

50 Days

Awlaze!

Daily Devotions

*Were not our hearts burning within us
while He talked with us on the road
and opened the Scriptures to us?*

(Luke 24:32)

50 Days Ablaze! Daily Devotions

Barry J. Keurulainen

Ablaze!
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50 DAYS ABLAZE! DAILY DEVOTIONS

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Introduction

Today begins a journey. Over the next fifty days, our attention will focus on the Great Commission that Jesus has given to each of us.

50 Days—Why this number? The number 50 is referred to many times in Scripture. In regard to these devotions, it is connected to the length of time between Easter and Pentecost, two of the three major festivals of the Church. These devotions, as a part of the overall 50 Days Ablaze! can be used at any time throughout the year but were written originally for use between Easter and Pentecost.

Following His Resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days with His disciples, teaching them and reviewing all that they had learned and experienced. Following His Ascension, they waited 10 days until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, empowering them to carry out the mission Jesus gave them:

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea
and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)*

The gift of the Holy Spirit was and is vital to the mission and the growth of the Church. It is by the Holy Spirit that God enables, empowers and guides the one, holy apostolic Christian Church on earth.

In the original language, the word for Spirit is “pneuma.” Primarily it means “wind” or “breath.” Today we get such words as pneumatic (as in pneumatic drill) from this root word. I share this not to bore you but to help shed some light on the role and purpose of the person of the Holy Spirit. Picture if you will the church as a sailing vessel. The Holy Spirit then is the wind that fills the sails, enabling the church to move toward its destination.

Ablaze!—is a worldwide Lutheran (LCMS) mission movement dedicated to sharing the Gospel with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The goal of Ablaze! is to ignite the world with the love of Christ Jesus. Ablaze! is not a program. It is not an answer. It is an invitation. Ablaze! invites you to carry the flame that burns in your heart to a world sitting in darkness.

The devotions over these 50 Days center on seven ways in which we are invited to respond to His mission: Learn, Pray, Give, Tell, Send, Go and Celebrate. It is my hope and prayer that as we journey through these 50 Days, like the men on their way to Emmaus, we will come to know Christ more deeply and that our hearts will burn within us as it did for those two companions of Jesus on that walk.

At the end of each devotion there is a prayer, a challenge, a suggested reading from God’s Word, and an excerpt from the Book of Concord. The prayer will provide you with an opportunity to gather your thoughts from the lesson and offer them up to God. Take some time to add your own thoughts to these prayers. The reading from the Word of God is intended to take us deeper into His teaching, providing us with something to meditate on during the day. The Book of Concord contains the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. Selected readings are provided to remind us that these seven mission responses are not new. They are rooted in the teachings of the Church for centuries. The challenge is offered to do just that—to challenge us to apply the lesson to our hearts and lives and to put the teaching into practice. Altogether, they are meant to raise the bar in the hope that through this journey we can grow and mature toward the full stature of Christ Himself.

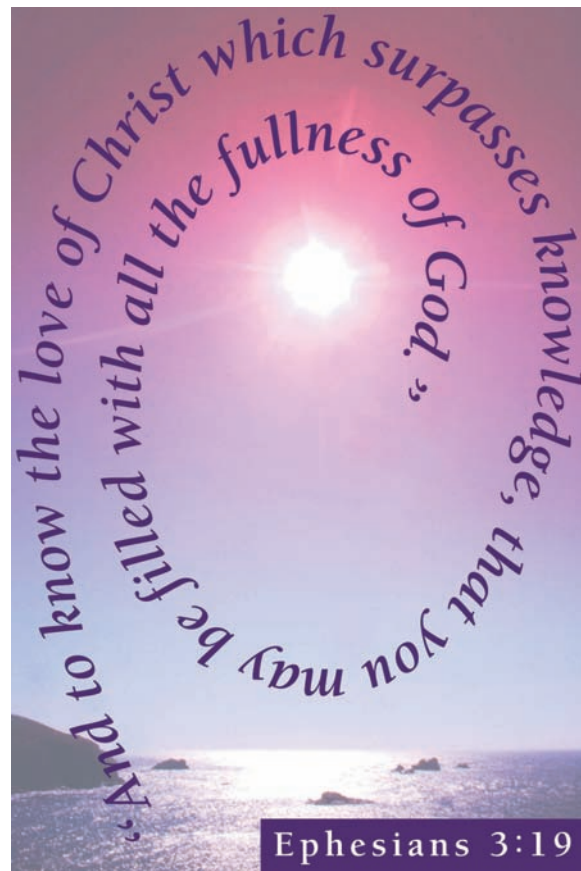
Welcome to the journey. Let’s begin our walk together with Jesus as our Teacher. In the end, it is my prayer that you and I will echo the thoughts of those two men who walked with Jesus, when they said, *“Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).*

The devotions will cover 50 Days, but may the journey continue for the rest of our lives.

To God Alone Be The Glory!
Barry J. Keurulainen

First mission response

Learn



1 Learn of Me

“Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me. That I am the Lord who exercises loving kindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

They had met only a few weeks ago. Since then, there was a flurry of e-mails and phone calls and notes. They talked into the wee hours of the night, not seeming to mind the loss of sleep. Their hunger to know about each other was almost insatiable. Such is the nature of love. When two people are attracted to each other, there is a desire—even a need—to learn as much as you possibly can about the other. Love feeds on this kind of information with a ravenous hunger. The more you get to know the person, the deeper the love grows. Should it be any different in our relationship with God? God doesn't think so. Listen to what He says: “. . . let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me.”

It seems so obvious. God wants me to know Him and understand Him. Yet, if I am honest, this is not a high priority with me as much as it should be. When I turn to His Word, it is not necessarily to know *Him* better. I am in search of understanding *my life* better: What am I supposed to do in life? What am I not supposed to do? How do I quit worrying? How can I overcome a grudge? What do I do when I am lonely or depressed? You know the list. Where do you turn when you are _____? (Go ahead and fill in the blank.)

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with seeking that kind of help. That is why God put those truths in the Word in the first place. But why is it not a priority of my heart to first learn about *His heart*: What makes Him sad? What does He delight in? God has feelings. He gets jealous. He delights in our offerings. He gets angry. He yearns for fellowship with us. The more I learn about Him

in His Word, the more my heart is ablaze with His joy and His love. Ask the two men who walked some eight miles with a stranger on their way to Emmaus. Dejected and despairing, they were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. At a normal pace, that would be about a two-hour walk. Somewhere along the way, a man came up beside them. It was Jesus, but He kept Himself from being recognized by them. As He joins them, He asks what they are talking about. Listen to their response:

“They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, ‘Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days?’ ‘What things?’ he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning, but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see” (Luke 24:17-21).

Wouldn't you expect Jesus to just suddenly reveal Himself and say, “It's me, brothers. It's true”? Wouldn't there be the desire to take

these men out of their despair as quickly as possible? Jesus, however, takes another route on this eight-mile walk.

“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

An eight-mile walk with Jesus as He reviews what the Old Testament foretold about Him. That is a Sunday walk I would take at any time. This two-hour Bible lesson reminds me that my heart, too, can be ablaze with new joy and hope in His love. Remember the rest of the story:

“As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:28-32).

Learning of Him is the first and most important mission response. It brings passion to all the other mission responses—Praying, Giving, Telling, Sending, Going and Celebrating. You can see these responses beginning to surface in the final words of this text:

“They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’ The two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when He broke bread” (Luke 24:33-35).

An eight-mile walk that began in despair led to an eight-mile return walk that was much different in pace and spirit. The journey back to their friends in Jerusalem was filled with a joy burning inside of them. What they had learned would change the pace and direction of their walk for the rest of their lives. It all began with what they learned as Jesus opened the Scriptures to them.

It is no different today. Jesus is ready to open the Scriptures to our hearts as well. Is your journey this day one filled with despair or doubt? Is your pace a little slow and dragging? Is your spirit burdened and weighed down? Jesus is willing to walk with you as He did with the two men on their way to Emmaus. Take the time to get to know and understand Him. Take one more look at Jeremiah 9:23-24 and the final words, “. . . let him who boasts, boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.”

This is what He wants us to learn. God is not one to delight in suffering or unfairness. There is much in life that causes confusion as to why God allows certain things to happen. The men on the road to Emmaus were confused. But the more we learn of Him, the more we will see and understand Him to be a God that delights in showing us kindness and in doing what is right. He can be trusted. No where better can His desire to exercise kindness, justice and righteousness be witnessed than on the Cross. The Cross alone helps me to learn all that I need to know about Him.

What difference would it make in your walk—in its pace and in its direction—if Jesus were to open His Word to your heart?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, walk with me this day. As you open my heart to your Word, teach me all that you desire for me to learn about you. When life seems unfair or when events confuse me as to where you are, remind me of your Cross. It is there that I have come to trust that you really are One who desires to exercise kindness, justice and righteousness. As you open your Word to me, then will my heart burn within me and I shall serve you with renewed love and joy. **Amen.**

Challenge: Read John 18-21. As you read these verses, what do you learn of Jesus? Write down your thoughts as though you were introducing Jesus to a friend. Tell what you admire about Jesus. What attracts you to Him? Who is He?

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:97-112

From the Book of Concord: “Remember, then, that you must be concerned not only about hearing the Word, but also about learning it and retaining it. Do not think that it is up to your discretion or that it is an unimportant matter. It is the commandment of God, who will require of you an accounting of how you have heard, learned, and honored his Word.

“In the same way those conceited spirits should also be punished who, after they have heard a sermon or two, become sick and tired of it and feel that they know it all and need no more instructors. This is precisely the sin that used to be numbered among the mortal sins and was called *acedia*—that is, laziness or weariness—a malignant, pernicious plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives many hearts so that he may take us by surprise and stealthily take the Word of God away again.

“Let me tell you this. Even though you know the Word perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are daily under the dominion of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three and all the other commandments. Therefore you must constantly keep God’s Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased than by any hypocrisy, no matter how brilliant” (The Large Catechism, The Third Commandment, p. 400.98-102).

Learn Who Matters to God

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.” (1 Timothy 2:1-6)

When I first heard about the mission and goal of Ablaze—“to share the Good News of Jesus with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017”—I laughed. My laughter was not necessarily one of joyous faith and thanks. It was more like that of Sarah and Abraham when they heard that they would have a baby: “Yeah, right.” I thought, “How crazy is this? This is just about numbers—another wild idea by people who sit in offices and have no grasp on reality.”

But the vision would not let me go. The question that kept surfacing was, “Can we do any less?” This was especially brought home to me when I read these words:

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone . . . This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved . . . For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men . . .”
(1 Timothy 2:1-6).

Do you hear the reoccurring theme as to who matters to God? Everyone! Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all men—not just *some* or *most*—but *all* men.

I have heard it said that numbers are not important when it comes to matters of faith. Don’t tell that to God. A book of the Bible is

named “Numbers.” If you read the book of Acts, you will very quickly get the impression that numbers do matter to God and to the early Christian Church—twelve, to begin with, and then one hundred twenty. Soon there were three thousand added to their number. But who’s counting? God apparently was. Why? Because numbers matter to God.

Remember what Jesus said about the shepherd: One, two, three, fifty-six, fifty-seven, eighty-nine, ninety-one, ninety-nine—where is number one hundred? The shepherd went out looking for the one. Why? Because numbers mattered to the shepherd.

Remember the woman with the ten precious coins? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—where is the tenth coin? She turns the entire house upside down in search of it—and when it is found, there is partying and celebrating among her friends. Why? Because numbers mattered to the woman.

Picture it this way if you will: A family of six goes to the zoo. After a very nice day, they head home. Only when they get home do they realize that one of their four children is not with them, apparently left behind and lost. Can you imagine the wife saying to her husband, “I am so glad that we have the three children we do. After all, it is quality that counts and not numbers”? Ridiculous to even consider. Those parents would waste no time in going back to find that child. In fact, they would never

have been placed in this situation in the first place, because they would have been keeping count. Why? Because numbers matter to those parents.

Who matters to God? Everyone! God wants all to be saved! Not most. Not a majority. He wants all to be saved. So, He keeps count. Like the woman with the coins and the shepherd with the sheep, numbers matter to God. Not numbers in themselves, but *who* those numbers represent. Each number represents a soul for whom Jesus gave His life as a ransom. He paid the debt that each of us owed to God on account of our disobedience. His final words, "It is finished," literally mean "paid in full."

Numbers matter to God because each and everyone of them is someone for whom

blood was shed. Jesus tells us that the angels celebrate and party in heaven when just one person repents and comes home to God. Why? Because numbers matter to God. He is keeping count.

Prayer: Jesus, you are my ransom. You are my mediator. There is no way that I could have paid the debt that you so willingly offered on my behalf. You stand before the Father on my behalf as my mediator. Only through you can I approach the throne in prayer and have confidence that on the Day of Judgment I will be able to stand before the Father with confidence and peace. Thank you, that in the multitude of people upon this earth, I matter to you. Move my heart, Jesus, that those in my life who matter to you will matter to me as well. In your name I ask this. **Amen.**

Challenge: Think about who matters to you. Who matters to you but does not know or believe that they matter to God? For the next 48 days, would you be willing to pray for them? Pray for their family, their job, their health and, yes, pray for their relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 11

From the Book of Concord: "But since the Confutation condemns us for assigning these two parts to repentance, we must show that Scripture makes them the chief parts in repentance or the conversion of the ungodly. For Christ says in Matthew 11[:28], 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.' There are two parts here: being weary and carrying heavy burdens refer to contrition, anxieties, and the terrors of sin and death; to come to Christ is to believe that on account of Christ sins are forgiven. When we believe, our hearts are made alive by the Holy Spirit through the Word of Christ. Therefore, these are the two chief parts: contrition and faith. In the first chapter of Mark [v. 15] Christ says, 'Repent and believe the gospel.' Where in the first part he denounces sin, in the second part he consoles us and shows us the forgiveness of sins. For 'to believe in the gospel' is not that general faith, which the demons also possess, but it is properly speaking to believe the forgiveness of sins given on account of Christ. For this is revealed in the gospel. Here you also see that these two parts are joined: contrition, when sins are condemned, and faith, when it is said, 'believe the gospel.' We will not argue if someone says that Christ also included the fruits of repentance or the entire new life. It is enough for us that he names these two chief parts: contrition and faith" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII: Repentance, pp. 193-194.44-45).

3 Learn What He Desires

“On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’” (Matthew 9:13)

When you know someone well, you know their styles, their likes and their dislikes. It is important for you and them to get to know those kinds of things. As relationships deepen, it is important to not only know the personal preferences of a person, but to also know what their deepest heartfelt desires are in life.

Knowing what a loved one desires is part of a growing and vibrant relationship. Furthermore, you not only know what they desire, but what is important to them becomes important to you. The desires of their heart become a part of what you desire in life. This is evident among best friends, in marriages, and in healthy working teams.

It is also evident in one’s relationship with God as it matures and grows over time. It is not uncommon to find some in the faith whose main concern is to escape the fires of hell and make sure they will be in heaven someday. Their faith initially is fairly self-centered—like that of a toddler. Their concern is more on how God can help them with a variety of problems within their life. This does not mean they are not Christians. Their faith, however, needs to mature. Paul spoke about this when he said,

“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:1-3).

This kind of growth is so apparent in the disciples who initially followed Jesus. At first their faith was very self-centered and immature. How often did Jesus find them talking about who was the greatest in their midst? Even on the day of Ascension, they were still focused on their needs and their desires. Remember them asking Him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Yet, along the way, as they are filled with the Spirit and mature in the faith, their focus and their desire are transformed. Christ’s mission becomes their mission. Christ’s passion becomes their passion. Christ’s desire becomes their desire. They became so identified with Christ that Paul was led to say,

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

What is it that Jesus desires? If you could put it into a sentence, what would you say is His heartfelt desire for you? For those in your life and in this world? Listen to what He says:

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew (9:12-13)).

Jesus was not one to be overly impressed with outward show. People in His day were no different than people in our day—or for that

matter, than you and me. We often become so impressed by what is outside a person—the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, the salary they make. These were the kind of people who were upset with Jesus because He was hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, a less than impressive crowd. They could not stand it when He had the nerve to invite Matthew, one of the least respected in their community, into His circle of friends.

The heart of Jesus, however, desires something different than most people. Jesus looks for what is in a person's heart: *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice."* Mercy is a matter of the heart. Sacrifice is focused on the actions that show on the surface. Jesus, of course, is very interested in our outer actions. But first He looks into the heart as to what motivates the actions that surface.

David understood this so well when in his own guilt he came before God and declared,

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51: 16-17).

Many years ago, Fred Rogers of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" sang a song, "It's You I Like." In this song, he would sing:

"It's you I like; it's not the things you wear;
it's not the way you do your hair,
But it's you I like, the way you are right now,
the way down deep inside you,
not the things that hide you,
—not your toys, they're just beside you."

If Jesus were singing that song to you, what are the things that he would point out that identify you and give you a sense of value and yet are only beside you? They are not the real you. He would say to you, "It's you I like."

We may look inside ourselves and think, "If you only knew . . . If you only knew what I have done and what I have thought . . ." Jesus does know and His response is, "It's you I like."

Listen to what He says: *"I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners."* He is not impressed by those who pretend to have their act together and are impressed by their own righteousness—those who see no urgent need for Him. He is, however, touched by those whose hearts are broken and contrite. He is moved by those who know they have failed Him. His promise is there for you: *"All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).*

The love of Jesus is like no other you could ever know. This does not mean that He winks at our sin. Consider the woman caught in adultery. After He places His own name and life on the line for her, Jesus turns to her and says, *"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? . . . Then neither do I condemn you . . . Go now and leave your life of sin"* (John 8:10-11). He loves us just the way we are, but He loves us so much that He does not want to leave us that way.

This promise is not just for you and me. There are so many others that Jesus desires to call to Him. It may be the last person you would ever think about as a possibility because, on the surface, they just do not seem to be open or receptive. Jesus looks at them in a different way. He looks at them the same way He looked at Matthew or the woman caught in adultery—straight into the heart. You know some of these people in your life. These are ones to whom we are called. These are the people who make up the 100 million to whom we can communicate the love of Christ so that their hearts might be ablaze with His love and presence.

Who is there in your life that might surprise you if you were to look at them in the same way that God looks at them? Would you be willing to pray for them over the remainder of these 50 days? Pray for their well-being. Pray for their family. Pray for the opportunity to share the love of Jesus with them. Responding to the call of Jesus to be His witness begins with learning about Him personally and about what He desires. It also involves learning about the people who matter to Him.

Prayer: Lord, you desire mercy and not sacrifice. Help me to learn what this means. So often I focus on the external things about those around me. I am attracted by those who seem to have their act together but ignore those who are less than impressive. Yet, you look into their

hearts, as you have done with me. You do not turn away from those whose hearts are broken and contrite. Help me to not turn away from them either. May they see you in me, through my words and my actions. In your name I ask this. **Amen.**

Challenge: If Jesus were to say to you, “It’s you I like, the way you are right now, the way down deep inside you, not the things that hide you—not your _____, they’re just beside you,” what would He put in the blank? What are the things about you that make you feel important but are just beside you? If you were to say these words to the people who matter to you—the people you are praying for—what are the things that are beside them? The things that hide them?

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51

From the Book of Concord: “This Christ calls all sinners to himself and promises them refreshment. He is utterly serious in his desire that all people should come to him and seek help for themselves. He offers himself to them in the Word. He desires them to hear the Word and not to plug their ears or despise his Word. To this end he promises the power and activity of the Holy Spirit, divine assistance in remaining faithful and attaining eternal salvation” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article XI: Election, p. 517.8).

4 Learn His Word to Revere Him

“Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, ‘Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.’” (Deuteronomy 4:10)

Fred had been in the church longer than anyone could remember. Every Sunday he was there. In fact, every Sunday before worship, he could be found sitting in Sunday School class—third from the left in the second row of chairs. There was little question of his dedication. He had the pins to prove it. Each year the Sunday School department gave out pins for perfect attendance. Fred had seven of them—seven years in a row of perfect attendance.

One day, a visitor came and joined in the study. Afterwards, Fred greeted him, and welcomed him to the church. As the conversation progressed, the visitor noticed the seven pins that Fred wore on his coat. He asked Fred what they were for. Fred proudly shared that they were given to acknowledge his seven years of perfect attendance in class. “I have never missed a class, except the one time they cancelled it due to the blizzard of five years ago.” The visitor responded, “My, with all that knowledge, you must really be equipped to do something quite significant. What, may I ask, will you do with all that learning?” Fred thought for a while. No one had ever asked him that question before. Fred had never asked himself that question. After a few moments of quiet reflection, Fred beamed proudly and said, “Why, I am going to get another one. I am going to get an eighth pin. No one, I believe, has ever done that around here.”

Sadly, this story is repeated over and over again in many circles. Maybe not with Sunday School pins, but how many people study God’s Word Sunday after Sunday and year after year

but have no purpose in mind as to what they will do with all that they learn?

This is not to put down learning and study. Let there be no doubt, God wants us to learn His Word. His Word declares,

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it and how from infancy you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14-16).

God wants us to learn His Word, but not as an end to itself. In learning His Word, we gain wisdom in two key areas. First, in the matter of salvation, we get to know Jesus. The Scriptures show us what He has done for us and how we are saved. Secondly, all of our learning is meant to give us wisdom in the area of day-to-day living, as we are “equipped for every good work.”

There is a huge difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge, which the world knows much about and values so highly, is fostered by curiosity. Twenty-four hour news coverage—and behind-the-scenes coverage like we have never seen before—feeds our curiosity, increasing our appetite for more of the same. We live in a society that values information and knowledge (i.e., the more you know and

have at your finger tips, the more influential and powerful you are in life). Wisdom, however, is fostered by reverence. God says,

“Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, ‘Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children’”
(Deuteronomy 4:10).

God has revealed His Word to us that we might revere Him and stand in awe of Him. This reverence will then draw us in to learn more about Him. Don’t confuse reverence with fear. Reverence, or awe, is a sense of wonder and humility that is created when one is in the presence of greatness and mystery. Fear repels us, causing us to shrink back in terror. Reverence will draw us near in humbleness as we are empowered to live changed lives. Time after time, this is evident in those who are exposed to the teaching of God.

Remember the woman at the well with Jesus (John 4)? Knowing little of who He is or what He offers, nonetheless her life is changed. Throughout her conversation with Jesus, even though Jesus exposes her sinful life, she is drawn in closer to Him. That is what reverence does. When she leaves Jesus to go back to town and the folks there, she is a changed woman. She knows it. The townspeople sense it. By what they see and hear from her, they feel compelled to go and check this out for themselves. The response of her neighbors is exactly what God had in mind all along when we learn His Word. It is not about getting one more Sunday School pin. It is about mission. It is about drawing others into the fellowship of God. This is the good work that follows once God has made us wise unto salvation. Listen to how God described His original intent for our learning:

“See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will

show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?’”
(Deuteronomy 4:5-7).

The world knows what it is like to see people living in fear. We have plenty of that around us these days. The world is not so familiar with those who live in awe and reverence. There is nothing quite so compelling as witnessing someone whose life is lived out not in mundane routines and uncertainty of the future, but with a sense of awe and reverence for a God whose love and authority lays claim on their day-to-day living.

When God delivered His people out of Egypt, He gathered them together at Sinai, giving them His Word with a mission in mind. They were to learn it and live it—not to gain His love (they already had that, undeserved and freely given). God had shown them His grace and mercy in His saving act through Moses. His intent was that their witness would compel nations to be drawn to Him.

When the people of God stood before Him at Sinai, the Word He gave them revealed two things: His Law and His Gospel. In His Law, He clearly said what He demanded of them. The commandments were not suggestions but His revealed will. In His Gospel, He revealed what He had already done for them in delivering them from slavery. His Word—both Law and Gospel—caused them to stand in awe before Him. These are the two great teachings of Scripture—Law and Gospel. The Word caused them to stand in reverence before Him. That is the result of learning His Word—it fills you with reverence.

Today, we stand at another mountain—not Sinai, but Calvary. We need not approach this one in trembling. Nor should we be too casual, lacking deep reverence. For here again God reveals Himself in both Law and Gospel. It moves one to fall before Him in both fear and

love. Emil Brunner, a Swiss theologian, wrote in a sermon:

“Only at the cross of Christ does man see fully what it is that separates him from God; yet it is here alone that he perceives that he is no longer separated from God. Nowhere else does the inviolable holiness of God, the impossibility of overlooking the guilt of man, stand out more plainly; but nowhere else does the limitless mercy of God, which utterly transcends all human standards, stand out more clearly and plainly.”

One of the mission responses to God’s Word is learning—not as an end in itself, but rather that we might learn to revere Him. When our hearts are ablaze with reverence and awe before Him, then those around us will marvel at what kind of God we serve who is so near to us and who fills us with wisdom and understanding. Remember what God said in Jeremiah,

“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast

of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving kindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Prayer: Dear Father, your Word reveals you as Holy and Just. That alone would fill me with such fear and trembling. How could I even dare come into your presence, let alone speak to you as I do right now? But your Word also reveals you to me as Gracious and Merciful. You delight in showing me love and kindness. You invite me to approach you as my Father. Holy and Just. Gracious and Merciful. I stand before you in awe and reverence. Who is a God like you? So pure that you cannot tolerate evil before you. So kind that you turn no one away who comes to you in the name of your Son. It is there, in Jesus, that I behold your wisdom and power and righteousness. In Him your holiness and justice and grace and mercy are satisfied and fulfilled. I stand in awe of you and praise, you dear Father. **Amen.**

Challenge: Write down on an index card the words of Revelation 4:11: *“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”* In the coming days, read and meditate over these words, using them as a form of worship and praise.

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 4

From the Book of Concord: “Let me tell you this. Even though you know the Word perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are daily under the dominion of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three and all the other commandments. Therefore you must constantly keep God’s Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased than by any hypocrisy, no matter how brilliant” (The Large Catechism, The Third Commandment, p. 400.100-102).

5 Learn the Joyful Sound

“Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord.” (Psalm 89:15)

The word “acclaim” in Psalm 89:15 seems to imply an action on our part. Look up the word in the dictionary and you will find that one of the meanings for acclaim is “to shout approval.” There is, indeed, joy to be found in those who learn to shout their approval and praise unto God. But a closer look at the text reveals *God’s action*. The English Standard Version is helpful in shedding light on this: *“Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face.”* The festal (festival) shout mentioned refers to an event in one of the most precious of festivals to Jewish people—the Year of Jubilee. The history of this great festival is found in Leviticus 25. It begins with God’s command that Israel allow the land to rest every seventh year. No crops or cultivation. The seventh year was to be a Sabbath year as the land rested. No planting, picking of fruit, or harvesting of any kind. Israel was asked to trust God that He would provide for their needs during this time:

“You may ask, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?’ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in” (Leviticus 25:20-22).

What an incredible promise—God is promising them a triple harvest. Next, God commanded that the people observe seven consecutive cycles of Sabbaths for the land—49 years of trusting that God would

provide for their needs and then some. After these seven seven-year periods, the fiftieth year was to be a Year of Jubilee. When that year arrived, there would be a sounding of trumpets. (The word Jubilee means “the clamoring of trumpets.”)

“Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan” (Leviticus 25:9).

The joyful sound of the trumpet could be heard throughout the land—in every village and every city. Much like the ringing of church bells in our day, the trumpets would joyfully sound. What made their sound so joyful is that this marked the canceling of all debts and restored all goods to the original owner. It freed every servant. If a farmer had fallen into hard times, the Year of Jubilee returned his land and possibly even his family to him. The Year of Jubilee enabled a person to say, “Nothing in my past can be held against me. I am free. That which I lost has been given back to me.”

Those who learned the meaning of the sound of the trumpets were so joyful as it filled them with confidence and hope even in the midst of depressing and difficult times. Those who knew the joyful sound became fearless as they walked through life. They may be afflicted, but their hearts are at rest in knowing the joyful sound.

The echoes of this joyous sound reverberate

throughout the pages of the New Testament. The message Christ proclaims is that *this is* our year of the Jubilee. It is so fitting that in His first sermon to His own hometown, Jesus would stand up and say,

“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

In Christ, I know that my past does not have to be held against me. That which I lost in Adam’s fall, I have now regained in being able to call God my Father. The inheritance is mine once again. Blessed are those who know and have learned the joyful sound.

It is not a sound that I must wait to hear once every seven years or every fifty. The joyful sound is heard when I drink of His blood and eat of His body and hear the words, “The body of Christ, given and shed for you.” Can you hear the joyful sound in that? It is our Lord proclaiming release to you and me in our poverty and blindness. The joyful sound is heard in the liturgy of the church when the

pastor pronounces in the stead and by the command of Jesus the forgiveness for our rebellion and disobedience. The joyful sound is heard in the splashing of water with the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Time after time the joyful sound is heard as God shouts His approval of us on account of what Jesus has done on our behalf. Read and ponder the words of Romans 8:1: “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” The past is forgotten. The trumpets are blasting. Blessed are those who have learned the joyful sound.

There are many ways in which we can respond to Jesus in mission. We can pray, we can serve, we can tell, but there is no more important response than first learning and hearing the joyful sound within our own being.

Prayer: Jesus, it is because of you that I hear and know the joyful sound. I have heard the joyful sound of the Father’s shout of approval for me. It is all because of you. Now it is my turn. I want to shout my approval and praise of you. You alone deserve that, and it is my joy to offer you it with all of my heart and soul and might. To you alone belong glory, honor, wealth, power, riches and blessing. Now and forevermore. **Amen.**

Challenge: On the next Lord’s Day, when you are in worship, listen for the joyful sounds in the hymns you sing, the liturgy, the Word and the prayers. Listen again for the same joyful sounds the next time you witness a Baptism or receive the Lord’s Supper.

Scripture Reading: Leviticus 23-25

From the Book of Concord: “In the first place, we have a clear text in the very words of Christ, ‘DO THIS in remembrance of me.’ These are words that instruct and command us, urging all those who want to be Christians to partake of the sacrament. Therefore, whoever wants to be a disciple of Christ—it is those to whom he is speaking here—must faithfully hold to this sacrament, not from compulsion, forced by humans, but to obey and please the Lord Christ. However, you may say, ‘But the words are added, ‘as often as you do it’; so he compels no one, but leaves it to our free choice.’ Answer: That is true, but it does not say that we should never partake of it. Indeed, precisely his words, ‘as often as you do it,’ imply that we should do it frequently. And they are added because he wishes the sacrament to be free, not bound to a special time like the Passover, which the Jews were obligated to eat only once a year, precisely on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first full moon, without variation of a single day. He means to say: ‘I am instituting a Passover or Supper for you, which you shall enjoy not just on this one evening of the year, but frequently, whenever and wherever you will, according to everyone’s opportunity and need, being bound to no special place or time’ (although the pope afterward perverted it and turned it back into a Jewish feast)” (The Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, p. 471.45-48).

6 Learn a New Song

“And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth.” (Revelation 14:3)

Have you ever noticed how much God likes “new”? Page through the scriptures and new things jump off the page. He likes *new* wine (Numbers 18:12); *new* hearts (Ezekial 36:26); a *new* spirit (Ezekial 11:19); a *new* name (Isaiah 62:6); a *new* creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); a *new* command (2 John 1:5); a *new* covenant (Jeremiah 31:31); *new* wineskins (Matthew 9:17); the *New* Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12); and a *new* heaven and a *new* earth (Revelation 21:1).

It should not surprise us, then, that around the throne, as people and multitudes gather, they sing a *new* song (Revelation 14:3). Would anything else be fitting for a moment like that: People streaming in from all parts of the world and from all moments in time—people whom we have not seen for years who have had such an impact on our lives—all gathering together in praise to Father, Son and Holy Spirit! What could be more fitting than for this multitude to join in singing a new song of praise?

Do you find it hard to picture? Me too. But consider this: What is your favorite hymn or song to sing in praise of God? Even if you cannot sing, what is the song you just love to hear sung by a large group of people? Can you picture singing that song—people, lots of people around you, singing with all of their heart and soul? When I am singing a song that expresses the love and faith I have deep inside, I love to sing it out for all to hear, because I am speaking about the love and joy of my heart. Ask those around me. They will testify to my singing certain songs joyfully loud (not always on key, but joyfully loud). Now, try to imagine what it will be like to gather around the throne

and sing praises to Him with loved ones from all ages standing before Him face to face.

Look over there—there are Abraham and Sarah singing, and near them is Isaiah. Come on over here with me and let me introduce you to my dad who loved to sing when he was here on earth. What they and we all share in common is that everyone is singing a new song.

What is this new song being sung by those who have gone before us? It is part of an expanding and unending chorus that echoes throughout the pages of Revelation. It begins with the singing of “Holy, Holy, Holy” (4:8) as the Lamb of God is crowned in glory. It reaches its peak with the Hallelujah Chorus in the marriage celebration of the bride and the Lamb in 19:1-10 and continues to be sung in glory and joy even as you read these words.

The words of the new song are given in Revelation 5:9-14. There are three stanzas. The first proclaims that the Lamb is worthy to receive the scroll because with His blood He has *“purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”* (vv. 9-10). The second stanza (v. 12) expresses the praise and honor and glory that the Lamb alone is worthy to receive: *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.”* The third stanza gives glory both to God and the Lamb together: *“To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”* (v. 13).

This “new song” is mentioned only twice in Revelation—once in 5:8-9, and once in 14:3. There

is, however, an interesting difference between the two verses. Take a look at them and see if you can detect the difference:

“And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy, to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’” (Revelation 5:9-14).

“And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth” (Revelation 14:3).

In the first reference, the new song is sung before the throne by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. In the glory of heaven where we know fully and no longer in part, everyone knows the words and the tune. In worship, there is nothing quite like the joy of hearing people sing when everyone knows the words and the tune and sings from the depths of their souls. That is the scene before the throne.

In the second reference, the new song is sung by the 144,000. Who is singing the new song? This represents the church on earth—those believers, you and me among them, who are awaiting the great day of the Lord’s return. What I find curious and incredibly humbling about this verse in Revelation 14:3 is the word “learn.” In heaven, before the throne, there is no learning. Everyone knows the words. No choir practice is necessary before the throne. But here on earth, not everyone knows the song. There are so many who do not know what the Lamb has done for them. So many have never even heard. Some who have heard may not yet fully understand. They have heard the Word, and yet they walk along their way downcast and depressed, much like the men on their way to Emmaus after the Resurrection.

We gather Sunday after Sunday in worship for “choir practice.” Crowds of people—believers mingled with unbelievers, and those who have so many questions and doubts—worshiping and learning a new song. This is what humbles me: Here we are in worship, learning the song that they sing before the throne in perfection and glory. Some of us may sing it off key and others may be flat, but we sing. Sometimes it is more than my singing that is flat. Sometimes it is my faith and love for Him that fall flat. Yet we sing the song that is sung in glory around the throne. We sing the new song that praises Him for what He has done and for what is yet to be revealed.

In worship we learn of His love and His saving grace over and over each Sabbath Day. In spite of our willful disobedience, we hear the words, “On the night when He was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when He had given thanks He gave it to them and said ‘Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you,’ and in response we sing the new song as the words, “Holy, Holy, Holy” roll off our lips.

The liturgy within our church is structured to bring praise to Him *and* to teach us. There are such powerful and profound lessons to be learned within the liturgy and the hymns we sing. It may seem repetitive at times, but that is good. We are learning the new song, and repetition helps us to learn. Ask any choir director. You practice and you practice it over and over and over again until you know it and it becomes part of you.

God first placed the new song into my heart when I was baptized as an infant. As I grew up, my mom and dad sang the new song to me, teaching me the words as they opened His Word to me. Through devotions and our evening prayers, they taught me the new song. All of this was reinforced as they took me to Sunday School and Worship, which were a must in our home. These were a part of the “choir practice” where we were learning to sing the new song with brothers and sisters already before His throne. What I remember most is when my mom and dad would sit on the piano bench,

singing as a duet so many of the great hymns. I can still hear them singing together, “I Love To Tell The Story.”

I love singing the new song, but I am still learning it. As I grow in His Word, I am learning new stanzas in which to express the adoration and love I have for what He has done. I am still learning the width and depth and breadth to words that I have sung most of my life. Louis A. Brighton, in his wonderful commentary of Revelation, says it so well:

“There is a profound message. . . here on earth, the church learns the hymns sung by our glorified brothers and sisters in Christ. The church on earth joins the church in heaven to form *one* holy church, united in faith expressed through hymns sung in unison. In worship the church on earth raises her voice to participate in the heavenly worship. This truth is articulated in the Preface: ‘With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying...’” (p. 369).

When I hear those words spoken, I cannot help but think of my dad and those who stand before Jesus. What they sing in joyous and endless praise, we here on earth are learning. The thought of that humbles me and fills me with great joy at the same time. It also compels me to invite more people to join the “choir”—to come and worship with me. As I share His love with those who are lost and they join me in worship, each voice adds to the growing swell of praise unto Him. It is not enough for me to learn the new song. I want to invite those whom I know to join me in the chorus now and unto eternity.

All of this is summed up so well in the song that I remember my mom and dad singing on that piano bench, “I Love To Tell The Story”:

I love to tell the story
of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story,
because I know ‘tis true;
It satisfies my longings
as nothing else can do.
I love to tell the story,
‘twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story;
‘tis pleasant to repeat
what seems, each time I tell it,
more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story,
for some have never heard
The message of salvation
from God’s own holy Word.
I love to tell the story,
‘twill by my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story,
for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting
to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory,
I sing the new, new song.
‘Twill be the old, old story
that I have loved so long.”
I love to tell the story,
‘twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.

(Words: A. Katherine Hankey, 1866, Music: William G. Fischer, 1869)

Prayer: You alone, O Christ, are worthy to receive glory and honor and power and wealth and all wisdom. I bow before you, O Christ, in humble and heartfelt thanks for your life that you offered up on my behalf. You endured the agony of the cross, the shame of man’s mockery and the forsakenness of your Father, so that I might be cleansed. Yours and yours alone are the Kingdom and the Power and Glory now and forevermore. **Amen.**

Challenge: The next time you are in worship, sing each of the hymns and participate in each part of the service imagining that you are standing with the company of heaven before the Throne.

Scripture Reading: Revelation 4-5

From the Book of Concord: “I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought into it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God’s Word, which is the beginning point for entering it. Before we had come into this community, we were entirely of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ. The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word. By it he creates and increases holiness, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in its fruits, which the Spirit produces” (The Large Catechism, The Third Article of The Creed, pp. 437-438.51-53).

7 Learn the Secret

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13)

A few years ago, a movie came out entitled, “Pleasantville.” Nothing changed in Pleasantville. Everything remained the same. Everyone was happy. Same routines, same daily schedules, and the same cycle of events day by day. Slowly, through a chain of events, things began to change. The change was very unsettling to most as they did not know how to respond to it.

We do not live in Pleasantville. Life changes rapidly. More often than not, too rapidly. Years ago, the world around us embraced stability as something to be valued. That too has changed. Today, the world values change. Remaining the same as we were yesterday is considered a weakness. Doing things the same way we used to is a sure way to failure in the technology and life style of today’s world.

The problem I find in all of this is adjusting to change. Just about the time that I finally catch up to the changes around me, things change again. I was just beginning to catch on to VCR’s—at least how to change the clock on them—and then out came DVD’s. I was just beginning to catch on to DVD’s, and out came the MP3’s. There is no end. Change in technology is one thing. Change in my personal life is another. Life can be such a yo-yo at times. Calm one moment and chaotic the next. Exciting one day and exasperating the very next. How does one adjust to the sudden changes around us and within? We don’t live in Pleasantville.

However, this very characteristic of our world is what God can use to open the doors of mission before us. Our mission is to enter into the lives of people torn by change and offer them a changeless Christ. His Word assures us, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).*

This was the secret that Paul discovered through the many changes in his life. He knew what it was like to experience the highs and the lows of life. He knew what it was like to have food on the table and what it was like to wonder where tomorrow’s supper would come from. He knew what it was like to be respected by many and what it was like to be reviled by others. Paul did not live in Pleasantville either, but he did live in contentment. His secret: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).*

This is not mere positive thinking where we say with the little red engine in a children’s story, “I think I can, I think I can.” This is a confidence that is rooted in Christ, not me, who enables me to accomplish what He calls me to do. The changes of life can be overwhelming, flooding over us and filling us with despair and fear. The disciples knew all too well the unsettling nature of change. Anticipating the death of Jesus, their lives were soon to be turned upside down. Listen to what He says to them and to us, *“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1).* These words, “let not your hearts be troubled” are a command of Christ. When the spirit is

troubled and we find ourselves worrying, there is something we can do: *“Believe in God; believe also in Me.”* The way to stop worrying in the midst of change begins when we stop focusing on ourselves. That is what worry is all about. When I worry, I focus on me. When my heart is directed to focus on Him, I worship. In the midst of changes, Jesus invites and even commands us to focus on Him, the one who never changes. A Lutheran prayer book from 1862 has this prayer:

“Let not the world ensnare our hearts by its attractions nor overburden us by its cares. Enable us to abandon all hope of lasting consolation from created things, and to esteem nothing honorable, nothing pleasing, nothing great and worthy the affections of our souls, but thee, the Lord, and that which directly tends to the improvement of our state in thee. Lord, thou art the chief among ten thousand, and the one altogether lovely. It is only by abiding in thy truth that we can taste the consolations of grace or the hopes of glory. Wherever we look for support out of thee, we find nothing but weakness and distress. If thou dost not strengthen, illumine, deliver and preserve us, the friendship of mankind can give no consolation, the strength of the might bring no support, the counsels of the wise and the labors of the learned impart no instruction, the treasures of the earth purchase no deliverance, and the most secret places afford no protection. Thou, Lord, thou alone art the supreme, the essential and final good, the perfection of life, and light, and love. Oh grant us thyself; may we ever abide in thy doctrine; then shall we have both the Father and the Son, and then shall we be able to do all things through Christ who strengtheneth us” (Family Prayer, pp. 146-147.)

As we learn His Word, we not only learn to revere Him, but we learn the secret to a contented life—Jesus. In Him we too can

say, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

One year after that prayer was written, Abraham Lincoln would offer his own testimony as to how he or a nation could find strength in the midst of change. Ponder his words of March 1863:

“It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord. We know that by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end our national reformation as a whole people? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have daily imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us” (Lincoln Proclamation Appointing National Fast Day, March 30, 1863, Washington, DC).

It is as if those words could have been written today about the world we live in. Self-

sufficiency is a cancer of the soul. It creeps in, robbing us of the very thing that the world hungers for—contentment.

Take a close look at the commercials on television or in print and ask what they are selling. Beyond the cars and clothes and comforts of life, they promise something they cannot deliver—contentment. We chase after this most of our lives, believing that if we buy this or invest here, that in the end we will be satisfied and secure.

One thing and one thing only can offer an abiding contentment—Jesus Christ. A few years ago, a dear friend of mine was diagnosed with lung cancer. The future looked bleak. He was very anxious. As I sat with him in the hospital, I told him, “I have no idea whether you will make it through this or not. I cannot promise you that you will beat the cancer. What I can promise you is what God promises:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance,

character and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:1-5).”

I assured my friend that while I did not know the outcome of his battle with cancer, I knew by God’s promise that God could use the suffering to bring about perseverance and character and, ultimately, hope. All the while, God would pour into his heart truckloads of love by the Holy Spirit. I then asked him, “Is this enough?” God be praised, I saw in his eyes at that moment and through the rest of his battle with cancer contentment and peace that was unshakeable. There are certain things that cancer cannot do, and one of those is to rob us of the strength of Christ.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This is the secret to contentment. This is our message to a world no longer living in Pleasantville.

Prayer: Father, may I in the hours that lie ahead, keep close to mind and heart that I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me. On His strength alone, not mine, may I rely and at the end of the day, may the glory be yours alone. **Amen.**

Challenge: Identify one area in your life where you frequently worry. Ask God to help you to rely on His strength, not yours. Focus your prayer and thoughts on what He is able to do.

Scripture Reading: Romans 5

From the Book of Concord: “Now although untested people despise this teaching completely, it is nevertheless the case that it is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences. For the conscience cannot find rest and peace through works but by faith alone, when it concludes on its own with certainty that it has a gracious God for Christ’s sake, as Paul says (Rom. 5:1): ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God’ (The Augsburg Confession – German Text, Article XX: Faith, p. 54.15-16).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Learn and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

2nd Mission Response

Pray

*Jesus took bread,
gave thanks
and broke it,
and gave it
to his disciples, saying,
"Take and eat;
this is my body."*

Matthew 26:26

A Farmer's Prayer

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” (Matthew 9:35-38)

The marines are looking for “The Few and The Proud.” The army is looking for those who are willing to “Be All That You Can Be.” The Navy is looking for those who want “Not Just A Job, but An Adventure.” The Air Force is looking for those who want to “Aim High!” Jesus is looking for “Laborers”—laborers willing to go out into the fields of the world.

“The harvest is plentiful.” Ask any farmer what those words mean and you will hear words like “urgency,” “immediate,” and “no time to waste.” When the fields are “plentiful,” there is a window of opportunity for the harvesting the crop. Wait too long and the crop is in danger of being lost either to over ripening or a storm destroying it before it is harvested.

Jesus saw the potential for a great spiritual harvest. Yet, there were not enough laborers to send into the fields. Two things impress me about Jesus in this particular moment: His passion and His priority. First is His passion, which is rooted in love. His love reminds me of what a former Jehovah’s Witness, now a Christian, once said about witnessing: “Do not attempt to witness to a Jehovah’s Witness at your door unless you have love within your heart for that person.” That makes sense. Our most effective witness is the love of Christ within our hearts. If our witness is not born out of compassion for the person we witness to, then we run the risk of merely engaging in a debate.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Jesus’ heart went out to the crowd. That is no small thing when you read the verses or even the chapters that precede this. One gets the sense that the calendar of Jesus was pretty full. The crowds were pressing in on a daily basis. It would have been enough to cause anyone to crave a little space and time to self. Jesus’ reaction, however, was one of great compassion. He was moved by their situation. They were *“sheep without a shepherd.”* Sheep are not only fairly dumb animals; they are defenseless. Without a shepherd, they stand little chance against attack. These people were no different. They were without direction or defense.

The second thing that impresses me is His priority. His first thought is to ask us to pray. *“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest fields” (Matthew 9:38).* While prayer is too often my last resort, it is the first thing Jesus thinks of. That speaks to my heart in many ways. First, it convicts me. If Jesus depended so much on prayer, certainly I need no less. It also humbles and even perplexes me. Jesus connects the spiritual harvest of the world to the people of God falling on their knees in prayer. This raises the bar extremely high for me as to prayer being one of the most important works that a believer can do as a mission response. If Jesus attaches such importance to prayer, why

don't I? Martin Luther, referring to the prayers of God's people in worship, wrote:

“O if any congregation, please God, were to hear mass in this way and pray in this way, so that a common, earnest, heartfelt cry of the whole people were to rise up to God, what immeasurable virtue and help would result from such a prayer! What more terrible thing could happen to all evil spirits? What greater work could be done on earth whereby so many pious souls would be preserved and so many sinners converted. . . . For indeed, the Christian Church on earth has no greater power or work against everything that may oppose it than such common prayer. . . . What matters is not the place or building where we assemble, but unconquerable prayer alone, and our really praying together and offering it to God (Luther's Works, Vol. 44, p. 66.)

The effect of such prayer is illustrated wonderfully by a story that we'll pick up in the year 1858. A Sunday School teacher by the name of Mr. Kimball introduced a Boston shoe clerk to Jesus Christ. The clerk was Dwight L. Moody who became an evangelist. While Moody was preaching in England in 1870, the heart of a pastor named F. B. Meyer was set on fire, and he later came to an American college campus to preach. Under his preaching, a student by the name of Wilbur Chapman was saved. He engaged in YMCA work and employed a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to do evangelistic work. Billy Sunday held a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina. Because the revival stirred the hearts of many, some 30 businessmen wanted to devote a day of prayer for Charlotte. In May of 1934, a farmer lent the men some land to use for their prayer meetings. The leader of the businessmen, Vernon Patterson, prayed that out of Charlotte the Lord would raise up someone to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The businessmen then called for another evangelistic meeting asking Mordecai Ham, a fiery Southern evangelist who shattered the complacency of

church-going Charlotte, to preach. The farmer who lent his land for the prayer meeting was a man by the name of Franklin—Franklin Graham. He brought his son Billy to the meeting, and it was at that meeting that Billy became a Christian.

The world knows the rest of the story. Or then, maybe we don't. Who can tell how many other lives have been touched and will yet be raised up for the sake of Christ to impact this world? “Out of Charlotte the Lord would raise up someone to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth.” This was the prayer of 30 businessmen. Franklin lent his land so that this might happen. Did he know that his own son would be raised up in the way that God would use Billy Graham? Probably not. As a farmer, though, he more than likely understood the urgency that is reflected when Jesus said, “*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest*” (Matthew 9:37-38). A farmer can relate to a farmer's prayer of this nature. The priority of Jesus to pray became his priority. The land of Franklin's became the Lord's. Billy was set ablaze through the Word entering his heart. E. M. Bounds in his book, “Purpose in Prayer” writes,

“When we calmly reflect upon the fact that the progress of our Lord's kingdom is dependent upon prayer, it is sad to think that we give so little time to the holy exercise. Everything depends on prayer, and yet we neglect it—not only to our spiritual hurt, but also to the delay and injury of our Lord's cause upon the earth. The forces of good and evil are contending for the world. If we would pray, we could add to the conquering power of the army of righteousness; and yet our lips are sealed, our hands hang listlessly by our side, and by holding back from the prayer chamber we jeopardize the very cause in which we profess to be deeply interested”

The forces of good and evil are contending for the world. When you look over the decay

and decadence of Jesus' day, He saw the potential. "*The harvest is plentiful.*" He saw the opportunity to offer people hope and direction. It is no different today. There is a growing spiritual curiosity in the world. It may not seem that way in some churches, but there is a spiritual awakening going on around us. Do you find that hard to believe? Go into a bookstore and see how many books there are on meditation and spiritual matters. Not necessarily Christian, but the quantity demonstrates the interest of people who are hungry to know more about spiritual matters. People are hungry for hope. Surveys will reflect that almost 50 percent of those not presently attending church say they would consider going if someone were to invite them. The fields are white unto the harvest, and there are plenty of them. The task before us can seem rather intimidating. It all depends on our view of things. We can either look out over the world and see the problems, or we can look out over the whitening fields and see the potential.

John Elway, retired quarterback of the Denver Broncos, was known for his late game heroics. He had a knack for bringing his team

from behind with just seconds remaining when everything seemed lost. In one particular game, they were 80 yards from the end zone, less than two minutes to go and down by six. As he got into the huddle, he said, "It is a great time to be playing football." What a great attitude to reflect in the church. This is the Lord's moment. Sure there are many obstacles standing in our way, but who else can offer the hope we bring with the Gospel of Jesus? It is a great time to be witnessing. Where do we begin? We begin as Christians gathered in small and large huddles for prayer.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, the fields are plentiful. There are so many in this world who are hungry and searching. They are restless until they are at rest in you. Raise up workers who will devote their lives to serving you in the mission fields and within our churches. Raise up men and women who will in their jobs and neighborhoods give witness unto you through their words and actions. By means of your life saving Gospel, bind Satan so that nothing stands against your Word of Salvation from being proclaimed throughout the world. **Amen.**

Challenge: Pray for laborers for the harvest. Pray for more missionaries to be raised up throughout the world. Pray for men and women in your congregation to come forward as future full-time workers in the Church.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 9

From the Book of Concord: "Therefore, on the basis of God's Word we now want to give a further account of how the human being is converted to God; how and through which means (namely, through the oral Word and the holy sacraments) the Holy Spirit desires to be active in us and to give and effect true repentance, faith, and the new spiritual power and capability to do the good in our hearts; and how we should respond to such means and use them.

It is not God's will that any are damned but that all turn to him and be saved. Ezekiel 33[:11]: 'As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn back from their ways and live.' 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' [John 3:16]" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will, p. 553.48-49).

The Disciples' Prayer

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'" (Matthew 6:9-10)

Bernie was the type of student that you could not help but like. There were times, however, when he could be rather exasperating. He was the eighth-grade class clown who many times was interested in anything but the class at hand. It was hard to keep his attention, and when you didn't have his, you were soon bound to lose the attention of the entire class.

One particular day stands out in my mind. I was teaching on the topic of prayer. Out of the blue, Bernie raises his hand and says, "Look, Pastor, let's face it—my prayers are cheap and shallow. They are the same thing each night. What am I supposed to do?" I stood there for a moment looking at him, expecting some wise crack to follow. He sat there looking at me, not saying a word. The class was silent. I realized that this was no attempt on his part to be funny. There was pain and confusion in the eyes I was staring into. My first thought was, "How many other people feel this way about their prayer life but don't have the courage to express it?" Since that day, I have thought to myself, "Bernie is no different than the disciples who said to Jesus, 'Teach us to pray.'"

Prayer, in some ways, is such a simple act and expression of faith. On the other hand, prayer—meaningful and genuine prayer—can be one of the hardest things for me as a Christian to engage on a daily basis. On top of that, remember Jesus' words, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out*

workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38). There is such a privilege in these words as Jesus invites us to participate with Him in the harvest of souls. The privilege, however, carries a responsibility. He links the raising up of harvest workers with our faithfulness in prayer. It is a responsibility for which most of the time I feel so inadequate. Who are we that Jesus links the harvest of souls to our prayers? I am, after all, someone who also can echo Bernie's sentiments, "My prayers are cheap and shallow." Jesus, however, understands and knows us very well. He knows how inadequate we can feel. So He teaches us how to pray by offering us "The Disciples' Prayer." It goes like this:

"Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be done on earth as it is
heaven. Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive
those who trespass against us. And lead
us not into temptation but deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the
Power and the Glory forever and ever.
Amen."

Many refer to it as The Lord's Prayer, but I like to think of it as The Disciples' Prayer because He gave it to us for our encouragement and to teach us how we are to approach Him in prayer. Dr. Martin Luther expressed it this way:

"Furthermore, we should be encouraged and drawn to pray because,

in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves. For in that case our conscience would always be in doubt, saying, 'I have prayed, but who knows whether it pleases him or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode?' Thus there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it. This we should not trade for all the riches in the world (Book of Concord, The Large Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, p. 553.22-23).

This prayer, like none other I know, is a masterpiece of the infinite mind of God. Who else could take every aspect of true prayer and compose it in such simple form? In fewer than 70 words, Jesus teaches us a way to pray that can be committed to memory quickly, yet is slowly learned and grasped by one's heart. I learned this prayer as a young child, yet I am only beginning to fathom the depths of what Jesus is teaching me about prayer. Through this prayer, I am exposed to three key emphases in prayer.

The first is that the purpose of prayer is for the glory of God and not my needs. In other words, prayer is more about Him than it is about me. Jesus reflects this in John 14:13, *"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."* As each petition is expressed, the focus and glory are all His. We praise Him when we say, "Hallowed be Thy Name," and we surrender to His will when we offer, "Thy Will Be Done." We agree with His evaluation of us as sinners when we ask, "Forgive us our debts," and we thank Him when we ask in humble trust, "Give us this day our daily bread." Then, in the end, we declare that all attention

and focus will be on Him and His Kingdom and Power and Glory now and forever!

Luther hit it right on the head when he said, "Prayer is an act of worship wherein we bring our petitions before God with our hearts and lips and offer up praise and thanksgiving to Him" (Luther's Small Catechism 1943, p. 146).

The second emphasis reminds me that the entire prayer challenges my attitude and spirit, which so often take on the tone and color of the world around me. Scan the prayer for a moment. The constant reference to "our" and "us" is a reminder of the unselfish nature of prayer. Why is it that my prayers revolve so much around my concerns and me when clearly Jesus' teaching expands my view and prayer list?

The name "Father" reminds me that prayer is more than some religious exercise and routine. It is so easy for me to slip into a mechanical attitude with my prayers. The name "Father," however, reminds me that prayer is an intimate expression of love between a child and his or her parent. In the word "hallowed" there is a spirit of reverence as I am ushered into the presence of the King.

Following this, our lips utter the same words heard in Gethsemane, "Thy will be done." In these words I hear trust and loyalty. From the lofty heights of "Thy will be done" there is then the mention of something as mundane as bread, drawing me to a focus on this day. In this prayer, where Jesus is teaching me so much about life, He shows me how to clothe myself in an attitude of dependence, day by day, for the most basic things in life.

Tucked in the midst of this prayer that covers the range of life itself, we ask, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In these words, there is the humble confession of a penitent heart, pledging itself to not hold back from others what Jesus freely gives us.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Can you hear the humility in

those words? No bravado or boasting of what we can do on our own. Only the plea, “lead us not”—do not let anything become a temptation to us that would steer us from you. “Deliver us from evil”—protect us from the evil one and his lies and deception. It is an attitude of humility and self-awareness that knows if we are left to ourselves, we are lost and doomed.

Finally, while there are so many facets to this beautiful prayer, the emphasis I cherish as much as any is the mission heart of the entire prayer. The emphasis on “our” and “us” is exactly the way a mission responder prays. His or her concern is for the welfare of the world. When we pray for the forgiveness of sins, we ask not only for ourselves but for the lost of the world as well. When we ask that He deliver us from evil, we are asking on behalf of those who do not know Christ has defeated Satan and death and paid the price for our sin. When we ask, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking Him to extend His kingdom of grace to everyone. Luther understood so well the mission heart of this petition when he said, “What do we ask in this petition? We ask that God would graciously grant us true faith

and a godly life and that He would extend His Kingdom of Grace on earth” (Small Catechism, The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Like a beautiful sparkling diamond, this prayer has many facets to it, each adding to its beauty. When you find yourself in a place where Bernie found himself, reflect on this prayer Jesus gave us and learn of its beauty from these facets:

1. The Disciples’ Prayer reminds me that prayer is about Him not me.
2. The Disciples’ Prayer provides a great attitude check.
3. The Disciples’ Prayer has a mission heart.

Prayer: I agree, Father, with Bernie at times. So often my prayers feel like they are cheap and shallow. I tend to make my prayers more about me than you. Expand my heart so that I focus less on me and more on you and on the need of people throughout this world to know you. In this prayer that Jesus gave to me, mold my attitude and spirit to reflect His own. Above all else, may my prayer life bring you all the glory. **Amen.**

Challenge: In your own words, pray this day according to these three emphases: Give praise and honor to Him; Humble yourself before Him, surrendering your will to His; Pray for those around you—for their forgiveness, their strength in the face of evil, and for their daily needs.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6

From the Book of Concord: “From the fact that prayer is so urgently commanded, you ought to conclude that we should by no means despise our prayers, but rather prize them highly. Take an example from the other commandments. A child should never despise obedience to his or her father and mother, but should always think: ‘This act is an act of obedience, and what I do has no other purpose than that it befits obedience and the commandment of God. On this I can rely and depend, and I can revere it highly, not because of my worthiness, but because of the commandment.’ So, too, here. We should regard the words of our prayers and their purpose as something demanded by God and done in obedience to him. We should think, “On my account this prayer would not amount to anything; but it is important because God has commanded it.” So, no matter what he or she has to pray for, everybody should always approach God in obedience to this commandment” (The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer, p. 442.12-13).

10

A Child's Prayer

*"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:10)*

One day a man was walking through a department store with his two-year-old son. The child was in a very grouchy mood and nothing seemed to satisfy as he fussed and fumed. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey or listen. Then, for whatever reason, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key, not caring who in the store might overhear him. As best he could, this father began sharing from the depths of his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I am so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one aisle to the next. Quietly, the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The cantankerous child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the child lifted his head and said, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

In a way, the picture of that father and son remind me of what prayer is so often in my life. When I am a little cranky and crabby or anxious and afraid, my Father gathers me up into His arms as He sings His love song to quiet me. This is what I hear Him doing in Psalm 46. The words of this Psalm describe a world that is being shaken at its core. You can hear it in some of the words: *"Therefore*

we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea" (v. 2). "Nations are in uproar; kingdoms fall" (v. 6). In the midst of this great uncertainty and instability, God says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (v. 10). With these words, it is as if He is scooping us up in His arms like the father with his child in the store. Prayer has many facets to it, but none more precious or beautiful than that of love. St. Augustine said, "True whole prayer is nothing but love."

Show me someone who prays well, someone whose words touch the heart of another deeply, and I will show you someone who is in love—in love with the One to whom they pray and in love with those for whom they pray so passionately.

Nowhere is this seen more vividly than in the life of Jesus. Love is the language of Jesus' prayers. Time after time, one can hear the passionate and deep love in the prayers Jesus offered. Nowhere more intimately is this evident than in the Garden of Gethsemane.

"Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will'" (Mark 14:35).

This is the prayer of a child crying out to his daddy. Intimate words of love that plead for another way to deal with what lies ahead. Yet, His prayer that night is not only out of love for His Father, but for His disciples as

well. This is so beautifully reflected by John as He records more of Jesus' prayer that night: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). His disciples were not the only ones on His mind that night:

"My prayer is not for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:20-21).

Can you hear Him singing that song of love over you? You and I were on His mind that night. Generations yet to be born were on His mind that night. Over all of us, Jesus was singing His song of love to quiet us in our own moments of pain and anguish. Is there any more beautiful song to hear than when God sings His song of love over us?

There are times in worship when I find myself singing a song of praise to Him, and it is as if He is at the same time singing His own song of love over me in a Holy duet. One song that comes to mind where I have experienced this time and time again is "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (Lutheran Worship #508):

Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy mercy fly
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide.
Oh, receive my soul at last!

Other refuge have I none;
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.
Leave, ah, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me!
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head,
With the shadow of Thy wing.

Wilt Thou not regard my call,
Wilt Thou not accept my prayer?
Lo, I sink, I faint, I fall;

Lo, on Thee I cast my care;
Reach me out Thy gracious hand!
While I of Thy strength receive,
Hoping against hope, I stand,
Dying, and behold, I live!

Remember, however, that prayer is not just one way. As God sings His song of love over us, He desires that time of intimate fellowship with us as well. Look again into the Garden. He longs for fellowship with His disciples in prayer:

"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray. . . . My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me'" (Matthew 26:36, 38).

In one of His loneliest moments Jesus hungered for someone to sing a song of love over Him. Jesus still invites us to pray with Him and share in this holy duet—this song of love for each other. This is what I love about the great hymns of the church. They are filled with words where God sings His song of love over me, and where I in return sing my own song of love over Him. Consider again the hymn, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." In the first three stanzas, it is as if I were the little child saying, "Sing it again Daddy, sing it again." But then in the final two stanzas, the tone changes. Now it is I who am singing to Him. I am singing my song of love for who He is and what He has done:

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find.
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy name;
I am all unrighteousness,
False and full of sin I am;
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
Grace to cover all my sin.
Let the healing streams abound;
Make and keep me pure within.

Thou of life the Fountain art,
Freely let me take of Thee;
Spring Thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity.

Jesus invites us to join Him in a duet—a song of love for each other. But there in the Garden, let us not forget that He had someone else on His mind and heart as He prayed. Listen as He prays, “*May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (John 17:21). On His mind and heart was a lost and dying world. Jesus is inviting you and me to join Him in a song of love, to

pray earnestly for those who do not believe. Who is there in your life that does not know Jesus Christ? Would you be willing to pray for three people every day at 3:00 p.m.? (Just tuck it in your mind—“3 at 3”.) As we do this, our joy and privilege will be that we are singing a duet with Christ Himself. This is the true essence of a Child’s Prayer.

Prayer: Father, Daddy, sing it again. Sing it again to me. Let your song of love in Jesus, which you first sang over me in my Baptism, be the joy of my heart this day. Sing to me of your love and grace and constant presence throughout this day. **Amen.**

Challenge: Asking God to sing His own song of love over you, take a few moments to reflect on the song “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” and its message for you today.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 46

From the Book of Concord: “And [I believe] in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our LORD, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. On the third day he rose [again]; he ascended into heaven, seated at the right hand of God, the almighty Father, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.

“What is this? Answer: I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my LORD. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true” (The Small Catechism, The Second Article of the Creed, p. 355.3-4).

11

Elsie's Prayer

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you; I always pray with joy." (Philippians 1:3-4)

I have this mental photograph of Elsie in my mind. This 70-year-old woman, all five feet of her, is kneeling on the stone floor in front of the altar one hour before worship. At first glance, one might think she is praying. Closer examination will reveal that she is straightening the tassels of the altar paraments, one tassel at a time. Years later, that picture still speaks to me. It tells me of a person who wanted to make sure that no detail, great or small, detracted from the worship and glory that was to be offered to God in the worship soon to begin. That one scene typifies her life of servanthood. I had a nickname for her at the time. I called her Bunny Rabbit. She moved around and never seemed to flag with energy, much like the Energizer Bunny seen on the commercials, whose battery never seems to run dry.

I have another mental photograph of Elsie in my mind. Years later, I visited her in her home. It had been years since we had seen one another, as I had moved away. Entering her house, I was greeted with an unfamiliar scene. She was lying in bed. Her body was so weakened through her illness that she could barely move. At age 92, her body was worn down. Now confined to a bed, she might as well have been in chains. This was the spirit of what she shared with me in our conversation: She felt like a prisoner, unable to do anything worthwhile. Up until this point, her world had revolved around her service to her church and the Lord she loved so deeply. Now, her world revolved around her bed from which she could not move. I

shared with her Paul's words:

"I thank my God every time I remember you in all my prayers for all of you, I remember you in my prayers with joy" (Philippians 1:3-4).

I reminded her of how Paul had written these words while confined himself, even chained in prison. Our visit ended. The Lord called Elsie home a few months later. I was told by friends, however, that while she spent those final months weakening in body, her spirit kept going and going and going as she interceded with prayers for many loved ones and the ministries of her church. Even though she could no longer serve her church each Sunday by straightening out the tassels and countless other tasks, Elsie remained a vital part of the priesthood of believers.

In the Old Testament, the priesthood had two basic functions. The first was to represent God before people. The second was to represent people before God by bringing forth the prayers of God's people. Each of us belongs to the priesthood of God. God's Word declares, *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. . ."* (1 Peter 2:9). C.F.W. Walther, the first President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, said that each Christian is by means of their Baptism a priest:

"It is, of course, beyond dispute that a pastor before all others has the duty to lead souls to Christ. It is furthermore true that parents have a special responsibility to lead their children to Christ and to raise

them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Father and mother are appointed by God as the pastors of the home. . . Each of us has a brother or sister, or acquaintances, relatives, friends. When we are with them, let us take to heart that we through holy baptism have been made spiritual priests, and that we there also made a covenant with God to enter into His service. Let us avail ourselves of each opportunity to speak something good, to recount what God has done for us, to win back the erring, to reprove those who sin, to comfort and encourage those who are sad and disheartened” (a condensed translation by James Ware of a sermon preached by Dr. Walter in 1842, as printed in *The Lutheran Witness*, October, 1987).

Within that priesthood, our ministry is to include the ministry of intercession. Intercession is when we pray on behalf of another person. We carry their joys and their burdens before the throne. A ministry of this nature often outlives those who offer such prayers. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus said,

“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

The ministry of intercession is one way of loving our neighbor while on our knees or while in chains.

Intercession, however, does not happen when we pray only out of the burden or pain of our own situation. The ministry of intercession moves us away from being consumed with what is breaking our heart and asking ourselves what breaks the heart of God. Having wisdom in this is possible only through the Word where we learn to understand the heart of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said,

“If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart” (Cook, p. 146).

The ministry of intercession involves us in rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). Will Rogers was known for his laughter, but he also knew how to weep. One day he was entertaining at the Milton H. Berry Institute in Los Angeles, a hospital that specialized in rehabilitating polio victims and people with broken backs and other extreme physical handicaps. Of course, Rogers had everybody laughing, even patients in really bad condition; but then he suddenly left the platform and went to the rest room. Milton Berry followed him to give him a towel, and when he opened the door, he saw Will Rogers leaning against the wall, sobbing like a child. He closed the door, and in a few minutes, Rogers appeared back on the platform, as jovial as before.

If you want to learn what a person is really like, ask three questions: What makes him laugh? What makes him angry? What makes him weep? These three questions will reflect much about the character of a person. The church today is in need of more people who know the difference between anger and anguish. The difference between anger and anguish is a broken heart. It is easy in this world in which we live to get angry over its sin and corruption. It is not so easy to look at sin, our own included, and to weep and pray over it. Consider Moses. When he descended down Mt. Sinai with the tablets in hand and saw the sin of his people, he broke the tablets in anger. Then he returned back to the top of the mountain where his anger turned to anguish as he interceded for the people of Israel.

The ministry of intercession is one that is filled with joy and anguish as God’s people,

His priests, intercede for one another. We may not be able to travel to foreign mission fields. We may not be fluid and eloquent with words to speak. But we can pray. Page through the story of the early church in the book of Acts. It is apparent just how much those who were on the front line coveted the prayers of God's people, that the Word of God would be preached boldly and without restraint:

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).

It is no different in our day. One of our most effective and powerful mission responses is to pray. Pray for missionaries and their safety. Learn about specific missionaries and engage with them in a prayer ministry. Pray that the Word of God will be preached without restraint.

A ministry such as this is not only at the heart and center of our calling in the Holy Priesthood, but it joins us with Christ in a most intimate way, for this is at the heart of His ministry at present before the throne.

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Further, we read,

"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:34-35).

Waiting for the Lord to call her home, Elsie continually offered up prayers for anyone and anything that came to mind. Not only did her prayers benefit an untold number of people, but she, too, was blessed. In those prayers, the loneliness of her confinement was replaced with an intimate fellowship with Jesus, the Friend who had borne all her sins and grief.

That is what prayer can be—an intimate fellowship with Jesus, even in our lowest moments. That is what one daughter discovered about prayer through her dad.

The man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been told of his visit.

"I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new pastor at the church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

A little puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. I gave up any attempt at prayer," the old man confessed, "until one day about four years ago when my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest: Sit down on a chair; place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because He is the One who promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it, and I've liked it so much that I do it for a couple of hours every day. I just sit here and talk with Him about whatever concerns me regarding my family or news I hear on TV. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the man to continue on the journey and in this unique ministry of intercession with Jesus. He prayed with him and returned back to church. Two nights later

the daughter called to tell the pastor that her dad had died that afternoon.

“Did he seem to die in peace?” the pastor asked.

“Yes, when I left the house around two o’clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange—in fact, beyond strange—kind of weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed.”

Even when chains imprison or bind us, whatever those chains are, there is freedom and intimacy with Jesus as we enter into a ministry of intercession with Him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you sit at the right hand of the Father. Yours is the position of glory and power. You dwell there as True Man and True God, interceding for me, praying on my behalf. Kindle in my heart the same passion and love that is in you that I might join you in this ministry of intercession on behalf of others. For when I intercede for others, I then reflect your very heart and love to others.
Amen.

Challenge: LCMS World Missions publishes a Pray For Us Calendar each month. Visit their website at www.lcmsworldmissions.org and print out this month’s prayer calendar. If you do not have internet access, ask your church office for a copy. Commit to praying for these missionaries for the remainder of our 50 Days Ablaze.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 42

From the Book of Concord: “Therefore from youth on we should form the habit of praying daily for our needs, whenever we are aware of anything that affects us or other people around us, such as preachers, magistrates, neighbors, and servants; and, as I have said, we should always remind God of his commandment and promise, knowing that he does not want them despised. This I say because I would like to see people learn again to pray properly and not act so crudely and coldly that they daily become more inept in praying. This is just what the devil wants and works for with all his might, for he is well aware what damage and harm he suffers when prayer is used properly” (The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer, p. 444.28-29).

12

Jesus' Prayer

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35)

When I was in college, Coach Meyers taught me how to serve and volley. He taught me the rules of the game and how to keep score. He didn't just say, "Go Play Tennis!" He taught me the fundamentals. When I was much younger, Mrs. Slade tried to teach me how to play the piano. The operative word there might be "tried." She gave me scales to practice and started me off with John Thompson's most basic book for beginners. However, I was much more interested in baseball and, well, anything but sitting on a piano bench on a spring afternoon.

Who taught you how to pray? As you were growing up, who taught you how to pray in a meaningful and satisfying way? This is a question that more and more I ask young and old alike. What I am discovering in their answers is there are definitely people who teach us *to* pray but *how* to pray is a different matter.

Jesus, of course, gave us one prayer to teach us how to pray, which we examined on Day 9 in "The Disciples' Prayer." All of this left me wondering, though: How did Jesus pray? When did He pray? What kind of things did He most often pray about? Who did He pray for in His life?

Study the prayer life of Jesus and, in answer to those questions, you will see four clear patterns: 1) Jesus would frequently withdraw for a time of prayer; 2) His prayers were intertwined with thanksgiving and praise; 3) He was incredibly honest with God;

and 4) He interceded for others. It is a model that is beginning to change my own prayer life.

Withdrawing

Jesus frequently withdrew from people and the crush of ministry demands to fellowship with His Father in prayer and gain wisdom in making key decisions. Before He chose His disciples, He withdrew to pray (Luke 6:12-16). When the crowd pressed in on Him with their own agenda to make Him king, following the feeding of the 5,000, He withdrew to a mountain to gain perspective through prayer (Matthew 14:13-23). As He prepared for His final journey to Jerusalem, He withdrew to a mountain with three friends for prayer (Luke 9:28-36). The one time of withdrawal that touches me the most is found in Mark 1:32-38:

"That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases . . . Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.'"

Jesus found strength in withdrawing to

pray and spend time with His Father. Henri Nouwen in his book, “Out of Solitude,” sheds this insight:

“In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.” In the middle of sentences loaded with action—healing suffering people, casting out devils, responding to impatient disciples, traveling from town to town and preaching from synagogue to synagogue—we find these quiet words . . . in the center of breathless activities we hear a restful breathing. Surrounded by hours of moving we find a moment of quiet stillness. In the heart of much involvement there are words of withdrawal. In the midst of action there is contemplation. And after much togetherness there is solitude . . . somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should therefore be the subject of our most personal attention” (pp.13-15).

Thanksgiving and Praise

The life of Jesus was marked with prayers of thanksgiving, sometimes at the most difficult of moments. There is one prayer that He would pray twice—once during a difficult moment, and another time during a moment of joy. When the people of Korazin and Bethsaida rejected Jesus and His miracles, He pronounced a curse upon them. Then, amazingly, He offers this prayer,

“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure’” (Matthew 11:25-26).

When the 70 returned from a successful mission, they declared to Jesus, *“Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name”* (Luke 10:17). At that moment He would speak the same prayer that He had spoken in response to those who had rejected Him and His miracles.

His consistency in life and ministry humbles me. He was able to see a reason to rejoice and even give thanks in any situation. Even in the face of great sorrow or betrayal, we see Jesus giving thanks to His Father. At the tomb of His beloved friend Lazarus, in the midst of many tears, including His own, His heart is filled with thankfulness as He anticipates what His father is about to do:

“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41).

Even before the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus was thankful in prayer.

I see in the life of Jesus exactly what Paul was talking about when he said,

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

I find this one of the most difficult aspects to include in my daily prayer life—a thankful spirit, no matter the circumstances.

The other prayer of thanks that astounds me is the one heard as we prepare for Holy Communion: “On the night when He was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them “ In the face of betrayal, Jesus gives thanks. Hours before His arrest, the brutal beating and His death and agony upon the Cross, Jesus gives thanks!

Honesty

Another characteristic of Jesus' prayer life was His incredible honesty. Outside of the Cross, one of the most common pictures that are placed in the chancel of a church is a picture of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Those two symbols—the Cross and the Garden are reminders of Jesus' honesty in prayer.

When He brought His disciples with Him to the Garden, He was distressed to His inner most being (Mark 14:32-33). In His agony, He seeks another way:

“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus was expressing an honest tension inside of Him: I do not want to go through this and yet I want to follow your will in it.

Another honest prayer comes from the Cross. Jesus cries out with words that fall on my ears in an unsettling way: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)*. Gone is the intimate reference to “Father,” replaced by the impersonal, “My God, My God.” There He hangs, pouring out His honest and deepest pain.

God can be honored in honest prayers. You and I can be strengthened in honest prayers. In both of Jesus' prayers, I see Him stronger afterward. In the Garden, He would leave His disciples saying,

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Do you hear His confidence in those words, *“I have overcome the world”*? He was already assured of victory because He had submitted to the will of His Father. Satan held nothing over Him. There was the suffering He had to face, of course, but the battle had been won for Jesus when He had in honesty poured out the tension within and submitted himself to His Father's will.

Intercession

The other key part of His prayer life that I find woven throughout Scripture is that of intercession. A key element of His ministry on earth and now before the throne is to intercede for us:

- He prayed that Peter's faith would be strong and not fail (Luke 22:31).
- He prayed for the young man possessed by a demon (Mark 9:29).
- He prays for us even now before the throne (Romans 8: 33-34 and Hebrews 7:25).
- He prayed on the Cross, asking for forgiveness for those crucifying Him (Luke 23:34).

One other time of intercession where Scripture allows us a very intimate look is during His final hours before His arrest. We seem to have a fascination with the final hours of a person's life. What did they eat? What did they say?

What was on Jesus' mind? Take a look at John 17 and the following outline of what Jesus prayed about that evening. We can use it as an outstanding model for our own prayer life today:

- In John 17:1-3, Jesus prays *for the glory of His Father*. He wants God to be known and recognized by people. He was more concerned about God than Himself. He was willing to decrease at that moment as long as all the attention would be directed to the Father.
- In John 17:4-8, Jesus prays *about His mission*. Jesus had a clear sense of what His life was to be about, and He talked to the Father about it. Each of us has a different and unique mission given to us by God. It is good to talk to God about that in prayer so that we stay on course with the ministry He has called us to serve in our life.

- In John 17:9-19, Jesus prays *for His inner circle of friends*. Who is in your inner circle of friends? Jesus prays that they will be protected from the evil one, that they experience joy in life as He has known it and that they live with a sense of purpose, having been set apart and sent by the Father.
- In John 17:20-22, Jesus prays *for future generations* who will yet believe in Him. That includes you and me. That night, as He faced the agony of the Cross, you and I were on His mind and heart. Who are the future generations that you can be praying for even now? Future sons-in-law or daughters-in-law? Future children or grandchildren? Future believers from your neighborhood or workplace?
- In John 17:22, Jesus prays *for the world*. The term “global view” is not new to Jesus. Long ago, He was praying for the world, that they might know Him and bring glory to the Father. His passion causes me

to search and ask, “For whom in the world do I pray, that they might come to faith in Him?”

When I consider what Jesus prayed for on that night, I see the very heart of the Ablaze! Initiative: Praying for the glory of the Father. Praying for the mission and purpose He has given to us. Praying for the opportunity to share the Gospel of Christ with our inner circles. Praying for the world, that they might know Jesus.

My tennis game is very rusty these days.

My piano playing is confined to chopsticks and one-finger melodies (as long as there are not too many flats).

My prayer life is blessed daily by the example of Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, in the crowdedness of this day, show me the blessing of withdrawing and spending time with you in prayer. Help me to learn how to grow in my prayer life that it would be marked with thanksgiving and honesty. Open my heart so that I might be touched by the needs of others and carry them to you in prayer. In your name I ask this. **Amen.**

Challenge: Using Jesus’ outline, pray this day for the glory of the Father, your mission in life, your inner circle, future generations, and the world.

Scripture Reading: John 17

From the Book of Concord: “Therefore, there is and remains in Christ only one single, divine omnipotence, power, majesty, and glory. They are the characteristics only of the divine nature; they shine forth, reveal, and show themselves fully, but spontaneously, in, with, and through the exalted assumed human nature in Christ. Just as in glowing iron there are not two kinds of power, to shine and to burn, but the power to shine and to burn is the characteristic of the fire. Nonetheless, because the fire has been united with the iron, it demonstrates and reveals its power to shine and to burn in, with, and through the glowing iron in such a way that even the glowing iron, on this basis and through this union, has the power to shine and to burn, without any transformation of the essence and the natural characteristics of fire and iron” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VIII: Person of Christ, p. 628.66).

13

A Soldier's Prayer

"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." (Ephesians 6:17-18)

As a young boy, I would spend hours "playing army." If I was not in the back yard with neighbor children, playing with our toy guns, then I was in my house spending hours meticulously setting up my army soldiers on the floor and carrying out mock battles. I don't want you to think that I have this streak of violence within me. I just liked soldiers and all that went with it.

It is no surprise, then, that I have always been attracted to Ephesians 6. Since my childhood, my imagination was captured by Paul's description of the Christian as, well, what else—a soldier.

"Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:13-17).

What is not to love in those verses for a sixth-grade boy who loves to play army? Years later, I looked more closely at that verse. One would think that when someone is equipped in such a way, they would then

go immediately into battle. Take a look at the verses that follow:

"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me . . ." (Ephesians 6:17-19a).

Pray. Three times Paul mentions to pray. Is this why the Christian gets suited up with the armor of God? There I was, expecting to see some reference to the Christian rushing into battle wielding the sword with fierce determination. Instead—pray.

To be honest, it seemed at first a little like a letdown. All this cool armor, and I am told to pray. That doesn't sound very spiritual, but it was honestly my first thought. As time went by however, I saw it from another perspective.

I once heard it said that, "Prayer is not preparation for the battle; prayer *is* the battle." I did not understand what that meant at first. How is prayer a battle? I thought back to Ephesians 6, and the lights began to come on, especially when I looked earlier in the chapter:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and

against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Stand your ground against spiritual forces! When the day of evil comes, stand your ground. Finally, it dawned on me. The battle is against Satan and his demonic forces, and the battleground is prayer. Satan hates it when we pray. Listen to what some have said about prayer (taken from “The Book of Positive Quotations”, J. Cook):

“Prayer is a strong wall and fortress of the church. It is a goodly Christian’s weapon” (Martin Luther, p. 160).

“We can do nothing without prayer. All things can be done by importunate prayer. It surmounts or removes all obstacles, overcomes every resisting force and gains its ends in the face of invincible hindrances” (E.M Bounds, p. 127).

“Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays” (Soren Kierkegaard, p. 127).

“Prayer is an end to isolation. It is living our daily life with someone; with him who alone can deliver us from solitude” (Georges Lefevre, p. 127).

“God shapes the world by prayer. Prayers are deathless. They outlive the lives of those who uttered them” (E.M. Bounds p., 128).

“God has so constituted things that prayer on the basis of Redemption alters the way in which a man looks at things. Prayer is not a question of altering things externally, but of working wonders in a man’s disposition” (Oswald Chambers, pg. 130).

“The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray (Samuel Chadwick, p. 128).

Satan hates it when we pray. He knows all too well the words and truth of the hymn, “What A Friend We Have In Jesus” (The Lutheran Hymnal, #457):

Have we trials and temptation?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a Friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In His arms He’ll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.

The last thing Satan wants is for us to pray, finding comfort and strength in the arms and presence of God. Maybe this is why those who have spent a lot of time in prayer testify as to how hard it is. Martin Luther said, “No other work requires more labor and effort and therefore is more efficacious and fruitful” (Luther’s Works, Vol. 25, p. 460). Centuries later, Richard Foster echoes a similar thought:

“We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness” (1992, p. 7).

Prayerlessness—that wilderness of having no energy or even desire to commune with God in mutual conversation. It is an all-too-familiar place for some, but not safe. Martin Luther said, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” Prayer is the battle. As I ponder that thought, my mind is drawn to an Old Testament story that speaks volumes to me regarding prayer. It is found in Exodus 17: 8-13:

“The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.’ So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.”

Israel was facing a deadly enemy, intent on destroying them. Moses calls together his leaders to devise a battle plan. When all was said and done, Moses tells Joshua to choose some men and go out and meet the enemy. Moses will then take two others with him and go up to the top of the hill. There he will pray. He would pray for their victory. He would pray for their courage and their perseverance. What follows is enlightening. As long as Moses has his arms extended in prayer, the Israelite army is victorious. As soon as his hands tire and he lowers them, Joshua’s troops are defeated. Moses raises his arms again, and Joshua and the army are victorious. He lowers them, and they are defeated. Eventually, Aaron and Hur will hold his arms up and the

victory is secure. As much as the battle was being fought with the Amalekites down below, behind the scenes, the other battle being waged was with Moses in prayer. That kind of battle can be very tiring. As I consider Moses, it raises within me two questions: First, who supports me and holds me up in prayer? Just as important is the second question: Who am I supporting and lifting up in prayer as they go through their battles?

Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:17 urge us to stand firm and pray, not only for ourselves, but also for all the saints. Certainly there are many saints who we know personally that we can lift up their arms in prayer. Let us not forget, though, to pray for the saints throughout the world. Paul writes not only to Christians of his day, but ours as well:

“Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you”
(2 Thessalonians 3:1).

We may not all be “missionaries” in the sense of God calling us to journey to distant lands and live in a foreign culture; however, we are all mission responders when we support those whom God has called and gifted for that purpose. The third stanza of “Hark the Voice of Jesus Calling” (The Lutheran Hymnal, #496), teaches us how we can support LCMS and other Christian missionaries with our prayers and our resources:

If you cannot be a watchman,
Standing high on Zion’s wall,
Pointing out the path to heaven,
Offering life and peace to all,
With your prayers and with your
bounties, You can do what God
demands;
You can be like faithful Aaron,
Holding up the prophet’s hands.

The weariness I see in Moses is the same kind of weariness I hear in Jesus’ voice in the Garden of Gethsemane as He asked His disciples to stay awake and watch in prayer

with Him. The battle ahead was fierce and He was weary. The fierceness of this battle was portrayed so vividly in the movie, “The Passion of The Christ.” The movie created quite a stir within the hearts of many believers, and certainly at a different level among the public. The scene of Christ’s beating and crucifixion was riveting for some and repulsive for others.

As dramatic and emotional as some of those scenes were, the opening scene gripped me more than anything else in the movie. The opening scene shows Christ in the Garden wrestling in prayer. There is an intensity that goes deeper than the physical beating that grabs at my heart in the first frame of the movie. As they prepare to leave the Garden, Mel Gibson takes license to show something that Scripture does not record—an encounter between Jesus and Satan. An ugly snake slithers toward Jesus. Slowly, Jesus raises His foot and stomps on its head. I wanted to cheer at that moment. There is no written record of that happening in the Garden (at least not in the Garden of Gethsemane). In another garden, however, that very scene was foretold. In the Garden of Eden, God would declare to Adam and Eve and the serpent,

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

The battle for Jesus was fought on the Cross as He endured the shame and even the rejection of His own Father. Hours before

the Cross, there was another decisive battle. This one was fought with Jesus on His knees in prayer. When Jesus declared, “*Not my will, but Your will be done,*” the head of Satan might as well have been crushed.

This one thought gives new meaning for me when I end my prayers by saying, “In Jesus’ Name.” Not only is His name the only way I gain access to the Father, but also when I close my prayers in this way, it is as if I were saying, “Jesus you understand.” You know all too well what it is like to wrestle in prayer. You understand the difficulty in surrendering one’s will.”

Prayer may well be the battle, but rest assured the war is won. The head of Satan has been crushed. Now when you find yourself wrestling with God in prayer, know without a doubt that God hears. Through the prayers offered by His Son, both those at the throne right now and those offered in the Garden, He promises to hear you. He will help you stand firm. He turned a deaf ear to His Son once. He has bound Himself to never do that again to anyone who comes to Him in the name of Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, for your night of agony and prayer in the Garden, I thank you. You hungered for someone to watch with you that night, but you were left alone. Now, as I come to you with my burdens and the needs of others, my joy is in knowing that you will take me in your arms and shield me. Satan will assault me, but the victory is secure through your death and resurrection. For this and so much more, I love you and praise you. **Amen.**

Challenge: Ask three people in your inner circle of friends and family what you might pray about on their behalf. This may be a good time to expand your prayers for those three people for whom you have been praying.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 26

From the Book of Concord: “This should be kept in mind above all things so that we may silence and repel thoughts that would prevent or deter us from praying, as though it made no

great difference if we do not pray, or as though prayer were commanded for those who are holier and in better favor with God than we are. Indeed, the human heart is by nature so desperately wicked that it always flees from God, thinking that he neither wants nor cares for our prayers because we are sinners and have merited nothing but wrath. Against such thoughts, I say, we should respect this commandment and turn to God so that we may not increase his anger by such disobedience. By this commandment he makes it clear that he will not cast us out or drive us away, even though we are sinners; he wishes rather to draw us to himself so that we may humble ourselves before him, lament our misery and plight, and pray for grace and help. Therefore we read in the Scriptures that he is angry because those who were struck down for their sin did not return to him and assuage his wrath and seek grace by their prayers” (The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer, pp. 441-442.10-11).

14

A Friend's Prayer

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)

In my office there are a number of pictures. Some of them are hand carved or painted. One of them, however, is priceless to me. It is an 8x10 watercolor picture—vibrant and colorful. It speaks of joy and happiness. Some might say it is impressionistic in style. It is a rainbow gone wild. My daughter made it for me when she was in kindergarten. As you can probably tell, I love it. Then again, what child has ever drawn a bad picture for their mother or father? What mom or dad isn't looking for one more picture to place in the office or on the refrigerator? I believe that is how God views the prayers of His children. Just as a child cannot draw a bad picture, the child of God cannot offer a bad prayer.

Prayer is at times difficult and hard. While at times we yearn for it, we also hide from it. Prayer is in many ways the battle. Prayer is, however, bathed in grace and love. God hears us not because of our earnest efforts, but because of nail-pierced hands that pray on our behalf. In prayer we are not trying to overcome God's reluctance; we are taking hold of His willingness. We dare not make prayer about us. It is about Him, not me.

As a way of illustrating this, take a look at Mark 9:14-32. Jesus has just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. Immediately, he is faced with a problem. A man is asking His disciples to cast out a demon from his son. The boy is thrashing about and foaming at the mouth. Can you imagine how chaotic this moment must have been? The disciples had been unable to cast out the evil spirit. In

regard to that, Jesus is later asked why the disciples could not cast the spirit out. He said, *"This kind can come out only by prayer"* (v. 29).

So the boy's father approaches Jesus and says, *"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us"* (v. 22). Listen to what follows: *"'If you can?' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for him who believes.'* Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, *'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"* (vv. 23-24).

The prayer of the boy's dad is not what one would call a classic prayer. It is simple. It is honest. It is childlike. "I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!" That sounds like a prayer that I have offered many times. Jesus responded to the man, not because of his great prayer, but because of Jesus' great love.

I have come to believe that just as we are so apt to think that salvation is in some way tied to our efforts, we are also prone to think that prayer is about us getting it down right. Maybe we hide from prayer because of this inner need to have everything just right. We look to get our faith up to a certain level or our life in order before we pray. These things are important, but we are starting from the wrong end. It is about Him, not us. Who is He? What has He promised?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is teaching His disciples about prayer. After He gives them The Lord's Prayer (or if you will, "The Disciples' Prayer"), He then tells them a parable about a man who gets a visitor at

midnight, but he does not have bread to offer him. He goes to his neighbor and says,

“Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.” Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs” (Luke 11:5-8).

Many place the focus of this parable on the neighbor doing the knocking. A closer look will expand this focus. In the culture of Jesus’ day, a guest at one house becomes the guest of the entire village. As the man knocks at the door of his friend, he asks only what is expected of anyone in that village. Turning down such a request is an insult to the guest and would place the man who was in bed in a position of shame the next morning with those in the village. Luke 11:8 is better translated, “I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s *shamelessness* he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” The man will get out of bed because he does not want to be put to shame before his own people the next day. What does this tell us about prayer? God has placed His name on the line. He promises to hear us and answer our prayers. *“For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:10).* The promise of answered prayer is contingent on His grace and His power that enables us to believe.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “Because God is the living God, he can hear; because he is our loving God, he will hear; because he is our covenant God, he has bound himself to hear” (Cook, p. 159).

In the body and blood of Jesus Christ, God has bound Himself to us in that covenant. When we come to Him as His children through Jesus, there is no child that can offer a bad prayer. This is not to say that all of our prayers will be masterpieces. There will be those prayers that might just cause Him to shake His head and wonder. Richard Foster wrote,

“Jesus reminds us that prayer is a little like children coming to their parents. Our children come to us with the craziest requests at times! Often we are grieved by the meanness and selfishness in their requests, but we would be all the more grieved if they never came to us even with their meanness and selfishness. We are simply glad that they do come—mixed motives and all. This is precisely how it is with prayer. We will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough, or know enough in order to pray rightly. We simply must set all these things aside and begin praying. In fact, it is in the very act of prayer itself—the intimate, ongoing interaction with God—that these matters are cared for in due time” (p.8).

In Scripture, there is another picture of a man standing at the door and knocking. *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).* Regarding this passage, a Lutheran theologian from Norway by the name of O Hallesby said that to pray is to let Jesus come into our hearts. For me, that is a nice way to view prayer. Prayer is not a matter of our taking the first step and wondering, “Will God hear me or answer me?” Prayer is a response to the great love that God reveals to me through His Word.

Jesus is constantly knocking on the door of our hearts. He promises to come into those who open the door. Prayer is one way that we can respond to His knocking. It need not

be a fancy prayer. Simple is good. In my own prayer life, one of the more meaningful times that I shared with Him in prayer was one morning when my body and spirit were exhausted. My prayer time is usually while I walk the dog. That particular morning, the brain was fried and the soul felt empty. I remember saying, “God, I am too tired to talk this morning.” The time that followed was particularly sweet. The words of Psalm 46 came to my mind: *“Be still and know that I am God.”* In those moments, it was as if the door had been opened and Jesus came in to spend some time with me.

Doesn’t it amaze you that He even wants to come into our hearts and fellowship with us? Do you know what it is like when your home is a mess and suddenly you hear that company is on the way? The home of my heart is sometimes such a mess. Maybe

this too is why we sometimes shun prayer and experience prayerlessness. Yet by His grace He wants to spend time with me. St. Augustine once wrote, “God thirsts to be thirsted after.”

“I stand at the door and knock.” The picture of Christ at the door has been one that I am familiar with since I was a child. Remember the painting—Jesus holding a lantern, standing at a door with no handle on the outside? The handle is on the inside. He will not force the door open.

He is knocking at the door. Will you go and answer it?

Prayer: Father, I come to you as your child. I do not come on my own. You took the first step by coming to me through your Son. Help me to never ignore your knocking on the door of my heart. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Keep the prayers simple today. Read a verse or two and then just sit quietly reflecting on what God is saying to you.

Scripture Reading: Luke 11

From the Book of Concord: “According to Christ’s teaching they should abstain from sin, repent, trust the promise, and rely completely upon Christ. Because we are not capable of doing this by our own powers, the Holy Spirit wills to effect repentance and faith in us through the Word and the sacraments. And that we may complete this and persist and remain faithful in it, we should call upon God for his grace, which he has promised us in Holy Baptism, and not doubt that in accord with his promise he will convey it to us, as he has promised: ‘Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, pp. 651-652.71-72).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Pray and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

3rd Mission Response

Give



15

Give with an Open Hand

“The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Psalm 145:16)

Jacob and Esau were brothers. To say that there was sibling rivalry would be a bit of an understatement. The roots of their rivalry began at their birth. In Genesis we read,

“When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. . . .” (Genesis 25:24-25).

From then on it seemed like Jacob’s life was a matter of grabbing for one thing after another. Does your life ever feel like that?

Have you ever noticed what babies do when you reach out with your finger? They grab it and hold on tight and don’t let go. That is just the beginning. As the little ones grow up and become toddlers, they take hold of their toys and hold on for dear life—with a death grip should anyone try to take it away. “Mine!” they defiantly declare.

Then a few years later, as they learn to ride a bicycle, what do their hands do in those first frightful minutes? Grab on and hold tight.

Then there is the license to drive a car and there are those hands again, holding onto the steering wheel until the knuckles turn white.

High school and college graduations roll around and there is that hand—clutching onto the diploma.

Then there is the dad walking his daughter down the aisle, and hands are clutched and holding on (even his, as if he could stop time).

Clutched and grabbing hands. We do it with careers, possessions, and even relationships. They are the story of our life. If you fast-forward to the end, however, do you know what you will discover? As the person is lying ill and dying, in those final moments there are the hands grabbing hold and then . . . the person dies and finally they relax their grip.

You and I are a lot like Jacob. Grabbing from the time of birth. It is a part of our sinful nature. We do it with each other, and we do it with God. How often have you found yourself struggling to say, “Not mine but your will be done, O God”? It is hard to open the hands, even when they are praying.

God’s hands are not closed. He is not a grabber. He is a giver. That is His track record. That is who He is by nature. It has been that way from the beginning. He created the world and then opened His hand to give it to Adam and Eve so they could rule over it and manage it. Even in their sinful disobedience, He yet opened His hand again, giving them clothing in their nakedness.

Throughout the pages of Scripture He continually opens His hand, providing His people with protection and food, and above all, His loving blessing, even when they were clutching onto their false gods. All of this led the Psalmist to declare, *“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Psalm 145:16).* The hand of God is open and as Dr. Martin Luther reminds us, it is open not just once in a while but on a daily basis. In

Luther's Small Catechism, regarding the First Article of the Creed, he wrote:

"I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true" (Luther's Small Catechism, pp. 13-14).

As we turn the pages of Scripture, we see the open hands of Jesus. He could have healed people without touching them, but how many times do we hear of Him reaching out to touch the lame, the leper, the blind and the dead? His approach with children is no different:

"And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them" (Mark 10:16).

Then one day, they took Jesus to a hill. Fists were clenched in anger and hate, but not His. The soldiers grabbed hold of the hammers while Jesus opened His hands as well as His heart as He asked for forgiveness for them.

Days later, when the disciples were huddled together out of fear, Jesus appeared to them. Thomas was with them this time. Jesus opened His hands and said to Thomas,

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

A few weeks later as He prepares to leave them, *"When he led them out to the vicinity*

of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them" (Luke 24:50). Time after time, God opens His hands to bless and give to His people.

This same Jesus is the One who calls us to follow Him with open hands. Time after time, this was the nature of His call to be His disciples. While John and James were mending their nets, Jesus called them to follow, and they had to open their hands to drop their nets and follow.

A rich young man wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him he had to let go of his wealth. The man walked away, unable to open his hands to let go of what he spent his life collecting.

It was a different story with another rich man. His name was Zacchaeus. In his life, Zacchaeus not only held tightly to what he had, but he also grabbed at what other people owned. He was not the town favorite. For whatever reason, Jesus wanted to stay at his house. Something happened in that visit. The generosity of Jesus must have taken hold of the heart of Zacchaeus, because suddenly he was a different person. When his heart opened, so did his hands.

"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor; and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount'" (Luke 19:8).

This kind of transformation is not contained to individuals. It happens within the community of believers as well. It becomes contagious.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

The early Christian Church was marked by open hands. They had witnessed the open hands of the Savior giving them His body and blood in the upper room. They had witnessed the open hands of the Savior, giving His life in place of theirs. They had witnessed the open

hands of the Savior as proof that He was alive. How could they then be grabbers? How could we?

“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Psalm 145:16).

Right there in that verse is what makes the difference between a giver and a grabber. When we trust that the open hand of God will

satisfy the desires of every living thing, then why would we need to keep our hand closed?

Prayer: You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. I trust you. I know how you have opened your hand for me. Help me now to open my hand unto others.
Amen.

Challenge: Are you a grabber or a giver? Richard Foster in his book, “Celebration of Discipline,” (1988) lays out some principles to help us do an inventory on this kind of question. In the challenge below, spend a few moments to reflect on the questions. Rate yourself on a scale of 1-10. (1 equals “I rarely do this” and 10 equals “I always do this.”)

- _____ I reject anything that is producing an addiction in me.
- _____ I buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
- _____ I refuse to become a slave of modern gadgetry. I resist the notion that because the newest model has a new feature, I must have it.
- _____ I develop a habit of giving things away, especially when I receive something new.
- _____ I reject all “buy now, pay later” plans.
- _____ I learn to enjoy things without owning them; share things; use the library.
- _____ I develop a deeper appreciation for creation; stimulate my senses with nature rather than just modern technology.
- _____ I shun whatever would distract me from my main goal of seeking His kingdom first.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 65

From the Book of Concord: “Moreover, we also confess that God the Father has given us not only all that we have and what we see before our eyes, but also that he daily guards and defends us against every evil and misfortune, warding off all sorts of danger and disaster. All this he does out of pure love and goodness, without our merit, as a kind father who cares for us so that no evil may befall us. But further discussion of this subject belongs in the other two parts of this article, where it says, ‘Father almighty.’

“Hence, because everything we possess, and everything in heaven and on earth besides, is daily given, sustained, and protected by God, it inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to love, praise, and thank him without ceasing, and, in short, to devote all these things to his service, as he has required and enjoined in the Ten Commandments.

“Here much could be said if we were to describe how few people believe this article. We all pass over it; we hear it and recite it, but we neither see nor think about what the words command us to do. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator” (Large Catechism, The First Article of the Creed, p. 433. 17-21).

16

Give with a Servant's Heart

"No one 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 God and money." (Matthew 6:24)

I am not normally inclined to give great attention to facts and statistics. Maybe in baseball—but anywhere else, it just does not seem to excite me. However, I came across some statistics that made an impact; in fact, they astounded me. Consider these for a moment:

A Financial Audit of America:

Eight out of 10 people spend more than they make.

In the year 2000, people in America spent \$1.17 for every \$1.00 they earned.

Nine out of 10 people have no consistent savings plan.

80% of Americans owe more than they own. Seven out of 10 people will live in debt and die in debt.

At Retirement:

Only 2% are financially free.

23% must continue to work.

45 % of retirees depend on relatives for subsidy.

30% depend on charity.

The Average American family owes:

\$15,000 – \$20,000 on family loans

\$17,000 – \$19,000 on credit cards

\$20,000 on two car payments

\$120,000 on a mortgage

More than 60% of failed marriages cite money problems as the root cause of divorce, and 63% cite credit card abuse as the root cause of bankruptcy. (Reggie McNeal, 2000)

"No one 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 God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Money is not evil in and by itself. It does, however, make a terrible master. Judging by the statistics, money has become the master as well as the devotion of more and more people. Christians are by no means exempt from this slavery of wanting more.

"More." Four letters that make up one of the most powerful words we know and speak. We are promised that true contentment is obtainable if we only had "more." All day long we are assaulted with advertisements that promise us one of three things: more pleasure, more power or more prestige. That's it. I tell the eighth-grade students in my religion class that those three things are what is being sold in most advertisements. Oh, there is a car to be bought or a perfume to be worn, but behind all the products are pleasure, power and prestige. The really clever ads are able to sell all three in the same 30-second commercial. John Ortberg writes,

"All day long we are bombarded by the prophets of more. Use me, buy me, drive me, wear me, try me, put me in your hair. The things we can obtain just for more hair satisfaction are staggering! You can wash it, blow-dry it, condition it, color it, straighten it if it's too curly, curl it if it's too straight, wax it if it grows where it shouldn't or Rogain it if it

doesn't grow where it should. Just a little more of someone's product and your hair is sure to be happy" (p. 45).

The hair may be happy, but will you be happy? "More" is a hunger that cannot be satisfied. No matter how much "hair stuff" we have, it does not guarantee us happiness. (Of course, for some of us not a lot of hair stuff is needed anyway.) Life, however, doesn't consist in the possessions we own. Oh sure, they will give happiness for the moment, but life is more than this, isn't it? Jesus warned,

"Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

A young lady reminded me of a conversation we had many years ago. She had just been crowned as Miss Pennsylvania and was preparing for the Miss U.S.A. pageant. As we sat and talked, I asked her to remember that there was a difference between happiness and joy. Things make you happy because happiness is dependent on things outside of us. I went on to say to her that only one thing gives joy—a relationship with Jesus. Happiness versus joy. Happiness is so deceiving. We believe it will last and is so easily attainable. This is due in part because happiness is connected to things—things that seem right within our grasp.

In baseball, many hitters strike out swinging at a high fast ball. The reason this happens is that it is a pitch they can see. It is up and close to their eyes, and so they swing with all they have. Chasing after things, believing that in owning them we will be happy and satisfied, is like that. Those things—the new car, the house, the new set of clothes—are so visible. High and fast, right before our eyes. We "swing at them" as hard as we can, only finding ourselves striking out time after time.

Breaking the desire for more, however, is not easy. How does one break free? We cannot do it on our own. Seminars and books

can be helpful, but before they are of any effect there needs to be a moment of decision within the heart—not just a one-time decision, but rather one that is made each day as to whom we will serve.

This is what Joshua put in front of the Israelites. Surrounded by the abundance of the Promised Land, Joshua said,

"But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

It was a decisive moment in their history. Joshua understood that they could no more serve two masters than they could walk in two directions at the same time. As I read through the history of the Israelites, I am amazed at how tenaciously they held onto those idols. Years following the Exodus, even generations later, they persist in holding onto false gods while still claiming allegiance to "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The results were disastrous. The pages of the Old Testament are littered with their failures and defeats. What makes us in America think that it will be any different today?

John Calvin said, "Where riches hold the dominion of the heart, God has lost His authority" (p. 337). Two masters—God and material things—they cannot co-exist. They are diametrically opposed and cannot exist side by side. One calls for us to be humble. The other calls for us to be proud. One demands that we set our mind on things above, and the other to set our minds on things below. One calls us in the end to love the Light, and the other leads us to love the darkness. The one leads us to see the essential in the invisible, while the other leads us to think that the essential is in things seen. Whom do you serve? Look at your checkbook register

and ask yourself that question. Look at your calendar and what fills up your day. Look at what books and TV shows your mind absorbs and ask, “Whom do I serve?”

Once the matter of who sits on the throne of your heart has been settled, it is time then to turn to the Word for some very practical advice—much of it from a man who had it all: Solomon. He was one of the richest men of the Old Testament, and he offers some down-to-earth advice.

1. Keep Good Records – The Principle of Accounting

“Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations” (Proverbs 27:23-24).

“Know the condition of your flocks.” Have you ever said, “I just don’t know where my money goes”? This may be a warning light that you do not “know the condition of your flocks.” “Knowing the condition of your flocks” is equivalent to knowing how much money you have to live on. Have you ever heard the expression, “Money talks”? I don’t think so. It doesn’t talk; it just sneaks quietly away. It doesn’t tell you it’s leaving either. God’s Word says, *“Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding” (Proverbs 23:23)*. At all cost, do whatever it takes to have a sense of your resources. In order to “know the condition of your flocks,” there are four facts you need to know:

- I need to know what I own.
- I need to know what I owe.
- I need to keep record of what I earn.
- I need to know where it goes.

2. Plan Your Spending – The Principle of Budgeting

“Plan carefully and you’ll have plenty. But if you act too quickly you will never have enough” (Proverbs 21:5 GNT).

Financial freedom is not based on how much you earn. It is based on how you spend it. Spending more than you make is a habit that does not normally change, no matter how much you make. Freedom does not come from making more. Freedom comes from spending less and being content with what you have.

3. Save for the Future – The Principle of Saving

“In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has” (Proverbs 21:20).

The wise person saves. Yet, in our consumer-oriented society, we seem to have forgotten this. This is not the way it is everywhere in the world. The average Japanese family saves 25% of their income. The average European family saves 18%. The average American family saves 5%! When we live our lives with such little margin, we are bound to fall into debt, which becomes an unforgiving master. J. Rubin Clark says,

“Once you’re in debt, interest will be your companion every minute of the day or night, and it’s working against you. It has no love, no sympathy. It is as hard and soulless as a granite cliff, and you cannot dismiss it. Whenever you get in its way or you cross its course or fail to meet its demands, it crushes you” (p. 60).

Such a lifestyle is bound to lead us into a life of debt. *“Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it” (Proverbs 13:11 ESV)*. This truth is put into practice in the life of Joe Paterno, coach of the Penn State Nittany Lions football team. Recently he and his wife gave a generous gift of millions of dollars to the University. When asked why he did not leave that for his family, he said that he was afraid the sudden wealth would be harmful to them, as it would not teach them the principle of saving.

When it comes to saving, John Rockefeller said it well when he said to save 10%, give 10% to charity and ministry, and live on the 80%.

4. Return Ten Percent to God – The Principle of Tithing

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. ‘Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it!’” (Malachi 3:10).

Tithing is not a hard fast rule for the Christian. We live in grace and not by the law. This, however, does not negate the wisdom of tithing. Tithing is important for three reasons: In regard to my past, tithing is *a statement of gratitude*. In light of the present, tithing is *a statement of priority*. It expresses that God is first. In view of the future, tithing is *a statement of faith*. God will supply what I need to make ends meet.

The tithing that I practice is not the result of my being a strong Christian. It is just the opposite. I need to tithe because I am weak. I am way too prone to spend what I have on things. Tithing reminds me of what is essential in life and what is the priority of my heart.

5. Enjoy What You Have – The Principle of Contentment

“It is better to enjoy what we have than always to be wanting something more” (Ecclesiastes 6:9 CEV).

I have discovered that “things” do not satisfy for long. Just when I think that one

particular thing will satisfy my longing for more, before I know it I am hungry again. Did you ever try to eat just one potato chip? Next to impossible. That is the way it is with me and things. It is important for me to get a handle on this, because there is so much at stake. My contentment with life and the ability to live with genuine and lasting joy is dependent on this. Also, my ability to share in the joy of advancing Christ’s mission is effected by these principles.

Herb got it. He was a quiet and gentle man. For years he worked in the post office. His life was not extravagant by any means. His was a modest lifestyle. Needless to say, it came as quite a shock when upon his death it was discovered that he had left various ministries a generous gift. His ability to be content in life allowed him in death to help advance the Gospel of Christ. Untold numbers of people will be blessed by his generosity that was rooted in not giving in to the desire for more.

In his life, Herb was a servant of Christ. Now, in his death, his legacy remains one of serving Christ as his estate blesses many ministries in proclaiming Christ to the lost and unbelieving world. Herb had discovered the key to a contented and fulfilled life. He served one Master—Jesus Christ. Now, his resources that could have mastered him serve the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, you are the One I seek to serve. You are the One and only One that can free me from the bondage of serving the things of this world. Grant me the discipline, the will, and the wisdom to handle my money and possessions in a way that glorify you and enable me to be content. **Amen.**

Challenge: Which of the five principles for handling your possessions do you need to pay more attention to? What steps can you take to allow Christ to be the Master you serve?

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 21-22

From the Book of Concord: “So that it may be understood and remembered, I must explain this a little more plainly by citing some everyday examples of the opposite. There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.

“So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God. Notice again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are when they have such possessions, and how despondent they are when they lack them or when they are taken away. Therefore, I repeat, the correct interpretation of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely” (The Large Catechism, The First Commandment, p. 387.5-10).

17

Give What You Have

“Moses answered, ‘What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to You?’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied. The Lord said, ‘Throw it on the ground.’” (Exodus 4:1-3)

Changing one’s path or even routine is not always an easy task. We are creatures of habit and easily get stuck in the well known, comfortable and predictable ruts of life. From the time we get up in the morning, we have our routines to ensure we get out of the door on time. Some head to the shower the moment their feet touch the floor while others head to the kitchen to get coffee ready and make breakfast. Once out the door, the routines continue as to which road we take to work and which radio stations we listen to on the way in.

I doubt that Moses was any different. Forty years in the wilderness of tending sheep had more than likely given him his fair share of routines. The places he led the flock to for grazing and where he stopped to rest were more than likely all a part of a well known routine. Scripture records,

“Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God” (Exodus 3:1).

How many times had he traveled this familiar route? What he saw on this particular day would not have been that different either.

“... Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up’” (Exodus 3:2-3).

Burning bushes in the desert were not out of the routine of the day. Burning bushes that do not burn up—that is a different story. Moses broke out of his routine and went over

to check out this strange bush. From that point on, the old routines would never be the same again. As Moses came close to the bush, God spoke:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land . . . and now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So, now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:7-10).

Then the well known excuses begin to fly:

“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11).

“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exodus 3:13).

“What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you?’” (Exodus 4:1).

“O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

When I study that litany of excuses, I see a reoccurring theme: “I don’t have what it takes – I do not have the credentials to appear before Pharaoh – I don’t have any proof that you sent me or asked me to do this – I do not have the ability to speak – Send someone else.”

God listens to him for a while and then he asks, “*What is that in your hand?*” (*Exodus 4:2*). Moses responds, “*A staff.*” I can remember as a sixth-grader always being fascinated by what followed. God tells Moses to throw it down on the ground, where it became a snake. God says, “Pick it up, by the tail.” What is there not to like about this story as a sixth-grader? As the years rolled by, however, what followed this became even more fascinating to me. When all the excuses have been thrown out and Moses is willing to go to Pharaoh, consider this one last verse:

“So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. And he took the staff of God in his hand (Exodus 4:20).

“He took the staff of God.” The staff of Moses has become the staff of God. God owns it. That one small verse says volumes to me about the way God engages us for His service. He calls us to serve Him even as we offer every excuse in the book. “I don’t have the ability.” “I don’t have the credentials.” “I don’t have what it takes.” God in response says, “Then give me what you have.” For Moses, it was a stick.

For Nellie, it was stamps. Years ago, after suffering a debilitating stroke, Nellie spent hours cutting out stamps to redeem them for mission work around the world. Not a glamorous job, but how many untold people benefited from her selfless work?

For Sarah, it was her typewriter. Not the Sarah of the Old Testament. (I don’t remember there being a typewriter in her tent). Sarah of Cabot, Pennsylvania, had a typewriter. Sarah taught Latin in high school before retiring. As her body gave way, making it virtually impossible to carry out any meaningful activity, she became depressed. Then the

opportunity arose for her to use the typewriter to record her reflections on the history of the local area. Her articles would be printed in church newsletters and in the local paper.

People like Moses and Nellie and Sarah have a few things in common. They know what it is like to be in exile, cut off from life as they knew it. They also know what it is like when God comes along and says, “Give me what you have.” Just as Moses’ staff became God’s, so Nellie’s stamps became God’s stamps, and Sarah’s typewriter became God’s typewriter.

When it comes to serving God, He asks us to deal with the talents He has given each of us. There is not one person who is not in some way talented and gifted by God. I see that everything we have and everything we are is involved in the talents that God entrusts to our care. This would include every one of our possessions, our time, each minute of it, and each relationship we enjoy in life. This would also include our jobs and our hobbies. The Good News about Jesus Christ and His redemptive work on our behalf is included in this as well.

When you step back and look at it, everything in our life is a trust from God that He has placed into our care. There is coming a day, however, when we must give an account of how we have used those talents for the sake of the kingdom. This is illustrated in the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25: 24ff. In this parable, a man going away on a journey entrusts his property into the care of his servants. One receives five *talents*, which is worth over \$50,000 dollars in today’s economy. Another receives two *talents*, worth \$20,000 dollars, and the other receives one *talent*. While just one *talent*, still it was no small trust as it represents \$10,000 dollars. The owner expected them to invest these *talents* and do something with them. It was understood that when he returned, he would expect an accounting of what they had done with this great trust.

The first two invested and doubled what they had been given. The third buried it. He

was afraid to take a risk and so he played it safe. He was not unethical, just very cautious and wanting to take no chances. The owner applauded the efforts and gain of the first two. The owner was, however, quite upset with the third. He expected more. A closer look at the parable reveals that the master does not reward success as much as he acknowledges and rewards faithfulness. "Well done, good and faithful servant!" He had entrusted them with certain *talents* with the expectation that they would use them and invest them. The one who is found unfaithful is the one who, out

of fear of failure and fear of how his master would respond, plays it safe.

God hears the cries of his people today as He did in the time of Moses. He is calling people like you and me to respond to them on His behalf. He is not looking for us to offer excuses or to play it safe and hold back. He is asking us to offer Him what we have.

Prayer: Father, I offer you what I have. No excuses. What you have given me, I offer it all back to you. Use it to bring relief and comfort to those who cry out to you. I ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Challenge: A stick. A typewriter. Some stamps. What is it for you? What do you have that can be used by God to accomplish great things on behalf of His hurting and oppressed people?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25

From the Book of Concord: "Therefore, let us learn the First Commandment well, so that we see that God will tolerate no presumption or trust in anything else; he makes no greater demand on us than a heartfelt trust in him for every good thing, so that we walk straight ahead on the right path, using all of God's gifts exactly as a shoemaker uses a needle, awl, and thread for his work and afterward puts them aside, or as a traveler makes use of an inn, food, and lodging, but only for his physical needs. Let each person do the same in his or her walk of life according to God's order, allowing none of these things to be a lord or an idol" (The Large Catechism, The First Commandment, p. 392.47).

18

Give Extravagantly

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.” (Mark 14:3)

The word “extravagant” is defined as “exceeding the limits of reason or necessity; spending much more than is necessary” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). It is not a word that our world is unfamiliar with when it comes to lifestyle. However, in regard to giving, more times than not we are encouraged from our youth to practice moderation. Jesus’ view is a bit different.

While Jesus is dining with Simon in his house, a woman enters and breaks open a jar of very expensive perfume—worth one year’s wages! In today’s standards that would equal, on average, \$15,000–\$20,000! Extravagant giving at its best (or at its worst, depending on your point of view). Some of those watching could not believe this and became indignant. What a waste. Could it not have been used for the poor?

Apparently this was the final straw for Judas. Immediately after this, he would go to the chief priests to arrange the betrayal of Jesus. Jesus’ reaction, however, is interesting, to say the least:

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

Two things make her gift memorable. First, while I am not an expert in the perfume department, I do know that expensive perfume is powerful. It doesn’t take a lot to fill a room with its fragrance. An entire bottle of it poured out at one time on one person—can you imagine!? Not only would it be overpowering, but wouldn’t it linger with Jesus for days—on Him and on His clothes? Throughout the days of “Holy Week,” wherever He went, would people have been able to smell the fragrance on Him? Memorable, to say the least. Days later, I wonder if Jesus could still smell that fragrance and be reminded of this woman’s act of love?

The second thing that makes her gift memorable is that Jesus lifts up her gift as an ongoing memorial:

“I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (v. 9).

It was a sure thing that her act of love and sacrifice would be recorded in Scripture when the Master Himself said that it would be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached.

What is it about her gift that touched Jesus? What makes her giving so memorable? It’s fragrance, yes. Smells have a powerful way of remaining with us. But even more memorable than the fragrance was its extravagance. A year’s wages—it is a gift that seems to exceed the limits of reason or necessity—at least for most, Jesus excluded. Jesus understood that deeper than

the extravagance of money spent was the extravagance of love being poured out by this woman upon Him. She held nothing back. She came to break open her jar and empty all of its contents. The Bible is silent as to her motive. Had she heard Jesus teach? Had she witnessed His miracles? One can only guess. But in her act she not only prepares Him for His burial, she gives witness to a more extravagant love than her own.

Jesus came into the world and into our lives in order to break open His own “alabaster jar”—the jar of His own body. He held nothing back. The lifeblood of the Son of God was spilled out. No wages—not even a lifetime of wages—can match or pay for the cost of that sacrifice.

When one has tasted of the extravagant love of Christ that is poured out for us on the Cross and given to us in the Body and the Blood of the Sacrament, the desire created within us by the Spirit is to offer it to others in return. Our lives are then marked and remembered for offering the fragrance of His extravagant love.

Each of us has an alabaster jar. Our lives and our bodies are those vessels that contain the precious treasures that God entrusts to us. Those treasures are our talents and abilities. These are our possessions as well as material blessings—these reflect who we are as created individuals.

Do you ever get the feeling, though, that so much of life is spent in conserving and playing it safe? Instead of pouring out our contents, we carefully distribute what we have, a little here and a little there. At the Cross, however, we are faced with the outpouring of God’s extravagant love. The question that remains in response is where in our life are we willing to break open our jar and spill out its contents in an act of extravagant love? Such an act makes us vulnerable to criticism and misunderstanding. Jesus and the woman with the alabaster jar understand this all too well.

C.S. Lewis has helpful words in this regard (p. 169):

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable . . . The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers . . . of love is Hell.”

When I look at the account of the early church in the book of The Acts of the Apostles, the picture I see is one of extravagant love being poured out. Those who witnessed the life and death and resurrection of Jesus held nothing back. Time, property, wealth, and even life were not held back as they poured out themselves as mission responders to what they had been given by Jesus.

In what ways is Jesus calling you to open the alabaster jar of your life and pour out its contents as a gift of extravagant love?

Prayer: Father, you have poured out your love for me in extravagant ways. Every day my heart is overwhelmed by your generosity and grace. Nowhere, though, do I see the extravagance of your love more than at the Cross of your own dear Son. You have purchased me, not with gold or silver, but with His precious body and blood. How can I begin to thank you and express my love to you? My soul praises you and you alone. No one loves me as you love me. I only ask that in my life I might have the opportunity to pour out my love in extravagant ways for you in return. **Amen.**

Challenge: By means of some extravagant act or gift, find someone with whom you can express the love that Jesus has poured out on you.

Scripture Reading: Mark 14

From the Book of Concord: I believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church, the community of the saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the flesh, and eternal life. Amen.

What is this? Answer:

“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true” (The Small Catechism, The Third Article of The Creed, p. 355.5-6).

10

Give Eternally

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:32-33)

A few years ago, I conducted a funeral for an elderly man whose family lived out of state. It was their plan to leave immediately after the funeral for the long drive home, taking with them what remained of dad’s possessions. The family arrived at the church and as they were being seated, I looked outside at the cars in the parking lot. There next to the hearse, the family had parked their car, hitched to a U-Haul trailer, loaded up with dad’s belongings. A hearse and a U-Haul trailer side by side. I wonder if it caused anyone going by to question whether someone was trying to take it with them after all?

In the play by Tennessee Williams, “Cat On A Hot Tin Roof,” Big Daddy says, “Yes sir, boy—the animal is a beast that dies, and if he’s got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be everlasting!—Which it can never be.”

Does that sound correct in your mind? Jesus would say no. In fact, He said the opposite:

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted” (Luke 12:33).

Jesus would tell us that we can’t take it with us—not in a U-Haul trailer—but we can invest our possessions and our lives in things that allow us to give eternally. This is not an easy lesson for me to learn. I am torn between two competing desires of what I should invest

my life toward. At this point in my life, I find myself wanting to invest in what I call my “retirement life style.” I do not necessarily want to be wealthy and rich. The lottery is not a temptation for me. However, I want to insure a lifestyle in retirement that is at least comfortable. There is nothing wrong or sinful in that. Yet, I am too easily distracted by what is visible and before me. Competing with this desire is my desire to invest my life in things that last—things that will last beyond me.

What complicates all of this is that the world seems to be changing the rules as to what is important and necessary for a “comfortable retirement.” I know, I do not have to buy into that, but too often I fall into the trap. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the average American had 72 “wants” and considered 18 of them important. One hundred years later, the average American has 496 “wants” and considers 96 of them as genuine necessities for happiness (Miller, p. 5).

Being honest, though, it is not the changing scene of America’s values, nor is it my approaching retirement that causes me to be torn. It is me. Down deep, down to the very nature of my being, I am sinful. My very nature is corrupt. “Off track” would be another way to say it. “Bent,” “Crooked,” “Warped”—whatever way you want to describe it. The Confessors of our faith expressed it this way:

“Furthermore, it is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are

conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God's eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.

“Rejected, then, are the Pelagians and others who do not regard original sin as sin in order to make human nature righteous through natural powers, thus insulting the suffering and merit of Christ” (Book of Concord, The Augsburg Confession, Article II: Original Sin, pp. 36, 38.1-3).

Corrupt. Full of lust. Lacking true fear. Yet, I am born again. In my Baptism, I have been created anew. There is a new nature within me that desires to invest in things eternal. The two natures compete against each other within me. Things can too easily take possession of me. I know, however, that I am spiritually healthier when I hold onto my possessions loosely, using them to serve others.

Mother Teresa apparently understood the importance of holding onto possessions loosely. A story is told of a time that she was visiting Australia. A new recruit to the monastery in Australia was assigned to be her guide and “gofer” during her stay. The young man was so thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this woman. He dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, he never had the opportunity to say one word to her. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the friar had his opportunity to speak to Mother Teresa. He said to her, “If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the

plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?” Mother Teresa looked at him. “You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?” she asked. “Oh, yes,” he replied eagerly. “Then give that money to the poor,” she said, “You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.”

When I heard that story, I wondered if the young friar was as disappointed as the young man who approached Jesus as to what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus told him to observe and keep the law. His response was, “*All these I have kept*” (Matthew 19:20). Rather than laugh at him, Jesus says, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven*” (v. 21). The young man walked away.

Wealthy in the wallet but poor in the soul. Jesus was inviting him to invest in things eternal, things that will last. I believe that if this young man were to walk in our churches today, we would view him as being very religious and upright. But his heart was not right. His wallet was expanding, but the capacity of his heart to love was shrinking. That moment in Jesus’ life always causes me to pause and ask myself what I am investing and giving my life toward.

David Livingston understood what it meant to give eternally. He was willing to give up his possessions for the sake of the poor. His efforts would open the doors of evangelistic opportunity in Africa. He walked across the continent twice—both directions. As he traveled, he made maps and told people about Jesus. It was reported that when he died, his body was to be transported back to London for burial. The night before the ship sailed, the citizens of Africa came aboard, cut out his heart and buried it beneath a large tree in West Africa. His body would be taken back to London, but his heart belonged in Africa where he had invested so much of his life.

If people were to bury your heart, where would they bury it? Beside a ball park?

Beside a church? Beside a mission within the city? Beside a pile of reports of investments? Where do you invest your heart?

The mission that Jesus has given to us invites us to invest our hearts and lives in things that have eternal consequences. What does this look like when it occurs? Recently, I was back in the church where I grew up as a young boy. The church has changed in many ways with exciting growth and many new faces. One face that is no longer there (for he is now before the throne of God) is that of Gordon. He was once my Sunday School teacher. As far as teaching goes, he was not necessarily gifted in that area. I do not remember any outstanding lesson that he taught. He invested his heart, however, in people. He was always there. He gave of himself. Years later he would be willing to travel hundreds of miles in order to attend significant moments in my life. He and his wife invested in those whom they served. He invested in people, and in so doing gave of

himself eternally. My life and character were shaped by his investment. My ministry and service to others has been deeply influenced by his example. How many lives have been touched through his investment? What stories might be told in heaven that will link back to this mild-spoken man who invested his heart in the lives of some junior high children, who gave of himself eternally?

Prayer: “Forbid it Lord, that our roots become too firmly attached to this earth, that we should fall in love with things. Help us to understand that the pilgrimage of this life is but an introduction, a preface, a training school for what is to come. Then shall we see all of life in its true perspective. Then shall we not fall in love with the things of time, but come to love the things that endure. Then shall we be saved from the tyranny of possessions which we have no leisure to enjoy, of prosperity whose care becomes a burden. Give us, we pray, the courage to simplify our lives” (Peter Marshall, p. 33). **Amen.**

Challenge: Identify one purchase that you have wanted to make that you would be willing to forego and instead, give the money to a ministry or a charity. Or, devote some of your time to serving or ministering to others that you would have otherwise used for your own pleasure.

Scripture Reading: Luke 12

From the Book of Concord: “Let each and everyone, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol” (The Large Catechism, The First Commandment, p. 390.28).

20

Give What Will Cost

“But King David replied to Araunah, ‘No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing.’” (1 Chronicles 21:24)

My mom reminds me of Araunah—
incredibly generous and accommodating. Araunah is a Jebusite (that is not what reminds me of my mom), but he is chosen by God to be His vessel at a critical time in David’s life. King David has committed a sin of great pride against God: He asked for a census of his troops. It is a request of arrogance and pride. The commander of David’s troops, Joab, knows this and advises the King that it is the wrong thing to do. King David goes ahead with the request nonetheless. God is, indeed, not pleased and goes about punishing the nation because of the King’s pride. David quickly recognizes his sin and says,

“Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? O Lord my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people” (1 Chronicles 21:17).

This is where Araunah enters in. God tells David to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah so that he might offer a sacrifice to appease God’s wrath. Araunah is more than willing to offer his floor, and he is even willing to give the oxen for the offering, wood for the fire, and wheat for the grain offering. Araunah says, *“I will give all of this”* (v. 23). David responds to this offer by saying,

“No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing” (21:24).

Araunah and David agreed on a price, and that site would eventually become the site of the future temple of Jerusalem, where countless sacrifices would be offered up to God by generations to come.

The connection between Araunah and my mom? Generous and accommodating. Mom is a person always ready to offer what she has to help someone else. I witnessed this personally when as a young boy she would always offer me money to place in my Sunday offering. Not a bad thing, I suppose, for a young boy who did not have deep pockets. Years later, I was at her home visiting with her. She was unable to attend church with me due to illness. Before I left the house, she handed me her offering envelope and then a little cash for my offering. Once a mother, always a mother. I kindly turned her offer down and thought about what David said to Araunah:

“I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing.”

It is so easy to look for the less demanding way. The scenarios are all too well known. We are asked to bring a dish to the potluck supper, and we ask ourselves, “What is the easiest thing to bring that will cost me little in time or money?” I wonder what would happen if someone were to bring to the next potluck, say, crab legs or Baked Alaska? When we are asked to give toward a special offering for those in disaster, we ponder and ask ourselves what amount will not cost us too much? What if we were to hold off from

purchasing that one new accessory in our life in order to give a gift ten times what we might have otherwise? The church is having a special toy drive for some hurting families, and all too often we go looking for the most inexpensive toy. I wonder what it would be like if someone rolled in a new bicycle or offered a new Playstation?

Jesus has given us a mission. It is a mission that is rooted in a sacrifice that cost Him everything. He held nothing back.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

There is no way that we can pay Him back. That is not what He expects or asks from us. Yet, the very nature of discipleship is being willing to decrease in importance as Christ increases in importance and focus in our lives. He calls us to offer our lives as a living sacrifice.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

The following testimony of David Livingston offers me insight on this:

“People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life—these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing

compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father’s throne on high to give Himself for us.”

We are called upon to offer our lives to God as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Often, though, that sacrifice will come to us in what may seem the smallest of ways. The Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, in an address to ministers, caught the practical implications of living for Christ:

“We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table. ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’ But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid’s troubles instead of saying, ‘Get lost.’ Go to a committee meeting instead of doing what we want to do. Giving a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home instead of hanging out with our friends. Usually, giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it’s harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.”

It is in those moments that we have the opportunity to give generously in ways that may cost us but in the end bring witness to Him. I have seen the power of this kind of generosity in my friend, Art. He is one of the most generous people I know. When we go out, he is more generous with tips than I have witnessed in anyone else. Waiters in restaurants remember him. He does it not to impress the people with him but because the generosity of Christ flows through his being. In the end, this is what people remember about

him. The impression he leaves is one of a child of God who is generous with the gifts he has been entrusted with in life. I suspect Art would be the one who would bring the crab legs or offer the Playstation.

The next time you are asked to offer a sacrifice unto God, don't look for something that will cost you little or nothing. Try offering the "crab legs." It is in those moments when we are asked to offer a few of those quarters that we are helping to construct living temples in the lives of those to whom we give, where sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving can be offered up to God.

Prayer: Jesus, you held nothing back. You sacrificed everything on my behalf. The cost, as great as it was, did not cause you to shrink away from doing your Father's will. I thank you and praise you for your gift. There is no way that I could ever repay you. If I had all the resources in the world at my disposal, it would not be enough. Yet, this is not what you ask. You desire instead that I offer to you my life as a living sacrifice. Fill my heart with such joy and grace that when the opportunity to sacrifice for you is before me, I give generously and joyously out of love for you.
Amen.

Challenge: Who in your life is a generous person who holds nothing back with you and others? Give thanks to God for them. Consider even telling them of the witness they are to you.

Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 24:18-25

From the Book of Concord: "However, the law does not teach how and why the good works of believers are pleasing and acceptable to God, even though in this life they are in fact imperfect and impure because of the sinfulness of the flesh. The law demands total, perfect, pure obedience if it is to please God. Instead, the gospel teaches that our "spiritual sacrifices" are pleasing to God "through faith" "because of Christ" (1 Peter 2:5; Heb. 11:4; cf. 13:15). In this respect Christians are not under the law but under grace. This is so because they are personally freed from the curse and condemnation of the law through faith in Christ and because their good works, though imperfect and impure, are pleasing to God through Christ. This is also true because they act in a God-pleasing way—not because of the coercion of the law but because of the renewal of the Holy Spirit—without coercion, from a willing heart, insofar as they are reborn in their inner person. At the same time they continually do battle against the old creature" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI, p. 591.22-23).

21 Give Cheerfully

“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:7-8)

What is your first recollection of giving a gift? For me it was when I was seven years old. It was Christmas time. The family would be gathering together, and I wanted to give some gifts. I went to the local hardware store in town with money burning a hole in my pocket. I remember searching the aisles—not an easy task for a seven-year-old’s budget, especially considering that there were ten gifts to purchase. Finally, there was the perfect gift—# 2 pencils. (Have you ever wondered why, if they are the most popular pencil, they are still # 2?) Sorry—anyway, those pencils would do the trick. I can remember like it was yesterday coming home with my gifts. I was as pleased with my purchase as if I had just purchased a new car. I wrapped them up individually, and on Christmas Eve night gave them to my family. I was laughing with glee and delight. It was just so much fun.

That picture is the one that God longs to see within us when we offer Him or His people our gifts.

“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The Greek word for “cheerful” is where we get the word “hilarious.” God loves hilarious giving. The joy and delight I had in giving those #2 pencils is what He looks for in the gifts I offer Him and others today.

I would imagine that this is the type of joy He saw in the Magi on their journey to find the Christ born in Bethlehem. Of all those

involved in the birth of Christ, those who we traditionally place at the manger, I find myself increasingly intrigued by these “Magi from the east.” How long was their journey? As they followed that glorious star—a star that apparently moved along with them as it would eventually “*stop over the place where the child was*” (Matthew 2:9)—what was their expectation or, better said, who was their expectation?

Somewhere along the journey the star either parked over Jerusalem or was hid from their view. I wonder if they were surprised when they asked for directions and the religious leaders of Jerusalem knew nothing about this. Even more so, when they gave directions doesn’t it surprise you that not one of the religious leaders went with them? It was only a seven-mile journey. Yet, I find this detour in Jerusalem to be enlightening.

In the end, what guided them to Jesus was not the star but the Word. It was the Word to which the chief priests turned in determining the location of His birth. That says volumes to me. It is the Word of God, ultimately, that reveals the Christ. Other things in the world can get us curious, but in the end it is the Word that will guide us to Him.

Given these directions, they set out on their journey. The star appears again. Seeing it, they are overjoyed. I could even picture them laughing merrily as they realized they were so close. Never mind the fact that Bethlehem is a small, insignificant town. They had probably imagined Jerusalem. This news would not lessen their joy.

Then the star stopped right over the house. (What kind of star is this? How close does it have to be to the ground in order to be so pointed in its guidance?) At long last, they arrived. Their journey covered thousands of miles and who knows how many months or even years. The knock at the door. Can you imagine the surprise? There before the Magi was a young, relatively poor couple, not the royalty they might have expected. Now at their door, standing in front of them, are Magi. Gentiles. Dressed in full regalia with caravan in tow. Gentiles wanting to come into the house of a Jewish couple to see and worship the child.

It may not have been easy for Joseph to invite them inside. No upright Jewish man would easily invite a Gentile into his home. They would be the first of a long and continuous line of “outcasts” who would want to see Jesus. Joseph would be the first of a long line of believers who would open his heart and home to those wanting to worship Christ.

As they entered,

“ . . . they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh ” (Matthew 2:11).

What they discovered was probably different than what they expected. The disinterest of the religious leaders of His own nation may have discouraged them, but when they saw the star reappear, “*they were overjoyed*” (v. 10). Nothing would hold them back from worshipping the King and presenting Him with their expensive gifts. They had followed a star that held out glorious promise. What they discovered may have been different than what they expected. Yet, they gave of themselves and their gifts with overflowing joy. They gave with hilarious cheerfulness.

This is a lesson I want to apply to my life this day, and each day for that matter. There are times when it feels the daily journey of life

is long. Sometimes, at the end of the journey, it is not always as I expected. Things are not as glorious as they might have appeared. The reaction of those around me can be discouraging and negative. In those moments, I want to be like the Magi—overflowing with joy. I want to hold nothing back and fall down before Him and worship Him and offer Him my gifts. Then, like the Magi, I want to go on from there another way—my life changed and different for having worshipped Him, my heart filled to overflowing with joy.

I believe that our life in Christ, as Christ intended it, is to be filled with joy. Jesus said,

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

God loves cheerful, hilarious givers because it is a reflection of a life that overflows with joy, even when life is not what we expected. Dallas Willard wrote,

“How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality within the freedom of God’s loving rule. Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God” (p.80).

Who of us has not seen enough of grouchy, unhappy and complaining Christians? Spirituality rightly understood, as it is rooted in His abundant grace and mercy, is the source of abounding joy and hope. It is not about having a positive attitude, as though we can effect the change. He is the One who provides us with the joy, the resources and the opportunities to be hilarious in our life and in our giving.

One last thought about those pencils. The money used to buy them? Mom and Dad.

They gave me the money that I used to buy them their gifts and gifts for the rest of the family. That is precisely what God is willing and waiting to do for us today. As Christ lives in each of us, His love will transform our hearts and fill us with joy and provide us with opportunities for hilarious giving to Him and to others.

Prayer: Jesus, throughout this day, help me to be filled with joy. No matter the moment, be it disappointing or better than I ever expected, let me know the joy of your presence in my life. When you provide me with the opportunity to give of myself to others, let my cheerfulness in giving border on a holy hilarity that will call their attention to you. I want nothing less, Jesus, than for you to receive the glory and praise for anything that I accomplish or give in this day. **Amen.**

Challenge: Where in your life has God been asking you to give of yourself but your offering has lacked a cheerful spirit? What impact would it have if your spirit in giving were to be changed?

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 8 and 9

From the Book of Concord: “In other cases (as in 2 Cor. 9:7, in the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon, and in 1 Peter 5:2), ‘from necessity’ means what is wrung from people against their will, through coercion or in some other way, that they act outwardly, as a pretense, but indeed without and against their own will. For God does not want to have such hypocritical works. Instead, the people of the New Testament are supposed to be a willing people (Ps. 110:3), and ‘to sacrifice with a free will’ (Ps. 54:6), not reluctantly or under compulsion, ‘but from obedient hearts’ (2 Cor. 9:7; Rom. 6:17). For ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor. 9:7). In this sense and meaning it is right to say and teach that those whom the Son of God has freed do true good works freely or from a free and willing spirit . . .” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article IV, p. 577.17-18).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Give and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

4th Mission Response

Tell

**GOOD
NEWS**



Go
tell
it

. . . Everywhere!

Tell Them First

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon [Peter] and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’” (John 1:41)

What do you know about Andrew? He was one of the twelve disciples. What else comes to your mind when you hear his name? He was Peter’s brother. Time after time when Scripture identifies Andrew, it does so with these words, “Andrew, Peter’s brother.” Do you think that this bothered Andrew to always be known as “Peter’s brother”? I remember growing up in our small town where I was known as “Jim’s brother.” His nickname was “Kurls,” which was a strange shortened version of our last name. As I entered high school, I became known as “Little Kurls”—not exactly a name that a new freshman aspires to claim. Such is the plight of being the little brother.

Andrew was Peter’s brother, but Scripture tells us that he was known for more than that. Andrew brought Peter to Jesus. He is not the only one that Andrew brought to Jesus. We are told that he brought a little boy forward with his bag lunch:

“Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’” (John 6:8-9).

We are also told that he brought certain Greeks forward who wanted to meet Jesus:

“Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’”

Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus” (John 12:20-22).

Andrew did what he had done with others. He opened the door for them to meet Jesus.

Andrew may have taken a back seat when it came to his brother Peter, but this did not stop him from telling people about Jesus and bringing them forward to meet Him.

When I review these three readings, certain things impress me about Andrew’s character. First, Andrew seemed to be a humble person, whose pride did not get in the way of being a witness for Jesus. As soon as Andrew had met Jesus, he immediately went to his brother:

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’” (John 1:41).

“The first thing.” So excited with the news about Jesus and so devoted to his brother, Andrew goes immediately to tell him. A dominant, older sibling can sometimes cause the younger brother or sister to be filled with resentment or jealousy. There is none of that here. Andrew brought Peter to Jesus. Could he guess that his elder brother would overshadow in this area as well? Probably. Jesus would give Peter a new name, a nickname of sorts:

“‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which when translated is Peter [or Rock])” (v. 42).

There is no such mention of a nickname for Andrew.

Would it later bother Andrew that he was not a part of the inner circle in the significant moments of Jesus' ministry, even though he was one of the first ones called? If it bothered him in any way, he didn't let it slow him down in telling people about Jesus or in bringing them to Him.

Ponder those Bible readings about Andrew. Do you see some common threads? Here is a servant who has a heart for the outcast. The Greeks come forward, knowing that Gentiles are not welcomed in Jewish circles. Philip is uncertain what to do with their request. Who does he turn to for help and advice? Andrew. Why doesn't Philip take these Greeks to Jesus himself? We do not know the answer to that. What is clear, though, is that he assumes Andrew can help in this matter. Andrew does not brush them away. He, along with Philip, brings them forward to meet Jesus.

Andrew does the same thing with a little boy. The other disciples are ready to send the crowd home for lunch as Jesus raises the question, "*Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*" (John 6:5). Philip sees only the impossibility of the task—"*Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite*" (v. 7). Andrew, however, views it differently: "*Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?*" (v. 9). It probably all seemed so ridiculous. Such a small lunch—five loaves and two small fish. Small is a good word. The original language would suggest the fish were the size of a sardine. Yet, by now Andrew had seen what Jesus can do with just a little. So he brings the young boy and the small lunch forward. The rest, as they say, is history—the history of Jesus doing fantastic things with a little.

It may be that Andrew played "second fiddle" to his brother. He wasn't a part of the inner circle even though he was one of the first to be called by Jesus. This did not stop him from placing others first when it came to telling them about Jesus or helping them in

their journey. Andrew was willing to give up many things, including his pride, for the sake of bringing people forward to meet Jesus. Who is the Andrew in your life? Who brought you to Jesus? Who has placed you first, not caring if they got acknowledged or even noticed?

The mission of the Church is blessed when there are those who are willing to serve as an "Andrew" within the ministry and lives of its people. Who are the Andrews in your congregation—those people willing to sacrifice in order to help other people?

Years ago, Albrecht Durer was blessed by an Andrew in his life. Albrecht Durer, a renowned artist in the 1500's, had a friend by the name of Franz Knigstein. Albrecht and Franz as friends went to art school together while trying to work to pay their way. Rather than having both of them fail at their art studies, they decided one should work while the other attended school. Franz agreed to work as a laborer, while Albrecht gratefully pursued his art career—promising to return the favor once he became a successful artist.

Much time passed as Albrecht developed his potential genius. Finally, he returned to keep his promise to Franz, who was overjoyed at Albrecht's success. Soon Albrecht realized that the years of labor had been hard on Franz. His fingers had become too bent and twisted to manipulate a paintbrush. He could never become the artist he hoped to be, nor could Albrecht ever fulfill his promise of repayment.

One night, as Franz knelt in prayer, Albrecht sorrowfully sketched the crippled hands of the friend who had made his success possible. His painting is what we today know as "The Praying Hands." Albrecht Durer's beautiful artwork is a tribute to the spirit of love and sacrifice to which Franz Knigstein's life was testimony.

For Albrecht, it was Franz's hands that represented the love and service of an Andrew in his life. Whose hands remind you of Andrew's thoughtfulness and helpfulness?

Praise be to God for the Andrews of this world—those people who work quietly

behind the scenes. They give of themselves sacrificially for the sake of the mission, without getting much recognition. Yet, this is not what they hunger for in life. What excites them is the opportunity to introduce one more person to Jesus.

Andrew was one of the first to hear of Jesus, the Lamb of God. He was the first to tell his brother Peter about Jesus. Yet, often times he comes in second as far as recognition in Scripture. He never wrote an Epistle. He is not mentioned in the Book of Acts or any of the Epistles. None of this apparently fazed him in the slightest way. Second in life so often, his passion was to tell others first. Tell them about Jesus. His first priority was to bring them to Jesus so that their hearts

could be ablaze with His love as was his own. Can you imagine the impact upon our churches were they to be filled with people with Andrew's heart—befriending people and introducing them to Him one at a time? The fire of Christ's love is kindled in the hearts of people one at a time.

Prayer: Lord, for all of the Andrews in my life, who have sacrificed for me and who have brought me to you, I thank and praise you. May their hearts be blessed in the joy of knowing what I now share with you. Show me this day where I can be an Andrew for someone in my life—not seeking the attention, only wanting to help and serve. Give me the opportunity where I might introduce someone to you, my Lord and very best friend. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who are the Andrews in your life? If possible, give them a call or send them a note to thank them for how they have given so much to you.

Scripture Reading: John 1

From the Book of Concord: “In Luke 22[:24–27] Christ expressly forbids lordship among the apostles, for the question of who would be in charge and become, as it were, the vicar of the absent Christ was the very thing about which they were arguing when Christ spoke of his passion. Christ rebuked the apostles for this error and taught that there would be neither lordship nor superiority among them but that the apostles would be sent as equals to carry out the ministry of the gospel in common. For that reason he said, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but it is not so with you. Rather whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant.’ The contrast here shows that lordship is rejected. So does the parable in which, during a similar dispute about authority, Christ sets a little boy in their midst to show that just as the child neither assumes nor desires the chief place, so among his servants there will be no preeminence [Matt. 18:1–4]” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, p. 331.8).

Tell it Boldly

“I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” (1 Corinthians 2:3-5)

I did not know her as an outspoken person. She and I had never had cross words with each other. Physically she was not an imposing woman, actually rather thin and frail in stature for the ten years I knew her. Why then did she intimidate me so? Those who know me would say that I am not one that lacks in boldness in expressing my opinion or views. Yet in this relationship, I felt inhibited, even timid. I understood this at first as early jitters. But as the years went by and she became my mother-in-law, I thought that time would help me to relax and grow a little more confident. It never happened.

Maybe a lot of sons-in-law can tell the same story. There are, after all, more mother-in-law jokes than one can remember. But beyond what appears to be humorous in this, there was within me a growing burden. With every visit, that burden only intensified. The more I got to know Margaret, the less I was certain where she stood with Jesus. Was she a believer? This became the burning question—a question that I was too timid to ask. It remained this way for years. Until the phone call. The message: “Margaret has lung cancer. It is not good. Time is short.”

We packed up the kids and drove back home to visit with her and the family. We were at home for a few days. On the final day, I remember waking up that morning. As I lay in bed, I offered this prayer: “Jesus, forgive me for being timid. Forgive me for saying nothing all of these years. Give me one

chance this day and I will not blow it. I will give witness to you.”

The day went its course as I looked for that opportunity. Nothing seemed to present itself. Margaret was now in the hospital. As we went in to say our goodbyes, I was still looking for a moment alone with her. Amazing, isn’t it? I have shared the Gospel before hundreds, and yet in this moment I needed it to be with no one else around. Her hospital room was packed with family. Kids running around and everyone gathered around the bed. “It isn’t going to happen,” I thought to myself. Then one by one they all began to leave. So weird as I look back on it now. None of them knew of what I had prayed. None of them knew my burden of the last 10 years. One by one they left, until it was Margaret and me and Jesus.

I am not exactly sure how I began or even what I said. My words did not exactly flow out of my mouth. Stumble would be a better word. As I try to recall what I said, it went something like this: “Margaret, I uhmmmm. . . believe that Jesus. . . uhmmmm. . . is my Savior. Uhmmmm. I believe that we are all sinners and unable to save ourselves by what we do or don’t do. Uhmmmm. . . I believe that He died on the cross so that you and I might be forgiven.” Then there was silence. What followed was as sweet as I could have imagined. Almost as if taking pity on me, she took hold of my hand. That was the first time that I can remember our two hands joined

together in ten years. She looked at me and said, "I believe that too!"

Phewwww! I let out one eternal gasp of air that I had been holding for ten years. "I believe that too!" Those four words snatch life out of death. Those four words breathe hope. Those four words are lifegiving. They still ring the sound of joy as I write them now.

After that, I remember praying with Margaret and then we said our goodbyes. That was the last time we would speak, that is until I see her again before the Lamb on His Throne.

Looking at this event as I describe it, it doesn't appear to be a strong example for "Telling it Boldly." Yet, I see it as one of my boldest moments in witnessing. A boldness not rooted in me or even in my efforts, but a boldness rooted in Christ. I believed that should the opportunity present itself, He would give me the words and He would use those words in Margaret's life. Just as important, I believed in the very words that I stumbled to share with her. My presentation was weak, but the Spirit was not.

Remember the story of the Sunday School teacher who witnessed to a Boston shoe clerk, Dwight L. Moody? Listen further to an account of that witness:

"Kimball found Moody working in the stockroom, wrapping and shelving shoes. Kimball said he spoke with 'limping words.' He later said, 'I never remember just what I did say: something about Christ and His love; that was all.' He admitted it was a 'weak appeal.'" (p. 70).

The fire that was kindled in the heart of D.L. Moody by a modest Sunday School teacher would kindle a fire of love and hope in the hearts of thousands.

When I consider the bold acts and witnesses of the early Church, I do not see eloquent men and women. Paul admitted as much:

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

I felt with Margaret what Paul felt with the Corinthians. Have you experienced that too? Boldness in those moments is not defined by what we say. It is the willingness to be God's vessels, trusting that His Spirit will reveal itself. This is exactly what Jesus asked the disciples to have confidence in. As He was preparing to leave them, they were terrified. In response He said,

"Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11).

We may stumble over the words, but the power of God will not. Tell it boldly. Bold in the power of God. Who in your life have you been burdened over as to where they stand with Jesus? Tell it boldly! Not bold with words necessarily, but bold in the confidence that the Spirit will give you the words to say and will then work with those words long after you have finished. Tell it boldly in the confidence that what you are sharing with them is lifegiving, breathing with hope.

My prayer is that you will hear in response, "I believe that too."

Prayer: “I believe that too.” How precious those words are, O Lord, when they come from the lips of one we care for and we share together a common love for you. Help me to be bold in my witness for you—bold not so much in the words I use, because you know

how I can so easily stumble over them, but bold in stepping forward to give testimony as to my love for you, and bold in my conviction that you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. **Amen.**

Challenge: Is there someone in your life with whom you have hesitated, for whatever reason, to share the Good News of Jesus? Pray for them and ask God to give you the discernment as to what He wants you to do.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 2

From the Book of Concord: “We ask here at the outset that all this may be realized in us and that his name may be praised through God’s holy Word and Christian living. This we ask, both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom that has now begun” (The Large Catechism, The Second Petition of The Lord’s Prayer, p. 447.52).

24 Tell it to Your Children

“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the Lord swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.” (Deuteronomy 11:18-22)

My daughter, Jennifer, ran track in high school. One of her events was the relay race. Jen and her team were pretty fast. Being fast is an important part of a relay team. It is not, however, the only important factor. Once in a while, Jen’s team would concentrate so much on their speed that they would not slow down for the hand-off and would end up colliding into each other. As the baton bounced on the track, they were disqualified. The fact that they were one of the faster teams was of no consequence.

It is in that agonizing moment that I see a snapshot of what is occurring within the homes. The family is like a relay team, racing through life at breakneck speed. Time matters. In fact, for many, time has become a more precious commodity than money. Time, however, is not the only important factor. The hand-off is critical—that moment when the baton of faith and family values is passed on to the next runner. Judging from the statistics, that baton is dropped more times than not. The team may be fast, but many end up being disqualified in the end.

Consider these statistics:

- More than five million high-schoolers binge drink at least once a month.
- One-third of sixth- and ninth-graders obtain alcohol from their own homes.

- Four out of every five students (80%) have consumed alcohol (more than a few sips) by the end of high school.
- Two-thirds of twelfth-graders report having been drunk.
- In 2002, 53% of twelfth-graders reported having used an illicit drug in their lifetime.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth, ages 15-20.
- The United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world.

(SADD)

In a recent survey, George Barna polled 1,000 adults nationwide to evaluate how well children under the age of 13 are being prepared for life in five dimensions: emotional, physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual:

“Fewer than one out of every twenty adults believe that America’s youngsters are receiving above average preparation in all five of those areas of life. . . . The lowest ratings, however, were reserved for the moral and spiritual preparation of children. Only eight percent of adults said kids get better than adequate preparation in the spiritual realm, while more than

seven out of 10 adults (71%) said children get inadequate spiritual training.”

The “baton” is “bouncing on the track.” Why is this happening? The answer to that might again be found back on the track. In a relay race, there are many hindrances that contribute to a bad hand-off. The zone in which the hand-off is made is narrow and limited. During that time, there is the distraction of a lot of noise as the crowd and other teammates cheer on other runners. In the excitement of the moment, with the adrenaline pumping, it is easy to forget to slow down the pace enough to ensure a good hand-off.

In the lives of families, there is a great deal that distracts. Many things press in upon us, screaming for attention and priority in our day. God understands these dangers to the family. They are not new. Long ago, God warned families of this. As the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, God knew the danger that lay ahead. They would be surrounded by the distraction of living in a land of abundance. Preparing them for that, God offered some coaching.

1. The first coaching tip: Set the example for your children by impressing the Word upon your hearts and then and only then upon your family.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up”
(Deuteronomy. 6:4-7).

What does this look like when it is being carried out day by day? There are many examples, but consider one—David Bloom.

David Bloom was the journalist for NBC who died while covering the war in Iraq. Shortly before his death, he e-mailed his wife with these thoughts (source from www.sounddude.com):

I hope and pray that all my guys get out of this in one piece. But I tell you, Mel, I am at peace. Deeply saddened by the glimpses of death and destruction I have seen, but at peace with my God, and with you. I know only that my whole way of looking at life has turned upside down—here I am, supposedly at the peak of professional success, and I could frankly care less. Yes, I’m proud of the good job we’ve all been doing, but in the scheme of things it matters little compared to my relationship with you, the girls and Jesus. There is something far beyond my level of human understanding or comprehension going on here, some forging of metal through fire. I shifted my book of daily devotions and prayers to the inside of my flak jacket, so that it would be close to my heart, protecting me in a way and foremost in my thoughts. When the moment comes when Jim or John or Christine or Nicole or Ava or you are talking about my last days, I am determined that they will say, ‘He was devoted to his wife and children and he gave every ounce of his being not for himself but for those who he cared about most, God and his family. . . . You cannot know now whether you will look back on it with tears, heartbreak and a sense of anguish and regret over what might have been. Or whether you will say—he was and is a changed man, God did work a miracle in our lives. But I swear to you on everything that I hold dear—I am speaking the truth to you. And I will continue to speak the truth to you. And not be trite, but that will set me free.

God bless you, Melanie. I love you and I know that you still love me. Please give the girls a big hug—squeeze ‘em tight—and let them know just how much their daddy loves and cares for them.

With love and devotion,
Dave

“With love and devotion”—for his family, for God—you can read it and sense it in every sentence he wrote. This was a man whose heart belonged to God. Overflowing with God’s love, he sought ways to impress that upon his family.

2. That leads to the second coaching tip which God offers: As we seek to tell our children, it is important to remember that often the lessons of life are more caught than taught. I believe that this is what His Word is getting at when it says,

“Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:7-8).

In other words, make it visible. In his letter to Melanie, David Bloom wrote, “Save this note. Look at it a month from now, a year from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now.” Did he know? Did he have a premonition? We do not know. He apparently knew, however, the power of making it visible. Take the words and feelings of love and make it visible. This is so important in telling your children. Make it visible. Leave notes. Draw pictures. Hang them on the refrigerator. Put together the scrap book or the photo album that you keep saying you will get to someday. Send an email. Whatever it takes, let your love for your family and God’s love for your family be visible.

This is precisely what God does with us. He makes His love visible—in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The Cross. The water of Baptism. The Bread and The Wine. The Bible. It is a love letter to us. All of these are ways in which He seeks to make His love visible, so that we will not forget. Just stop here for a moment and ask yourself, what are some of things that you could do this day to make the love of God and your love visible?

3. As I look at God coaching the Israelites, telling them to first impress His Word upon their hearts and then make it visible before the children, I also see an important third coaching tip: The baton of faith and values is passed not just one time but repeatedly through the many different albeit ordinary events of the day. It is almost as if every day is the practice day, leading up to that final moment when a parent crosses the finish line.

In the course of a day, there are countless moments that can serve as illustrations of spiritual truths. They cannot be forced or rushed. When they are, the baton is often dropped. The Word of God is quite deliberate with the slow and steady rhythm of this kind of teaching that requires us to slow it down:

“Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (v. 7).

The problem for many of us is not in the desire but in the slowing down. Listen to what one authority in child development says:

“The demands of a job that claim mealtimes, evenings and weekends as well as days, the trips and moves necessary to get ahead or simply to hold one’s own, the increasing time spent commuting, entertaining, going out, meeting social and community obligations . . . all of these produce a situation in which a child often spends more time with a passive babysitter than with a participating parent. . . .

“A team of researchers wanted to learn how much time middle class fathers spend playing and interacting with their small children. First, they asked a group of fathers to estimate the time spent with their one-year-old youngsters each day. They received an average reply of fifteen to twenty minutes. To verify these claims, the investigators attached microphones to the shirts of small children for the purpose of recording actual parental verbalization.

The results of this study are shocking. The average amount of time spent by these middle class fathers with their small children was thirty-seven seconds per day! Their direct interaction was limited to 2.7 encounters daily, lasting ten to fifteen seconds each!” (Dobson, pp. 157-158.)

Just as startling to this finding is when it was recorded—1970! Since then, do you think that this statistic has improved dramatically? Who is it, then, that will tell the children? In his study, George Barna notes,

“Ultimately, children get neglected because parents rely upon everyone else to do their job for them. The popular notion that it takes a village to raise a child has become an accepted excuse for millions of parents to assign away the commitment for their child’s development. Families may not be able to provide everything that a child needs to be successfully launched into today’s world, but they can do a lot more than they are seeking to provide today. Rather than play victim and blame social institutions for inadequate performance of duties, millions of families would be well-advised to rearrange their priorities and reclaim their commitment to preparing their children for life.”

I no longer have kids at home—a true empty-nester—but I can still remember the guilt feelings that would begin to surface and rush through me: “I know that I should spend more time, but where?”

With each family it will be different. I would only offer the sensible advice God offers—let it be in the ordinary moments of the day.

“When you sit at home [watching TV], when you walk along the road [riding in the car], when you lie down [bedtime prayers], and when you get up [what do you say to each other before you go off to school or work?].”

These are the normal, ordinary moments that avail themselves to talking about faith issues.

It might be tough at first, but try reclaiming the lost blessing of the kitchen table. It will help to turn the TV off. As I counsel young couples getting married and when I talk to eighth-graders, I am led to believe that the kitchen table is a forgotten blessing in the house. Many families have simply forfeited it to holding stacks of mail and clutter from the day.

When our girls were still at home, we found the meal time offered a wonderful time for this kind of exchange. As they got older, I can remember marveling at how we would sit around the table and talk long after the meal was over. No one was rushing off to his or her room or the TV or to practice. That day can become a reality. Don’t think it is too late. This blessing can be shared with grown children or grandchildren.

Even the normal conversations that arise in a day provide the opportunity to pass the baton through spiritual dialogue. For example, have you ever heard one of your children say, “It’s not fair!”? O.K.—how often have you heard them say it? We had one daughter who shall go nameless who used this phrase so often that I threatened to put it on her tombstone someday.

Seriously, though, life isn’t fair. We all know that. The child is only echoing a truth that is deep inside of us. Yet, God is fair and just. How does one reconcile these two truths? Moments like that provide us with the opportunity to reaffirm this tension with our children. We may not have the answers. I certainly did not with my girls. I do believe, however, that our faith becomes more credible in the heart of our children when we allow the struggle to surface in our conversations. Youth of today are not necessarily looking for all the answers, but they are looking for authenticity—someone who is real and upfront, even if that means admitting that you do not have all the answers.

What I have found is that this kind of openness builds credibility, which opens the door for other questions. I can still remember the moment as if it happened yesterday. In reality, it happened 14 years ago. The four of us were driving in the car at night. The girls were in the back seat. Along the way, one of them asked, “Dad, how do I know that what is in the Bible is true?” This was no out-of-the-blue question. This was a passing-the-baton moment. At first, I could feel myself tensing up. “Don’t blow it,” I said to myself. Then as a runner preparing to pass the baton, I slowed down and relaxed. Trusting that I could not convince my daughter of anything, nor did I have to because that is the work of the Spirit, I said, “I cannot convince or prove to you that what the Bible says is true. Only God can do that. And He will. I believe that His Word is a living Word and as you read it, He will convince you of its truth.” Our conversation continued from there and I offered some guidance as to where she could begin reading.

I believe that those kinds of moments are the natural result of allowing the faith to be a part of our rising up and lying down, our walking along the road and eating at the table. When the rhythm of life is marked by these moments, one can expect more questions to arise. It is in those moments that the fire of faith is stoked and kindled to burn within them as it did within the men on their way to Emmaus. This is the progression seen in the Deuteronomy passage. After all of God’s coaching, He offers this thought,

“In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?’ Tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deuteronomy 6:20).

The verses that follow recount the history of what God has done on behalf of the Israelites.

One of the greatest moments is when the child asks the parent to tell them what it all means. What would you say at that moment? What do you tell your child? Don’t panic. Don’t tense up. If you are uncertain, then begin first by looking into your own heart and asking yourself “What do I believe?” Remember, God’s first coaching tip was to impress this on your heart first. Before you attempt to teach anything to your children, make certain that what you teach is what you believe. I once heard it said that the difference between a belief and a conviction is that a belief is something you hold onto while a conviction is something that holds onto you.

Children know what is real and what is fake. They instinctively know what we hold onto and what has a hold on us. David Bloom wrote to his family, not only to share those things he held onto, but more importantly what had a hold of him. What is it that has a hold of you?

Back to the track—while I remember painfully well the moments when the baton bounced on the track, I remember even more joyfully the moments of the clean hand-off, watching the next runner burst forward into the race set before them. When I cross the finish line of my life, I cannot think of one thing that will bring me greater joy than to know that those who follow me will burst forward with a clean hand-off into the race set before them.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for those who have run the race before me, passing the baton of faith so faithfully to me. Help me to now run the race set before me with joy and perseverance. Give me wisdom to daily pass the faith onto those who will follow after me. I don’t want to wait until the end. Let there be a moment in this day where I take the opportunity to pass onto them the love and faith I have in you. **Amen.**

Challenge: Look for a moment this day—in an email or a note or a conversation—to pass the baton of faith on to those close to you. What is one thing you can do this week to put “God’s coaching tips” into practice: 1) Impress the Word upon your own heart first; 2) Lessons of life are more caught than taught; make it visible; 3) Pass it on not just one time, but repeatedly through ordinary events of the day.

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6

From the Book of Concord: “If this were not enough to admonish us to read the catechism daily, God’s command should suffice to compel us. For God solemnly enjoins us in Deuteronomy 6[:7–8] that we should meditate on his precepts while sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising, and should keep them as an ever-present emblem and sign before our eyes and on our hands. God certainly does not require and command this so solemnly without reason. He knows our danger and need; he knows the constant and furious attacks and assaults of the devil. Therefore, he wishes to warn, equip, and protect us against them with good ‘armor’ against their ‘flaming arrows. . .’” (The Large Catechism, Preface, p. 382.14).

25

Tell the Disciples and Peter

“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” (Mark 16:7)

Harold Sherman wrote a book, “How to Turn Failure into Success.” In it, he offers a “Code of Persistence,” listing eight principles for success. These principles may be helpful in some of life’s challenges. The problem I see in them, however, is what happens if you cannot get beyond the first one— # 1: “I will never give up so long as I know I am right.” What happens when you know you are not right? What happens when your sense of personal failure overwhelms you to the point that you cannot move forward? What would this code mean to Peter in light of the events of Good Friday?

Have you ever wondered what it was like for Peter waking up on that Saturday following the crucifixion? Hours earlier he had been so self-assured, so confident, never believing that he could do such a thing: “*Peter declared, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you’*” (Matthew 26:35).

Then hours later, he would deny His best friend, his Master, not once but three times. How could he get out of his mind that moment when the eyes of Jesus and his met in the judgment hall?

“Peter replied, ‘Man, I don’t know what your’re talking about!’ Just as he was speaking the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:60-62).

How does one stop the tears? Jesus had warned him. He was too full of himself to listen. Now, how does he undo the damage done? Jesus lies in a grave, dead. What is Peter to do with his guilt? Then comes the news:

“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (Mark 16:7).

The women report that they have seen Jesus. He is alive! He wants to meet with the disciples. Is this good news for Peter and the rest? Or does it add to their terror and fear? If the news is true, how will they face the One they have betrayed and denied?

Two words, however, offer comfort and hope: “. . . and Peter.” “Tell His disciples and Peter.” In those two words, the angel of God is signaling Peter that he is loved. The message of the empty tomb is nothing less than that of forgiveness.

God does not want our sins of the past or our lack of loyalty and love toward Him to keep us distant from Him. “Tell His disciples and Peter.” The compassion and gentle grace of those words are not only for Peter, they are for you and me. Take a pencil and write your name just beneath Peter’s in that verse in your Bible. If you are troubled by past sins or if your heart has wept and wept and nothing undoes the wrong and failure of the past, write your name just below Peter’s. Not all the tears we cry or the good intentions we offer will bridge the gap that our sins have

created between us and Jesus. The Good News, however, is that they don't have to. He bridges that gap. Through His death and resurrection, our sins have been paid for in full.

That is hard to believe, isn't it? It was for Peter as well. Even with these words, Peter did not know what to do with them. Following an appearance by Jesus with the disciples, Peter announces, "*I'm going out to fish*" (John 21:3). It is hard to know what is going through his mind at this moment. What follows is pretty clear, however. Jesus appears on the beach, asking the age-old question that is asked of every fisherman: "Catch anything?" When they tell him "No," He tells them to cast on the other side of the boat. When their nets become so full that they cannot haul in the net, it dawns on them that the guy on the shore is Jesus. Peter can stand back no longer. He dives in and swims to shore. There on the shore is a fire burning with some fish cooking for breakfast.

Only twice in the Gospels is there mention of people gathering around a fire—once here on the beach, and the other time in the courtyard where Peter stood denying Jesus. There is no way of knowing the intent of this fire, but I do know that smells have a powerful way of invoking memories of things from the past. Near the crackling fire, Jesus pulls Peter aside and three times asks, "Peter, do you love me?"

What I find interesting is that in the first two questions, Jesus uses the Greek word "Agape" for his question. He is in essence asking, "Do you love me with the love of God? Do you love me unconditionally?" Peter, knowing his actions of the past have not reflected his love, reaffirms his love for Jesus: "*Yes, Lord, he said, 'you know that I love you'*" (John 21:15).

The third time Jesus asks the question, however, He uses the word, "phileo," which is a lower form of love. It is a word that stands for *friendship*. When Jesus asks this question, Peter cries. Now he realizes the extent to

which he has disappointed and let Jesus down. After each reply, Jesus' response is nothing short of amazing—amazing grace! He says to Peter, "Feed my sheep." Into Peter's hands, as well as the other disciples, Jesus entrusts His Church. Feed them. Lead them. Protect them. Besides the fire on the beach that day, Jesus would kindle a new fire burning in the heart of Peter.

Such is the nature of grace. Undeserving though we are to be forgiven, He not only forgives us but entrusts His Holy Church into our hands. The message of the angel to the women is a message to you and me. "Go tell His disciples and Peter." Who is it in your life whose name you could write below Peter's and now your own? Who is there that is detached from Christ because of personal failure, who finds it difficult to live according to any "Code of Persistence" because they cannot get beyond the first principle—# 1: "I will never give up so long as I know I am right"? The mission of the church is to go and tell them what we have learned: the Lord is alive and wants to see them. The message of the empty tomb is about a Lord who is able to meet each of our needs no matter where we are in life:

To the imprisoned – Jesus is the Key to Freedom, the Door of Salvation.

To the sick – Jesus is the Great Physician.

To the naked – Jesus is the Lily of the Valley, more adorned than all of Solomon's raiments.

To the attacked – Jesus is the Advocate and Redeemer from the law.

To the addicted – Jesus is the Supplier of every need.

To the debtor – Jesus is the Payer of our debt, our Earnest.

To the lonely – The Comforter has come.

To the drowning – Jesus is an Anchor and Green Pastures.

To the homeless – Jesus is the Cornerstone of that mansion, just over the hilltop.

To the depressed – Jesus is the Sun of
Righteousness, the Rose of Sharon.
To the educationally harassed – Jesus is the
Alpha and Omega.
To the lost – Jesus is the Bright and Morning
Star, the Day Star.
To the wanderer – Jesus is the Way.
To the dead – Jesus is the Life.
To the seeker – Jesus is the Truth.
To the hungry – Jesus is the Bread of Life, the
bagel of the day.
To the thirsty – Jesus is the Cup of Heaven,
the Vine that can turn water into wine, [the
Everlasting Water].
(Leonard Sweet, p. 43)

Prayer: Jesus, you satisfy every thirst and every hunger pang within my being. Your love and compassion toward me humble me. Thank you for the message that you have passed onto Peter and to me so that nothing keeps me distant from you or you from me. I love you Lord. **Amen.**

Challenge: Is there a “Peter” in your life to whom you can tell the Good News that Christ is alive and wants to see them?

Scripture Reading: Romans 8

From the Book of Concord: ““And remit our debt, as we remit what our debtors owe.’ This petition has to do with our poor, miserable life. Although we have God’s Word and believe, although we obey and submit to his will and are nourished by God’s gift and blessing, nevertheless we are not without sin. We still stumble daily and transgress because we live in the world among people who sorely vex us and give us occasion for impatience, anger, vengeance, etc. Besides, the devil is after us, besieging us on every side and, as we have heard, directing his attacks against all the previous petitions, so that it is not possible always to stand firm in this ceaseless conflict.

“Here again there is great need to call upon God and pray: ‘Dear Father, forgive us our debts.’ Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; for before we prayed for it or even thought about it, he gave us the gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness. But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness. For the flesh in which we daily live is of such a nature that it does not trust and believe God and is constantly aroused by evil desires and devices, so that we sin daily in word and deed, in acts of commission and omission. Thus our conscience becomes restless; it fears God’s wrath and displeasure, and so it loses the comfort and confidence of the gospel. Therefore it is necessary constantly to run to this petition and get the comfort that will restore our conscience” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 452.85-89).

Tell Yourself

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” (1 John 3:19-20)

“The gracious forgiveness of all your sins! Hear it rightly. Take it absolutely literally—the forgiveness of all your sins. Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby, upon whom nothing weighs heavily, thus even lighter of heart, provided much has weighed upon your heart” (Soren Kierkegaard, 1813-1855).

“Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby. . . .” Ah, when that is true, life is so good and sweet. There is, however, a phrase in that quote that is tricky to get past with ease. Know what the phrase is? “. . . you ought to be . . .” “It is not that I disagree with it. There is just a huge difference between what ought to be and what is. In other words, knowing God has forgiven me is one thing. Telling myself that I am forgiven is another matter all together. Going away from the altar as a newborn baby is great, but first you have to get there . . . to the altar. That was Leah’s struggle.

I was in my office when she called, her voice filled with despair in the midst of deep sobbing and tears. We arranged to meet within the hour, upstairs in the sanctuary. When I went up to meet her, I found her in the very back of the church. In fact, she was as far back as one can be from the front of the sanctuary and the altar without actually being outside. I invited her to come inside. She told me that she did not feel worthy to go

any closer. I did not insist. We stood there in the entrance of the church and talked. Leah’s journey had been a very rough one. Let her words that she shared as a testimony in a worship service tell you her story:

“Seven years ago my life changed forever. I began experiencing extensive fears and worries which became debilitating and included controlling “what if” thoughts and unrealistic danger. I over-examined daily thoughts and actions. I repeated them constantly in my mind. I was paranoid. Due to denial and fear of judgment, I avoided getting help, fearing how the outcome would affect me as a mother, as an employee and as a potential employee if I left my present job—and how would others judge me as a person in today’s world? As a consequence, I allowed anxiety to control my life, and eventually depression set in. I needed to make an immediate choice in my life. The symptoms were causing severe confusion to my children and threatening my marriage. I needed to make a commitment to get the help for myself and for my family.”

Leah knew what it was like to be afraid of people. Standing now in the back of the church, her question was, “Do I have to be afraid of God?” This had become the battle within. She had come to the conclusion that she had this disease because of God’s dislike

for her. Believing she was unworthy of His love, she had thrown out every Bible in the house. Her actions only fed the feeling of unworthiness. It became a vicious cycle. It was not the illness keeping her away but the deep feeling of unworthiness.

Does God want us to approach His altar? Many of us would immediately say, “Of course,” but there is a wide gap between saying it and believing it, especially when you find it difficult to forgive yourself. There are so many things that can lead us to believe we are not worthy or wanted. It could be years of a destructive addiction. Maybe it is an injury we caused to someone by what we said or did. Is there anything inside of you that makes you feel unworthy or unwanted? Anything that holds you back from coming closer?

Leah was diagnosed with Obsession Compulsion Disorder. It had driven her to a point of despair. The paranoia was at its worst, with her believing that God had it out against her. It had confused her family. It was destroying her marriage. She was not being honest with her husband. The walls were going up at home and between her and God. It wasn't the disease that was keeping her at a distance. It was what she had done and said that left her feeling distant from everyone. She not only wondered if those whom she loved could forgive her, but she was uncertain how to forgive herself. Complicating all of this was the confusion between true and false guilt. Some of Leah's guilt was over things that she had truly messed up. Other parts of her guilt were over things she imagined, with no basis of truth to it, as it was a part of the paranoia. In either case, the problem was the same: “How do I forgive myself?” Does He want me to approach Him?

I did not say a lot to Leah. I just had the sense to say little and get out of the way with what God was already doing. I did direct her to Luke 15 (the story of the prodigal son). I briefly explained to her how the son returned home with a rehearsed speech in his mind in

order to get on his dad's good side again. At least it would be better to be in his father's house as a servant than the way he was living at present. On his way home, before he could get words out of his mouth, his dad was running toward him. Normally it would be reversed, with the father waiting for his son to come to him. Then there is the shame of this father running. This was an action that was sure to invite the disrespect of the village upon the father. The father did not care. His son was coming home. Before the son could offer anything, the father was restoring the dignity of his son with the ring, the robe and the sandals.

I reminded Leah that the Father in this parable is Jesus. This is what He has done for you and me. This is what He is doing today. He is running toward you. The shame you feel, He has taken upon Himself on the Cross. Now He wants to restore your dignity and worth by means of His cleansing grace. We are not worthy. Not Leah. Not you. Not me. None of us are worthy. But, oh my, are we wanted! Do you see Him running toward you!?

I invited Leah to spend some time alone with God, pondering the words of Luke 15. I also invited her to go closer to the altar should she wish. God would enjoy and welcome that. I then left her alone to ponder the One running toward her.

Forgiveness. It is one thing to know that God has forgiven us. It is sometimes very hard to forgive someone who has hurt us. Maybe hardest of all is being able to forgive ourselves.

What is it that stands in the way of forgiving oneself? I have found three common stumbling blocks. The first is “performance-based forgiveness”—the belief that I must do enough in order to deserve His mercy. I know in my mind that it is by His grace, but so ingrained in my sinful nature is the thought that I am in control. I am the one who must contribute toward my good. It is more than my not being able to accept something for

free. It is that I have a hard time admitting that I am helpless without God making the first move.

The second thing that stands in the way of forgiving oneself often times revolves around understanding the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is when I say, “I have done something bad.” Shame is when I say, “I am bad.” God deals with both of these on the Cross.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1-2).

I have been justified. God has declared me just. He has removed my guilt. It is as if I did nothing wrong. But what of my remembrance of what I have done? What do I do with my shame? He has declared me just. He holds nothing against me. Does He, however, want to fellowship with me? From Leah’s perspective—can we be friends? Can I come near to Him again?

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:9-10).

Justification is a legal term.

Reconciliation is a relational term. It is very personal. If I get a speeding ticket, I want to be justified. I am not really concerned if the officer and I are reconciled (that is unless he is a friend of mine). At the Cross, God reconciles me to Himself. The friendship is restored. He wants to have me close.

The third thing that stands in the way of forgiving oneself is our hesitancy to turn around and take a look at Him. This is the essence of repentance. The defiance of sin is nothing less than our turning our back on God.

When God leads us to repentance, it involves a change of mind and a turning around. We see things differently. That is what happened with the prodigal son. That is what God was inviting Leah to do. Turn around and look at my face—the face of Jesus as He comes running to you.

“Repent, then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Here is how Leah’s testimony continues:

“I got professional help and started on medication. I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Without help, I was told, I would not improve. I was not able to take control of my fears by myself. I could only do this with Christ’s help. Admitting to others my paranoid fears was the hardest part. I feared telling anyone, partly due to paranoia and partly due to societal judgments. I was inspired through prayer, patience, encouragement and spiritual guidance to allow God to handle my fears. As I got to know God and who He is and that He is with me at all times, I realized that I had the courage to fight the paranoia. Two thoughts were of help to me. The first is a quote from Billy Graham: ‘Anxiety is the natural result when our lives are centered on anything short of God.’ The other thought is from Deuteronomy 1:17: *“Do not show partiality in judgment; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God.”*

“Judgment belongs to God,” and, in Christ, He has declared you and me not guilty. Before you tell anyone about the love of God . . . before you proclaim to the world what you have learned about Jesus . . . tell yourself that He has forgiven you—of *all* your sins.

Martin Luther was once asked if he felt his sins were forgiven. He replied, “No, I don’t *feel* that they are forgiven; I *know* that they are, because God says so in His Word.”

There is a huge difference between *knowing* and *feeling*. I do not always *feel* forgiven, but I trust His Word—His Word that tells me it is so.

Spend a few moments to meditate on His Word. Let Him speak to you. If you are bothered by your remembrance of past sins, let His Word remind you that He has forgotten them.

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgression from us. As a father has compassion on his children so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:8-14).

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me . . . You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise” (Psalm 51:10-11, 16-17).

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1 John 3:20).

“God is greater than our hearts.” He knows the guilt and the shame that can so often haunt you. Set your heart at rest. Be at peace, not in your promises to do better but in

His promise that is carried out on the Cross. I like the way Charles Stanley has put it:

“There we have it. Christ is God’s solution for dealing with sin. Only through Christ can we find forgiveness. But once it has been found, it is a settled issue—past sin, present sin, and future sin. The details of what we have done, why we did it, and how many times we did it are irrelevant. Sin is sin; lost is lost; paid is paid; forgiven is forgiven. Either we have it, or we don’t. Are there sins from your past that continue to hang over you like a dark cloud? When you pray, does something inside you cause you to doubt that God is going to listen to you because of your past? Do you feel that your potential for the kingdom of God has been destroyed because of your past disobedience? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you have not yet come to grips with God’s solution to your sin. You are still holding on to a way of thinking that will keep you in bondage the rest of your life. You have set yourself up to live a defeated life in which you never reach your potential for the kingdom of God” (p. 56).

“Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby, upon whom nothing weighs heavily . . .” Getting to the altar was not an easy journey for Leah. She did get there, however. After I left, she eventually entered the church and made her way up to the altar. As she did, I imagine that the angels in heaven rejoiced and “high-fived” each other. Leah was home. When she left the altar, it was the beginning of a new journey and “upon her heart nothing weighed too heavily.”

That moment freed her from her bondage to fear. God, who works all things together had used her disease to draw her closer to Him. Now others are blessed and being invited to come to His altar through her witness and service within the Kingdom. I know of few greater joys than that of

witnessing the power of the transformed life.

Do you find it difficult to approach the altar? Tell yourself this day: “God has forgiven me. I am justified. I am reconciled.” Tell yourself, “Sin is sin; lost is lost; paid is paid; and forgiven is forgiven” and “I am not worthy, but I am wanted. I am wanted and loved by God, and the blood of Jesus makes me worthy to come close to Him.

Prayer: I am justified. I am reconciled. I am welcomed in your presence. You want me to come close to you—not because of anything I have done. I deserve none of this. It is all because of you, Jesus. You have taken my shame and guilt upon yourself. Now you welcome me to draw close to you with nothing weighing too heavily on me. All praise be to you, O Christ. **Amen.**

Challenge: Look for a moment this day in an email or a note or a conversation to pass the baton of faith onto those close to you.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 103

From the Book of Concord: “From Peter they also quote this statement [1 Peter 4:8], ‘Love covers a multitude of sins.’ It is evident that Peter is also speaking about love toward the neighbor because he connects this passage to the text that commands love for one another. Indeed, it could not have entered the mind of any apostle to say that our love overcomes sin and death; or that love is an atoning sacrifice on account of which God is reconciled apart from Christ the mediator; or that love is righteousness without Christ the mediator. For even if there were such a love, it would be a righteousness of the law rather than of the gospel, because the latter promises us reconciliation and righteousness when we believe that on account of Christ as the propitiator, the Father is gracious to us, and that the merits of Christ are bestowed upon us. Therefore a little earlier Peter urges [1 Peter 2:4, 5] us to come to Christ so that we might be built upon Christ. And he adds [1 Peter 2:6], ‘Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ Our love does not free us from shame when God judges and accuses us. But faith in Christ does free us in the midst of these fears because we know that on account of Christ we are forgiven” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 156.238-239).

27

Tell the One Who Hurt You, “I Forgive You”

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

Telling someone what you have learned about God’s forgiveness is one thing. Telling someone who has hurt you, “I forgive you” is another story altogether.

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

It would be so much easier for me if “kind” and “compassionate” were in reverse order. “Kind” is an action-oriented word. “Compassionate” is a feeling-oriented word. Placing them in that order calls upon me to act kindly toward a person whether the feelings precede those actions or not. I would rather wait until I feel like it. God in His wisdom understands, however, that so often action needs to precede feelings. The first and foremost action is that of forgiveness.

Now before we go too much further, let’s clarify what forgiveness is because there are many misconceptions. Forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting, almost pretending that something never happened. God certainly forgets. He tells us in Jeremiah 31:34b:

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

God is able to completely forget and clear out of His thinking or remembrance the wrong that I have done. When I try this, I end up feeling guilty that I must not have forgiven a person when their offense to me keeps rising up in my mind. Forgiveness is as much a process where I must daily die to myself and allow Christ and His love to rise

up within me. Joseph of the Old Testament is a great example of one who does not forget. He remembers quite well what his brothers did to him. Through a painstaking process, he works toward reconciliation with his brothers. James R. Bjorge in his book, “Living in the Forgiveness of God,” writes,

“Forgiveness happens when past resentments are dealt with, not just discarded; are owned, not disowned; are recognized, not repressed; are released, not retained” (p. 60).

Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it excusing. Forgiveness is not a matter of sweeping under the carpet what someone has done to us. Realize that just a few verses before we are told to forgive “*just as in Christ God forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32), we are also told, “*In your anger do not sin*” (vs. 26a). Nor is forgiveness a matter of “time heals all wounds.” Sometimes time will only cause bitterness to take root. God’s Word warns, “*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry*” (v. 26b).

Forgiveness involves in our relationships what it did with Jesus on the Cross—the canceling of the debt we believe someone owes us. This does not mean we leave them off the hook. Rather, it means that we take “the knife” out of our “gut.” In “The Art of Forgiveness,” Lewes Smedes writes:

“When you forgive a person, this does not mean you are immediately healed.

When you forgive a person, this does not mean you are going to be buddy/buddy. When we forgive a person, this does not mean we surrender the right to restitution or justice when appropriate. When we forgive a person, this does not mean that we trust them, yet. When we forgive a person, we are not avoiding pain; we are opening the door to healing. When we forgive, we take the journey at the pace we are able to handle . . . the deeper the hurt, the longer the journey” (pp. 177-178).

The hardest thing for me to get a hold of emotionally and relationally is that forgiveness is not dependent upon first hearing that someone is sorry. If that were true, Jesus would never have prayed, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). In light of these words, the words of Ephesians 4:32, “. . . *forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you,*” stir my heart and burden me. How can this be in my life? I feel so inadequate to the task. Here I am helped by Henri Nouwen’s words in “The Return of the Prodigal Son”:

“I have often said, ‘I forgive you,’ but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return, if only the praise for being so forgiving! But God’s forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few

conditions between me and the one who I am asked to forgive” (1994, pp. 129-130).

Forgiveness in light of this is not an easy matter. There is often a feeling of injustice left within me. It is on this note that the words of Philip Yancey in “Amazing Grace” are helpful:

“At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy” (p. 93).

Even in light of this, I still find forgiveness to be an ongoing learning and growing process in my life. What helps me most of all is to remember that forgiveness ultimately is God’s. I am the vessel through which His forgiveness is to flow. It is not my forgiveness that I must muster up on my own strength. Rather, it is allowing His forgiveness to flow through me to others.

The story of Corrie Ten Boom has shed light on this for me over and over. Corrie Ten Boom, author of “The Hiding Place,” tells how she and her family secretly housed Jews in their home during WW II. Their illegal activity was discovered, and Corrie and her sister, Bessie, were sent to the German death camp, Ravensbruck. There Corrie would witness many being put to death, including her sister. Following the war, Corrie spent her days proclaiming the love of Christ.

“It was 1947 and I’d come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth that they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that that’s where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God

casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, ‘no fishing allowed.’ Then some faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out, ‘A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’ And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remember him. I was face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. ‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.’ ‘Fraulein,’ again the hand came out—‘will you forgive me?’

“And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been

many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. . . . ‘Jesus help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit” (pp. 53-55).

“I forgive you.” They are not easy words to say, but they are words that can free us and bring healing, if not to the one to whom we speak them, then at least to ourselves. Pattie Davis, daughter of Ronald Reagan, recalls a moment in her father’s life following the attempt on his life:

“The following day my father said he knew his physical healing was directly dependent on his ability to forgive John Hinckly. By showing me that forgiveness is the key to everything, including physical health and healing, he gave me an example of Christ-like thinking” (p. 70).

Forgiveness is not excusing. It is not forgetting. Nor is it tit for tat. Some get that impression from Matthew 6:15:

“But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

God’s forgiveness toward us is unconditional. No strings attached. It was

offered and paid for on the Cross before we were born. So what does this verse mean in our lives and relationships? I believe that if I say to someone in my life, “I will never forgive you,” I am in essence saying to God, “You can have your way with me; your love can flow through me to anyone in my life except for this one person.” Refusing to allow His love and forgiveness to flow through me to another person places me in a dangerous position. I then begin to shut my heart to God. It is not that He is unable to forgive me, but rather, that I am unwilling to receive it and be a conduit for it.

We are called to be proclaimers of the Gospel. One of the tougher ways we may be asked to do this is through the act of forgiveness toward someone who has hurt us. They might never respond. That doesn’t change what we are asked to do. It does not necessarily mean that we place them in a position of trust again in our life. It does mean, however, that we allow God to have His way with us. Sheldon Vanauken once said,

“The best argument for Christianity is Christians; their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths” (p.85).

When we are able to offer with joy and unconditional love the words, “I forgive you,” we offer the best argument for Christianity that I know.

Prayer: Those words are not easy to say. How did you do that on the Cross, Jesus? As they nailed you to that beam, you prayed for their forgiveness. Help me. Help me to say those words, “I forgive you,” to those in my life. I want your love to flow through me to them. I do not want my heart to become closed to you. Help me Jesus, for I cannot do it on my own. Amen.

Challenge: Is there someone who sinned against you, and you find yourself unable to forgive them? In the confidence of His grace, ask God to help you be the vessel through which His grace and forgiveness can flow.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4

From the Book of Concord: “There is, however, attached to this petition a necessary and even comforting addition, ‘as we forgive our debtors.’ He has promised us assurance that everything is forgiven and pardoned, yet on the condition that we also forgive our neighbor. For just as we sin greatly against God every day and yet he forgives it all through grace, so we also must always forgive our neighbor who does us harm, violence, and injustice, bears malice toward us, etc. If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you. But if you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven—not on account of your forgiving (for he does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it, as the gospel teaches) but instead because he has set this up for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise that matches this petition in [Luke 6\[:37\]](#), ‘Forgive, and you will be forgiven.’ Therefore Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord’s Prayer, saying in [Matthew 6\[:14\]](#), ‘If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. . . .’” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 453.93-96).

Tell of His Name (or the Rocks Will)

“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’” (Luke 19:39-40)

Sitting on my desk is a rock. It has been with me since I found it on a beach in Maine back in 1964. It is not a pet rock. It doesn't do any tricks. It is just a rock that happens to remind me of an important place in my life and heart.

If you find that a bit strange, have you ever thought that rocks actually have had a rather important part in the pages of Scripture? What rocks come to mind when you mentally scan the stories of Scripture?

If rocks could talk, what a story they would tell! The rock upon which Jacob slept (Genesis 28:11) could testify of a God who gives second chances to people who have fallen, cheated and schemed like Jacob. The stone that provided water for Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 17:6) would remind us of a God who provides for our needs in the wilderness of life. The stone upon which the Law of God had been written (Exodus 31:18) could talk about the love of a God who sought through words written in His own hand to provide His people with an opportunity to respond to His loving act of deliverance. Upon that stone, God was establishing the basis for our relationship with Him throughout the rest of Scripture (i.e., Because I have done this for you, therefore I ask you now to do this in response). Then in 1 Samuel 17:40, little pebbles that fit into the hand of a shepherd boy could remind us of our God who defeats the giants in our life, no matter how imposing and impossible they seem at first. In the life of Jesus, there are any number of

rocks and stones. What would the stones that Satan used to tempt Jesus to turn them into bread (Matthew 4:3) have to say to us? What testimony could they offer as to how Satan tempts us so precisely to the desires of our heart? Yet, in Jesus we see the Word of God giving the strength to resist and not buckle beneath temptation. Then in John 8:7, what story of love and mercy could be told by that one stone held in the hand of Jesus? An angry and self-righteous mob stood ready to throw stones at the head of the adulterous woman. Jesus holds up one stone. *“Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone.”* One by one they leave until only Jesus and the woman are left. Of what would the stone at Lazarus' grave testify (John 11:38-44)?

Then there are the rocks of Palm Sunday. If these rocks could talk, they would remind us that we were created for the praise of God.

“‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out’” (Luke 19:40).

The religious leaders wanted Jesus to quiet the crowd. Jesus sternly reminds them that the praise of God is not something that can be stilled. You and I were created to praise God and to bring glory to His name.

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:4-6).

In his book, “The Purpose Driven Life” (p. 64), Rick Warren writes,

“Anthropologists have noted that worship is a universal urge, hard wired by God into the very fiber of our being—an inbuilt need to connect with God. Worship is as natural as eating or breathing. If we fail to worship God, we always find a substitute, even if it ends up being ourselves. The reason God made us with this desire is that he desires worshippers! Jesus said, ‘The Father seeks worshippers’ (John 4:23, The Message).”

If rocks could talk, would these stones of Palm Sunday remind us of the tears? Typically, the observance of Palm Sunday in most churches is one filled with great joy as children enter with palm branches waving, and adults sing glorious and triumphant songs. Yet, on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus cried. As soon as He refers to the stones crying out, we read,

“As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you’” (Luke 19:41-44).

In one of our greatest of celebrations, the heart of Jesus was breaking. He knew of the destruction that awaited so many because they would not believe in Him. Not only would their city be destroyed in less than forty years, but their very souls would face eternal destruction.

It is hard to say what the crowd was thinking amidst their songs of praise, but if rocks could talk, they would tell us that on the mind of Jesus were the lost.

What occupies your mind? Maybe you have seen the famous sculpture, “The Thinker.” Have you ever asked yourself, what is he thinking? The statue was originally created in 1880 as a part of Auguste Rodin’s larger work, “The Gates of Hell,” which was an ornamental door for a proposed palace of decorative arts, based on Dante’s “Inferno.” The entire work was never completed, but Rodin’s intent in “The Thinker” was for him to be contemplating the plight of those in hell.

I believe that one thing which has weakened the mission of the church is that there are not enough people who think about that. The plight of the lost in hell at present is not something any of us want to be burdened by in a day. The future of those without Christ is not foremost in much of our thinking. On that Palm Sunday, it was for Jesus. He wept. He knew full well what the future looked like for so many—a future separated from the Father, Himself and the Holy Spirit.

We have been created to live to the praise of His glorious grace (Ephesians 1:6). As part of that purpose, Christ has given us the mission of inviting as many as possible to the feast. How can we keep silent on this? We have in our possession the message of forgiveness through Christ alone. It is the only message of hope for the world. There is no other way. That is not just my view; it is His. Jesus says, “. . . *No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).

There are some things that are so important we cannot afford to be silent. A few years ago there was a TV commercial for Mercedes Benz. It showed their car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. Someone then asked the company spokesman why they do not enforce their patent on the Mercedes Benz energy-absorbing car body, a design evidently copied by other companies because of its success. The spokesman matter-of-factly replied, “Because some things in life are too important not to share.” (Leadership Journal, 1993, p. 61). How true that is. The Good News that is ours about the forgiveness

of our sins through Christ will save people from something far worse than an auto collision.

When you read of the early Church, it is clear that they could not stop telling others about Christ. Their joy and conviction could not let them be silent, even with people that they would not normally speak to in life:

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:19-21).

If rocks could talk, what great stories they could tell. One other rock I have saved for last—the rock of the Resurrection. Can you imagine the joy in retelling what that Easter morning was like? No one needed to roll the rock away for Jesus to exit. All the forces of death, our sin and Satan himself could not keep Christ in that grave. Would the rock

tell us of the power God exerted to raise up His Son as a loud “Amen” to His Son’s “It is finished”? Would the rock tell us of the joy in the midst of disbelief as the women and later the disciples approached the tomb? Oh, if rocks could talk.

But they don’t have to. For we are His living stones, called to declare His praises:

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:2-3, 9).

Prayer: Open my lips, O Lord, and I shall declare your praise. You alone are worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! May I this day as your living stone give praise to you in my words and through my actions. To you alone be the glory. **Amen.**

Challenge: Carry a small stone in your pocket this week. Let it remind you that you were created to praise the Lord in your life.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 2

From the Book of Concord: “Thus you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires, namely, that one’s whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: ‘What you formerly sought from the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly.’

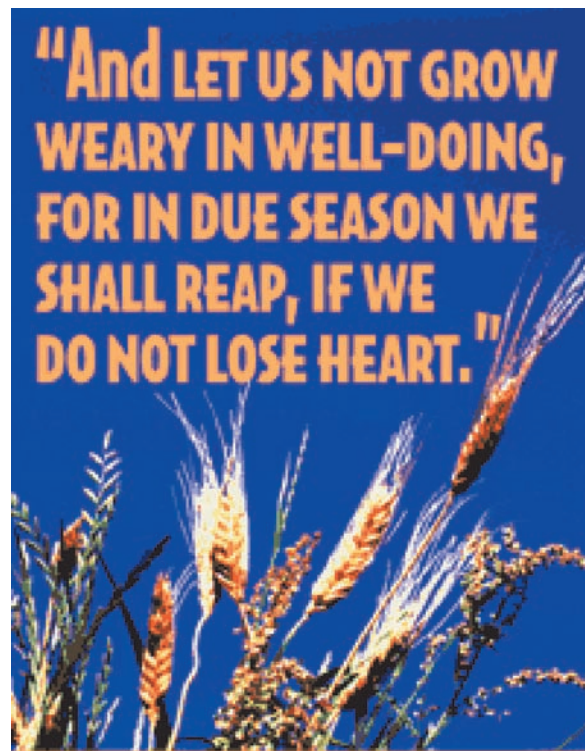
“Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other

consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort” (The Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, p. 388:13-17).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Tell and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

5th Mission Response

Send



20 Sent into a Changing World

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”
(John 17:15-18)

The wedding was beautiful. The reception that followed was relaxed elegance. It is a day that I will never forget—September 8, 2001. Following the wedding, my daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband, Seth, traveled to New York where they would set sail for a honeymoon cruise to Bermuda. As they sailed out of the New York harbor on the morning of September 9, they stood on the top deck, looking at the skyline. They were going to take some pictures but decided to wait until they returned. That return trip never happened—at least not to New York. Following their cruise, they were directed a week later to the harbor in Philadelphia. They would they not return to New York as a result of September 11, and they would not return to the same world from which they had departed as newlyweds. They were beginning their married life in a world that changed overnight.

Prior to September 11, the world seemed to function with certain predictable rules and outcomes. There was a certain routine to life that many found comfortable and secure. Since that time, life seems less familiar and secure.

Although unrelated to September 11, this is not a great deal different from what is going on within the Church today. The Church of the 50's and the 60's existed in an environment that was friendly and familiar. I remember well how my first-grade teacher would read to us from the King James Bible and then pray the Lord's Prayer to begin each day. This was

in the public school! The church was accepted and influential within society.

The times have changed. It did not happen overnight, but it has and is changing fast. When I first came out of seminary, one out of four couples lived together before marriage. Now it is closer to three out of four. Instead of referring to “families,” it is more accurate to refer to “households” because of so many different blends of relationships living under one roof. The traditional family is almost the exception rather than the norm. Lately we hear of courtroom battles challenging “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance and “In God We Trust” on currency. The battle for defining marriage intensifies over questions that were almost unthinkable just fifty years ago. For those of you who are old enough, do you remember Elvis and how on the Ed Sullivan Show the camera would not scan down to show his shaking hips on television? The times have changed.

In all of this, the Church, for the most part, has not changed. In many ways, that is good. The teaching based on God's unchanging truth is the same. The Cross is central. Christ is Lord. In other ways, though, it is not good. The church is perceived as not struggling with the issues of the world. In fact, there are many who would view the Church as being immoral, because they do not see the Church as wrestling with the serious issues of abortion, poverty, homosexuality, or Aids, to

mention a few. When I first heard this, I was offended and insulted. I thought, “How dare they.” The more I thought about it, though, I began to wonder. Does the world see the Church as issuing moral judgments with no serious dialogue going on among people? When was the last time I encouraged serious conversation to occur over these issues? Don’t get me wrong. I stand with the Church on these issues. However, how can we engage in a meaningful conversation with those who are increasingly viewing the Church as being irrelevant and disconnected with the real issues of life?

It is important to struggle with this question, because the world is spiritually very hungry and thirsty. There is a spiritual revival going on in America. It is just not happening within the Church. When I was growing up, Billy Graham was viewed as America’s pastor. Today, I believe that Oprah Winfrey would be identified more in that role. I asked my eighth-grade religion class how many knew of Billy Graham. Two out of twelve raised their hands.

Many churches today find themselves struggling to hold their own with rising finances and decreasing attendance. Meanwhile, there is the Wal-Mart mindset that creeps into the church. People’s expectations as to what the church should do for them continually increase.

It all sounds depressing, doesn’t it? In one way, it is. Yet, in another way, it is not. There is a bright and hopeful future for the Church—not for the church as I’ve known it; I believe those days and that church are of the past. The Church, however, of my faith’s confession is alive and well throughout the world today. In the Nicene Creed, we confess, “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.”

The word apostle means “one who is sent out or away.” When we confess our faith in the “apostolic Church,” we are not only saying that our church is rooted in the apostles’ teachings but that we, like they, are

sent out. In other words, everyone within the local church is a missionary. Each person is sent out. Could you imagine the two men who walked with Jesus to Emmaus staying there with what they learned? Could you imagine them sitting at the table saying, “Let’s wait until the rest come to us, and we will tell them who we met along the road”? No, they immediately got up and hoofed it back to Jerusalem to tell the others, “It is really true—He is alive!”

We are not to sit back. We are sent out with the saving message that God loves the world. He shows that love by giving us His only Son. It is His Son, Jesus, who takes our punishment upon Himself, so that we can now call God “Father.” Enjoy and appreciate the rich and precious gift that is yours to call God “Father.” We had lost that right in the rebellion and disobedience of our sin. Not everyone born is a child of God. A creation of God? Yes. A child of God? No. Only those who know Jesus as their Savior and brother are able to call God their Father. This is a message that is unique to the world. No other religion lays claim to this. While the Islamic faith rejects outright any thought of God as Father, a recent survey of six hundred former Muslims who had become Christians reveals that one of the factors in their conversion was the emphasis on the love of God and the intimacy that we have with Him as our heavenly Father (Sproul, p. 33).

We are the “sent ones” into a world that is hungry to hear the Good News. This is not some new thought or fad. This is the prayer of Jesus. As He faced His own brutal death, most on His mind and heart was the future of the Church. He prayed,

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18).

Jesus understood that the disciples would have to be sent. The world was not about to come to them. They would be engaging the world on its home turf. Back in the 50's and 60's, the world surrounding the church, at least in America, was familiar. The church was playing on its own home field. In sports, home field advantage is key. The crowd is friendly. The playing field is known. I grew up watching the Red Sox play in friendly Fenway. The little nuances of home field, not to mention enthusiastic fans, gives teams an edge. In the life of the church, we have lost the home field advantage. Today, we are not living in a churched culture. That does not cause me to despair. It does, however, cause me to say with even greater boldness, "I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church."

Elizabeth and Seth's ship had come back to a different harbor and to a different country

than the one they left seven days earlier. As a result, now more than ever, we need to see that the vessel of "one holy Christian and apostolic Church" is not a cruise ship for the comfort of its passengers, but a rescue ship sent out with a life-saving mission. Ships are safe in the harbor, but that is not what ships are built for. The vessel of the Church has been sent out to sail into the waters of a changing world with an unchangeable message of God's love in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Father, the world has changed so much. There is little that I can count on remaining the same, with the exception of you. Your love and your Word are constant and unchanging. You are the same faithful and loving God that Adam, Moses and my believing ancestors worshipped. I praise you for your unchanging grace. Give me wisdom to carry your message into the world that is changing every day. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Where might you be able to enter into the world this week to engage in listening and conversing over the issues of the day?

Scripture Reading: John 20

From the Book of Concord: "Therefore, in his immeasurable goodness and mercy God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and of the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save. By means of this proclamation he gathers an everlasting church from humankind, and he effects in human hearts true repentance and knowledge of sin and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God wants to call human beings to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or read) and through the sacraments (which they use according to his Word). [1 Corinthians 1\[:21\]](#):" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will, pp. 553. 50).

30 Sent to Do Whatever We Can

*“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”
(1 Corinthians 12:7)*

July 24, 2002 in Sipesville, Pennsylvania, was another hot and muggy day. At 8:50 p.m., nine men working the second shift in the two-year-old Black Wolf Coal Company’s Quecreek Mine broke through into the Saxman Mine, which they thought was 300 feet from where they were mining. The maps they were using were outdated. Usually this was not a problem; but the mine they broke into held an unseen danger—water. Groundwater had filled the cavern. When the wall was breached, 50 to 60 million gallons of water began to pour into the Quecreek Mine, trapping the nine men working the late shift 240 feet below the surface.

Over the next 77 hours, the story of their rescue would capture the attention and the heart of the nation. Over the span of that time, we got to know the miners personally.

Their story of how they survived was inspiring. Huddled in the darkness, 240 feet below surface, these men supported each other. They used their body heat to warm each other in the subsurface cold. They would place the coldest among them in the center to provide him with extra warmth. They encouraged each other with their words when one became down or anxious. They were committed to each other, even to the point of binding themselves together with rope so that nothing could separate them from each other. At first I thought, “What a great example of the church.” Nine men huddled together in the darkness, supporting each other, while binding

themselves to stick together no matter what might come.

Later, I would re-think my first impression of this. Viewing the church as those huddled beneath the surface is, indeed, the way many see the church. The church then becomes nothing more than a place of refuge where people gather to support each other, waiting to be rescued—helpless in the growing darkness of the world. It is, to say the least, a weak and tepid view that does little to inspire joy or enthusiasm.

Speaking at a conference, my District President, John Brunner, helped me to see it from a different perspective as he offered his own keen perception of this same incident. Consider if you will, the church from the view of those who are above the surface, sent to do whatever they can to rescue those beneath. This is a much more exciting and true picture of what the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church” is to be.

Consider some of the details of this story from the view of those on top. There had never been an approach such as they were attempting—the rock was too hard to get through as quickly as necessary. Rock of this density could take weeks and months to drill through. But someone knew of a special compressor in the area that would make the drilling easier. A man was contacted in Hamburg, New York, for permission to use it. But soon the drill bit broke, and they had to send for a replacement from Roanoke,

Virginia. While waiting, they were not idle. There was urgency to their task. Using satellite technology, a local man with a global positioning system (GPS), was able to pinpoint the miners' exact location. Strategy sessions were held, and resources were gathered from all locations. Gathering local knowledge and resources as well as imported resources, they devised an approach that had never been tried before. Geology, mechanical engineering, medical technology and space science, as well as other disciplines, were joined together for the sole purpose of saving these nine men. Much of this planning took place while they waited for the new drill bit to arrive. As they worked and waited, they understood it was very possible that the chance of getting to the miners in time was slim. None of this caused them to waver in their effort.

Can you see the parallels between this story and that of the Church? It is a much healthier and dynamic picture of the Church. The "one holy Christian and apostolic Church" is a team sent out by Christ with an urgent mission: People are trapped—trapped in bondage to sin, burdened with guilt, and facing unknown fears. They live out their lives in darkness, helpless and unable to save themselves. Time is short. The work of bringing to them the life-saving message of Jesus requires our best and most coordinated effort as the *one* holy Christian and apostolic Church. We cannot sit idly by. Nor can we be deterred when we think that the chances are slim. Christ sends us out, empowered and gifted by His Spirit, for the sake of those who are lost. There is no time for casual onlookers or those who merely want to talk about the mission. It is a mission that will demand the use of every resource we can imagine. It is a mission that requires the unity of a team in approaching the task. We are told in Scripture:

"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good"
(1 Corinthians 12:6).

The Spirit has gifted each and every one of us with various spiritual gifts and abilities.

These gifts are given to us for the common good. God expects that we will use them to serve and bless His Church. When we do not use the gifts that God has given us, the work of the entire team is diminished. It may seem at times that what we are trying to accomplish is impossible. Not enough time. Not enough resources. Not enough knowledge or experience as to how to get it done. Yet lives are at stake—eternally. We are sent to do whatever we can in order for people trapped in sin to know the freedom that Christ offers. Christ who sends us will not allow us to be without the resources. I agree with J. Hudson Taylor who said, "Depend upon it—God's work done in God's way will never lack supplies" (p. 101).

Those resources are available within the gifted community of His Body and in the world that surrounds us. An example of this is seen in the 1500's. Martin Luther often ranks in the top five of the most influential people over the last 1000 years. Understand, though, that his effectiveness is due to the work and timing of the Spirit. Forty-five years before Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church, a German named Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press. This allowed books, formerly copied one at a time by monks, to be printed in mass. Luther's teachings and others to follow were spread throughout Europe because of God's use and timing with this invention. "God's work done in God's way will never lack supplies." Isn't it ironic that we now stand at the threshold of our mission with a technological invention as significant today as Gutenberg's printing press was in the 1500's? Like the teams that worked together for the rescue of the nine miners, the one holy Christian and apostolic Church must also work as one, employing as many resources as are available to us for the rescue of lost souls.

LC-MS President, Gerald Kieschnick, has laid out a vision before us that expresses this so well:

“We in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have ONE Mission—to seek lost people for Christ! We proclaim ONE Message—that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world! We do so as ONE People—united by God’s love in Jesus Christ.”

There are many things that can divide us within our own church. There are, however, many more things that unite us.

There is at least one other insight to be gained from the Quecreek Mine. Let me share with you the words of John Brunner:

“Yet with all the advanced technology and equipment, the people who could provide the best advice were those who had been in those same mines before, especially those who had just escaped. They could tell the rescuers what the conditions were like and how best to reach those at risk. Geology, mechanical engineering, medical technology, space science and several other disciplines were all applied. But knowing what the miners were experiencing and what they needed in order to survive long enough to be saved was critical. The only ones who really knew were the ones who themselves had been most recently in the dark.”

We who walk in the faith and have been in the church for a while forget what it is like to be lost and living in despair. I wonder how the church might be blessed to simply sit down with those who are recent converts and talk with them about what life is like now compared to their life without Christ. It may be that some will say, “I don’t know anyone who recently was lost.” This is very possible, because our circles can become so narrow at times. Then we need to do whatever we can to find some and speak with them. If we do not have the people we need to rescue the lost, we need to find them. If we do not have the resources, we need to ask for them. In the book of 1 Chronicles, this verse is recorded:

“. . . men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do. . .” (12:32). The church of today needs in its mission those who understand the times and what the church should do in light of it.

The mission before us is too large and too demanding for any one Christian or church to go it alone. Whatever we can. There are resources around us. Just as the rescue of the nine miners utilized many disciplines, can we do any less when it comes to matters eternal? How could your church partner with other churches in the community? How could you partner in the support of missionaries with the LC-MS World Missions department? Whatever we can. “I believe in the one holy Christian and apostolic Church.” How can we place more emphasis on that word “one” in our efforts rather than the separate efforts of many churches? One Message! One Mission! One People!

All of this is not to suggest that we can save anyone. Only by the effort and work of the Holy Spirit does one come to the faith. None of us can talk someone into the faith or reason them into the faith. This is His work. Mine is to present the opportunity for that Word to have its way with them. Paul said,

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:14-15).

Jesus has given me a command. He has given you the same command. It is a mission that demands that we do whatever we can to reach the lost. If we do not, then people around us and people we love will spend an eternity in hell.

Did you catch the pictures of the final moments when the nine miners made it to the surface? Did you see how grimy and dirty

they were? Did you happen to catch how grimy and dirty the rescuers were? I will bet you, though, that to those nine, those who were standing above pulling the cage up to the surface had the most beautiful feet they had ever laid their eyes on.

Prayer: Father, you did whatever you could to win me back. You were even willing to give up your own Son. I ask that you move us to love others as you have loved us so that we too are willing to do whatever we can to reach others in your name. **Amen.**

Challenge: In what way could you join with other Christians in your congregation or your community to reach out in service to others in the name of Christ?

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12

From the Book of Concord: “Therefore, if we want to consider our eternal election to salvation profitably, we must always firmly and rigidly insist that, like the proclamation of repentance, so the promise of the gospel is *universalis*, that is, it pertains to all people (Luke 24[:47]). Therefore, Christ commanded preaching ‘repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.’ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ for it (John 3[:16]). Christ has taken away the sins of the world (John 1[:29]); his flesh was given ‘for the life of the world’ (John 6[:51]); his blood is ‘the atoning sacrifice for . . . the whole world’ (1 John 1[:7; 2:2]). Christ said, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ (Matt. 11[:28]). ‘God has imprisoned all in unbelief, that he might have mercy on all’ (Rom. 11[:32]). ‘The Lord does not want any to perish but all to come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3[:9]). He is ‘Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him’ (Rom. 10[:12]). ‘Righteousness’ comes ‘through faith in Christ’ to all and ‘for all who believe’ (Rom. 3[:22]). ‘This is the will of the Father, that all who . . . believe in Christ shall have eternal life’ (John 6[:39, 40]). Therefore, Christ commanded that the promise of the gospel must be proclaimed to all those to whom repentance is preached (Luke 24[:47]; Mark 16[:15])” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, p. 645.28).

31 Sent Out to a Shaken World

“When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God!’”
(Matthew 27:54)

December 26, 2004—Sunday morning. For most of us, the day was a quiet one. The day after Christmas. Time to look at the gifts again. Time to pick up some of the mess. Halfway around the world, an entirely different day was unfolding. Five miles below the ocean, the most powerful earthquake in the last forty years shook the earth. Literally, it shook the earth. So powerful was this earthquake (new estimates have it at 9.3 on the Richter scale) that it slightly changed the rotation of the earth!

Earthquakes occur when tectonic plates that make up the earth’s surface shift. The plates that move and grind and press on each other will at times slip and snap. Earthquakes beneath the ocean floor sometimes generate immense sea waves known as tsunamis. The temperature and pressure in the seabed increase, sending an energy surge through the water.

The tsunami wave is not really a tidal wave as much as it is a power surge through the water. A deadly wave of this type will move through the ocean at the speed of a jumbo jet. Amazingly, to a boat on the surface, the wave is barely detectable. There is a wave on the surface, but it is not large by any description. A tsunami wave can move across an entire ocean, as the one of December 26 did in the Indian Ocean, in a matter of a few hours. It is estimated that the force of an earthquake of this magnitude is equal to the explosion of one million atomic bombs.

When this energy surge gets closer to shore, a telltale warning sign occurs: the water near the shore will recede, and then the ocean returns to shore all the receding water plus the surge of energy generated by the earthquake. This momentary recession serves as a warning for some, but others are foolishly enticed to come in to where the water once was to collect the fish and the shells, only to be swept away in the onslaught of water that follows.

On Maikhao Beach in northern Phuket, Thailand, a 10-year-old British girl named Tilly Smith had studied tsunamis in geography class at school and recognized the warning sign of the receding ocean. She and her parents warned others on the beach, which was evacuated safely.

As the surge of water and waves comes forward, there is such force that everything is swept away in its power. The wave itself will range from three feet to over 100 feet in height. Along with the vast waves is the destructive high tide of water that comes behind it. It is reported that palm trees were completely covered by water. In the Alaskan Tsunami of 1964, the water rose up a mountainside to a height of more than 1,700 feet.

At the moment, it is estimated that anywhere from 228,000 – 310,000 people are thought to have died as a result of the 2004 Tsunami, and the count is not yet complete.

All of this is beyond my comprehension. Yet, as unimaginable is the destruction and the

loss of life, the one fact that causes me even greater burden and tears is the question, “What of their souls?”

Many of the countries affected by this disaster are populated heavily by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. What of their souls? The destruction and suffering inflicted by the tsunami is horrific. Yet that pales in comparison to the destruction and suffering that awaits those whose lives have been fractured from God by sin.

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

A life fractured from God. This is what sin does. As with the rescue of the miners from Quecreek, I see a parallel in the disaster of December 26 for our spiritual lives.

The sin of Adam and Eve created a fault line. It fractured many relationships.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:8-9).

What a sad and pitiful picture that is. Adam and Eve sin and now they are hiding behind the trees from the God who created them for fellowship and intimacy. That is fractured. Then as God talks with Adam and Eve, we hear:

“And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’ The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it’” (Genesis 3:11-12).

And so the blame game begins. The oneness between man and woman has a huge fault line running through it. The result of sin does not stop there. There is more fracturing—this time between man and the world that God wants him to manage.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken. . .” (Genesis 3:17-19).

The fault lines that were caused by man’s disobedience have, like the slipping tectonic plates, released a power surge throughout the world—for all of time. The Bible tells of the disastrous results of sin that continue to sweep over all generations:

“But mark this; there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Often times, like it is with a tsunami wave, the destructive power of sin is not detected beneath the surface. People go about their lives, engaging in sinful habits, unaware of the destructive power that lies underneath the surface. As it gets closer to shore it begins to surface. It is deceiving at first because it offers something that entices people to come closer. As they do, it then releases its destructive power over them, and they are swept away in its destructive path. The pages of Scripture and of newspapers are filled with the carnage that is the result.

As those who have been sent into a world that is being shaken to its core, we must ask ourselves, “What is our responsibility in the midst of this?” We are not untouched by the fault lines of sin. Believers and non-believers alike can be and are swept away in its destructive path.

It is reported that when the tsunami hit shore, many people were immediately killed. Others ran to their safety. Still others ran safely away, only to return and help rescue those left behind and in danger of being killed. Out at sea there were sailing boats with people on board. Actually, they were in a safe place. As this unfolded, those on board noticed some people being carried out to sea by the force of the tsunami. Some on the boats helped them aboard, while others sailed away, not wanting to be involved and looking for a safe place to lay anchor.

Which of those two boats is Christ's view of the Church? The one holy Christian and apostolic Church is sent with a mission into the world to rescue the lost—those who are drowning in their guilt and shame. In the mission that He has given us, the Church is sent to cast the net of His grace and forgiveness to a world drowning in hopelessness and despair. Long ago, God was so disgusted with the world that we read:

“The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.’ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. . . . God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, ‘I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; I am surely going to destroy both of them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood. . . . But I will establish my covenant with you and you will enter the ark’”
(Genesis 6:6-8, 12-13, 18).

It was by means of the ark that God saved the earth from complete destruction. Today, God still desires to save the world through His chosen vessel, the ark of His Church.

The power of sin has shaken the earth to its core, stronger and deeper than any earthquake ever recorded. People's lives and homes are being shaken and torn apart daily. Into this world we are sent—sent with the message of another earthquake of even greater magnitude than that of sin or of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Ours is the message of how God is shaking the world to its core. It is actually a message of two earthquakes by which God is shaking the very foundations of the world:

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split” (Matthew 27: 50-51).

Then three days later, another earthquake was felt throughout the world:

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it” (Matthew 28:2).

The Cross and the Tomb shook the earth. More than just the earth, these two earthquakes shook loose the hold Satan had on us. They also shook loose the power and grip of death. The aftershock of those two 'quakes was still felt 50 days later on Pentecost when the Spirit, sent from Jesus, came upon the disciples, and their witness from that time forward would shake the world upside down. The aftershock of those two earthquakes is still being felt today in our lives.

On the day before we were going to bury my dad, I can remember standing above his open grave and saying out loud, “You hold nothing over me or over my dad. You could not hold onto the body of Jesus. Nor will you be able to hold onto the body of anyone who is in Jesus!”

“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true; Death has

been swallowed up in victory. Where O death is your victory? Where O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:54-58).

Be steadfast. Let nothing move you. The world is being shaken at its core by the fault lines of sin. Be steadfast. Let nothing move you. There are many things that can shake our world. Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean or, close to home, the death of a loved one or an illness. Our confidence in the midst of a shaken world is that the earthquakes that surrounded His crucifixion and resurrection provide us with an unshakable foundation, enabling us to say:

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the

sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her; she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Psalm 46).

Prayer: O God, you are my Rock. In a world shaken by sin, I stand on the steadfast promise of your Word. Kingdoms and powers will tumble but you, O God, and your Holy City stand secure. Yours alone is the Kingdom and power and glory forever and ever. **Amen.**

Challenge: Is there someone in your life who has been shaken and would benefit from receiving a note from you with the words of Psalm 46?

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 15

From the Book of Concord: “This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures (Ps. 51[:5] and Rom. 5[:12]; Exod. 33[:20]; Gen. 3[:6ff.]). Therefore, the scholastic theologians have taught pure error and blindness against this article:

1. That after the fall of Adam the natural powers of the human being have remained whole and uncorrupted, and that each human being possesses by nature sound reason and a good will, as the philosophers teach.
2. That the human being has a free will, either to do good and reject evil or to reject good and do evil.
3. That the human being is able, by using natural powers, to keep and carry out every command of God.

4. That human beings are able, using natural powers, to love God above all things and their neighbors as themselves.

5. That if human beings do as much as is in their power, then God will certainly give grace to them.

6. That if someone wants to go to the sacrament, it is not necessary to have a proper intention to do good, but it is enough for that person not to have an evil intention to commit sin, because human nature is so completely good and the sacrament is so powerful.

7. That there is no basis in Scripture that the Holy Spirit with his grace is necessary for performing a good work.

These and many similar things have arisen from a lack of understanding and ignorance about both sin and Christ our Savior. We cannot tolerate these purely pagan teachings, because, if these teachings were right, then Christ has died in vain. For there would be no defect or sin in humankind for which he had to die—or else he would have died only for the body and not for the soul, because the soul would be healthy and only the body would be subject to death” (Smalcald Articles, p. 311.3-11).

32

Sent Out With a Purpose

“For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.” (Acts 13:36)

What a great obituary. “David had served God’s purpose.” That is the way I want it to be read when I die: “Barry served God’s purpose.”

Unfortunately, it is not always that way. There is so much that demands our attention. So much that distracts and takes us off course. The greatest hindrance, however, is when a person or a church has no idea of what their purpose is in life. This happens more often than not.

Dr. Hugh Moorhead, a philosophy professor at Northeastern Illinois University, wrote to 250 of the world’s best philosophers, scientists, writers, intellectuals and key thinkers, asking them, “What is the meaning of life?” Some offered their best guess and others admitted that they just made up a purpose. Others were pretty straight-forward and said they had no idea. Some of them wrote to him and asked him to write back and tell them if he discovered the purpose of life (Chicago Review Press, 1988).

Knowing the purpose for which you exist is the key to living a productive and fruitful life. This is true for individuals, as it is true for congregations.

The effective churches are those who minister with a sense of purpose, evaluating everything in light of that purpose. Those individuals that I have known whose lives have been fruitful and productive live with an inner awareness that God has sent them into this world to accomplish something.

When I consider the life of Jesus, I see Him in this way. He lived each day with an awareness of being sent. From the Gospel of John, this becomes so apparent. Read the verses that follow slowly and thoughtfully. Ponder and reflect on what they reveal about the life of Jesus:

“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to finish His work’” (4:34).

“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (5:30).

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (6:38).

“But I know him because I am from him and he sent me” (7:29).

“The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him” (8:29).

“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (9:4).

“Then Jesus cried out, ‘When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me’” (12:44-45).

“For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it” (12:49).

“I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me” (13:20).

“Now this is eternal life: that that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (17:3).

“For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” (17:8).

“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (17:18).

“Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’” (20:21).

What was it like to hang out with Him on a daily basis, constantly hearing Him refer to His being sent? It would have to rub off on those He was with during those three years. It did. Years later, the influence of Jesus can be heard through Peter’s words when he wrote:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Peter did not always see things this way. In the beginning, when Jesus asked him to become a fisher of men, Peter’s response was to ask Jesus to get out of the boat. Now, here is Peter with that same inner sense of being sent by God to carry out a specific mission in life.

As Jesus lived out His life with a clear sense of being sent by the Father, He then

sent not only Peter, but you and me and every church that bears His name into the world. In years past, the emphasis in the local church was placed more on supporting those missionaries who had been sent into the mission field. In a world that has changed and now resembles more the world of the first century, the vision needs to be raised up within each church that *every member* is a missionary.

Think of it in this way: Wherever you go in the day ahead—to the office or to the classroom or to the mall—go into the day as one who is sent. How would it change your routine to go with the sense of being sent? It was that sense of purpose that compelled Jesus each and every day. It is that sense of purpose that He now places before us when He says,

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

This is the sense I get when I read these well known words of Ephesians 2:

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (vs. 10).

Imagine going into each day, sent by God, looking for those opportunities to do good works that He prepared for you before you were even born. That has a way of changing the outlook of a day into one that is loaded with possibilities and purpose.

The life of Jesus was defined and guided by the knowledge that He was sent by the Father. This was always on His mind. It kept Him accountable and focused. What makes us think that it is any different for us? When we lose this sense of being sent, as a church or as individuals, we run the danger of being taken off course by many distractions. The result? Our life, or our ministry, is unproductive. In Titus 3:14, God says,

“Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.”

We know all too well the stories of those who lost focus along the way. John Stott expresses it this way:

“The Christian landscape is strewn with the wreckage of derelict, half-built towers—the ruins of those who began to build and were unable to finish. For thousands of people still ignore Christ’s warning and undertake to follow him without first pausing to reflect on the cost of doing so. The result is the great scandal of Christendom today, so-called ‘nominal Christianity.’ In countries to which Christian civilization has spread, large numbers of people have covered themselves with a decent but thin veneer of Christianity. They have allowed themselves to become somewhat involved, enough to be respectable but not enough to be uncomfortable. Their religion is a great, soft cushion. It protects them from the hard unpleasantness of life, while changing its place and shape to suit their

convenience. No wonder the cynics speak of hypocrites in the church and dismiss religion as escapism” (p. 108).

Enough for nominal Christianity and its thin veneer in our lives. Just as many in Dr. Moorhead’s survey wanted to hear back as to whether he discovered anything about life’s purpose, the world is eager to learn from people of purpose. More importantly, God is looking for people who will enter into this day with the awareness that He has sent them with a purpose. When our hearts are ablaze with His purpose, the world will take notice that we too have been with Jesus.

Go ahead, put your name in the blank: “_____ served God’s purpose.” Let it begin with this day. One day at a time—wouldn’t it be great to be able to say that in this day you served God’s purpose?

Prayer: Jesus, as you were sent by your Father, you now send me. Help me this day to serve your purpose for your glory. **Amen.**

Challenge: Write on an index card, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20: 21). Carry the card with you throughout the day and place it somewhere to remind you of being sent into this day in His name.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2

From the Book of Concord: “This teaching states that in his intention and counsel God had preordained the following:

1. That the human race has been truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ, who has merited with his innocent obedience, suffering, and death both the righteousness that avails before God [Rom. 1:17; 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21] and eternal life.

2. That this merit and the benefits of Christ are to be offered, given, and distributed to us through his Word and sacraments.

3. That God wills to be effective and active in us with his Holy Spirit through the Word, when it is preached, heard, and meditated on, to convert our hearts to true repentance, and to enlighten them in true faith.

4. That he wills to make righteous all those who in true repentance accept Christ by faith, and he wills to receive them into grace as children and heirs of eternal life.

5. That he wills to sanctify in love those whom he has justified, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 1[:4].

6. That he wills to protect them in their great weakness against the devil, the world, and the flesh, to guide and lead them in his ways, to lift them up when they fall, and to comfort and preserve them in crosses and trials.

7. That he wills to strengthen and increase in them the good work that he has begun in them and to preserve them to the end, when they abide in God's Word, pray diligently, persevere in God's goodness, and faithfully use the gifts they have received.

8. That he wills, finally, to save and glorify forever in eternal life those whom he has elected, called, and justified" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, pp. 643-644.14-22).

The Sending Church

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabus, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:1-3)

When you read through the Acts of the Apostles, you almost need a Trip Tik from AAA to map the way of all the journeys. This is a church on the move. It is a very unique church. It is a sending church.

Not every church could be described in this way. Many churches offer great worship, meaningful Bible studies, and Christ-centered ministry to those who enter. That is the key: “to those who enter.” The ministry is for those who enter. There is very little sending that occurs.

What are the distinguishing marks of a sending church? Look closely at the model offered in Acts 13:

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabus, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.”

Now I know the temptation is to whiz through those names. Just another list of tough names to pronounce. There is, however, some great insight to be gained by looking closer. These men involved in ministry and teaching were quite a mixed group, to say the least. Barnabus was from the island of Cyprus. Simeon was also named Niger, which is a Latin term meaning “black skinned.” Lucius was from Cyrene, which was west of Egypt on the coast of Africa. His name was Greek, and so there is the strong possibility

that he was a Gentile. Manaen was a member of high society, having grown up with Herod the tetrarch. Then there is Saul with all of his credentials in education and rabbinical training. Right there in the middle of multi-cultural and urban Antioch, the Roman capital of Syria, is a church with a leadership team that reflects the community that surrounds it.

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting.” This community was marked by worshiping and fasting. The discipline of fasting is not practiced by many today. It does, however, have deep roots within Scripture.

“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4: 32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on Him and on doing His will (Willard, p. 166).

This simple reference to worshiping and fasting reveals a church that humbly depends not on its own resources and ideas, but on God’s Word to guide them. It is of no surprise then that, in the midst of this, the Holy Spirit

gives them specific guidance as to what they should do. Sending churches wait on the Lord, expecting to be guided by His will.

“Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Sending churches are not possessive. They are willing to let go of some of their best leaders if this is the will of God. Prompted by the Spirit, they first pray and fast again. There is the need within them to make sure this is of God. Confirmed in this, they send off two strong leaders so that the Word about Christ can spread to the outer most parts of the world.

Sending churches are not selfish about their resources. They are willing to share for the sake of the kingdom. They understand and follow the encouragement of John when he said to another church,

“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth” (3 John 5-8).

This is one of the many things that I have so respected about St. Luke. Over the years, this congregation has been willing to send out its staff and give ten percent of paid staff time for work in the Kingdom at large. This attitude of unselfishness is a blessing to the Kingdom and a reflection of the Triune God Himself.

The very nature of God, who is the Head of the Church, is that He is a sending God. Everything about God is outward. The opposite of God would be sin, where everything is turned inward on self. Think about the Triune God for a moment. The

Father says, “Look at my Son; isn’t He something?” Jesus says, “I am here to do the Father’s will and bring glory to Him.” The Spirit comes to bear witness and testimony not to Himself but to Jesus. Everything about God is outward and focused on others, including you and me.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. . . .”

The very foundation of the Old Testament Church reflects this outward, sending movement of God. Look at the life of Abraham or Moses and you will see God sending them out to strange lands or into Egypt to free His people. God does not sit still. Nor does His Church.

Should it surprise us, then, that following Pentecost, God seeks to send His Church into the world? When they are slow on the take to do that, God allows for the persecution of Christians, forcing their hand to go out into the remote parts of the world.

At the center of mission is the sense that life is to be lived away from ourselves. Mission involves the willingness to leave our comfort zone, knowing that where we go, we take with us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Sending churches do not seek to raise up members as much as they seek to raise up missionaries—those who live as Jesus did, with an awareness that they are sent. Sending churches operate with a different scorecard in measuring their effectiveness. Rather than asking how many people were seated in church on a Sunday, they are asking how many people were sent out as missionaries. Reggie McNeal puts it this way:

“A missionary church culture will need to begin keeping score on things different from what we measure now. These may include how many ministry initiatives we are establishing in the streets, how many conversations we are having with pre-Christians, how many volunteers we are releasing into local and global mission projects aimed

at community transformation, how many congregations are starting to reach different populations, how many congregations use our facilities, how many languages (ethnic and generational) we worship in, how many community groups use our facilities, how many church activities target people who aren't here yet, how many hours per week members spend in ministry where they work, go to school and get mail" (p. 67).

The sending church not only reflects the heart of the Trinity and the model of the Church in the Book of Acts, the sending church is evolving as a key piece in the mission strategy of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Consider these numbers:

- In 2004, seven new career missionary families were placed. That brings the total of career missionary families to 81, covering 32 countries. As more and more nationals are trained on location, fewer and fewer full-time missionaries will be needed. This is not to say that full-time will be eliminated; in fact more and more are needed in one of the largest mission fields, right here in the United States.
- In 2004, the LC-MS sent 43 short-term volunteer missionaries to fields for one week to six months of service. It is anticipated that this number will grow rapidly in the next few years.
- In 2004, 41 long-term missionaries were placed for six months to a two-year service. 78 were requested, and there are 200+ opportunities.

What does all of this tell us about the future? The money crunch that makes many wring their hands at the cutbacks may also bring about great blessing. Just as the persecution in Jerusalem forced the hand of the early Christians, so these days force us

to find alternative ways to proclaim Christ to the nations. The sending church will play a key role in fulfilling the Great Commission in the future. Sending out teams of voluntary missionaries from our midst, we follow after the example of our ancestors in the Church in Antioch two thousand years ago.

It may be that within your midst there is no one evident that could be sent at this time. There are, however, opportunities for the local church to “adopt” and support missionaries through a program in the LC-MS called “Together In Mission.” More information can be found at www.lcmsworldmission.org or calling 1-800-248-1930.

What would it take for your congregation to become more of a sending church? What are the marks of that church in Acts 13 that characterize your church right now? In prayer, ask God for His guidance and empowerment to make this more of a present reality. In conversation, speak with other members and the leaders as to what steps can be taken to move toward this in your ministry. Those who belong to a sending church or who desire to see their church become one will be open to either being asked to be the one sent out or then staying behind and releasing others to go, supporting them with their prayers and offerings.

The sending church is not the work of a few, but the ministry of the entire Body. The sending church understands that it is not about them. It is about God. It is His ministry. It is His mission. The Spirit said to those gathered in Antioch, “*Set apart for me. . .*” The sending church understands that everything they do and everything they possess is for Him. To God alone be the glory.

Prayer: O Father, Son and Holy Spirit, your very nature is to send out and give to others. May your Holy Church on Earth reflect this likeness by sending out into the world those who bear your name and message. May it be so within your Church, beginning with me today. **Amen.**

Challenge: What can you do to support the sending out of missionaries? Investigate ways that you and your church can support the LCMS missionary efforts through prayers, gifts or volunteers from your own congregation.

Scripture Reading: Acts 13

From the Book of Concord: ““Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.’ Acts 11[:14]: ‘[Peter] will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ Romans 10[:17]: ‘So faith arises from the proclamation, and proclamation comes through God’s word. John 17[:17, 20]: ‘Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word. Therefore, the eternal Father calls from heaven regarding his dear Son and all who proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name, ‘Listen to him!’ (Matt. 17[: 5]). All who want to be saved should listen to this proclamation. For the proclamation and the hearing of God’s Word are the Holy Spirit’s tools, in, with, and through which he wills to work effectively and convert people to God and within whom he wants to effect both the desire for and the completion of their conversion” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will, pp. 553-554.51-52).

34

Sent to Babylon or Jerusalem?

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

It is no secret that I like history and enjoy teaching it whenever I have the chance. So let's begin with a little history of Israel. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? O.K.—I will keep it to 350 words. Count them if you want.

It begins with Abraham. He is the father of Isaac, who is the father of Jacob, who is the father of twelve sons that form the nation of Israel. Eventually they end up in Egypt in slavery for a few hundred years. Miraculously, they escape. At Mt. Sinai they are given moral teachings and laws that have never been touched by any other society. After 40 years, they enter some of the most controversial land on the planet—back then and now. It is the crossroads for anyone going anywhere. They fought off one enemy after another. No fancy governing structure, they raised up one judge after another to save the day when they were in chaos. Finally, they recognize that they need something more unifying and so they look for a king. Eventually, one king—David—leads them to establish a holy city and a temple that would be the envy of everyone. The temple became the center of their life. It replaced the portable tent of meeting. Their identity and faith were shaped in this culture and city of faith.

As the years pass, the family of Israel begins to fight—actually, continues to fight—with each other. This leads to two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. North and South. Two kingdoms, two kings. Not only is there division among the tribes, but they continue

to mess with idols, and their hearts drift from God. Prophets are sent to warn them, “Shape up or ship out.” They don't listen. One kingdom is overpowered and taken away. You would think the other would learn, but nope. In 587 the armies of Nebuchadnezzar overpower them and take them away to Babylon. The temple is leveled. The kings are gone. The leaders and priests are led away in chains. There is not much left. Their land is taken away from them. Everything that was familiar to them is gone. They are exiles in a foreign land. Their faith is not the only one of the land.

That is about it. Much of the Old Testament revolves around that story. Prophets are sent to warn them and to offer them hope. Others, like Daniel who lived during this time of exile, are shining stars in the midst of a pagan culture.

375 words—O.K., blame the extra 25 on all that fighting of the two kingdoms.

I wanted to review that history for this reason: Much of Israel's life and history are spent living in Babylon more than in Jerusalem. They spend more of their time in an “unchurched” city and culture than they do in a “churched” one.

That is what it is like for many of us. The history of our Lutheran church is that it began in Germany in a churched culture. The church was at the center of town and was at the center of life. This is the way it was for many of us growing up right here in America. Back in the 50's and the 60's, the church held

a position of influence in society. The church was at the center of American life. Not any more. It is not “Jerusalem” that we are living in. We are in “Babylon.” If America was once a Christian nation, it is no longer. I was raised learning how to relate to Catholics and Presbyterians and Methodists. The world I now live in calls me to give an account of my faith to the Muslim, the atheist, the New-Ager and my friend who believes that all roads lead to heaven. That is the mission field we live in these days.

I was raised in a time when if someone said, “Thus says God,” most people would perk up and listen like it were E. F. Hutton. The world I now live in rejects any and all absolute truths. It is not politically correct. How do I respond to that culture?

On a congregational level—how do we engage with a culture that embraces those things that are “unclean” to us? How do we relate to other Christians who do not share the same articles of faith as to what our church teaches and confesses?

Living in Babylon is confusing. Living in Babylon is uncomfortable. Jesus understood this when He sent out the disciples. He said,

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”
(Matthew 10:16).

Living in Babylon has an advantage. It offers us the opportunity to be salt and light in a way that Jerusalem does not. Let’s not run away from this too fast. In fact, let’s find a way to engage with it.

If you want to gain some insight on how to live in Babylon, take some time to read Daniel. There are few in the Bible that I know who shine like he does. As the Church of the twenty-first century is sent into Babylon, there is much we can learn from him. Consider these verses in Scripture:

“Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new

names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (Daniel 1:6-8).

Daniel and his friends were given good jobs in the king’s palace. Daniel, however, refused to defile himself with the things of the world, including the new name given to him. His friends take on Babylonian names that we are quite familiar with: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel would not bite on that. He kept to his own name. He would not bend or compromise. That is what it takes when you live in Babylon and not Jerusalem.

The next verse is found in Daniel 1:21: *“And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.”* As pagan and ungodly as the culture might have been, Daniel remained in the public sphere. He was at home in the public place, engaging the world as the place to do God’s work. The apostolic Church of the twenty-first century does not necessarily need more workers in the church but more missionaries to engage the world in the market place.

The third verse is in Daniel 9:3: *“So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.”*

Daniel did this regularly through the day. He understood that *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12).

The enemy is not the person you work with or the selfish powers that might be in control. The enemy is Satan himself, and so we must be constantly in prayer if we are to remain strong while living in Babylon.

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your

hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17).

Daniel’s heart and mind had already decided to whom he was committed, no matter what. No one or nothing else would grab hold of his allegiance and loyalty. When you are living in Babylon, it is important to remember that your life is lived out before an audience of One.

Daniel did well in Babylon because he was spiritually bilingual and bifocal. He knew the language of two kingdoms—that of Nebuchadnezzar and that of the King of Kings. Apostolic Christians and apostolic churches of the twenty-first century need to be bilingual as well if we are going to be salt and light.

Daniel was also bifocal in vision. He saw things clearly both near and far away. He understood that the things around him were temporary. He understood that many of those things could take him off course and so he willingly refused to defile himself with their use. He wanted to be in the world but not of it. He also saw things far off. He knew that there was only one King he needed to bow before and to whom he would one day give

an account of his life. Therefore, he had no desire to bow the knee or his heart before anyone else.

It is often reported that Luther said he had only two days on his calendar—“today” and “that day.” He wanted to invest today toward that day—the Day of Judgment. Why worry about tomorrow or yesterday? Only two days really matter: “today” and “that day.” For many of us, “that day” was settled long ago. On the Cross, when our judgment fell on Christ, “that day” is no longer to be feared. But what of those who have no relationship with Christ? How can we spend “today” for “that day” on their behalf?

We are not living in Jerusalem anymore. But, that is not all bad. Living in Babylon gives us the opportunity to shine in a most important way.

“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3).

Prayer: Father, as I go into a world that is more like Babylon than Jerusalem, help me to live with two days on my calendar—“today” and “that day.” Help me to invest today toward helping others to be prepared for that day. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Daniel had set times to pray each day. In the next 24 hours, set aside three specific times to pray in quiet and solitude.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10

From the Book of Concord: ““The coming of God’s kingdom to us’ takes place in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and second, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation. Now, we ask for both of these things: that it may come to those who are not yet in it and that, by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter, it may come to us who have attained it. All this is nothing more than to say: ‘Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached throughout the world and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us, so that your kingdom may pervade among us through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the devil’s kingdom may be destroyed so that he may have no right or power over us until finally his kingdom is utterly eradicated and sin, death, and hell wiped out, that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness”” (The Large Catechism, The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 447.53-54).

35

Send Me

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8)

There are many things I love about children’s sermons. Kids have such freedom in expressing themselves. I am sure that many parents hold their breath, wondering what their child might say or reveal that would embarrass the family. One of the things I particularly enjoy is when I ask for a volunteer. Before I can even say what it is that I want them to do, the hands go up: “Pick me . . . pick me . . . please. . . .” It matters not what the task. They just want to be picked.

This is the spirit I see in Isaiah as he stands before the Lord. Before he even knows what God wants, his hand shoots up like some preschooler: “Pick me . . . pick me . . . please”

All of the mission responses we have looked at over these last 34 days are empty without this kind of heart. Jesus said,

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

The heart of one who is willing to be sent out reflects this unrestrained joyous surrender to the will of God.

Getting to that point is no small thing. There is so much that can stand in the way. Look at Isaiah. Listen to how it was for him:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs,

each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:1-8).

What happened? How does Isaiah move from “Woe is me! I am ruined!” to “Here am I. Send me!”? That is quite a jump. Knowing the answer is foundational to any church becoming a sending church or any Christian living with that inner sense that they are sent on a mission from God. As a way of approaching this, let’s use the word HOLY as an acrostic to show the way in which Isaiah was able to move from fear to faith, and from guilt to grace.

H Him

“I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying” (Isaiah 6:1-2).

Worship is about Him. He has created us so that we might delight in Him and give praise to Him.

“Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations” (Psalm 100).

Do you notice how many times the pronoun he or him or his is mentioned? Life is all about Him. Worship is all about Him. Rick Warren expresses it this way:

“It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose” (p. 17).

So often I want to make it about me: My needs. My hurts. My joys. Matt Redman has written a song that reminds me of this each time I sing it. Here is a portion of that song:

The Heart of Worship

When the music fades
And all is stripped away
And I simply come
Longing just to bring
Something that’s of worth
That will bless Your heart

I’ll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required.
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear.
You’re looking into my heart.

I’m coming back to the heart of worship
And it’s all about You.
It’s all about You, Jesus.
I’m sorry. Lord, for the thing I’ve made it
When it’s all about You,
It’s all about You, Jesus.

When our worship is about Him, then He will be revealed to us in all of His glory and power. *“I saw the Lord.”* Those four words speak volumes as to what worship is all about. He reveals Himself to us in His Word and within the Sacraments. He speaks to us and serves us before we can even open our mouths. It’s all about you, Jesus.

O Omnipotence and Omnipresence

“And they were calling to one another; ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:3-4).

Isaiah has entered this moment filled with grief and fear. King Uzziah was dead. As far as kings go, he had done well by Israel in many ways. Since David, he was the best king that sat on the throne. His reign had been for 52 years. There had been a feeling of security with him. Now the future of Israel

is uncertain. Israel is deteriorating on the slippery slope of immorality. Isaiah is also grieving the death of a friend. The world seems to be caving in on him. Do you know what that feels like?

At moments like this, the vision of God in all of His holiness and glory can create both fear and comfort. God-pleasing worship carries that tension. On the one hand, worship helps us in times of trial and testing to remind us that we are not the victims, but that in Christ we are the victors. He is bigger and stronger than any problem we face. In the face of many changes, Isaiah was reminded of God's omnipotence and omnipresence. Worship that reveals God in His holiness and glory will also strike fear in our heart.

L Lowly

“Woe to me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!’” (Isaiah 6:5).

God's holiness and purity. You see this time after time. Habakkuk trembles before the holiness of God (Habakkuk 3:16). Job repents in the face of God's purity and wisdom (Job 42:1-6). The disciples, in view of the righteousness of Jesus, understand their own sinfulness (Luke 5:8).

One cannot look at God without having a sense of one's own unworthiness. The thief on the cross saw not so much the power of Jesus as he did His righteousness and holiness. In response, he saw his own unworthiness and asked for mercy.

Isaiah, in view of God's holiness, fully understood his own condition. When he saw the holiness of God it was as if he realized, “If this is the standard, if this is how high the bar is raised, then I am doomed. I don't even come close. I have seen God, the Lord Almighty. I live in the midst of an unclean land. What hope is there for me?”

Y Yield

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar” (vs. 6).

“From the altar.” This was the place where a continual sacrifice burned in the Old Testament. One lamb offered in the morning. One lamb offered in the evening. The altar was the place to which people turned to find peace in the atoning sacrifice. Could Isaiah now find that as well?

With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:7-8).

“Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Those words not only took away his guilt, they took away his fear and dread before the Lord. Isaiah then only wants the opportunity to respond. He and the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus would understand each other very well.

The heart of the sending church and the heart of the believer are rooted in that moment when a person comes face to face with the holiness and the grace of God. In that moment, at the foot of the Cross, there is a cleansing in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that makes children out of all believers, who are just itching to raise their hands and say, “Pick me . . . pick me . . . please”

Prayer: Cleansed by the blood of the Lam. The guilt of sin atoned for by your grace. Here I am, O God. Send me. **Amen.**

Challenge: Spend some time this day with your favorite Christian music or reading some Psalms and offer praise and worship to God for His cleansing that you have received.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 6

From the Book of Concord: “Observe that in these three petitions we have needs that concern God himself in a very simple form, and yet everything has been for our sake. What we pray for concerns only ourselves in that, as mentioned above, we ask that what otherwise must be done without us may also be done in us. Just as God’s name must be hallowed and his kingdom must come even without our prayer, so must his will be done and prevail even though the devil and all his host bluster, storm, and rage furiously against it in their attempt to exterminate the gospel utterly. But we must pray for our own sake so that his will may be done also among us without hindrance, in spite of their fury, so that they may accomplish nothing and we may remain steadfast against all violence and persecution and submit to the will of God” (The Large Catechism, The Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 449.68).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Send and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

6th Mission Response

Go



36 Go into the Streets

“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” (Luke 14:21)

I do not watch many movies twice. One that I have seen a few times, however, is “Father of the Bride,” starring Steve Martin. It is actually a remake of the old movie that featured Spencer Tracy. The movie has many hilarious moments—some of them far fetched, but others closer to the truth than one might want to admit. In one scene, they are going over the guest list. Actually, I found through my own experience in my daughter’s wedding planning that this process is not so much about who will be invited as who will be cut. I suspect many families have approached this task with greater turmoil than a baseball manager faces in making the final cuts to get his team to a 25-man roster.

Just the opposite is true with God. He holds nothing back when it comes to inviting people to the His Son’s wedding feast. In fact, when one looks at the record of Scripture, He appears almost reckless in his love and openness to those He invites. Look at the parables and you will find a shepherd who is willing to leave the entire flock for the one lost sheep. In another parable, the father is coming—no running—down the road toward the humiliated son returning home. He does not seem to care that his actions will make himself the object of shame. His son is returning home! (Luke 15).

In the parable of the wedding banquet, rejected by many who are too busy, too indifferent or too self-centered to come to his son’s banquet, the King invites—even

compels—the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame to come to his banquet. He holds nothing back. He is not looking who to cut, but rather who can be added to the list. What an amazing picture these parables offer us!

I agree with Philip Yancey who wrote, “. . . Jesus did not give the parables to teach us how to live. He gave them, I believe, to correct our notions about who God is and who God loves” (p. 53). The danger I find is that we become so familiar with these parables that we lose the sense of just how raw and almost reckless is the love of God. God is intent on one thing—He wants His house full.

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full’ (Luke 14:23).

Nothing will deter Him. No excuses, no matter how lame or personal against Him, will discourage Him. There will be those who will be too preoccupied with things: “*I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me*” (vs. 18). This is just an excuse. Would you not check out the land before buying it? Others will be too busy making a living to have time for Him: “*I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me*” (vs. 19). Still others will allow relationships to stand in the way of following the will of God: “*I just got married, so I can’t come*” (vs. 20). Again, this is a pretty lame excuse. Weddings

went on for days and would have involved the entire village. This banquet would not have been scheduled to conflict with such an event. The man is really saying, “I am busy; I cannot come to your banquet.”

I am reminded of a story that appeared in the Boston Globe in June of 1990. It is a modern day version of this strange and amazing wedding banquet:

“Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal. The two of them poured over the menu, made selections of china and silver, and pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive taste, and the bill came to thirteen thousand dollars. [Keep in mind—this is 1990.] After leaving a check for half that amount as down payment, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements.

“The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailbox, the potential groom got cold feet. ‘I’m just not sure,’ he said. ‘It’s a big commitment. Let’s think about this a little longer.’ When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager could not have been more understanding. ‘The same thing happened to me, honey,’ she said, and told the story of her own broken engagement. But about the refund, she had bad news. ‘The contract is binding. You’re only entitled to thirteen hundred dollars back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I’m sorry. Really, I am.’”

“It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party—not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blowout. Ten years before, this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had got back on

her feet, found a good job, and set aside a sizeable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town. And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken—‘in honor of the groom,’ she said—and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night” (Yancey, pp. 48-49).

No matter how offensive or lame the excuse, God will not be discouraged. I wish that I could say the same for me. I struggle with this at times. When I reach out to people and witness to them, it is one excuse after another. If it isn’t their lives being too busy with the kids, then it is that the church is not friendly enough. Or, that work is just so demanding that it leaves no time. It leaves me with the feeling sometimes of, “Why bother?” I become hesitant to approach someone else out of fear or resentment of the next excuse.

In those moments, one thought propels me forward: “Go quickly” (Luke 14:21). This is more than a thought. It is His command and our calling. Jesus calls us to go quickly and invite people to His banquet. This is not a calling for the ordained only. Each of us has been called through our Baptism into this priesthood.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare

the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”
(1 Peter 2:9).

In those moments when I get discouraged by the barrage of excuses, it is this sense of calling that keeps me going out into the streets, inviting people into the banquet. Jesus’ call to “Go quickly” reminds me that irregardless of how people respond to me or even what they may think of me, my life is accountable to one person and the call He has laid on my heart. In his book, “The Call,” Os Guinness has helpful words in this regard:

“Only madmen, geniuses, and supreme egotists do things purely for themselves. It is easy to buck a crowd, not too hard to march to a different drummer. But it is truly difficult—perhaps impossible—to march only to your own drumbeat. Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience or other. The question is not whether we have an audience but which audience we have. This observation underscores another vital feature of the truth of calling: A life lived listening to the decisive call of God is a life lived before one audience that trumps all others—the Audience of One.

“In Genesis, Abraham’s call is to live a life of trust in God as he journeys before God. Usually God calls Abraham, but at one point he appears and says, “*I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.*” Behind the voice of God is the eye of God, and behind the eye, the face, and behind the face the heart. To follow the call of God is therefore to live before the heart of God. It is to live life *coram deo* (before the heart of God) and

thus to shift our awareness of audiences to the point where only the last and highest—God—counts” (p. 73).

Keeping this in focus frees me. Free from wondering what people think of me. Free from worrying how people will respond because, ultimately, it is the Lord they are responding to when we live before the heart of God as Abraham did.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who understood something about standing strong and not backing down, said:

“Who stands fast, only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God?” (Guinness, p.94).

When we are living before God and certain as to where we stand with Him, we are freed to demonstrate that same kind of reckless love we experience and see in Jesus. I suspect that if one listened closely, there could be heard the applause of One—the applause of nail-pierced hands.

Prayer: Father, thank you for inviting me. I do not deserve your invitation, but you have extended it to me because this is the nature of your love. Yet there is still room, isn’t there? Who is it that you want me to go and invite as well? No matter the excuse, help me not to become discouraged, for there is too much at stake. In Jesus’ name I ask this. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who is one person that you know who has not yet responded to Christ’s invitation? Pray for them throughout this day that God would stir their heart and make them receptive to coming to the banquet.

Scripture Reading: Luke 14

From the Book of Concord: “In all these sayings Peter represents the whole company of apostles, as is apparent from the text itself. For Christ did not question Peter only but asked, ‘Who do you (plural) say that I am?’ [Matt. 16:15]. What is said here in the singular—‘I will give you the keys’ and ‘Whatever you bind . . .’—is said elsewhere in the plural: ‘Whatever you (plural) bind . . .’ [Matt. 18:18] and, in John [20:23], ‘if you (plural) forgive the sins of any . . .’ These words show that the keys were entrusted equally to all the apostles and that all the apostles were commissioned in like manner. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the keys do not belong to one particular person but to the church, as many clear and irrefutable arguments show. For having spoken of the keys in Matthew 18[18], Christ goes on to say: ‘Wherever two or three agree on earth . . .’ [Matt. 18:19–20]. Thus, he grants the power of the keys principally and without mediation to the church, and for the same reason the church has primary possession of the right to call ministers. One must, then, see Peter as representing the whole company of apostles in these sayings, which consequently do not attribute to him any special prerogative, preeminence, or lordship” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, p. 334.23-24).

37

Go and As You Are Going

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

How many commands do you read in the following Bible verse?

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19).

One? Two? Three? Four?

The common belief is that Jesus gave us four commands: Go. Make. Baptize. Teach. In reality, there is only one command. In the original language, only one is written in what is called the imperative: “make disciples.”

The word “Go” certainly sounds like a command doesn’t it? It is, however, a participle in form. Now, please understand that when it comes to grammar, participles sound more like vegetables to me. I suspect that I was thinking of other things during the days of ninth-grade English and Grammar. Participles and prepositions didn’t quite match up to the important things, like baseball. However, it is important for the sake of understanding our mission that we understand participles in this case. Jesus is saying, in effect, “As you go. . .” or “Going along the way. . .” or “Having gone. . .” In other words, He is assuming that the disciples will not sit still, waiting for the world to come to them. He assumes that they will be on the move. In essence, He is saying to them, “Wherever you are, make disciples!”

To understand the word “Go” as a participle is to understand the strategy of Christ for our mission. Christ does not establish His Church on a “build it and they will come” mindset, but rather, “As you are going along the way, make disciples.” Let it become a natural part of your everyday life.

Actually, when you review history, it has been the Divine strategy long before the birth of Christ. In the sixth century before Christ, the Southern Kingdom, Judah, which had lasted about 200 years longer than the Northern Kingdom, was captured and brought into exile, far from their homeland. From that time forward, the Old Testament people of God (the nation of Israel) were scattered throughout the world. Wherever they went, they carried their faith with them. Their faith was quite different from the other religions of the world. It was a belief in one God—a God who had provided His people with clear teachings of His mercy and grace. It was a teaching that called them to high moral standards that were unusual for those living beneath Roman influence. Most of all, wherever the people of Israel went, they went with the expectation that God would send His Messiah, a King. As much as the Jews longed to be back home, being dispersed helped to prepare the world for the coming of Bethlehem’s Child.

One can see the impact of this years, even centuries, later when magi travel a great distance to come and worship the promised

king. Where did they hear of this in the first place? The Word had spread throughout the continent because of the “going” of the dispersed Jews.

This is one of the keys to an effective church. The mistake is often made in measuring the effectiveness of a church by Sunday morning’s attendance or the size and creativity of its programs or ministries. Others will measure the effectiveness by the size of its building. The Word, however, measures maximum impact and effectiveness by a different standard. What Jesus holds up in His teachings is our ability to be salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:13-14).

What do salt and light have in common? They both must penetrate something or lose themselves in something in order to be effective. They both must go out from their source in order to be effective. The salt must go into the food and the light must go into the darkness. So it is with missional churches. They are measured by the sum total of individual believers who penetrate the community by means of their “goings” to and from.

This is the assumption behind the Great Commission from Matthew 29:19—*“Go [or as you go along your way] . . . make disciples.”* Imagine the impact potential for any congregation. The worship concludes and the members “go along their way” back to school or work or into their neighborhoods. This is the Church “on the go” in the mission sense.

Have you ever seen a sign that greets members who are leaving the church or the property that says, “You are now entering the mission field!”? This is the attitude of a missional church. The making of disciples occurs as people are “going along the way.”

There is something significant about this charge that Jesus gives His disciples in light of what He said earlier in Matthew 10:5-6. He sends the Twelve out with the following instructions:

“Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: The Kingdom of Heaven is near” (Matthew 10:5-7).

You see, there it is again. “As you go. . . .” It is this strategy that says be natural; be intentional. As you go, along the way, preach the message. What makes this different, however, is the limitation, “Do not go among the Gentiles. . . .” Jesus had a very specific objective. Go to Israel first. Later it will be expanded. Jesus was a master at laying the groundwork. He understood the importance of keeping it focused and narrow. Then when the objective is established, widen the scope. He did the same thing with the training of His disciples. He spent three years with them in an intensive leadership and discipling track. When He ascended, the group was small but the base was solid and deep. The Church exploded with growth when the Spirit came upon them on the Day of Pentecost.

In Matthew 28, on his Ascension Day, He expanded the commission:

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.”

No restrictions. No limitations. Go into all the world. What a radical thought for those who heard it. Go into all the world and make disciples of them. The strategy is simple. Be intentional and be natural. As you are going along the way. The vision is huge:

“Make disciples of all nations.”

This commission and vision shape and focus our purpose in ministry at St. Luke. Our purpose is expressed in our mission statement: “Making and Maturing Disciples to Minister.” In this six-word statement, “disciples” is the focus; it is the object of the sentence. It is around this that our ministry is directed. In everything we do, we are either seeking to make disciples, assisting them in maturing to the full stature of Christ, or leading them to minister according to the way in which God

has uniquely gifted and shaped them. Our calling is not to save souls. That is His work. Ours is to make disciples by means of those two other participles in the Great Commission: “baptizing” and “teaching.” Making disciples is directly connected to teaching the Word and baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism, not only does the Holy Spirit work faith and cleanse sin, but the Spirit also invites the person into a relationship with the Triune God and His Body, the Church. This is at the core of understanding what a disciple is. A disciple is not so much a student as he or she is a follower—a follower of one person, Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who seeks to model his or her life, submitting to the authority of His teaching.

Everything we do in the Church should focus on developing disciples—those who are willing to follow the call of Jesus for their life. Jesus said,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

One of the core principles taught in the discipleship class for new members at St. Luke is this:

“A disciple is one who responds in faith and obedience to the gracious call of Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a life-long process of dying to self while allowing Jesus Christ to come alive in us.”

This process begins in our Baptism where the old nature is drowned and the new man rises up within us. This is not a one-time act as some would think. It is the beginning of a daily dying and re-birth. Martin Luther would make the sign of the cross each morning as he awakened to remind him of his identity in Baptism where he was called daily to die to self as the new nature arose within him.

It is time to get on with the rest of the day. As you are going along the way, keep in mind the one command He gave before He left—”make disciples.” With that one command, however, He also gives us a precious promise: *“And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).*

Prayer: Jesus, I love being your disciple. Thank you for calling me to follow you. As I am going along my way this day, show me how I can fulfill your command to make disciples of those with whom I meet. Let it come naturally to me so that others might see you in me. **Amen.**

Challenge: As you are going along this day, look for natural opportunities to give a witness to Christ being in your life.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 28

From the Book of Concord: “Because of this personal union and the communion that results from it, which the divine and human natures in the person of Christ have with each other in fact and in truth, things are attributed to Christ according to the flesh that the flesh, according to its nature and essence, cannot outside of this union intrinsically be or have—for example, that his flesh is a true, life-giving food and his blood is a true, life-giving drink, as the two hundred *patres* [Fathers] at the Council of Ephesus testified, ‘carnem Christi esse vivificam seu vivificatricem’ (that is, that the flesh of Christ is a life-bestowing flesh). For this reason, too, this human being alone and no other human being can say in truth, ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ [Matt. 18:20], and, ‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’ [Matt. 28:20]” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VIII: Person of Christ, p. 631.76).

38 Go Because He Says So

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. . . .’” (Matthew 28:18-19a)

For years I have said that my passion is for the lost—for those who are dying without Christ. Whether in my personal life or as a leader within the church, I have sought ways to keep this as my primary passion. Then recently, I took a closer look at Matthew 28:18-19:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. . . .”

Many are familiar with this Great Commission. But do we know what should compel us to carry it out? I have always assumed it was because of our love for the lost, our concern that without Christ people will spend an eternity in Hell without Him, but this is not the basis He gives for the Great Commission. He says, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go. . . .”*

Jesus certainly wants our hearts to be filled with love for the lost. This, however, is not the primary motivator He gives for us to reach out with the saving message of the Gospel. His Lordship is what should compel us. Nothing less. All authority belongs to Him, and He commands us to do this.

Jesus has come through the crucifixion and the three days in the grave as the Victor! Luther’s words express this so well:

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and

condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness” (Luther’s Small Catechism p. 14).

His blood has not only freed me from my sin, the fear and punishment of death and the power of the devil—His blood has made me His own. “That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him. . . .” He is my Lord. He has the right to ask of me whatever He wishes. I am His slave.

The disciples understood this on that day of His Ascension. Scripture records for us this moment immediately before He gave them the Great Commission:

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Matthew 28:16-17).

Not everyone that day was convinced. But, those who understood knew who stood before them. In response they worshipped. Then Jesus said, *“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go. . . .”* Those who worship Christ as Lord must also be willing to hear Him say, “I have authority over your life; here is what I now want you to do in response.”

My passion continues to be for the lost, for those who will spend an eternity in Hell without Christ. The “aha moment” for me is in recognizing a greater, more abiding passion—I want to live my life in response to His authority over me. I want to be His servant and no one else’s. My love for the lost is rooted in a first love for Jesus.

There are many men and women of faith who I admire and respect. Many of those have blessed my life directly. Some I have never met and yet their lives are such a witness and inspiration to me. One whom I never met but will someday meet in heaven is Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. I am moved by his words:

“My life’s message is to be a slave of Jesus. And all that it involves. Love your master, trust your master, and obey your master. Obviously, I’m a son of God, heir of God, joint-heir with Christ, and if He was described as a slave—Paul, and Peter and the other apostles were slaves—this to me is the highest privilege any one could know. I evaluate everything I do in light of what He wants me to do. I try to relate every move, every day, in light of how I can help fulfill His great commission and fulfill His commandments.”

Responding to the Great Commission first out of obedience and love for Jesus rather than the needs of the lost will have an effect on my daily walk. When my response to the Great Commission is rooted first in obedience to His authority, then my life’s mission will reflect His own. The primary reason that Jesus came to this earth was not His love for you and me. It was not even so that He could die on the cross or rise from the grave. The primary reason that Jesus came to this earth was out of obedience to His Father. The result of that obedience was that He would die on the cross and be raised on the third day. Within that obedience there was, of course, His love for you and me. Clearly, though, His first love and passion was to follow His Father’s will.

I tend to so often focus on the loving Jesus that I diminish His primary motivation and purpose—obedience to His Father:

“‘My food,’ said Jesus, ‘is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work’” (John 4:34).

“... but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded” (John 14:31).

“Then He said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second” (Hebrews 10:9).

Remember how as a little boy Jesus upset his mother and earthly father when they could not find Him? Even then, there was a greater love within Him, guiding His steps: *“‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’” (Luke 2:49).*

The second way that responding to the Great Commission out of obedience and love for Jesus will impact my walk is that it will give me strength and guidance. There are many times in our lives that the expectations and needs of other people will tug at our hearts. What is the guiding principle that determines what we say yes to and what we turn away? The answer rests in living our lives before an audience of One.

The demands of a hurting and hungry world were always before Jesus. How did He know when to say yes and when to say no? Henri Nouwen offers this thought:

“In the lonely place Jesus finds the courage to follow God’s will and not his own; to speak God’s words and not his own; to do God’s work and not his own. He reminds us constantly, ‘I can do nothing by myself . . . my aim is to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me’ (John 5:30). And again, ‘The words I say to you I do not speak as from myself; it is the Father, living in me, who is doing this work’ (John 14:10)” (1974, p.14).

I am under His command to make disciples as I go along my way. I do this in obedience to Him and with love for those to whom I give witness. Even more important, though, is that my witness flows out of my first love for Him. This, in the end, will be the most winsome part of my witness. People will sense and see this, just as they will hear the witness I offer.

I am coming to see one other benefit to viewing the Great Commission from this perspective of obedience to His authority: Where I go or to whom I go is not as significant as making sure that He is the one who directs my goings. Remember the moment with Jesus and Peter on the beach? No sooner have they unpacked all the baggage of the last few days than this conversation is recorded:

“Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them . . . When Peter saw him, he asked, ‘Lord what about him?’ Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me’” (John 21:20-22).

It is so easy to become concerned with what God asks others to do, comparing our position in life with theirs. Keeping in mind that our response to the Great Commission is a matter of obedience frees me from getting all hung up as to whether someone is more passionate than me or more successful than me. It is not about me and what I accomplish in life. It is about His will for my life as His servant.

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go. . . .” As you are going into the day and week ahead of you, go as a person under authority. As you do, your mission will be a reflection of His; there will be the guidance as to when to say yes and when to say no; and there will be a lot less concern about what others are being asked to do in life. You will find that being His servant is the most freeing thing that you will experience in life.

Prayer: Jesus, You are my Lord. You have all authority over me. Show me what you want me to do. Give me the power by your Spirit to carry it out. I am your servant.
Amen.

Challenge: Is there anywhere in your life that God is waiting for you to submit yourself to His authority? Ask Him for His help in turning this over to Him.

Scripture Reading: John 21

From the Book of Concord: “For our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is our only teacher; concerning him this weighty command was given from heaven to all human beings, ‘Hunc audite’ (‘listen to him’) [Matt. 17:5]. He was not a mere human being or angel. He was not only truthful, wise, and powerful. He is the eternal truth and Wisdom itself, and almighty God. He knows very well what to say and how to say it, and he can accomplish through his power everything that he has said and promises, and can make it happen, as he says, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away’ [Luke 21:33], and, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ [Matt. 28:18]” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII: Holy Supper, p. 600.43)

39

Go and Don't Stop

"We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance." (2 Thessalonians 3:4-5)

When I grow up someday, I want to be like Caleb. There are many people that I admire in the Scripture, and Caleb is near the top of that list.

Caleb is one of the twelve spies who were sent into Canaan early in Israel's exodus from Egypt. Ten spies returned and reported to Moses that entering the Promised Land was next to impossible. Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, said that it could be done. Israel listened to the ten, refusing to enter. God then punished their disobedience and lack of faith by letting them wander in the wilderness for forty years—one year for every day that the spies had spent on their mission. Forty years later, when they finally entered, only two people remained who originally left Egypt—Joshua and Caleb.

It is what happens at this point that makes me want to be like Caleb. They are dividing up the inheritance of the land. Some parcels of that land are better than others. Listen to what Caleb says:

"Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified but, the Lord helping

me, I will drive them out just as he said" (Joshua 14:10-12).

At eighty-five years young, Caleb is asking for some of the toughest and most formidable property that exists. "Give me the hill country." No beach-front property for this man. "Give me the hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified." There is still a good fight left in this faithful senior citizen. "The Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as He said." His confidence is not in his strength but in God's.

Go and don't stop. There is so much that can stand in the way of our going. Maybe right now you find yourself discouraged, defeated and tired. Is there any good fight left within you? Go and don't stop.

History is marked by great people who would not let anything stand in their way. Winston Churchill seemed so dull as a youth that his father thought him to be incapable of earning a living.

Thomas Edison's first teacher described him as slow, and his father was convinced that he was a dunce. It took thousands of experiments before the light bulb was perfected.

Albert Einstein performed so badly in high school, except in the area of mathematics, that a teacher asked him to consider dropping out.

Then, of course, there was the man who failed in business at age 22. He ran for Legislature and was defeated at 23. He

failed again in business at 24. Elected finally to Legislature at age 25, he had a nervous breakdown at 27. He was defeated for Speaker at 29 and defeated for Elector at 31. He was defeated for Congress at 34 and then elected to Congress at 37. Then two years later he was defeated for Congress, and then again defeated for Senate at 46. He was defeated for Vice President at 47, as well as being defeated for Senate again at 49. Finally, he was elected as the 16th President of the United States at age 51—Abraham Lincoln.

Go and don't stop.

Going forth in the name of Jesus can be very discouraging at times. We can end up feeling, "What good does this do? Who really cares after all?"

It is in those moments when I am haunted by these types of questions that I find strength not in my desire or my ambition, but in His command, "Therefore go and make disciples." No one may care. It may do little good in my eyes. This does not matter in the end. What matters is that I am going in response to His command. He does not let me go it alone. Jesus offers a promise to accompany His command, "*and surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28: 20).

When I think about His promise, a picture that comes to my mind is something that occurred in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. From his seat in the top row of the Stadium, Jim Redmond saw what 65,000 others were seeing unfold. It was the semi-finals of the men's 400-meter race. A British runner by the name of Derek was in trouble. While others gasped and watched as Derek fell to the track surface, Jim Redmond reacted in a far different way. Derek was his son. Derek had ripped his hamstring and was now picking himself up in a brave effort to go and not stop. Jim Redmond left the stands. He raced down the stairs, brushed aside a security guard and bounded over a 4½-foot wall, rushing onto the track. When Jim reached his son, he told him, "You don't have to do this." Derek was

determined to finish. So arm in arm the young sprinter and his father limped toward the finish line. As they did, the stadium fans arose and applauded what was unfolding before their eyes. Millions of viewers across the world watched an unforgettable demonstration of a father's love (Branon).

So often has God done this very thing for you and me? Hurt and limping, He comes by our side to help us to go and not stop. The beauty of this is that He has already secured the victory for us. Yet, as we run the race set before us, He is there by our side to assist and strengthen us. Remember Caleb's words and faith: ". . . *but the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said*" (Joshua 14:12). So many times I have experienced this when in a quiet moment His Word has spoken to my heart at just the moment when I no longer wanted to go, when I just wanted to stop. So often He has come by my side through the workings and teaching of the Holy Spirit, as He did with the men on their way to Emmaus. So often He has sent Christian friends to walk along my side who encourage me and remind me that I am not alone.

Go and don't stop. Along the way, should you find someone else limping in their race, take the time to walk by their side and remind them of these words:

"But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (2 Thessalonians 3:3-5).

Perseverance

When all the world is looming dark
And things seem not so clear,
When shadows seem to hover 'round
Lord, may I persevere.
When it seems everything's been tried
And there's no way to go,
Just let me keep remembering

Sometimes the journey's slow.
I may just need to stop and rest
Along the path I trod,
A time to try to understand
And have my talk with God.
As I gain new strength to carry on
Without a doubt or fear,
Somehow I know things will be right,
And so, I persevere.

(By Anne Stortz from Chicken Soup for the Unsinkable Soul; Copyright 1999 by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen)

When the going is a little rough . . .
When you find your strength sagging a bit
. . . Remember Caleb. Forget about going
down hill. Say with Caleb, "Give me the hill
country," and start climbing. Go and don't
stop.

Prayer: Send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. Sever me from any tie but the tie that binds me to your service and to your heart. **Amen.** (David Livingstone)

Challenge: Who do you know that is a bit discouraged right now and wants to stop? Pray for them. Ask them how you might be able to encourage them in what they are facing.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11-12

From the Book of Concord: "From these things it is clear that James does not contradict us when he distinguishes a dead faith from a living faith in order to condemn idle and complacent minds who imagine that they have faith when they do not. He says that faith which does not bring forth good works is dead, but he says that faith which brings forth good works is alive. Furthermore, we have frequently shown what we mean by faith. We are not talking about an idle knowledge, such as is also to be found in the devils, but about a faith that resists the terrors of conscience and which uplifts and consoles terrified hearts. Such faith is not an easy matter as the opponents imagine; nor is it a human power, but it is a divine power by which we are made alive and by which we defeat death and the devil. So Paul says in Colossians [2:12] that faith is active through the power of God and conquers death, 'You were also raised with him through faith in the power of God.' Since this faith is a new life, it necessarily produces new impulses and new works. Accordingly, James rightly denies that we are justified by a faith that is without works" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, pp. 158-159.248-250).

40

Go the Extra Mile

“If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” (Matthew 5:41)

Jesus is a master—not only *the* Master, as in Lord and Savior, but *a* master—at teaching. He has a knack for saying something that on the surface seems so simple, yet when you look at it more closely, the depth is difficult to fathom. I see this especially when I read His Sermon on the Mount as it is recorded in Matthew 5-7.

I fear many of us have become so accustomed to these teachings that in our familiarity they lose their edginess, the radical nature of the life Christ calls us to live.

In a simple phrase, He has a way of turning the world, mine included, upside down:

The way to be first is to be last.

The way to be strong is to be weak.

The way to gain is to lose.

The way to be free is in surrendering everything to Him.

The way to live is to die.

The way to find yourself is to deny yourself.

Then there is this from Matthew 5:41: *“If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”*

On the surface, this appears innocent enough. Understood in the culture of Jesus’ day, it is hard to stomach. The Jews were living beneath Roman occupation. It was understood that if a soldier asked a Jewish citizen to carry his pack, then that person must carry it for 1000 steps—the equivalent of one mile. It was insulting. It was an infringement to the rights of all Jewish citizens. They hated

the Romans. They hated being asked to do something this demeaning.

Do you see why this is hard to stomach? *“If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”* Why would Jesus ask this kind of thing? Making matters worse, Jesus also said:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:38-42).

The tunic was the long linen or cotton inner garment. People normally would have more than one of these. The cloak, however, was the blanket-like garment that was worn as an outer layer. This is the one that would keep them warm. People normally had just one of these. The cloak was important enough that God sought to protect the ownership of it:

“If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (Exodus 22:26-27).

Literally adding insult to injury, Jesus now says, *“If someone strikes you on the right*

cheek, turn to him the other also.” Slapping the cheek was a way of insulting a person. Jesus is not addressing passive resistance to all evil. Nor is He suggesting that we never fight or defend ourselves. There is ample from Scripture that would say otherwise. He is, instead, dealing with how we handle it when someone insults us.

In a world of bumper stickers that say, “I don’t get mad, I get even,” what are we to make of this? As I said, so much of this Sermon on the Mount confronts us with radical truths that challenge one’s mind and soul, not to mention day-to-day life.

Those who are called to follow Christ have a higher calling than to seek revenge. We are not called to a life of fairness but to a life of righteousness. We are citizens of a Kingdom guided by much different values.

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

We are people of a kingdom that Jesus said is not of this world. We are called to live up to a different standard.

This is not to say or suggest that those who bear the name of Christ or His cross must then become doormats and open ourselves up to abuse. Jesus put limits to His teaching. He did not say that we should go as far as they would like. He said “go with him two miles.” He did not say that we should not resist evil. There are times that the Christian is called to bear arms into war. He did tell us, though, to not resist the evil person. There are boundaries that we must maintain. Jesus himself, when He was being questioned and beaten before Pilate, asked why they did not ask for witnesses. He also asked why He was being struck. These were His lawful rights that belonged to Him according to Jewish law. There is no doubt a tension that we walk as Christians in an unredeemed world between going the extra mile and yet holding up healthy boundaries.

What is the point of it all? What exactly is at stake in all of this? It is by this that we live as salt and light. Just prior to this teaching, Jesus said:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13-16).

Salt and Light. I have taught my share of devotions on how salt adds flavor and seasoning to the lives of people that are otherwise stale and flat. Salt, however, is also known for cleansing and preserving. That is not always a pleasant process. It can cause great pain.

In regard to light, I love to sing “This Little Gospel Light of Mine ” with children and adults. It is a fun song. But let us not forget that light also exposes those things that love the darkness. That is not always a fun tune to sing. When we live our lives in such a way that we are willing to forfeit our rights or even our property, we will not be hiding our light under a bushel basket. We will be serving as salt and light in a world that walks according to a different call.

Jesus recognized that we live in a world that operates by different values and principles than what He taught. Trying to mesh those two doesn’t work. It is like trying to mesh together two different computer operating systems. Several years ago, our school operated with the Apple system. Later we shifted to a Windows-based system. The old computer disks would not work on the new computers. They operate on two different systems. One would not recognize

the other. Jesus Christ calls us to operate under a different operating system than that of society—a different way of thinking and a different lifestyle. One does not recognize the other. But how will the world ever know that unless we demonstrate it, not only in our speaking but in our willingness to go that extra mile?

Those who saw Jesus ascend understood that the mission challenge He gave would require them to go into a world functioning under a different operating system. As the Spirit gave them power, I believe their willingness to not insist on fairness, and even willingly forfeiting their rights, gave them credibility before an unbelieving world. We today have that same mission challenge before us in a world that is not unlike the one they entered in the first century. As we do this, we reflect the very image of Him,

“. . . who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-6).

Of course, this same teaching applies not only to our relationships with unbelievers but with believers as well.

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

“Go the Extra Mile” makes a perfect theme for a wedding sermon. The wedding

text that most couples want at their wedding is 1 Corinthians 13. It is a beautiful text—flowing beauty and rhythm. But, have you considered what it calls the bride and groom to embrace within their relationship?

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

This is a higher love than what the world is familiar with, for those who have been married a while know that for these verses to be a reality, one must be willing to go the extra mile and then some. It requires that one be willing to give up the rights associated with “me” in favor of “we.”

When Jesus said, *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. . .”*, He knew their going and our going would be into a world that would be unfair and would take advantage. It is in this light that His promise becomes even sweeter: *“Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

Prayer: Lord, it is so hard to go that extra mile. You know that better than anyone. How did you do it? Help me. Give me a heart that is willing to go the extra mile with those people that are so hard to live with at times. I can do all things as you give me the strength. **Amen.**

Challenge: For whom might you be able and willing to go the extra mile this day?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5

From the Book of Concord: “Therefore it is God’s real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5[:46–47].

Once again we have God’s Word by which he wants to encourage and urge us to true, noble, exalted deeds, such as gentleness, patience, and, in short, love and kindness toward our enemies. He always wants to remind us to recall the First Commandment, that he is our God; that is, that he wishes to help, comfort, and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge.

If we could thoroughly impress this on people’s minds, we would have our hands full of good works to do” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Commandment, pp. 412-413.193-196).

41

Go and Wash Feet

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17)

It had been such a hectic day. The week had been a roller coaster of emotions. But each of them looked forward to this moment and this evening. At some point in the middle of their evening and gathering, he got up from the table and grabbed the two objects that everyone seemed to be ignoring. Slowly, he took off his outer garment and picked up the basin and wrapped the towel around his waist. Then one by one (one foot at a time), he began to wash their feet. Twenty-four feet—each of which would run away from him in the matter of a few hours (or in the case of one, within moments).

What he was doing should have been done by a servant—in fact, by the lowest of servants available in the house. Maybe no servant was available, we do not know. What we do know is that no one else was stepping up and volunteering. Why? You know the reason for that. It is the same reason that would have prevented anyone of us from offering to do it. So he did.

“When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:12-15).

Ever since that night, the gentle splashing of water from that basin has been heard in those who follow after Him.

A basin and a towel. Touching images, but let no one be fooled. Washing feet is rarely easy. Ask Jesus. He knows the future of the feet He washes, and yet He bends down to wash each one of them. I like the way Max Lucado expresses it:

“Hands that shaped the stars now wash away filth. Fingers that formed mountains now massage toes. And the one before whom all nations will one day kneel now kneels before his disciples. Hours before his own death, Jesus’ concern is singular. He wants his disciples to know how much he loves them. More than removing dirt, Jesus is removing doubt . . . Behold the gift Jesus gives his followers! He knows what these men are about to do. He knows they are about to perform the vilest act of their lives. By morning they will bury their heads in shame and look down at their feet in disgust. And when they do, he wants them to remember how his knees knelt before them and he washed their feet. He wants them to realize those feet are still clean. ‘You don’t understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later’ (John 13:7)” (pp. 18–19).

Jesus’ act of service is a beautiful story of love. It is also the mission that He asks each

of us to wrap around our waist as well. *“I have set an example for you to do as I have done for you” (John 13:15).*

Washing feet is not easy. Ask Mary. She knows. She shared the following with me:

“‘Love your enemy.’ I knew that the time had come to take this biblical command to heart. I had an enemy—my assistant who I worked with every day. She became my enemy due to her intense ambition to have my position, and my increasing fear that she just might get it.

“Things came to a head one morning when I called her on a deliberate act done to disparage me. We have had confrontations like this before, and she would later apologize for her attitude. This time, however, she argued and turned the blame back on me: ‘You don’t approve of anything I do.’ ‘You think you’re so superior because of your position.’ ‘I can’t do anything to make you happy.’

“At the end of this onslaught, she stormed out of her office in tears. She went to a colleague of mine with a tale of terrible persecution by me, and my colleague bought it and went to my boss. The result was that I was told to be nice to her or she would quit. I decided, ‘Fine. I’ll just be sweet as saccharine, and I will only speak to her about business.’

I was polite and soft-spoken, but I gave nothing of myself. Lo and behold, she began to be the same. Soon it seemed we needed insulin to deal with all the fake sweetness. The sweeter she acted, the more I seethed with resentment. Finally I realized I could not keep this up. I was going to crack and when I did, it wouldn’t be pretty.

“I knew the Lord wanted me to love her. Love her!? It was all I could do not to slap her! Finally, in absolute desperation, I prayed, ‘Lord, I can’t find anything about her to love. But I know you love her. I also know I cannot do this

using my own will. Love her through me.’ Every time I started to think a scathing retort, I reminded myself to let the Lord have it in His own way.

“Meanwhile, I did a good deed anonymously for another person in the office. While I was feeling really good about doing this good deed in secret, I heard a sentence in my head. It was in my voice, but it was most certainly not my thought: ‘Now do the same thing for (my enemy).’ I literally stopped in my tracks, took a deep breath and said, ‘Go ahead, Lord.’

“Soon after, my enemy got a phone call from her mother who was berating her for forgetting to pack her son’s ‘show and tell’ object. Being in the same room, I could hear her answers and could even hear her mother’s screaming voice over the phone. When she hung up, she sobbed quietly, trying not to be noticed. I said, ‘How about we walk outside for a break?’ At first she was skeptical of me, but as I spoke to her, saying things like, ‘That sounded like a difficult conversation’ and ‘It must be really hard to have to depend on your parents for help only to get criticized so,’ she yielded to my invitation.

“As we started to go outside, another co-worker who overheard the conversation came along and also offered her support. This was the first in a series of chain reactions that seemed to ripple through the office. Tempers were calmed; people were smiling and laughing more; the tension evaporated. Did my attitude start this change? No, the Lord came into that office through me and blessed us all. Do I feel better about her now? In a way. We’re still not close friends, and I don’t know that I can ever trust her. But none of that matters. I see what the Lord can do if I will only give up my selfishness and let Him have His way. The peace that I have now in my heart truly passes my understanding . . . and it is wonderful!”

Washing feet requires a humbleness that goes against our nature. We are so in the habit of making everything about us. Washing of feet is anything but that. Yet, this very act can transform our going into the world and lives of people into such a powerful witness. The world grows tired of power that struts. It is hungry to witness power that serves. Yet, our human nature is so apt to resist this mission Jesus places before us. Leslie Weatherhead, a British minister whose church was gutted by Nazi bombs, wrote in the midst of that destruction:

“When I am hot and rebellious, bitter and cynical and sarcastic; when it seems evil can win in the world and the battle is to the strong; when it seems as though pride possesses all the high places and greatness belongs to those who can grab the most; when it seems that faith is mocked and humility is trodden in the dust; when pity seems weakness and sympathy folly, what a foul egotism rises up within me bidding me assert myself, serve my own interest and look out for number one; then, O my God, as I listen down the corridor of the years for the voice of the Almighty, may I hear the gentle splashing of water in a basin and see the Son of God washing his disciples’ feet.”

How does one get beyond the pride or the fear? What enables us to look beyond the feet of those we are called to wash when we know that they are bound to disappoint us and let us down? The key is at the beginning of John’s account of that night:

“It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love” (John 13:1).

Jesus knew who He was. He knew where He was going—back to the Father. He had nothing to prove. So often people are reluctant to offer help in an area because they see it as beneath them. They are afraid that in doing so, it will hurt their image. When we know our purpose in life and our identity, we are freed to serve others without fear or resentment.

Has it ever struck you that our lives are lived out of three basins? One is the basin used to wash feet. Another is the one Pilate chose to use to wash his hands. The second is the basin of indifference that lacks passion and conviction. The first is the basin of servanthood out of which we serve as He has served us.

Jesus calls us to go out into the world and wash feet in service to others as He has done with us. Just as the disciples let Him down, so we are bound to disappoint Him as well. Many times over we will choose to live out of the basin Pilate chose rather than the one Jesus used. That is where the third basin comes in—the basin that holds the water of our Baptism. It is here in this basin that we not only can know who we are and to whom we are returning—it is in this basin that we are cleansed again and again for all those times when our feet are the ones that turn and walk away from Him. It is in this basin that we are cleansed and renewed in His baptismal grace. It is in this basin that the gentle splashing of water can still be heard in our hearts as Jesus cleanses more than just our feet.

Prayer: Your servanthood humbles me. Who are we that you are this mindful and humble before us? Thank you for cleansing me through your servanthood. Help me to follow your example this day. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who is that person in your life for whom it is difficult to “wash feet?” In the course of the next couple of days, how could you offer a humble act of service to them?

Scripture Reading: John 13

From the Book of Concord: “This should serve God’s purpose to break our pride and keep us humble. He has reserved to himself this prerogative: those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in their mind. They will find that they are no more righteous than anyone else, that in the presence of God all people must fall on their knees and be glad that we can come to forgiveness. Let none think that they will ever in this life reach the point where they do not need this forgiveness. In short, unless God constantly forgives, we are lost

“Thus this petition really means that God does not wish to regard our sins and punish us as we daily deserve but to deal graciously with us, to forgive as he has promised, and thus to grant us a joyful and cheerful conscience so that we may stand before him in prayer. For where the heart is not right with God and cannot generate such confidence, it will never dare to pray. But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when one knows that his or her sins are forgiven” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Petition of The Lord’s Prayer, pp. 452-453.90-92).

42

Go into the World

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

I grew up in a small church in Massachusetts. On a few occasions we would have a guest missionary come in with his or her slides. I was fascinated to see a part of the world that seemed light-years away. Their stories not only gave witness to a world far away, but in those stories I had the strong sense that these men and women had been with Jesus. Those evenings captured in my heart a desire to one day be a missionary myself. I dreamed of the day that I would travel to far away places and carry the Word of God to people of a different culture and language. I still have that desire—to take the Word of God to those who are lost. But, since that time, the world has changed a lot.

Through the progress of technology, transportation and communications, the world has become much smaller. A couple of years ago, I traveled to Tanzania to teach Christian leaders in the city of Moshi. I had never been that far from home. The fourteen-hour flight was the longest I have ever taken. Home seemed very far away. Yet, I realized in another sense just how much smaller this world has become. My dad served in World War II. He served in North Africa, Italy and France. During that time, he and my mom would write letters to each other. It could take up to one month for some of those letters to arrive at their destination. As I sat in the Internet café of Moshi, sending my emails, I thought to myself, “What must it have been like to live without a sense of immediate access?” It gave me new admiration and respect for my parents’ generation. It also

gave me a new perspective for what it means to be a missionary in today’s world. Immediate access not only makes many things convenient; it opens doors for getting the Word out about Jesus.

When one looks at this world that is getting smaller, a study of its population reveals a snapshot that looks like this:

If the world were a village of 1,000 people, by continents there would be:

- 564 Asians
- 210 Europeans
- 86 Africans
- 80 South Americans
- 60 North Americans

By religions, there would be:

- 329 Christians
- 174 Muslims
- 131 Hindus
- 61 Buddhists
- 52 animists
- 3 Jews
- 34 believers in other sects and religions
- 216 people with no identifiable religious belief

In this village of 1,000:

- 60 people would have half the total income
- 500 people would be hungry
- 600 people would live in shantytowns
- 700 people would be illiterate

What makes this even more interesting is that one does not have to travel the world to see this picture. It is right here in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1995), Caucasian domination of America will diminish substantially in the years to come, falling from 76 percent of the population in 1990 to just 52 percent by the year 2050. By contrast, the Hispanic population will rise from nine percent to 22 percent, and the Asian population, almost nonexistent a generation ago, will comprise 10 percent of the nation (Hower, pp. 59-60).

The dream I had as a young boy of carrying the Word to people of different cultures and languages is much more within reach right here in America. However, as the world we live in gets smaller, the thinking and vision of the Church needs to expand beyond the walls of the local congregation.

I love the imagery of the church as a ship. The sanctuary at St. Luke, as in many churches, is adorned with a beautiful wooden, tongue and groove ceiling. When you look up, it is like looking at a hull of a boat upside down. It reminds me each time I look at it that we are to be a ship—not a cruise ship, but a rescue ship. On a cruise ship, the goal is the comfort and the pleasure of those who are passengers—all the food you want to eat, games, entertainment and more than one can possibly imagine. The church is not a ship that is built for the comfort of the passengers. Imagine if you will, a cruise ship sailing along with its passengers dancing the night away with fine wine and tables overflowing with food. Meanwhile, in the waters below many people are screaming for help as they flail and drown. I ask myself what kind of ship is our church? What kind of ship do you want to sail on in the name of Christ? Jesus has charted the course for our journey:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This verse serves as an outline for the Book of Acts. The mission begins in Jerusalem. It then spreads to the surrounding area of Judea. Then it expands to Samaria and finally by the last chapter, Paul ends up in Rome, which for him was the remotest part of the earth. God has a global vision for the early Church. Their thinking went way beyond their walls. Can it be any different for us?

“For God so loved the World, that He gave His one and only Son. . . “ (John 3:16).

He loved the world, and in Acts 1:8, He asks us to do the same.

Acts 1:8 is not only a great outline for the Book of Acts, it is great strategy for the local church. God is calling us to be His witnesses. Let it begin in our Jerusalem (the town in which we live). Let it then expand to the county surrounding us (our Judea). From there, let us not be hesitant to enter into our Samaria. When Jesus asked the early church to go into Samaria, He was asking them to go into a different culture and to people they found difficult to like or trust. Where is your Samaria? Finally, to the ends of the earth. That may mean going as far as your neighbor who just moved in from China. It could also mean volunteering on a mission trip or sending someone to another country. What are some of the ways that you can think of to fulfill this command of Jesus in going to the ends of the earth?

Years ago, the slide shows I saw as a young boy told me of the wide gap between those in foreign lands and my small church in Massachusetts. That gap has closed a lot because of travel and communication advancements. In another way, however, the gap is widening between the Church and the culture of the world.

Compare the world with the Christ we preach. The gap is huge between His call to selflessness and the world’s self-obsession. Jesus declares that He is the truth and the way and the life. This does not match well with a world that rejects any absolute truth. More and more people no longer see Christians

or the faith they profess as an influence in society. Six out of ten Americans believe the church is irrelevant. Here in America there are 170 million non-Christians (making us the third largest mission field in the world) who view what the church offers as useless (Lewis, R., p. 23).

How are we to close that gap? First, recognize that this view of the world is not much different from the world into which Jesus said to the disciples “. . . *you will be my witnesses. . . .*” There is no need to become pessimistic or anxious. The world is ripe unto the harvest. It is a wonderful time to be in the Church and in the world as His witnesses. He has created and called us for a time such as this.

Secondly, one of the best ways to close a gap is to build a bridge. Saxonburg, Pennsylvania was the home of John Roebling, a famous bridge designer and the inventor of wire rope. His wire rope design was used in the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1860's. A bridge is a good visual for the church of the twenty-first century. Years ago, back in that small church where I grew up, it was enough to build a bridge between the church and culture on truth alone. “God says” was usually enough to get people to listen with respect and openness. Today, the bridge we seek to build, both in our churches and in our personal lives with the world around us, needs to be designed differently. As I contemplate how to fulfill God's mission in Acts 1:8, I have found the following words helpful:

“We need bridges that balance public proclamation with congregational incarnation. Bridges that are suspended by the steel cables of the Great Commandment as well as the Great Commission. In the twenty-first century, the church must understand, as never before, that faith—without works—is dead. So will be our influence. As a result, the chasm between the church and the world only grows wider and more disingenuous. Says George Barna,

‘Americans are not going to patronize an institution which appears incapable of living what it preaches’” (Lewis, R., p.40).

Jesus has given to us the mission of being His witnesses. We are not called to be promoters of a program or even of a church, but first and foremost, a witness to Him. Read the book of Acts and you will see that they do just that. They talk about Him and the difference He has made in their lives. The world is both listening and watching. The world is hungry for things spiritual. In “The Present Future,” Reggie McNeal writes:

“People may be turned off to the church, but they are not turned off to Jesus. Jesus is popular. He still makes the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* every year (generally around Easter). As I write these lines he's just come out on the cover of a prominent scientific journal. Church people sometimes get excited by this but fail to understand that people in the nonchurch culture don't associate Jesus with the church. In their mind, the church is a club for religious people where club members can celebrate their traditions and hang out with others who share common thinking and lifestyles. They do not automatically think of the church as championing the cause of poor people or healing the sick or serving people. These are things they associate with Jesus” (p. 12).

Our call is to stand firm in the truth of His Word while at the same time presenting our lives as living proof of a heart devoted to loving Him first and our neighbor as our own self.

The third way in which that gap will be closed is by relying on His power, not our own. “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. . . .*” (Acts 1:8). Jesus did not expect them to do this on their own. Nor does He expect that with us. I find it amazing that when Jesus left, the disciples did just what He said. They waited. They waited for ten days until the Spirit came upon

them. After all, they had been with Him for three years. They knew what the message was that they would speak. Yet, they waited. They depended on His power, not their own. We need to do the same, for it is only in His Spirit that any of us will have the boldness that is needed.

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4: 31).

When I consider those believers of the early Christian Church, I see ordinary folks. What made them different was not their education or their background. What made them different was this one truth:

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

“These men had been with Jesus.”

That simple phrase is what I want others to say about my life and me. “He’s been with Jesus.” I want my witness of Jesus to be marked with words and actions that will be a bridge by which the world I live in gets a little smaller and a little closer.

Prayer: Father as you have loved the world, so let your love fill my heart. May my life and the ministry of my church be motivated out of love for those your Son died for on the Cross. Help us to build those bridges that will enable the lost to be connected with you. **Amen.**

Challenge: How can your church take on a more global emphasis? Where would you say is your Jerusalem? Judea? Samaria? Outer most parts of the Earth? What can your church do to build bridges in these places?

Scripture Reading: Acts 1-2

From the Book of Concord: “All people, whatever their calling, should seek perfection, that is, growth in the fear of God, in faith, in the love for their neighbor, and in similar spiritual virtues” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII: Monastic Vows, p. 283:37).

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Go and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

7th Mission Response

Celebrate



43

Celebrating the Joy

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”
(John 15:11)

A young man has spent five years traveling throughout the world making a documentary on native dances. He is nearing the end of his project and winds up in Australia in Alice Springs. He begins to talk to an Aborigine, who asks the researcher if he ever saw the “Butcher Dance.”

“Butcher Dance? What’s that?” he asks.
“What? You never heard of it?”

Well, the Aborigine convinces the fellow that he must see the “Butcher Dance” to finish his project. Once convinced, the man gets excited about being able to experience this very famous dance. They begin their trek over the outback to a place where the Butcher Dance is observed. They follow a dirt track for 200 miles, walking for three days through creeks and valleys. It takes them another four days to get over the mountains. And, of course, all this time they are dragging their camera equipment and crew with them. After seven long days of grueling travel, they finally reach the village of the Butcher Dance. They find the village chief and explain to him why they have traveled so far and say they are anxious to start filming this exotic dance.

Then the bad news hits them. The chief explains that the Butcher Dance Festival was the previous night. The chief adds, “Maybe you can see it the next time.”

“Well, when will you hold the next dance?” the researcher asks.

“Not ‘til next year.”

“Couldn’t you please hold it just one more time tonight so we could see it and film it for our documentary?”

“No,” was the reply. “The Butcher Dance is very holy and is performed only once a year.”

The man is devastated but has no other option than to wait until the next year. So he decides to stay in the area and tries to make a go of it in the village, even though it is very difficult. He becomes ill, cannot find work, misses his family, but alas, he sticks it out.

A year passes and the day of reckoning comes—the next festival of the Butcher Dance. The natives form a circle around a huge roaring fire. A deathly hush descends over the performers and some sort of witch doctor appears and begins the ritual. The researcher is getting caught up in the fervor of the event. “Wow,” he thinks, “here I am, the first white man to see the famous Butcher Dance.” He starts filming. The chief strides to his position in the circle and, in a big booming voice, starts to sing. He says, “You butch yer right arm in. You butch yer right arm out. You butch yer right arm in, and you shake it all about!” (Bimler, pp.118-120).

That story makes me laugh. Laughter is a good thing in life. It reflects joy in the heart. Joy is a good thing. It must be, because there are over 800 passages in the Bible that deal with “joy.” God must like the word. Even more than liking the word in the Bible, God loves it when there is joy in life.

Jesus entered into His public ministry talking about joy. As He began His public ministry, some of His first words were regarding joy. He stood before the people in His hometown and read the words of Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Is it only coincidence that the text for His message is tied into the Old Testament celebration of the Year of Jubilee? As He entered ministry with a festal shout, so He prepared to end His days talking about joy: *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11)*. Amazing, when you think about it—on a night when Jesus is faced with deep anguish, He talks about joy.

Martin Luther once said, “God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to the dear God whenever you rejoice or laugh from the bottom of your heart.”

That makes sense to me. When I see my girls laughing, it pleases me so much. Why would it not be true with God when He sees me laugh?

At a time when Jesus shared some difficult teaching (some of it regarding obedience to His command to love as He has loved), He followed it with these words, *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* He does not give us His commands because we are too happy and He wants to make us more serious. He gives us the command to love one another because He believes that we are not joyous enough. There is no one in the entire universe who is happier or more joyous than God! He wants that joy to be in you and me.

The absence of joy from the life of the church and the Christian is a serious hindrance to our witness. Dallas Willard writes:

“How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality within the freedom of God’s loving rule” (p. 80).

Joy in the life of a believer is not only fun; it is a necessity. Take to heart the words of Nehemiah: “. . . *for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10)*.

For all those times I know the joy of the Lord through His body and blood, which I receive at His altar, or through the comforting presence of His Spirit, I ditto what Nehemiah said: “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” In times of trouble, joy gives strength. In times of temptation, joy gives strength. It is the absence of joy that makes us weak.

“Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us” (Willard, p. 181).

It is very basic when we delight in God as our greatest joy. Sinful actions are not as appealing or attractive. There is strength in that joy. Don’t get me wrong. Temptations are still attractive. They are just not *as* attractive. It only follows that where there is a heart of joy, it will seek the opportunity to celebrate.

When the Red Sox recently won the World Series, fans who had waited so long (86 years—but who’s counting?), looked for some way to celebrate the joy with others. Phone calls. E-mails. It was too sweet and too good to keep inside.

God understands this basic need and desire. He knows that our delight in Him needs a chance to express itself in community. This is one of the great joys of worshipping with other Christians. The Old Testament places a lot of emphasis on the feast days.

These days of feasting were to be as influential as were the strict regulations of fasting and sacrifices. The Book of Leviticus has the reputation for being a book of laws and regulations. It has a fair share in its pages. But it also has a lot to say about celebrating among the community of believers.

God is pleased when His people gather to celebrate in His name—celebrating His victories, His faithfulness and grace. This is what rests at the very heart and center of worship—the celebration of God’s goodness and glory. So often we want to make worship about us. We look for hymns that move us in certain ways; messages that help us with “real life” problems; worship time that helps us to experience His presence. I rejoice when this is the result of worship, but these are secondary. First and foremost, our worship celebrates Him. He alone is worthy to receive our praise and honor. This is reflected so well in the hymn of praise, “This is the Feast”:

This is the feast of victory for our God.
Alleluia.
Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,
Whose blood set us free to be people of
God.
Power and riches and wisdom and strength
And honor and blessing and glory are his.

This is the feast of victory for our God.
Alleleluia.
Sing with all the people of God,
And join in the hymn of all creation:
Blessing and honor and glory and might
Be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.
This is the feast of victory for our God,
For the Lamb who was slain has begun his
reign.
Alleluia, alleluia.
(Lutheran Worship. pp. 182-183)

When worship is carried out in spirit and truth as Jesus taught (John 4:23), all of worship is a feast—a feast on the love and faithfulness of God. The highpoint of this

feast is the celebration of Holy Communion. What a great way to refer to this meal—the *celebration* of Holy Communion. That is precisely what it is—a celebration. God is victorious. He rules. He alone is worthy.

Worship is nothing less than offering Him the praise He deserves in a rhythm that echoes our daily walk with Him.

“Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God.

“Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where his name is, there is he. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words he has used to make himself known to us.

“The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink. Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from his Word and from the way his Word has prompted his worship through the centuries. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in

its own day—the living heritage and something new” (Lutheran Worship, p. 6).

In worship, we are reminded through the hymns that our celebration of joy can sometimes be found in the midst of great pain. Some of the most endearing celebrations of joy have been in the presence of much pain, for the joy is not found in life’s circumstances but in the joy of the Lord.

Horatio Spafford stands witness to this so powerfully. Spafford was born in 1828 and lived much of his life in Chicago as a successful lawyer and businessman. He was deeply religious and active in his church.

Beginning in 1870, a series of tragic events tested his faith greatly. In 1873, a doctor advised the Spaffords to take a vacation for the family’s well being. Hearing that a dear friend, Dwight L. Moody, would be preaching in England, the Spaffords decided to leave for a vacation there. Spafford’s wife and their four daughters set sail, and Horatio would follow after completing some business. On November 22, 1873, while enroute, their ship sunk. Mrs. Spafford survived, but the four daughters were lost. When she arrived in Wales, she cabled her husband with the news: “Saved alone.”

Receiving the news, Spafford left immediately to join his wife. He asked the captain of the ship to notify him when they approached the approximate location of where his daughters’ ship went down. Notified that the area was near, Spafford went down into his cabin and wrote this hymn, which today we know as “When Peace Like A River,” or better known as “It is Well With My Soul”:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”
It is well with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come,

Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

It is well with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.

My sin . . . O, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend.
“Even so” – it is well with my soul.
It is well with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

Jesus said,

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

What amazes me about this statement is when He said it. He was facing death in the morning. How could He talk about joy?

“Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame (Hebrews 12:2).

What is that joy that was before Him? It is obeying the will of His Father. The joy of obedience. Beyond this, it is His joy of knowing that in the anguish of *His* soul, it may be well with *our* souls.

Joy in this life almost always involves an attitude of “No matter what, I will rejoice.”

There is certain defiance, because we know that at the Cross “it is well with my soul.” When faith shall be sight, we know that joy will have the last word.

For the sheer joy of knowing Him and for the joy of life itself, why not then celebrate the joy? “Butch yer right arm in, butch yer right arm out; butch yer right arm in and shake it all about.”

Prayer: Jesus, you are the happiest person in the universe. let your joy be my joy this day. no matter what goes on tody, let me say, “It is well with my soul. **Amen.**”

Challenge: What about God makes you smile and laugh? Be sure to laugh today and let the joy show to others.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 96

From the Book of Concord: “Alongside this definition, the word ‘gospel’ is used in another (that is, in a strict) sense, when it includes not the proclamation of repentance but only the proclamation of the grace of God, as in the subsequent passage in Mark 1[:15], ‘Repent, and believe in the gospel.’”

“In a similar way the little word ‘repentance’ is not used in just one sense in Holy Scripture. For in certain passages in Holy Scripture it is used and understood as the entire conversion of the person, as in Luke 13[:5], ‘Unless you repent, you will all perish,’ and in Luke 15[:7], ‘There will be joy over one sinner who repents . . .’ But in the passage in Mark 1[:15] and in other places where repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 20[:24]) or ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 24[:47]) are set in contrast, repentance means nothing else than to recognize sin truly, to be heartily sorrowful for it, and to abstain from it. This recognition comes from the law but is not sufficient for a salutary conversion to God, if faith in Christ is not joined to it. The comforting proclamation of the holy gospel offers his merit to all repentant sinners whom the proclamation of the law has terrified. For the gospel proclaims forgiveness of sins not to crude, secure hearts, but to those who have been crushed or are repentant (Luke 4[:18]). So that despair does not develop out of the sorrow or terror of the law, the proclamation of the gospel must be added to it, so that there may be a ‘sorrow that leads to salvation’ (2 Cor. 7[:10])” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V: Law and Gospel, p. 582.6-9).

44 Celebrating the Homecoming

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

Tony Campolo tells the story of a trip that he took to Hawaii. Jet lag kept him awake late into the night, and he went out for a walk on the streets of Honolulu. At two in the morning, he found himself in a doughnut shop. Sitting at the counter, he overheard several prostitutes who were sharing a booth. One of the girls, whose name was Agnes, mentioned that it was her birthday.

After she had left, Tony turned to the cook and the other prostitutes and said, “Let’s throw a party for Agnes.” The other girls agreed to bring decorations, and the cook said that he would bake a cake.

That night, they all gathered at the shop and when Agnes walked in, they brought out the cake and began to sing, “Happy Birthday.” Tears streamed down Agnes’ face, and when it came time to cut the cake, she just stood there. Finally she said, “Could I buy another cake and we’ll eat that one? I want to take this one home and show it to my mother.”

With that, she took the cake and left. In the sudden silence that filled the shop after she left, Tony bowed his head and began to pray, “Lord we thank you for Agnes and for your love for her. You loved her enough to send your Son to die for her on the cross. We thank you for the best present of all—the present of your own Son. Amen.” When he raised his head, he saw that all of the prostitutes had their heads bowed and had been praying with him.

The cook looked at him and said, “You’re a preacher!” When Tony admitted that he

was, the cook asked, “What kind of church do you have?” In a sudden flash of insight, Tony replied, “The kind that throws parties for prostitutes and gives invitations to sinners” (Campolo, pp. 3-7).

Jesus likes parties. This is pretty obvious in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. Three parables. Three things lost: A lost sheep. A lost coin. A lost son. Each story ends up with a party. Each story has one person looking for friends and neighbors to share in the joy and celebration. This is the thread that connects all three. Look over these three parables. The object of attention is not the sheep or the coin or the son. The focus is on the one searching. Each of them find what they are looking or waiting for, and they invite people to share in their joy and join in the party.

Nothing brings God greater joy than when one sinner repents and is safely back in the fold. Lost people matter to God. It matters not why they are lost. Some who are lost are very close to home, even within the confines of the church. They, like the coin, are helpless and can do nothing on their own to help themselves. Others are lost due to their ignorance and waywardness. Like the sheep, they are vulnerable to danger and harm. Searching for them is a much wider adventure. As with the lost son, some are lost because of willful disobedience and sinful living. No matter the condition or the reason, lost people matter to God. Charles Spurgeon wrote a century ago:

“There are Christmas days in heaven where Christ’s high mass is kept, and Christ is not glorified because He was born in a manger but because He is born in a broken heart. And these are days when the Shepherd brings home the lost sheep upon His shoulders, when the church has swept her house and found the lost piece of money, for then are those friends and neighbors called together, and they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory over one sinner who repents” (MacArthur, 1996, p. 246).

It’s rather amazing, isn’t it? Jesus portrays the sheer delight that goes on over one sinner who repents. In the movie, “It’s A Wonderful Life,” Clarence, the angel, explains that each time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings. That is nothing compared to the picture here. Jesus portrays three different views. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says:

“I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).

“There is more rejoicing in heaven.”

Who is it that shares in this rejoicing? Is it the angels? The saints? It is left unsaid, but this much is clear: When one sinner repents, there is a party in heaven.

In the second parable, the picture is one of God leading the rejoicing.

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

In his commentary on Luke, Dr. William Arndt writes:

“Bringing a lost one back into safety is the basis of joy before the angels of God, that is, in God Himself, who is here thought of as sitting on His throne, surrounded by the heavenly servants, who see Him rejoice and share His joy” (p. 348).

I can only begin to imagine the angels looking on as God dances around, cheering and applauding wildly in joy over just one sinner who is back home again. What must go through their minds to see God in all of His glory taking such delight over one person—a mortal, no less—being carried back home on the shoulders of Jesus?

That leads me to ask, “Where am I in that crowd when the cheering starts? Do I share in the joy?” God is exuberant, but I am afraid that I am not always quick to join in the celebration or to invite people like that prostitute to the party. In the third parable of the lost son, at the very end, the picture of rejoicing is much different:

“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:32).

This parable portrays that the rejoicing is more by those on earth. Those who are a part of the family and community of this prodigal son are the ones who rejoice and celebrate. That would seem to place this question directly at the feet of the church today: How shall we rejoice and join with God and the heavenly hosts in rejoicing over the lost who have come home?

Maybe it would help if we understood what all the fuss was about. Why the rejoicing in the first place?

Those in heaven who see God rejoicing and leading the cheers understand exactly what the father was saying to the older son when the younger son returned home: *“But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”*

Lost or found. Dead or alive. Damned or saved. Foolish or wise. There is no neutral ground when it comes to things spiritual. There is no middle road when it comes to one’s walk with Christ.

When the RMS Titanic sank, more than twenty-two hundred people were cast into the

frigid waters of the Atlantic. On shore, the names of the passengers were posted in two simple columns: Saved and Lost. God's list is equally simple (Lucado, p. 148).

The angels rejoice and celebrate with God over each person that repents. How many times has it been that this party was thrown in my honor? How many times have I been the one that strayed off, only to be rescued and carried home in the arms of love and grace? Shall I now sit here and watch as some neutral spectator? Why is it that I show more joy watching my favorite team celebrate a championship on the field than I do

in knowing God's joy in just one person who is safe at home with Him? Celebrating is the response of those who are passionate about the mission Christ has given us. God is looking for churches that will join Him in rejoicing over the lost coming home. He is looking for churches that know how to throw a great homecoming party.

Prayer: Father, in the repentance of just one sinner your heart is filled with joy. All of heaven joins in your celebration. May I and your church on Earth be marked by this joy as well. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Is there someone you know who has come back home to Christ? Send them a note or gift and let them know the joy it gives you to have them back.

Scripture Reading: Luke 15

From the Book of Concord: "In the last chapter of Luke [24:47], Christ commands the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name. The gospel accuses all people of being under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death and for Christ's sake offers the forgiveness of sins and justification, which are received by faith. The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promise of Christ, namely, that on his account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of those fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 130.62).

45 Celebrating the Community

“Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.” (Luke 24:52-53)

I like wearing baseball caps. I have a bunch of them. One is my favorite above all others. It is blue and has one mark on it: “B.” It doesn’t stand for Barry. It stands for Boston, as in Boston Red Sox. I won’t talk about it for long, but indulge me for a moment. After all, we waited 86 years for this moment.

October 27, 2004 was a celebration that I never thought would come. That was the night the Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals to claim the World Series. (Did I mention that they did it in four straight?) Forgive me for delighting in this so. Getting there was not easy or painless. Bucky Dent in 1978. Bill Buckner in 1986. Someone once said that watching the Boston Red Sox was like watching Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, you know someone is going to get killed; you just don’t know how it will be done. Watching the Red Sox is a lot like that. You knew they would lose. You just did not know how they would do it. Until October 27, 2004.

When they won that night, and especially when they beat the Yankees (sorry, I just had to get that in at least once), a bond developed among people. E-mails and phone calls and conversations at the water cooler. It did not matter if you knew the other person; there was a sense of oneness when you knew that you shared a common joy and pain. I experienced this at a local coffee shop. I saw a man wearing a ball cap similar to mine. I had never seen him before—no matter, I called out to him and said, “Love your hat!” He smiled

and we waved high-fives to each other. “The Red Sox Nation” is what some call it.

When the game was over on October 27, I spoke with my brother on the phone—just to share in the moment. Then my girls called, and there was the sharing of laughter and tears and stories about Grampie Toi. (How he would have loved this moment!) I realized then that a bond of another type had been formed between my girls and their grandfather who used to love listening to the Sox. This sentiment was apparently felt by many. The Boston Globe printed this article on October 29:

“Despite all that’s been said about a curse, a lot of Red Sox fans weren’t thinking of Babe Ruth or Bucky Dent the moment Boston won the World Series Wednesday night. They were thinking of their favorite uncle who was buried in a Sox jersey, or the hot dog vendor who used to sneak children into Fenway Park, or the neighbor who cried the night the ball went between Bill Buckner’s legs—all the loved ones who should have been there to share the moment” (Peter DeMarco).

After the game and the conversations, it was hard to turn the TV off. I just wanted to linger with the joy of the moment. Sleep could wait another day. The Sox were World Champions tonight. Plus, you never know when you might experience this again—if ever. Eighty-six years is a long time to wait.

All of this leads me to Luke 24:52-53: *“And they were on their knees, worshiping him. They returned to Jerusalem bursting with joy. They spent all their time in the Temple praising God. Yes”* (MSG).

Such was their joy in the victory of the resurrected and ascended Lord that they didn't want to leave it. They were ecstatic and wanted to hang out with each other in the temple, giving praise to God. I wonder what that was like for the religious leaders of the day. They did not believe but were in the temple, carrying out the required sacrifices and worship. What must it have been like to have seen and heard the joyous worship of these disciples?

Please don't think that I am comparing the victory of Jesus to that of a World Series victory. It's not even close. But, if you can relate to that sense of joy, that sense of community that is so great and so precious that you don't want it to end—then you have a mere hint of what it was like for those first believers after Christ's resurrection. In Acts 2, it says of them:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (vv. 42-47).

This, to me, is the picture of a victory party. It looks to me like a bunch of people who are lingering in the joy of the moment and the celebration. Who can blame them? Their celebration is like no other that has ever been experienced. It is not a temporary one

like that of a World Series. It is an everlasting victory. There is no “wait till next year” when it comes to a victory celebration in Jesus. Ours is the joy of saying, “He is Risen!” “He is Risen, Indeed!” It is an ever present reality that will not be lost or given up. I know all too well how fleeting is the joy of October 27. But for anyone who is in Jesus Christ—the crown of life that one wears by grace will not be taken away. It is eternal!

Much was made in the World Series of certain heroes: Johnny Damon and Curt Schilling, and Manny Ramirez, who was the MVP. People long to shower their adoration upon heroes. We wear shirts with their names on them; we want their photos and autographs. We are willing to pay a lot of money just for the “privilege” of having these things in our possession. We seek to pour our praise on someone great. We long to attach ourselves with someone we admire and respect.

There is, however, only one MVP—in all of Scripture and in all the world—the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God alone is the true hero. There are some amazing people in Scripture, but each one of them had their share of faults and weaknesses. Only One deserves our praise and adoration. God alone is the hero. Yet, incredibly, He wants us to have His name. Better than any autograph or jersey, God places His name upon us in our Baptism. Wherever we go, His name is upon us. It costs us nothing to receive it. It cost Him everything to offer it.

When I envision the Church, I see people gathering together in worship services (and through e-mails and at the water cooler) as they share together a common love and bond in the celebration of Christ's victory. So great is their joy that they linger there with each other, not wanting it to end. Just as the Red Sox victory was and is my victory, even more so—eternally so—is the victory of Christ my victory by means of my Baptism, where I am joined in His death, buried with Him in the grave, and raised with Him in His resurrection (Romans 6:1-14).

Within the Church that Jesus commissioned to carry His message to the world, there is the gathering of people who are so filled with joy that they cannot help but constantly talk about it. When they see strangers in public who wear the cross, or a fish symbol on the bumper of a car, there is an instant bond with this person that causes them to want to wave high-fives to each other from a distance. This is the celebration of community that I see in the Book of Acts. This is the Church that excites me when I see it in action today.

I see a danger, however, when one's faith and certainty of salvation becomes too private. This is not how I see it in Scripture. Salvation is very personal, but it is also communal. Personally, I have received by grace the gift of salvation. Jesus is my Lord. That also means that now, with Him as my King, I am made a citizen of His Kingdom, a Holy Nation like no other. The Church of today needs to lay claim once again on the joy of the celebration of community.

There is one other dimension to the Church, though, that should also be mentioned, for it also is very much a part of the celebration of community. Let's go back to the article in the Boston Globe:

“By yesterday, fans across the globe had posted hundreds of memorials on a website to those they had lost. Postings from London to Melbourne filled 54 pages, some tearful, many bittersweet, others overflowing with happiness. All

recalled great fans who never stopped believing in their team, but did not live to witness the dream . . . fans who posted to the website, as well as those who thought about loved ones Wednesday night as the Sox cruised to victory, agreed that the Red Sox Nation wasn't just on earth.”

My dad, who has been with Jesus for many years now, was a huge Red Sox fan. I do not believe, however, that his joy in heaven is increased by a Red Sox victory. If there is such a thing as a Red Sox Nation, then it is confined here to earth.

But the Church that celebrates the victory of Christ is both here on earth and in heaven. My dad and I share this victory together. When I worship, I am joined with him and all the company of heaven, singing the praises of our Triune God. When I receive the body and blood of my Savior, it is a feast that we share in together.

When you go out today or tomorrow, if you happen to see someone wearing a cross or some sign that they are a Christian, say hello to them. Take a moment to share in the joy of the victory—for we Christians are part of a Holy Nation together. In Christ, we are world champions!

Prayer: You, O Christ, are the Victor. You have defeated Satan and death and sin itself. I praise you and honor you, offering you my life this day in thanksgiving for making your victory my own through my Baptism. In your name, **Amen.**

Challenge: If you see someone this day wearing a cross or other Christian symbol, acknowledge to them that you too are a part of that “Holy Nation.”

Scripture Reading: Luke 24

From the Book of Concord: “This teaching offers the following beautiful, wonderful comfort. God made the conversion, righteousness, and salvation of each individual Christian such a high personal concern and intended to remain so faithful to it that ‘even before the foundation of the world’ [Eph. 1:4] he resolved and ‘according to his own purpose’ [2 Tim. 1:9] he preordained how he would bring me to salvation and preserve me in it. ^{cr}Likewise, he desired to guarantee my salvation so completely and certainly—because it could slip through our fingers so easily through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh or be snatched and taken from our hands through the deceit and power of the devil and the world. For he has preordained this salvation through his eternal intention, which cannot fail or be overthrown, and he has placed it for safekeeping into the almighty hand of our Savior Jesus Christ, from which no one can snatch us away (John 10 [:28]). Therefore, Paul also asks in Romans 8[:28, 35, 39], since we are called in accord with God’s intention, ‘Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ?’” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, p. 648.45-47).

46 Celebrating the Day

*“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”
(Psalm 118:24)*

There is a story of a little boy who came home from Sunday School on Easter Sunday very excited about what he had learned. He raced into the kitchen and shouted, “Wow, I learned what Jesus said when He burst out of the tomb on Easter morning!” His mom and dad were excited too, and they asked him, “Well what did He say on the first Easter morning?” And the little boy ran up to them, threw his hands up in the air, and shouted “TA-DA!” (Bimler, p. 14).

Obviously, the young boy has paraphrased Jesus a little bit. I suspect, though, that he is capturing the essence of joy and celebration that were evident that first Easter morning. “TA-DA—Here I am! I am alive, just as I said!” As a result, our lives are “TA-DA!” lives. We are able to enter each day in the confidence that Jesus is alive. Wherever we go, we give witness and bear testimony to the truth that Jesus is alive and ready to reveal Himself. Even in those days when the challenges are overwhelming, Christ stands ready to say to us, “TA-DA!” His resurrection gives us the ability to say with joyous defiance, *“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24)*. What day is the Psalmist referring to in this verse? Look two verses earlier at verse 22:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (vv. 22-24).

What so many thought to be worthless (the life of Christ, and so they discarded it), God raises up and uses as the cornerstone for what He is building. The day He has made is the Day of Resurrection, which makes every day a “TA-DA!” day—a day for rejoicing and celebrating. The joy of the resurrection is so great and timeless that it cannot be confined to one single day.

Martin Luther offers this thought regarding it:

“This is the time of the New Testament, a different day from that which the good sun daily makes. Here the Lord Himself is the Sun. He creates this day with its light and splendor. This day is not followed by night, nor does its light shine into the eyes of the body; it shines into the heart . . . This light teaches grace, peace, and forgiveness of sins before God, of which reason knows nothing . . . This is a happy day, as the psalmist here rejoices and says, ‘Let us be glad!’ The light and teaching of grace gives the heart peace, rest and joy in Christ. It realizes that its sins are without merit, that it is delivered from death, and that in God it forever has a gracious Father through Christ, as St. Paul says (Rom. 5:1): ‘Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ And then he further describes this peace and joy as something that endures in tribulation and gives courage. No unbeliever can know anything of this joy

and peace, nor can those who by their works endeavor to be pious and wipe out their sins . . . What could be more precious and nobler than an enlightened heart, a heart that knows God and all things, a heart that can judge rightly and speak truly in all things before God? Where could there be a higher or greater joy than in a happy, secure and fearless conscience, a conscience that trusts in God and fears neither the world nor the devil?" (Luther's Works, Vol. 14, p. 100).

If, then, there is to be celebration, let it be today. Why wait? So often we fall into the illusion that joy will come. We try to sing "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow," but it is not only our voice that ends up flat. We go to school and think, "I will be happy tomorrow." Then we graduate and get married. She or he is not exactly what we bargained for and we say, "I will be happy tomorrow." It never ends. Resurrection faith says in the face of it all, "*This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" We have seen through the eyes of faith what God can do with what others saw as worthless. The day we are in can then be redeemed by this same power.

Can this be said in the presence of tragedy? What I have seen in ministry is that so often it is precisely in these moments that those touched most deeply by suffering experience the joy of hope.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:1-5).

Jeremy Camp, a Christian songwriter, had only been married for a few months when his wife, Melissa, was diagnosed with cancer. She had come home from the hospital and asked him to get his guitar so that they could sing and worship. The song she wanted him to play was, "For You Are Good." Even in the midst of her dying, Melissa knew that God alone deserved the praise that her heart could offer. Weeks after Melissa's death, Jeremy wrote a song entitled, "I Still Believe":

Scattered words and empty thoughts
Seem to pour from my heart.
I've never felt so torn before,
Seems I don't know where to start.
But it's now that I feel your grace
fall like rain From every fingertip,
washing away my pain.

I still believe in your faithfulness.
I still believe in your truth.
I still believe in your Holy Word,
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

Though the questions still fog up my mind
With promises, I still seem to bear,
Even when answers slowly unwind,
It's my heart I see you prepare.
But it's now that I feel your grace
fall like rain From every fingertip,
washing away my pain.

I still believe in your faithfulness.
I still believe in your truth.
I still believe in your Holy Word,
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

The only place I can go is into your arms,
Where I throw to you my feeble prayers.
In brokenness I can see that this was your
will for me.
Help me to know you are near.

I still believe in your faithfulness.
I still believe in your truth.
I still believe in your Holy Word,
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

Even in the midst of pain or in days when we are confused and torn, the Cross assures us of God's love, and the empty Tomb proclaims His victory. I love the words from Romans 8:

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that has loved us" (v. 37).

No matter what Satan throws at us, no matter how unfairly the world treats us, we are more than conquerors. We do not merely win out over evil because Christ—He even takes every wound, every hurt, every failure, and

weaves them into the fabric of our life's story. More than conquerors.

Today is the day.

"This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Christ is ready to reveal Himself as the Victor. Today is a "TA-DA!" day!

Prayer: Father, this is the day which you have made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.

Challenge: Memorize Psalm 118:24 and repeat it to yourself throughout the day.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 118

From the Book of Concord: "This faith uplifts, sustains, and gives life to the contrite, according to the passage [Rom. 5:1]: 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.' This faith receives the forgiveness of sins. This faith justifies before God, as the same passage testifies, 'since we are justified by faith.' This faith shows the difference between the contrition of Judas and Saul on the one hand, and Peter and David on the other. The contrition of Judas or Saul was useless for the reason that it lacked the faith that grasps the forgiveness of sins granted on account of Christ" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII: Repentance, p. 192:36).

47

Celebrating His Greatness

“Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns.’ The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in his truth.” (Psalm 96:10-13)

Microscopes and telescopes caught my interest as I was growing up. What is not to love for a junior high kid looking through the lens of a microscope and seeing all types of crawling and creepy things? It was as if I was looking at another world within a world. As for the telescope, I stood in wonder looking through it at the vastness of the universe. I suspect that in seventh grade the word “vastness” was not in my vocabulary. “Huge” and “gigundo” are words that better describe my thinking at that time.

Whatever the words, the lens of the microscope and the telescope gave witness to God. Microbes and stars shouted out with His praise:

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy” (Psalm 96: 11-12).

It is a pretty amazing universe when you think about, where rocks can talk and trees sing and clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12). Just the picture of that in my mind makes me laugh. I especially like the way Psalm 96:11-12 reads in the translation from The Message:

*“Let’s hear it from Sky,
With Earth joining in,
And a huge round of applause from Sea.
Let Wilderness turn cartwheels,*

*Animals, come dance,
Put every tree of the forest in the choir.”*

Look with me through the lens of a telescope for a moment and behold the wonder of His glory and majesty. If you could travel at the speed of light (186,273 miles per second or 5,874,305,328,000 miles per year—a light year), then you could travel:

- around the Earth at the leisurely pace of seven times in one second.
- to the moon in 1 1/3 seconds.
- from the sun to Earth in 8 1/3 minutes.
- from the sun to Pluto in 5 1/2 hours.
- from the sun to the next star after Pluto in 4 1/3 years.

Gigundo! One more: At the speed of light, you could travel from Earth to the center of the Milky Way in 33,000 years. It is estimated that the Milky Way contains about 100,000,000 stars. It would take you more than 3,000 years to count them at the rate of one per second! That is just our galaxy. There are thousands of others.

“For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary” (Psalm 96:4-6).

Now look with me through the lens of a microscope and behold the wonder of His glory and majesty on a smaller but no less grand scale:

- Within the human body, one square inch of skin contains four yards of nerve fibers, 1,300 nerve cells, 100 sweat glands, three million cells and three yards of blood vessels.
- The human eye can distinguish up to one million color surfaces, taking in more information than the world's largest telescope.
- We have over 600 muscles; it takes 10 muscles to smile and 12 to frown. (So smile—it is easier.)
- We make one liter of saliva a day. (This statistic is for the seventh graders reading this who want to gross out their friends.)
- Every person has a unique tongue print.
- In one square inch of our hand we have nine feet of blood vessels, 600 pain sensors, 9,000 nerve endings, 36 heat sensors and 75 pressure sensors.
- The average scalp has 100,000 hairs. Redheads have 80,000 and blondes have the most at 120,000!
- It is normal to lose 100 hairs per day from the scalp. (I think I am above that average.)

Had enough? Oh well, two more: If it were possible to take from an average human body all of its arteries, veins and capillaries and join them end to end, they would stretch over 60,000 miles (the equivalent of two and a half times around the earth). Finally, the small air sacs in your lungs (if you were to cut and lay them flat), could cover half of a tennis court!

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From

the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet all flocks and herds, and the beast of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8).

The earth and the universe celebrate the majesty and glory of God. Talking rocks and clapping and singing trees. He is a God that just makes you stand back and smile and stand in awe. The awe of God is different than the fear of God. Fear makes us shrink back while awe draws us in. The awe of God is “to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal” (Heschel, p. 75).

The lens of the microscope and the telescope reveal the glory and wonder of God in fascinating ways. However, they fall woefully short of revealing the most essential things about God. They cannot show me those things that matter eternally. I need a third lens through which I can see God—a lens that reveals to me what the microscope and telescope cannot: His holiness and grace. This is the lens of His Word. Take time to read Psalm 19:1-6. These verses refer to the lens of His creation. Read further, however, and see Him through the lens of His Word:

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving

joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:7-14).

The words of that Psalm remind us that the Word of God reveals His law that warns us and convicts us. The same Word reveals His love that forgives us and allows us to call on Jesus as our Redeemer.

It is the Word of God, as Luther says, that is the very “cradle of Christ.” Each page is a lens through which I see Christ and the unfolding plan and wisdom of God.

“No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,’ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2: 7-10).

The Word of God alone enables me to answer the question that God asked to Adam and Eve in the Garden: “Where are you?” Ever since then, people have been trying to respond and answer that question. Scripture alone is able to give us the answer. It is one that can only be found at the foot of the Cross.

As the Lord is revealed through the lens of His Word, we are then invited to magnify that view through one more lens—the lens of worship.

God-pleasing worship is about Him. When Mary was told that she was pregnant with the Christ, she worshipped. Her first words were, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” What a great definition for worship: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Helping me to get a handle on this, I find these words helpful from the King James Version of the Bible:

“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:11).

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom and strength, and honour, and glory and blessing . . . Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:12-13).

“As we worship in this manner, giving careful attention to the details of God’s actions and to his ‘worthiness,’ the good we adore enters our minds and hearts to increase our faith and strengthen us to be as he is” (Willard, p. 178).

Worship focuses on Him. Along with this, He even provides me with the words to offer Him, the water that cleanses, and the bread and wine that nourish me. He gives me the Spirit to enlighten me as to His goodness. It is truly all about Him. He serves me before I can serve Him.

For me, the joy of worship is that it gives me the opportunity to celebrate His goodness and faithfulness with other believers. I hear someone once in a while say, “I can worship God at home or in the woods.” I suppose they are right, but why would you want to, in place of celebrating it with other believers? The questions I want to ask someone who says that are, “Would you want to celebrate

your birthday alone?” “Would you want to celebrate a Super Bowl win alone?” It is only natural that at times of celebration we seek to share that joy. This, to me, is the beauty of congregational worship. It adds to our joy while, at the same time, uniting us as one Body. God asked Israel in the Old Testament to gather together three times a year to celebrate His goodness. Those were festival holidays. Those moments gave them joy and strength and unity.

The Christian Church of the twenty-first century needs this no less. One of our most enticing mission responses that we can offer the world is the witness of believers in the celebration of worship.

On a clear night, look up at the stars and try to count them. Stand in awe of Him. Look at your eye in the mirror. Your retina is thinner than paper, yet its tiny surface contains 137 million light-sensitive cells. Blink your eyes in wonder. Then look into His Word and see Him on the Cross. He is there for you. See the empty Tomb. You need not fear the grave any longer. Then, with other believers, let your soul magnify Him in worship.

Prayer: I stand in awe of all that you have created. The universe declares your glory. Even greater, though, I stand at the foot of the Cross in awe and wonder of your mercy and love for me. All praise be to you, O Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Challenge: Make a list of the top ten things you see today that demonstrate the wonder and majesty of God. Give God thanks for each of these and, above all others, express to Him what the Cross means to you.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 19

From the Book of Concord: “The chief articles of our Christian faith constrain and compel us to maintain this distinction. First, in the article of creation, Scripture testifies not only that God created human nature before the fall but also that even after the fall it remains the creature and work of God (Deut. 32[:6]; Isa. 45[:11]; 54[:5]; 64[:8]; Acts 17[:25, 26]; Rev. 4[:11]).

“‘Your hands,’ Job said, ‘fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit’ (Job 10[:8–12]).

“‘I praise you,’ says David, ‘for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed’ (Ps. 139[:14–16]),

In Ecclesiastes 12[:7] it is written, ‘The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.’

“These verses testify clearly that even after the fall God is the creator of human beings and fashions the human body and soul. Therefore, the corrupted human being cannot be sin itself, without any distinction between the two. Otherwise, God would be a creator of sin. This is also confessed in our Small Catechism, in the explanation of the first article, where it is written, ‘I

believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.’ Likewise, it is written in the Large Catechism [‘Creed,’ 13], ‘I hold and believe that I am God’s creature; that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding,’ etc. It is of course true that this creature and handiwork of God is tragically corrupted by sin, since the *massa* [lump] from which God forms and makes the human being is corrupted and perverted in Adam and is bequeathed to us.

“Here upright Christian hearts should remember the indescribable goodness of God, that God does not cast such a corrupted, perverted, sinful *massa* immediately into the fires of hell. Instead, out of it God makes and fashions human nature as it now is, so tragically corrupted by sin, so that he might cleanse, sanctify, and save it through his dear Son” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article I: Original Sin, pp. 537-538.34-39).

48

Celebrating the Carefree Life

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

The Cookie Thief

A woman was waiting at an airport one night with several long hours before her flight.

She hunted for a book in the airport shop, bought a bag of cookies, and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book but happened to see, that the man beside her, as bold as could be, grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between, which she tried to ignore, to avoid a scene.

She read, munched cookies, and watched the clock, as the gutsy “cookie thief” diminished her stock.

She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by, thinking, “If I wasn’t so nice, I’d blacken his eye!”

With each cookie she took, he took one too. When only one was left, she wondered what he’d do.

With a smile on his face and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half as he ate the other. She snatched it from him and thought, “Oh brother—

This guy has some nerve, and he’s also rude. Why, he didn’t even show any gratitude!”

She had never known when she had been so galled, and sighed with relief when her flight was called.

She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate, refusing to look back at the “thieving ingrate.”

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat, then sought her book, which was almost complete.

As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise. There was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

“If mine are here,” she moaned with despair, “then the others were his, and he tried to share!”

Too late to apologize, she realized with grief, that she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.

(Author unknown.)

That story reminds me that sometimes in life you just have to laugh at yourself and not take yourself too seriously. Being carefree is no easy thing. There is a lot that bogs us down with the cares of the day. This is what I love about God’s Word. It can be so deep while, at the same time, so practical.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” But is that practical? Paul continues, “. . . *Do not be anxious about anything.*” I kind of like the way the King James Version expresses it: *“Be careful for nothing.”* That is actually a way of

expressing the negative side of “rejoicing.” Paul says that the way in which we can rejoice is to be “full of care about nothing” (don’t become filled with anxiety). Jesus was getting at the same thought when He taught:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25).

Both Paul and Jesus use the same word for “anxious.” When you look closely at what Jesus is saying, isn’t He teaching us to not get all hung up about all the daily necessities that so often occupy our minds, such as the clothes we have or don’t have? So much time and so much energy spent being full of care on things that, in the end, rob us of joy. It is hard, though, to break those thoughts. We have been trained since childhood to think just the opposite.

As my girls would go off to school or out with their friends, I said what every dad says: “Be careful.” Being full of care for nothing does not mean that we are careless. It does mean, however, that we rely on God to provide, rather than constantly worrying about it ourselves. We are able to relax our minds and our hearts, knowing that we are in His hands.

It is no accident, having said that we should be full of care for nothing, that Paul then says:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6).

The best way I know how to deal with worry is to stop focusing on me and to begin focusing on God. And the best way I know how to do that is in prayer and in worship. The result will be that God’s peace, beyond

my understanding, will guard my heart and mind and keep watch over me. His peace then helps me to let my mind and heart be at rest. I find it intriguing that the original language for “guard” is a military term for “sentry,” one who keeps watch over something valuable.

Rejoice. Relax. Rest. These three make it possible for me to celebrate.

I wish I could say that joy comes simply through prayer and telling ourselves not to worry. It isn’t that easy. You know that, and I know that. I am saved by grace and grace alone. I have no part in that whatsoever. This does not mean, however, that once I am in the faith God does not have certain expectations of me. Living with a spirit of joy and celebration is rooted in the peace that God alone provides me. Yet Paul, in the way of a command, places this right at our feet:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4: 8-9).

Each day, we are faced with decisions as to what we will allow our minds to focus on. I cannot expect my day or my heart to be filled with joy if I choose to let my mind dwell on sinful or ungodly thoughts, or if I fill my calendar and time with issues that have no eternal significance.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . .” (Galatians 5:22), but the soil of my heart is cultivated and nourished day by day with those things that I think and dwell on in my life.

Paul’s teaching is not easy, but it is right on the mark when he guides us to re-direct our focus and thinking. I really like the way in which Richard Foster expresses it in “Celebration of Discipline” when he writes:

“The decision to set the mind on the higher things of life is an act of the will. That is why celebration is a Discipline. It is not something that falls on our heads. It is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. When we choose this way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships, and the inevitable result will be joy” (p. 195).

Joy begins in the heart. All of our efforts will not give joy to life if the heart is not right. The only way to make the heart right is when we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. If we are not right in Him and with Him, there will be no joy.

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit . . . All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast” (Proverbs 15:13, 15).

While His righteousness gives me joy, I must remain alert. I know all too well that there is someone worse than the cookie thief who wants nothing less than to steal away the peace and joy I have in Jesus. Satan will seek to do this by filling my mind with worry. My confidence, however, rests in knowing that God’s peace, like a military sentry, will patrol the boundaries of my mind and keep me in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, may the peace that you alone give guard my heart and mind in you this day. May your peace that passes my understanding halt every anxious thought from entering.
Amen.

Challenge: What will you allow your mind to dwell on this day? Try to focus on those things that are “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy.”

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4

From the Book of Concord: “‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ In chapter 5[:1] he says: ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,’ that is, we have tranquil and joyful consciences before God. And in Romans 10[:10]: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified.’ Here he states that faith is the righteousness of the heart. Galatians 2[:16]: ‘And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by . . . works of the law.’ Ephesians 2[:8–9]: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast’” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 136.91-93).

40 Celebrating God's Handkerchiefs

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:1-4)

What does a "saint" look like to you? What would be the words that you would use to describe one? When I ask that question to various classes, the responses I get back often include words like "holy," "good," "Christ-like," "God-fearing." You get the idea. All good answers. The Greek word for saint, *hagios*, refers to "separate from common condition and use; pure; righteous."

Those are helpful definitions, but I especially like the one that Frederick Buechner wrote:

"In His holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called Saints" (2004, p. 352).

What a marvelous picture of those saints God places in our lives. Add this thought to your pondering as well:

"God, the shy and proper lover whose heart has been stolen away by the world, drops a handkerchief in the pure, naïve hope that the world, that someone, will notice and pick it up and give it back and in so doing notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace" (Buechner, 1993.)

If it seems like a stretch to picture God as our lover who longs to be one with us, consider how often He refers to us as being His bride:

"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10-11).

"As a young man married a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so will your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5).

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with me, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more

death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true . . . Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21: 2-5, 9).

God has a wedding on His mind. He cannot get it off His mind. He talks about it all the time in Scripture. His love for His Church, His holy and beautiful bride, is passionate like that of a lover. It is a theme woven into the fabric of Scripture as each page points toward the wedding that will be celebrated in heaven. It is not always a joyful theme. Much of the story of the Bible is one that is filled with great heartache. Listen to this love letter He writes to His wayward and unfaithful beloved, the nation of Israel, as He tries to woo them back to His love:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. 'In that day,' declares the Lord, 'you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. 'In that day I will respond,' declares the Lord—'I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will

say to those called, 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hosea 2:14-16, 19-23).

The story of Scripture is the story of God seeking to gain the attention of His people, enticing them back to His love. "God, the shy and proper lover" seeks to win over His people once again. "*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?*" (Hosea 11:8) is the plea of God heard through the prophet Hosea.

God is Almighty. He is Lord of the Universe. Yet, He will not force His way or His love upon you. "God, the shy and proper lover" will seek to catch your attention through what Frederick Buechner calls a "holy flirtation."

Many of us are too young to remember the days of dropping the handkerchief. The idea was simple: A woman conveniently drops her hanky to the ground. A gentleman notices this and stoops down to pick it up. As he hands it to her, their eyes meet and lock for that moment. She has his attention, and soon his love.

God has dropped many, many, many handkerchiefs into the world, hoping that the world would notice. Some of those handkerchiefs have been soaked with God's tears, such as those shed over the blood of Abel spilled onto the ground and all the persecuted who would follow.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

Stephen was one of God's dropped handkerchiefs. His life bore testimony to the very love and forgiveness of Jesus. A man by the name of Saul took notice of this. He would not, however, celebrate the gift at that time, but would assist in stoning Stephen by holding onto the coats who hurled the stones (Acts 7:58).

God dropped His handkerchiefs as He sent one prophet after another to catch the attention of His unfaithful lover, Israel. Time

after time, however, his “holy flirtation” was only to be picked up and flung in a furious and hateful swell of rage and anger. Instead of celebrating these gifts, the world would, as God’s unfaithful lover, reject them while they chased after other lovers.

Sometimes the handkerchiefs God dropped were so young and so fresh. Samuel was called as a young boy, and David was chosen among all of his older and stronger brothers. These, too, were the ways in which God sought to catch the attention of His lover.

There were times, as well, when the handkerchiefs held a sweet fragrance. The scent left from those whose lives radiated with the aroma of His love by means of their sacrificial gifts and actions. The woman with the alabaster jar, the widow and her mite, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who lovingly wrapped the body of Jesus in clean linen—they were among those fragrant handkerchiefs that God dropped into this world, all in the hope of catching the eye of His lover.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

When the world would not take notice, God then dropped His very best and most personal Handkerchief—His own Son. This was the One who carried the very fragrance of God Himself. This Handkerchief was marked by His love and holiness. This was the One that God dropped in the hopes that finally He would catch the attention of the one He loved. Jesus expressed this hope in one of His parables, shortly before His crucifixion:

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent

other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (Matthew 21: 33-40).

When finally this pure and clean Handkerchief of God had been stained with blood, they would lay Him in a grave. Wrapping Him in linens, ironically, they would place over His face a “handkerchief” or a “napkin.” When He arose, we are told:

“Simon Peter arrived after him, entered the tomb, observed the linen cloths lying there, and the kerchief used to cover his head not lying with the linen cloths but separate, neatly folded by itself” (John 20: 6-7 MSG).

I have always found it curious and humorous to think of Jesus rising up through the grave cloths and then neatly folding the face cloth to the side as if to make a little statement there in the tomb: “TA-DA!”

I am reminded of that little face cloth each time communion is offered and the cloth, or as some call it the “purificator,” is used to wipe the chalice. This is not the intent of this cloth, yet it reminds me of a God who is deeply in love. It gives silent witness to God who seeks to catch the eye of His lover, His holy bride, the Church. In this sense, communion is like that of a wedding rehearsal dinner where we celebrate a foretaste of the wedding feast that is yet to come when “God, the shy and proper lover” will be joined forever with His bride.

Over the years, God has continued to carry out His “holy flirtation” with the world. A study of world history reveals many “handkerchiefs” that God has used to

catch the eye and heart of His bride. There is great merit in taking time to study the lives and service of people like Martin Luther, Chuck Colson, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, and Anne Sullivan. God has made Himself known through all of these and so many others. God's desire is that others would notice Him and that they would be joined as one through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Who are the handkerchiefs that God is dropping in the world today? Who are the handkerchiefs that God has dropped into your life—those saints through whom God has sought to catch your eye and your heart? There are a few whose names come to my mind very quickly—those people who are so filled with grace that in their presence I have been drawn closer to God and have grown deeper in love with Him as a result.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, ‘These are the true words of God’” (Revelation 19:7-9).

The wedding plans are under way. The banquet is being prepared. God is sending us out as His invitations, asking the world to share in His joy and eternal fellowship with Him. You and I are carriers of those

invitations. One person at a time, will you join in the “Ablaze! Initiative” of sharing the Gospel with 100 million people by the year 2017?

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

“God, the shy and proper lover” is still seeking to catch the attention of His bride and His lover. Our lives have been blessed by those handkerchiefs He has dropped along our path to catch our attention. Now it is His desire to use you in the same way, in the hopes that through your life and witness others might “notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace.”

Prayer: Father, I thank you for all those whose lives and service have caused me to notice you and to fall in love with you. As you desire, I am willing to be used in this same way to draw someone's eyes toward you. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who has been a “handkerchief” of God in your life? If possible, let them know. Buy a handkerchief and give it to them as a way of thanking them.

Scripture Reading: Revelation 19-21

From the Book of Concord: “Our confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers [Matt. 25:21, 23]. The second kind of veneration is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin [Rom. 5:20]. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings. The opponents do not require these true honors. They only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly not necessary.

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Celebrate and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

50 Living with Hearts Ablaze

“They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon. Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.’” (Luke 24:32-35)

They ran down the road like those who know the privilege of carrying the Olympic Torch. The flame they carried, however, was burning within their heart.

It was not that long before that they had just walked this road. At the beginning of that journey, the flame in their heart was barely flickering and beginning to fade. As He walked with them, His teaching began to rekindle that flame. Then, as they sat at the table with Him, He broke bread and their eyes were opened. They recognized Him. In the breaking of the bread, He made Himself known. Then He disappeared. He was still present, just no longer visible to them.

Filled with joy and wonder, they sat there looking at each other. I would not be surprised if they weren't thinking, “What just happened? Did you see what I saw?” Then the question recorded in Scripture: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

A fire had been set ablaze within their hearts. This fire would not be extinguished. As is fire's nature, this fire would consume them—not in a destructive way, but in a purifying fashion. This fire could not be contained. It had to spread. How can you possibly keep this inside of you? They went back to their friends. They had to know.

Those who have recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread know the need to tell someone the Good News. Those who have learned of Christ as He is revealed in His Word understand the urgency of going and sharing the Good News with friends and neighbors. How can a believer be silent?

The four lepers understood how good news compels one to not be silent. In 2 Kings 6-7, King Benhadad of Aramea had laid siege to the city of Samaria. The people were starving. Some people were so hungry and desperate that they were killing and eating their own children. Who can imagine the horror of a situation like this? In Chapter 7 we read of four lepers at the city gates. They realized that they would die anyway, and so they decided to go for broke and surrender.

“Why stay here until we die? If we say, ‘We’ll go into the city’—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let’s go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die” (vv. 3-5).

They entered the camp of the Aramean army to surrender. In the meantime, the Bible reveals that God had caused Benhadad and all of his army to hear the sound of hoofbeats and the rolling chariots of a mighty army

coming. Frightened, they reasoned that Israel had signed a treaty with Egypt and that the Egyptian army was coming to Israel's aid. They fled for their lives, leaving behind tables full of food and other treasures. These four lepers walked into the enemy camp to surrender and no one was there. They went into the tents of the enemy and saw tables full of food. They were starving and so they feasted. Later they found silver and gold and fine clothing. They began to carry it away for themselves. Then after a while they said to each other,

"We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace" (v. 9).

So they ran back to the city and told the people the good news. The people thought it was too good to be true. They sent spies to investigate. Sure enough, the enemy was gone. The starving city came out and there was enough food for everyone.

How can you keep that kind of news to yourself? Even more so, how could these two men in Emmaus keep the Good News to themselves? They have news that will do more than satisfy the bodily hunger of a city. They have news that will satisfy the spiritual hunger of a world. It is unthinkable that they would not want to immediately tell everyone they knew.

They returned to Jerusalem: "It is true! The Lord has risen!" Out of breath but full of joy, they excitedly shared with the eleven and those gathered what they had seen and heard.

"While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a

ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you; everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: 'The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high'" (Luke 24:36-49).

The fire that was burning in the heart of these two men was beginning to spread. There in that locked room, Christ unlocked the storehouse of God's riches. Peace, joy, hope and a sense of purpose are the gifts of God at Christ's expense. He had paid the price. Now, they could be at peace because Jesus had overcome the world.

There is a great visual reminder of this in Rockefeller Center, New York City. At the entrance of the GE Building (formerly the RCA Building) is a huge statue of Atlas struggling to keep the world on his shoulders. Across the street in Saint Patrick's Cathedral behind the altar is a small statue of Jesus effortlessly holding the whole world in one hand.

Peace is not easy when we strive to balance the world on our own backs. But we don't need to. Jesus invites us to cast the weight of the world into His hands where He holds it with ease. Along with peace, the

disciples were overcome with joy. So joyous were they that they had a hard time believing at first. *“And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement”* Have you ever had trouble believing the Good News of His love and grace for you because of the sheer joy of it? The joy of the believer is one of the most influential and convincing proofs of faith. Malcom Muggeridge was a Marxist before he became a Christian. During the Cold War he traveled to Russia to write a story about the Communist party and the decline of religion in that atheistic regime. After conducting a series of interviews with officials in the Kremlin, he attended a Russian Orthodox Easter service. The church was packed. At the close of the service the priest announced, “Christ is risen!” and the people shouted back, “He is risen indeed!” Muggeridge looked into their faces and instantly realized that they were right and Stalin was wrong. He said it was the reality of their joy that tipped the scales of his soul toward Christ.

The reality of Christian joy is compelling. The joy of the believer, be it in persecution or in times of suffering or in great celebration, is one of the most winsome qualities of the Christian witness and life.

The room was ablaze. It was ablaze with peace and joy like they had never known. What fueled all of this was nothing less than hope. Everything that was written about Jesus had come to pass. Everything Jesus said was fulfilled.

“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’” (v. 44).

They could trust the Word. It had not let them down. Christian hope is not mere wishful thinking. Christian hope is the certainty and assurance of what cannot yet be seen but is known without a doubt through the

Word of God. As John Maxwell describes it:

What Does Hope Do For Mankind?

Hope shines brightest when the hour is darkest.

Hope motivates when discouragement comes.

Hope energizes when the body is tired.

Hope sweetens while bitterness bites.

Hope sings when all melodies are gone.

Hope believes when evidence is eliminated.

Hope listens for answers when no one is talking.

Hope climbs over obstacles when no one is helping.

Hope endures hardship when no one is caring.

Hope smiles confidently when no one is laughing.

Hope reaches for answers when no one is asking.

Hope presses toward victory when no one is encouraging.

Hope dares to give when no one is sharing.

Hope brings the victory when no one is winning.

The hearts of those in the room were on fire. It was a fire fueled by the peace that Christ was giving them. It was fueled by the fullness of joy that is only found in the emptiness of a tomb. It was fueled by a hope that God’s Word cannot be stopped. Fire like this, however, is all consuming. It cannot be contained. Jesus does not want it to be contained.

“You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (vv. 48-49).

Their mission was to the world. They were called to carry that flame burning within their heart to a world lost in darkness. It is the mission before you and me today. What is

the fire burning within your heart? I believe that within each of us there is a flame we carry wherever we go. What fuels the fire?

A.W. Tozer once wrote, “To derail us, all Satan needs to do is minimize our passion for two things—the person of God and the place of God” (Alcorn, p. 6). I believe that. So often God does not have my full attention or devotion. My passion for Him can so quickly get minimized and marginalized by the demands and expectations of so many others. So often the place of God is not my first love. God takes on second or third place all too quickly when my day or my week is full of other demands. The world and the things of the world have a way of dampening that fire.

The resurrected Christ places before us a mission that deserves and demands our all. He is not looking for lukewarm Christians, but those who are red-hot for His mission. His mission leaves each of us with a choice: “We face a choice to be worldly Christians or world Christians” (Minatrea, p. 5). Jesus prayed about this very thing in the Garden:

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18).

It is an awesome task. It is an even more awesome privilege that He has entrusted to us. One message—Christ the Lord! Do you know of any other way, any other truth, any other life? One mission—Ablaze!—dedicated to sharing the Gospel with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Yes, it seems like a huge undertaking. As I wrote at the beginning of these devotions, my first reaction to the Ablaze! Initiative was to laugh in disbelief. So did Sarah and Abraham when they heard that they would have a baby about the time they were getting

ready for a retirement center.

On our own, it is impossible. We will never even get out of the gate. We do not have to do it alone. We cannot do it alone.

“You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:48-49).

Ten days after Jesus ascended, the Spirit came as promised upon these timid, confused disciples. The world was transformed. It wasn't due to them. It was and is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who first disturbed them out of their comfort zone and then empowered them to carry the flame of the Gospel to a dark and cold world. That same promise is given to you and me and the Church today. It is time for the Church to celebrate anew the gift and blessing of Pentecost—the outpouring of the Spirit upon His holy bride, the Church.

Let the celebration begin by rededicating ourselves to responding to His Great Commission, first by *learning* and *praying*. Then, let us put our learning and prayers into action by *telling* and *giving*. Pray on behalf of His bride that she might be disturbed out of her apathy and comfort zone and be known as a *sending* Church, where believers are missionaries as much as they are members, *going* wherever God sends them. Then as the lost souls are saved and lives transformed, let His Holy Nation, the priesthood of believers, join with God and all the company of heaven, *celebrating* over each soul that returns home.

To God Alone Be The Glory!

Prayer: Father, in the Resurrection of your Son, you have lit a fire within my heart. Your Spirit has ignited me with His love, peace, joy and hope. Help me carry that flame into the lost and darkened world that I enter into now. In all that I do and in all that I say, may your name be glorified and honored. Through Jesus I ask this. **Amen.**

Challenge: Throughout the day today, and every day for the rest of your life, ask yourself, “What is the fire in my heart?” As you are going, carry the flame of His love and make disciples.

Scripture Reading: John 1

From the Book of Concord: “‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,’ that is, we have tranquil and joyful consciences before God. And in Romans 10[:10]: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified.’ Here he states that faith is the righteousness of the heart. Galatians 2[:16]: ‘And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by . . . works of the law.’ Ephesians 2[:8–9]: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.’

“John 1[:12–13]: ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.’ John 3[:14–16]: ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may . . . not perish but may have eternal life’ Likewise [John 3:17–18], ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned’” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 136.91-94).

*Disturb us, Lord,
when we are too well pleased with ourselves;
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little;
when we arrive safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess
we have lost our thirst for the Waters of Life;
having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity;
and in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes,
and to push us in the future with strength, courage, hope and love.*

(Sir Francis Drake)

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“On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, But go and **learn** what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”

(Matthew 9:13)

“This, then, is how you should **pray**: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’” (Matthew 6:9-10)

“Each man should **give** what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon [Peter] and **tell** him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’” (John 1:41)

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I **send**? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8)

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore **go** and make disciples of all nations’” (Matthew 28:18-19a)

“But we had to **celebrate** and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:32)

Ablaze!