read: John 16:1-11

Convict the World

I'm sure the disciples could not imagine that it would be to their advantage for Jesus to go away. When they had received the Holy Spirit, perhaps they understood. For now Jesus would be with each one of them wherever they might be, by the Spirit, teaching them and guiding them.

In addition to ministry to the faithful, the Holy Spirit has a ministry toward the world. The world describes the social, cultural system of humanity organized without reference to God or His Son. The Holy Spirit will convict the unbelieving world of the truth.

If you've ever tried to argue religion with anyone, you know the futility of the exercise. But now, if we will be faithful to proclaim the Word of God, to share the "good news" of Jesus Christ, then the Holy Spirit will help people hear and believe the truth. Evangelism is God's work through the Spirit. We are the instruments through whom God works, but it is His Spirit who convinces people of the truth.

The way the Spirit convicts of the truth is to show them Jesus. They are convicted of sin because they do not believe in him. They are convicted of righteousness because Jesus has gone to the Father. They are convicted of judgment because Jesus has already judged and defeated the ruler of this world, Satan.

What confidence we ought to have as we share the gospel, confidence that the Holy Spirit will convince them of the truth!

R&D List the advantages of having the Counselor with you.

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, give us the words to speak to the situations we face that Christ may be glorified and those who hear our words touched by him.

Friday, April 28

Read: John 16:12-24

Guide You into All Truth

What were the "many things" Jesus could not share with the disciples? They could not bear them. Perhaps he was referring to the significance of his crucifixion, burial, resurrection and ascension. While he told them of the events before they took place, he did not explain their meaning. He knew the difficulty they had shown in accepting the very idea of his rejection and death. Only after the resurrection would they be able to comprehend the truth about these great events.

The Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. The teaching epistles of Paul, Peter and John demonstrate the veracity of that statement. They were shown the significance of the cross, and they understood what was accomplished by the resurrection. The New Testament was inspired by the Holy Spirit who revealed the truth to the apostles.

The role of the Holy Spirit is to take the things of Christ and declare them to us. He glorifies Jesus by making his great love and divinity known to us. The cooperation of the Holy Trinity is mentioned here. Jesus reveals that all the Father has is his to reveal. As Jesus shares that with the Spirit, he will reveal it to us. From the Father to the Son to the Spirit, that's the order of revelation.

Personal revelation comes about this way, too. As we read the Scriptures meditatively, quietly praying for illumination, the Holy Spirit may very well guide us into the understanding of the truth.

R&D *How has the Holy Spirit granted you illumination?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, guide us into all truth.*

Saturday, April 29

Read: Acts 1:1-11

Wait for the Promise

“Wait for the promise of the Father,” said Jesus in his final address to his disciples. He explained the Father’s promise as a baptism with the Holy Spirit. Jesus quoted the enigmatic phrase of John the Baptist, who said, “I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). The baptism with the Spirit was not explained, only prophesied. The baptism in the Holy Spirit will equip the disciples for ministry. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8). In Greek, the word for power, *dunamis*, means enablement. Divine ability shall be bestowed upon the Church, an ability similar to the miraculous power of Jesus to demonstrate the presence of God to heal, to save and to restore. The purpose of the power is to energize them to be witnesses in all the world. They will not only give their testimony to

what they have seen and heard, but they, in their own persons, will be people whose lives will bear witness to Christ. For the power of the Holy Spirit comes, not only to enable miracles, but to enable the faithful to lead new and righteous lives.

In Ezekiel 36:27, the purpose of the gift of the Spirit is revealed: "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." The community of the faithful will be energized by the Spirit to be witnesses, and to give witness to Jesus Christ.

R&D Discuss how the power of the Spirit would affect ministry.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, you not only give us the power to be Christ's people in the world today, but you are in us to shape our lives in accordance with God's will for us. People want to know how much we care before they care how much we know.

Sunday, April 30

Sabbath Time

Pray without ceasing. 1 Thessalonians 5:17

The habit of living in prayer is no easy matter, and our prayer experience has, and must have, its cycles and seasons. Winters of patient waiting and apparent deadness are succeeded by springs of hope and quiet mellow summers and autumn glories, to be followed by more winters and new springs, as the soul passes through its seasons of spiritual experience as a branch of the living Vine. The voice of God called us out of nothing into being, and that same voice calls us on to the deliberate life of worship; and the utterance of our own life is to find union with the utterance of this living Voice which is ever leading us on to a more understanding obedience and a purer condition of contrite love.

Reflections