

Conspire to Inspire

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

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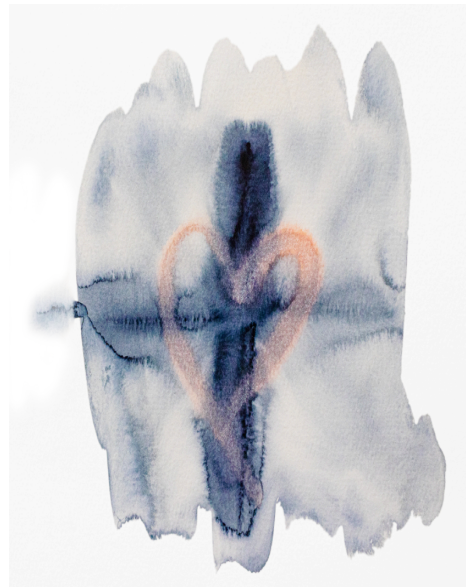
Preface

A Lenten journey can be a time of deepening faith. It can be a time of letting go and seeing what God may have in store. It might feel refreshing if you choose to select a new discipline; like prayer, a daily quiet walk, or listening to a new piece of music. It might feel like a weight has been lifted if you let some things go; like social media, arguing, worry, or an addiction. Lent is 7 weeks, beginning Ash Wednesday, minus the Sundays. Why? Because each Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection. It is, as many have said before, 'a little Easter' each week.

Our writers have selected their own passages within these topics: **Faith, Respect, Action, Worth, Creativity, Wonder, and Love.** For some reason, mid-December, God gave me the idea to gather my friends to contribute to this devotional. And as if pastors weren't busy enough, all of these pastors and church leaders said YES! They have offered their creativity to lead you each day and for them, I am thankful. Two of our writers contributed the very last weekend before proofing, you know who you are my Razorback friends!

If you want to get a small notebook to journal your answers, let that be a way to expand the devotional. You may also want to find a spiritual friend to talk with at the end of each week. Create a time to sit and see what the writings sparked in them. From Scotland, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, to friends from Texas, Michigan, West Virginia, Missouri, and last but not least, Arkansas, these devotionals are meant to be a true lift from the Holy Spirit.

Forever and always, may Jesus' love reign in your life. Now, get your ash in Worship!





Conspire to Inspire



Faith

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Conspire to Inspire Faith

Week 1 / Feb 14 / Judi McMillan

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 4:1 *"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness..."*

We begin our journey with the Holy Spirit, who calls us to go into a wild space.

"None of us is alone, remember. Jesus went by himself, but also with the Spirit, who calls us to go deeper into our own personal wisdom and collective wisdom."

We travel with others hungry to know God and feel radical and transforming love. Yes, my friends, we are "conspiring to inspire" in one another a deeper understanding of thought and action. If it were not for all those in faith who came before, and gently showed kindness or radical resilience in the face of injustices and pain, we would not be reading this, I imagine. So, will you journey into the space of Jesus' wilderness for 40 days with our authors and become a seed well planted and watered by God? Give yourself the gift of a 40-day reprieve from social media, or a major life decision. You may also just need a break to hear some stories from others. These writers will inspire in you a celebration of life and new considerations. This is your time. Grab a warm drink and remember to get your *ASH* in worship sometime today.



Reflection Question: *What is it you seek?*

Journal. Think. Meditate. Pray this question today.

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, lead me into the sacred, prepare me for the mundane, and help me give thanks no matter what wildness crosses my path this week. Amen.

Mary Gene Boteler

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

- Romans 8:35

“Dear brethren in Christ, I greet you from Jerusalem, the Holy City of GOD where peace was assassinated.” – Pastor Fursan Ayed Zu’mot; Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer

It is my friend, Mary Gene Boteler, who ‘conspires to inspire’ for me. A graduate of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, she is a pioneering woman who opened doors for women in ministry in the 1970s. She persisted in including me last year in a Peacemaking Pilgrimage headed for Israel/Palestine in November of 2023 when I was hesitant to leave behind stateside responsibilities and comforts. To prepare, we met a colleague, quoted above, whose witness also transforms my heart. Mary Gene is a passionate, bright, fierce follower of Christ.

Reflection Questions: *Who keeps you inspired? Who transforms your heart?*

Prayer: Gracious GOD, thank you for people like Mary Gene who conspire to inspire. I’m thankful for their witness, courage, actions, and influence.
AMEN

Conspire to Inspire Faith

Week 1 / Feb 16 / Ron Gilmer

Leo Sandon

“...let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

– Amos 5:24

Last Lent, I learned that Leo Sandon died the year before. The last conversation that I had with him was in 2017 while I was driving to Kansas, which is where he was from. He had been given a diagnosis that allowed all of us who loved him to prepare for his death. Every so often, I would “Google” Leo’s name to see if there was any news. Then, last year, on an afternoon between Ash Wednesday and Easter, there it was. Ashes Leo was; to ashes, he had returned.

Next to my father and grandfathers, Leo influenced me more than any other man in my life. The first time that I visited him in his office at Florida State University, I knew that he would be my major professor. He taught me to question everything from the status quo to the Scriptures. The most meaningful class I ever had was an independent study with him called “The Religious Dimension of the Civil Rights Movement.” He studied at Boston University and marched with The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He told me story after story about how religion influences politics – not the other way around. Sandon taught me that our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to act out in public so that justice may roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

As water rolls down mountains and flows into streams, each and every generation gives its life to the next one in the hope and promise that God is recreating the world into a place where justice reigns, and there is peace.

Reflection Questions: *How is justice rolling down through me? Who am I helping to step into the stream?*

Prayer: God, make me an instrument of your justice; make me an instrument of your peace. For your love that leads to life, we give you thanks. Amen.

Conspire to Inspire Faith

Week 1 / Feb 17 / Polly Williams

Alonzo Johnson

"I serve with "The idea of lifting up human dignity, walking with and partnering with strong communities able to help themselves and others, moving from toxic charity to self-reliance."
-Alonzo Johnson

While in seminary, I served as dorm manager meeting wonderfully unique folks who inspired me to be me. From that crew, I met your pastor Judi McMillan who I admire. I think she and I are quite smart. I also met Alonzo Johnson who is one of the most intelligent people I know. He is head of the Presbyterian Committee on the Self Development of People which models acknowledging GOD present with those who are recipients of mission dollars. Rather than judging any, this program empowers and celebrates each.

Reflection Question: *Sing or listen to the hymn, "We are One in the Spirit" and remember with gratitude those who celebrate and inspire your authentic light. What shines for you in this hymn?*

Prayer: Gracious GOD, thank you for people like Alonzo Johnson who conspire to inspire, partnering with all that each might shine with dignity. AMEN



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Respect

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Samaritan Woman

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman’s testimony...”
-John 4:39a

I am grateful I serve in a church where wearing clergy robes is the norm. Before I was ordained, I was serving as a liturgist in a church when I had a wardrobe malfunction, unbeknownst to me. A few of the church ladies immediately approached me after the service to alert me to this, and holding back tears and shrinking in embarrassment, I apologized and went to my car to cry. I think about this unnamed Samaritan woman who Jesus encounters. She is going to get water in the middle of the day, probably in order to avoid her neighbors who knew her entire embarrassing backstory. She had been married multiple times, and scandal possibly clung to her. As a woman, she should not be speaking alone with a Jewish man, and yet, Jesus sees value in her, asks her for water, and allows her to minister to him and his thirst. When she has an eye-opening exchange with Jesus, she recognizes he is the Messiah, and she immediately goes to tell everyone in the village. Somehow, even despite her isolation and embarrassment, her testimony is so strong, she is met with respect and belief.

Reflection Question: *Let us consider ways we too can look upon the vulnerable with respect, and like Jesus, ask what gifts are they contributing to our community?*

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for encountering us in our embarrassment and isolation. Heal us from shame and allow us to grow in self-respect and respect within our community. Amen.

Conspire to Inspire Respect

Week 2 / Feb 20 / Mary Austin

Nicodemus

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

-John 3:6-7

This story tells us that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, someone who is already devoted to following God. He follows the Jewish law faithfully as a way to stay attuned to God. We can picture him observing the commandments, giving to the temple, and praying often. And somehow, that's not enough. Some empty place inside nudges him to come to see Jesus. We can imagine his surprise when Jesus says he has to be born again, or anew. Jesus treats him like an equal, giving him a dose of the truth.

In the original Greek language, it's clear that Nicodemus isn't doing the work. God is. God gives birth to Nicodemus “anew” or “from above.” As Brian Stofregen says, the grammar indicates that “being born from above is not something we do. It is something done to us (by God). In a similar way, being born the first time was not something we did. Our physical births were caused by powers far beyond our infantile abilities and understanding. Being born is something that happens to us from powers outside of ourselves.”

Nicodemus represents all of us who don't know enough about God. Knowing that God does the birthing makes it all the more scary. We can't control it, pull back when it's too much, or set a timetable for it...we step into the mystery of God, and God yanks us into a new life.

Reflection Question: *What is waiting to be born in you, or in your life, this Lent? What is God bringing to life, with you, or in spite of you?*

Prayer: God who is Spirit, breath, inspiration, and midwife to our longings, may we be attentive to all that you are creating in this season. AMEN.

Conspire to Inspire Respect

Week 2 / Feb 21 / Henry Harris Jr.

Children

"But Jesus said, suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."
-Matthew 19:13-14 (KJV)

I love this passage of scripture because it resonates with me. At one point during Jesus' earthly ministry, some children were brought to Him, and the disciples turned them away. This sparked a response from Jesus which is the scripture I quoted above. Even though this is referring to children, we can also make this applicable to our lives as well. Children, in their weakness and vulnerability, have much to teach adults. Children carry such an innocence that adults can learn from. Maybe, we should look at this lesson, that we are God's children, regardless of our inadequacies and mistakes. While we feel that God has turned his face against us, or rejected us, he is telling us the same thing he said to the disciples, suffer little children come to me. We can have assurance that even through the hardest times in life, we can come to Jesus for guidance and reassurance, because he will never abandon us.

Reflection Question: *What can we learn from children that we can adapt as adults?*

Prayer: Journal. Humility. Trust. Pray that we carry an innocence as children. It's a perfect way of learning.

Woman Anointing Jesus

Luke 7:37-38 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

If Jesus was standing right in your home, right in front of you what would you offer him? Something to eat off of your best china, the best seat in your house, your most precious pride possession, all of your money, your car, maybe your home itself? How will those things benefit Jesus, who is before all things and in Him all things hold together? It's not about giving Jesus stuff. It's about offering Him our worship and not just Sunday mornings. Our worship is what moves Him rather it's in church, in our home, or in the car. The act this woman did in the text was far beyond perfume. It was her act of worship, adoration and a heart full of love and gratitude towards Jesus that moved Him to forgive her sins. On Thursday of Lent, what if, instead of asking Jesus for something, you simply worship Him wholeheartedly right where you are.

Reflection Question: *How did it feel to worship Jesus today? Can you see yourself incorporating more worship into your daily devotional time? Why or why not?*

Prayer: Lord, today I chose to worship you for you alone are worthy to be praised, help me to make worship a routine in my life.

Washing Disciples' Feet

"Sometimes I joke about what I'd do if I had one day left to live. Eat junk, go crazy, etc. Today it hit me: Jesus knew. And he washed feet."

Tweet from November 17th, 2014 the Rev. Dr. Steve Bezner

Jesus washing the feet of the disciples is an unexpected act. The servant leadership that Jesus exhibits is too much for Simon Peter. In John 13:8-9 it describes Peter's reaction to this humble act of the One Peter confessed was The Messiah, the Son of God.

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Peter initially, it seems, does not deem himself worthy of receiving this loving act of service from Jesus. After all, why would the "Word become flesh" lower himself to such a task? When Jesus nudges him, Peter relents and invites the full measure of Jesus's act of grace. Have we ever imagined ourselves as unworthy of God's grace? In doing so we are attempting to refuse the love humbly given to us by God. Like Peter, the extravagance of God's grace may make us uncomfortable. That's OK. Peter shows us that we can grow through that.

We can be encouraged to know that the Creator of the Universe emptied Themselves into a human body to show a vulnerable side of God. Peter eventually accepts what Jesus offers. Peter's example shows that we can fully submit to the love of Christ and invite God's love to fully cover us. This text invites us to follow Peter's example of submitting to God's will. The text also invites us to embody the servant leadership that Jesus demonstrates. We can respect Peter's reluctance as well as his eventual acceptance. Thanks be to God that God meets us where we are and loves us, just as he did Peter.

Reflection Question: *What does Peter teach us with his initial resistance and eventual acceptance?*

Prayer: God, please help us know we are worthy of Your grace and mercy. We need not resist all the ways you shower us with love and mercy. Help us submit to the love of Christ and please empower us to serve You and others. Amen.

Parable of Workers in Vineyard

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

-Matthew 20:15

After the first workers are hired, the other workers keep waiting. They don't give up and go home. They keep waiting through the day, with no guarantees. And they get hired with no guarantees. No one talks about how much they'll get paid. The owner tells the workers that he will pay them “whatever is right.” Suspicious people might think they're going to get screwed.

But when it's time to get paid, they get a whole day's wage. The realm of God is like this, Jesus says, and we're left to wonder which part of the story is like God's world. Is it the persistence? The trust? Surely it's not the complaints of the first workers. The jealousy? The grumbling? The first workers get mad and forget that they're getting exactly what they agreed to. They start to blame the owner.

As dedicated church people, this story feels unfair. We work hard for God, we give our gifts and tithes, and so we picture ourselves as the first workers...but more and more, I wonder if I'm really the last worker, getting so much more than I deserve. The story points us back to the mystery of what we don't deserve, and receive from God anyway.

Reflection Question: *Where do you picture yourself in this story? The first worker? The last to arrive? The patient boss?*

Prayer: Generous God, we are grateful for your gifts, and envious when other people get things we don't have. Teach us to live in gratitude, we pray. Amen.



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Action

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Jesus Walks on the Water

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. 25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. 27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” 28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” 29 “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

-Matthew 14:22-33 (NIV)

When you walk into the sanctuary at the kirk I serve in Scotland, you immediately notice the beautiful beams that seem to glide across the ceiling. You notice the curves so deliberately created to look as if a great big giant could pluck the roof off the building and set sail in the North Sea. So many kirk buildings across the world are the same, built to look like an upside-down boat. This intentional architecture always draws my mind to the scripture above. If we think of the kirk as a boat, one in which we glide across the water in the safety of a vessel, what does it mean when Jesus puts Peter back in the boat?

One of the hardest things about belonging to a church family is that we often disagree with one another or “butt heads” as my Granny would say. This conflict is sometimes about simply things such as what biscuits to buy for after church coffee, or more serious disagreements like political conflict. If we follow Jesus’s example, I think we often realize that faith grows in community and the boat was built so we can safely weather the storm together not separately. I tell my church family often that I am so glad to be sailing through life with them, even though occasionally I want to make one of them walk the plank. Families are complicated and messy, but they also teach us compassion and tolerance just like Jesus.

Reflection Question: *What makes you feel like you need to jump ship? How can we help folks feel safer in the boat than out?*

Prayer: Dear Captain, let us sing a song of peace while the sharks circle. Amen.

The Women at the Tomb

“the women went to the tomb with prepared spices...(and) rushed to tell.”

– Luke 24:1-16

“Do not save your loving speeches for any until they are dead, speak them now instead.”

This quote inspires me to encourage others more immediately than embarrassment or hesitation sometimes allows. The women on Easter morning are grieving yet DO NOT HESITATE to proclaim GOOD NEWS of the RESURRECTION to those who grieved most deeply.

My first sermon before Presbytery was on the fishes and loaves. During his deepest grieving over the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, our LORD and SAVIOR taught and fed crowds. Even and especially in grieving, the women and Jesus, served. When God's love in Jesus Christ and the Spirit convict you **to say and to do: DO NOT HESITATE.**

Reflection Question: *Read Luke 24:1-16. Be immediate in your witness and loving words. What can you say to someone today?*

Prayer: Gracious GOD, thank you for the women that first Easter morn who could not wait and did not hesitate to tell about our risen LORD. May we go and do likewise. AMEN

Conspire to Inspire Action

Week 3 / Feb 28 / Judi McMillan

St. Paul

“Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”

-Philippians 2:2-3

Saint Paul, formerly known as Saul, was active sharing the gospel in a variety of communities. He would often write to instruct and help with local church issues. The Letter to the Philippians was written after taking enough action to land him in prison. Others in the faith we know were arrested for taking theological stands as they pushed for justice and mercy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for preaching against the Nazis and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for working toward Civil Rights. Like Paul, they wrote letters from prison. Here is MLK's letter in full, with a short quote here: “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

Letter From Birmingham Jail

I marvel at those who are willing to be arrested for what they believe in. They keep faith God is working toward a better future, through their actions. Paul keeps focus while in jail, “be of the same mind, having the same love.” It is Jesus who calls us to love our neighbors. When in prison, neighbors are other inmates, guards, judges, workers, chaplains, and wardens.

I recall a short prison ministry in seminary while doing Clinical Pastoral Education. I met people of many walks of faith. I met professors who came to teach Shakespeare and saw a wonderful play behind bars. I walked with inmates on the outdoor track as they told me their growing up stories. It was a powerful summer. I saw humility, and experienced grace with those who dearly needed connection and faith.

Reflection Question: *When we are hurting, where do we make, create or find joy?*

Prayer: God of all space and time, hear those who in their letters speak of your love, and call us to action. Amen.

Miriam

“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.”

-Exodus 15:20

Miriam led worship after the Israelites escaped Egypt and God saved them. She was there to sing and dance a hymn to God. In worship, we are encouraged to sing with the hymns, maybe tap our toes along with the beat. In our congregation you may find those listening to anthems and swaying with the music if it is especially joyous. Sometimes, there is clapping (a form of tambourine?) when we are moved with the beauty and emotion music stirs in us.

But dancing? Do we dance in church? I did not grow up with dancing in church, but we did in school. We learned to dance and to partner up. At a ranch I go to in Wyoming, once a week, the local church hosts a square-dancing event. It is a wonderful time to meet the locals and to meet other visitors who are willing to get in the square and listen to the caller and smile and enjoy the fun. If you don’t have a partner, someone is asked to join in. No one gets left out. Last summer, members were traveling through Dubois, Wyoming at the same time I was there for retreat and that evening, we got to square dance. What’s funny is we had been talking about square dancing in Bella Vista for a year, but it took a road trip to make it happen.

I wonder, what would that kind of joy, like dancing, feel like in worship? Miriam danced and sang, to God. Can we do the same no matter the environment?

Reflection Question: *When was the last time you danced? Were you by yourself? Were you with a group?*

Prayer: Joyous God, may we feel your embrace as we take Miriam’s cue to dance and sing in celebration of life! Amen.

Lydia

“After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home...”

Acts 16:40

Remember Lydia? According to Acts, she worshiped God and sold purple cloth before she listened to Paul, who sailed from Troas after having a vision. She is remembered for her conversion, as if she did not have a life until she met Paul and Silas, and yet she did, and her willingness to share this life with Paul and Silas proved to be foundational to the early church’s mission in Asia Minor.

I had not given Lydia the attention that she deserves until it was time to start researching names for my daughter. How Lydia uses her wealth, social status and sophistication appealed to me. I also find humor and inspiration in how she makes history and wields influence in a patriarchal world. Would it be doting on the obvious to say that my daughter is named Lydia?

When Paul and Silas have nowhere else to go, they end up at Lydia’s home not once, but twice. First, Lydia welcomes them after she is baptized. Then, she welcomes them again after they are released from prison. If Jesus were to ask her when she welcomed the stranger or visited them in prison, she would have good answers. Now, we have a model of what Christian love looks like in public. Let us all remember Lydia.

Reflection Question: *How does who we welcome into our homes glorify Christ?*

Prayer: God of light and love, help us to welcome the wanderers on this Lenten journey. Help us to learn the lessons that they have to teach us and to welcome them into our homes, in Christ’s holy name. Amen.

Jairus

³⁵ While he was still speaking, some people came from the synagogue leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the synagogue leader, "Do not be afraid; only believe."

Mark 5:35-36

Jairus' faith is evident from the beginning of the story. He left his sick daughter because he trusted that Jesus would heal her. He knew that just the touch of Jesus' hand would be enough. But before Jesus can come to his house, Jairus gets news that it is too late; his daughter is gone.

The despair he must have felt. Jesus was coming, but he didn't make it in time. How many times in our lives do we feel despair that Jesus is too late? I often jokingly say that, if God would just let me know what the plan for the next few days is, my life would be so much easier. But that isn't what Jesus says. Instead he says, "Do not be afraid, only believe." Belief comes easy when things are going well, but in that moment of grief, I wonder if Jairus felt the words were hollow.

What a miracle Jairus and his family received! Their daughter was raised from the dead, and we can only imagine the celebration that must have followed. Jairus' story reminds us that even in the darkest moments of our lives, our faith in Jesus will give us what we need to walk through the pain.

Reflection Question: Sometimes God's miracles come in small blessings or in slow, steady works. Take a few moments to reflect on the glimpses of God in your life. How do you see God's work in our world?

Prayer: God of miracles, we know your plans are perfect. When we are afraid, remind us that we only need to put our faith in you. Amen.



Conspire to Inspire



Worth

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Woman who was hemorrhaging

“When the woman realized that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before [Jesus] she declared in the presence of all... how she had been immediately healed.” -Luke 8:47

According to the United Nations, there are a variety of social justice issues concerning menstruation in our world today. Like the unnamed woman in Luke 8, there are women who struggle with menorrhagia, abnormally heavy or prolonged bleeding. Others may have excruciating pain as part of endometriosis or fibroids, and there are people with disorders such as polycystic ovary syndrome and dysmenorrhea, where the pain is debilitating enough to interrupt daily work and life. Add on top of that issues of poverty and discrimination; communities where safe and effective hygiene products are not available, or where people are shunned, like the woman in Luke 8.... She had given everything she had on doctors and still no cure was in sight. She was isolated from her community. Jesus’ healing power allowed her body to be restored, and by inviting her to speak, she was restored to the community around her.



Spend some time researching contemporary issues around menstrual justice. Is there an organization or a cause you can devote time, money, and energy to helping solve?

Dear Healing Spirit, thank you for all the ways you restore us in the midst of our brokenness. Let us share that healing power with those unseen and unheard members of our world who are in desperate need of wholeness and healing. Amen.

Image: The Encounter by Daniel Cariola, located in Magdala, Israel at Duc in Altum.

God's Love

"People can make themselves enemies of God (James 4:4) but God never makes enemies out of people."

—Marcia Owen and Samuel B. Wells, **Living Without Enemies**. (67).

I hope you are enjoying our Lenten adventure. As editor, I had the special privilege of seeing your work ahead of time. This small endeavor felt quite connectional, a word Presbyterians love to say. My first thought is "thank you" and my second thought is "I love you."

How many times do we tell our friends and colleagues we love them? Do we regularly say we appreciate the particular gifts they bring for the benefit of others? How often do we tell those around us we care for them as they are caring for others? My friend Kathleen, whom I've known since seminary, told me many years ago she loved me. It was such a simple thing to say, but powerful to hear. I don't know why but it reminded me that yes! my dear friends love and care for me and how special it is to know people and cherish them. Even when you move and don't see each other for months or years, with abiding friends, you can catch up and share no matter the day you reconnect. So it is with God. God is always there to reconnect. Even if you feel a bit "off" in your spiritual disciplines, or you haven't finished that book like you planned, the presence of God is ready when you are. And God is love. She is ready to support and nourish your soul through friends, time in creation, creative endeavors, prayer and all the life affirming ways we were created for. God created you for love.

Reflection Question: *Who is a dear friend you would love to hear from today? Is there a way to connect with them?*

Prayer: Persistent God, keep reminding us we are always worthy of deep and abiding love. Like a dear friend who says three magical words: "call me whenever" or "I love you" or "you want cake?" Thank you for friends who bring me joy. Amen.

Nicodemus

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

—Matthew 11:28–30

Nicodemus went to Jesus by night because he was hungry for a deeper knowledge of the truth, but he was afraid of being seen. There is something about hiding and being afraid that is part of the human experience. We feel unqualified, afraid of what others will think, and carry a strong sense of shame. I believed I was shame, but I am not shame, and neither are you. Nicodemus was a powerful man, and had a powerful status, but regardless of what your position is, when you are hungry for truth you run for it. He did that. How does this apply to our life? Jesus dives into our sadness, and life experiences to provide joy, peace, and comfort. It doesn't matter when you approach him, he will be there not to judge you for your experiences and shame, but he will be personable, and engaging with you. There is a hunger for truth, not always being right. He didn't care about who he was, but wanted to become more acquainted with who “HE WAS” (Jesus). It is a beautiful thing to lay it all on the table, and become exposed to his presence, and it is there that shame and guilt will become irrelevant.

Reflection Question: *What is it in you that is keeping you in hiding that's hindering you from experiencing his abundance?*

Prayer: Journal. Freedom. Comfort. Faith. My prayer is that you encounter Jesus regardless of what baggage you may carry.

The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:20-28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Anna Case-Winters says this woman “is the first woman in the Gospel to speak.” (Belief Matthew Commentary, 201). And, she is the enemy. She is Gentile and Canaanite. She is from the land taken by the Israelites. The fact that she is speaking and shouting raised all the alarms for Jesus and his disciples. So yes, it is shocking to hear him tell her that she is not worthy because she is not Jewish. She persists anyway. And we know how that goes in our culture. Women who persist get labeled. They are problems, uppity, and demanding. And yet, this causes Jesus to pause when she says “Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” While she is an outsider, she gives Jesus her attention. She believes and has faith he can help her daughter. Her worth and need brought her to the One she felt could give life. And do you know what? Jesus meets her. He does not treat her as “other.” Instead, he honors her womanhood, (will he learn her name?) and says it is because of her faith, because she has shown courage for her daughter, he will heal her. I wonder, was anyone else healed in this moment? Did the disciples think “wow, here is a woman Jesus says is worthy.” Was re-telling this story as Matthew sees it a way to heal cultural division?

Reflection Questions: *Have you ever been called a name? Something that was hurtful, like “dog.” Did this empower you to keep moving forward? How so?*

Prayer: Faithful God, Jesus reminds us we might make mistakes upon first impression, but we don’t have to keep those impressions. We grow as we learn names and circumstances. You love us through mistakes on the way to deeper connection. We thank you for the Canaanite Woman’s bravery. May we be so bold, when we find ourselves on the outside of the inner circles of life. Amen.

Ruth

Read Ruth 2: 11-12

Oftentimes, our culture tries to tell us our worth is dependent upon our wealth, or on our social standing. But Ruth reminds us that our worth depends not on wealth or power but on our innate goodness as human beings. Ruth demonstrates this by remaining with and accompanying her bereaved mother-in-law Naomi back to her homeland and doing everything in her power to provide for her. Boaz also lifts up Ruth's worthiness by recognizing her selfless act of love towards her mother-in-law and allows her to glean from his fields, eventually marrying Ruth so that the family name can continue.

My wife's sister is named Ruth. Like the Ruth of the Bible, she selflessly serves others. Ruth is a registered nurse at a large Chicago area hospital, caring and tending for those who have undergone surgery or trauma. Ruth and nurses like her spend hours each day on their feet, just like the biblical Ruth, but rather than gleaning from the fields, they are tending to the well-being of patients at their most vulnerable. May we strive to do the same to all those in need of God's Love.

Reflection Question: *Who inspires you to care for others, and how might that caring relationship extend beyond one person to affect your community? Your world?*

Prayer: Lord, Help us to care for others as Jesus cares for us, reminding us that our worth lies within us, for we are all created in the image of God, beautifully and wonderfully made. Amen.

Mary Magdalene

“Soon afterward he went on through one town and village after another, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who ministered to them out of their own resources.”

– Luke 8:1-3

Mary Magdalene is one of several women who were able to, with their resources, help in Jesus’ ministry. She was there at the crucifixion as well as his resurrection. Mary, through her devotion and discipleship, maintained her relationship with Jesus, traveling and supporting him. We do not know the details of her transition, what it meant that she and others had been cured of demons and evil spirits. We don’t use that language today. Instead, we might say someone has wrestled with their inner demons or come to understand their own issues and is a work in progress. Whatever Jesus healed her of, it transformed her to continue the relationship. She was faithful and loving until the end of Jesus’ earthly life, and then she spread the news of his resurrection, becoming one of the first evangelists.

Given that Mary of Magdala is mentioned at least 12 times in scripture, she was not an acquaintance. She was a friend. She was as committed as the other disciples and cared to be a part of God’s work. Think of those who, perhaps, in the background of church life get things ready for others. Who sets the communion table and prepares the elements? Who, after Christmas, takes down all the décor? Who changes the paraments? Who is attentive to the small details: bulletins, editing the PowerPoints, and getting social media posts ready for the community? Are these people named and appreciated?

Reflection Question: *We are all works in progress. We all contribute. Who can you appreciate today, even if yesterday you overlooked their contributions?*

Prayer: Healing God, bless those who have discovered that YES! we are always worthy to contribute, show up, and be amazed.



Conspire to Inspire



Creativity

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Georgia O'Keefe

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

—Matthew 6:21

The painter Georgia O'Keefe once said, "God told me if I painted that mountain enough, I could have it." "That mountain", of course, is the ethereal, blue mesa called Pedernal. If you have ever visited Ghost Ranch in New Mexico where O'Keefe worked and lived, you have likely seen it. O'Keefe probably said the words about "having" it tongue-in-cheek, but it's an interesting way to think about what we value and what we really get to have, to keep. A gift of visual art is the way an artist's vision can stoke curiosity, the way it can cause us to see, both metaphorically and literally, in new ways. Maybe even the way it can make us love things that before were unknown to us, like animal skulls, far off mesas, and other easily ignored objects that feature heavily in O'Keefe's work. A treasure is something we have come to love, regardless of the value it has to others. I imagine even though we are often ornery and selfish and stubborn, we are God's treasure.

Reflection Question: *If we are God's treasure, how does that change how we view and treat ourselves?*

Prayer: Treasuring God, help us see the world in fresh ways and lean into the treasures we find and are. Amen.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642)

“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.”

–Genesis 2:1

As both a Commissioned Pastor and a staff member of a local natural history museum currently hosting an exhibit on Galileo, I’ve been asked on more than one occasion if I see conflict between science and faith. My answer is that for me, science strengthens my faith. Biblical and scientific accounts need not line up perfectly for one to inform the other. Unfortunately for Galileo, the church did not see it this way, and he was tried and found “suspect of heresy” for supporting the idea that the sun, and not the earth, was at the center of the universe. The Smithsonian notes that Galileo is the first to have made systematic observations of astronomical objects using a telescope.

God created the universe, and all the stars in them, telling Abram, *“Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.”* Then he said to him, *“So shall your offspring be”* (Genesis 15:5). How wonderful that we can marvel at our place in the universe without presuming to be at the center of it. May our awe reflect the awesome God who created heaven and earth.

Reflection Question: *How does the universe inspire you to greater faith in the One who created the world and all that is in it?*

Prayer: Lord of all Creation, May our wonder at Your handiwork inspire us to greater faith in You, who created the stars and set them in their courses. Amen.

Frank Lloyd Wright

When I was interviewed for my current call at the Presbyterian Church here, the committee took me straightaway to Crystal Bridges Museum. I had heard about it many times from my parents and I thought, this is a committee who gets me! It was a wonderful lunch and time inside the museum. I recall walking around with them and stopping to marvel at some tree drawings (I love trees) and Bill, a committee member, noticed this. I have since run into Bill at the museum as he loves to go see the art.

One of the features of CB as we call it, is the grounds and sculptures around in these Ozarks. And there is a Frank Lloyd Wright home that is free to tour. I have taken my kids and parents and walked through myself. Being inside and looking out, the architecture is connected beautifully to the grounds and the natural spring in the near distance. In summer when the light warms the outside tiles you can feel how soothing it would be to live inside, read a book, and fall asleep in the sun. There are no window coverings, so all the wildlife would be able to watch you as you watch them.

Here is a link if you'd like your own tour!

[Frank Lloyd Wright's Bachman Wilson House](#)

Reflection: *What is a favorite spot in your home where you can see beauty? What is it about that view that inspires awe, comfort and joy?*

Prayer: Creative God, continue to help me marvel at the smallest of treasures, be it the branch that moves in the wind, a bit of moss growing on the tree, or a small bug on the window. Help me always take notice, even if I have a list in my head. Amen.

P!nk

“One Thing I’m never gonna do is throw away my dancin’ shoes.”
Never Gonna Not Dance Again by P!nk

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Philippians 4:4

Before March, 2020 I listened to P!nk quite a bit and her songs were my go-to get up and move songs, that inspired the part of me that needed to be less worried about what other people think, the part of me that is a little edgy. During the pandemic, I followed her on social media, as she posted from her home. I watched the documentary that was made and almost complete before the pandemic began. The post-production footage showed her at home, off-tour, with altered priorities. She connected with her daughter and expressed hope through their collaboration on the song *Cover Me in Sunshine*.

Somewhere around fall of 2022 I said to myself, “if she ever tours in North America again, I am going!” She did and I did. For six months my husband, Rob, and I planned an August 2023 trip to NYC and spent a wonderful week in NYC seeing Broadway shows, eating amazing food, and seeing P!nk in concert. From the day she released her first single off her newest album I have been singing and dancing to *Never Gonna Not Dance Again* because it is a song of immense joy and hope and a commitment to self to remember to dance and find joy, to remember to celebrate life. In the Philippians verse, Paul’s use of the present imperative is a signal that “rejoicing” is an attitude of habit and over time, that habit impacts the way we behave and the choices we make. I choose to dance; I choose joy! I want to be the old lady still taking tap classes and moving and finding joy and to keep connecting to that inner joy and quest to celebrate until it is finished. I invite us all to find and DO the things that bring us joy!



[Link to song on YouTube \(clean version\)](#)

Reflection Questions: *What brings you joy? What can you do today to actively rejoice?*

Prayer: God of grace, we find our joy in you. Let us live out our joy daily, dancing, singing and doing! Amen.

Maria Battista

"I value intensive study in the tradition of the old masters, always working from life – the study of technique and aesthetics as well as of nature and of reality itself."

I first met Maria at Ring Lake Ranch several years ago. She was kind and attentive, an artist and sculptor. She does bronze sculptures and incredible pieces of jewelry. I was drawn to her gentle soul and kind heart. According to Maria's website she creates works for this reason. "I birth figures and portraits engaged in wonderment about the nature of reality. My work is devoted to the body as playground, battlefield, and temple of the psycho-spiritual life. In my figures I want the body intact, an integral thing full of meaning. Our bodies are valuable, universally vulnerable, and vibrating with inherent wisdom."

One sculpture she did which I love was of her partner (Two Spirit: Courage). I love in the world of art, artists capture their feelings for their loved ones. We want others to see the beauty we see. She shared this personal reflection: "For me, art is about mining and exposing the collective interior life – the broad range of experience, not just that which is beautiful or triumphant, though all of it, even our suffering can be seen as joy and triumph. Art is a contemplative practice for me."



Our work during Lent can be as simple as paying attention to the edges of a leaf that has fallen, or to a blossom on a tree. Have you really watched the line of a branch in the woods around us? Have you stared at the trunk and seen how a branch can curve and thwart your expectations as it grows in a twisty direction? This is how an artist sees. They watch what is happening before them, they select something they find intriguing, and they share it with their method, medium, and creative self.

To see Maria's work visit mariabattista.com.

Reflection Question: *What small detail can you see today from beginning to end?*

Prayer: Holy Creator, help us to imagine a world where all artists are able to create freely so we may learn and love what you do.

Ken Nordine

Ken Nordine was a radio star famous for spoken word performances with cool jazz music playing in the background. If you've ever heard the term "Word Jazz", Ken is the creator. He also worked commercially and would provide voice talent for various product ads that later became known as the album "Colors".

Colors is an album composed of 34 tracks and every song is titled a particular color. With each song, Nordine explores the traits and characteristics of colors, almost humanizing them in the process. Here are a few excerpts from the album:

Excerpt from "Hazel"

*"Willy nilly silly" is a better way to say the way
Hazel's been behaving on this silliest of days
I mean, really
Hazel!
Who would have thought, and at her age, too
Just shows you!*

Excerpt from "White"

*The whitest white that white can be white
As imagined by you
Imagined by me as the purest of pure pure white
Is just a little bit off
Just a little bit off white
Off-white white*

Reflection Question: *What is the meaning of all this? Surely it's Lavender's fault.*

Prayer: Dear God, thanks for all the colors. But some days I'm not that fond of Hazel so talk to her sometime. Amen.



Conspire to Inspire



Wonder

A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Mystic Motives

“Dwell alone, and you shall find the Friend. Take the lowest place, and you shall reach the highest. Hasten slowly, and you shall soon arrive. Renounce all worldly goals, and you shall reach the highest Goal.”

—Jetsun Milarepa

In matters of mysticism, a mystic is often found retreating inward; an attempt to become unified with God or to achieve a higher plane of consciousness. These endeavors often lead to illuminations that were otherwise stifled by entrenched dogma found in institutional religions.

Who among us are mystics? We never really know. It could be the cashier at your local grocery store. Maybe it's a business executive disillusioned by greed and suffering. Your dog or cat could be deep in samadhi in a given moment and you would never be the wiser. The who and why are of little consequence; it's the end result that matters. In a mystical exploration for personal truth, a longing for something more is our starting point and many of us are walking toward that path with fierce determination.

While pursuing communion with higher ideals, neophytes may discover that what they were originally looking for, are rewarded with unexpected gifts instead. For example, a person may indulge mysticism with ill-intent. They seek congress with spirits to gain malicious powers to be used against enemies, only to discover that they themselves were the actual enemy. And through this discovery, changes in their lives begin to unfold and often for the better. Another example might be a person who indulges mysticism to gain material things, only to discover their rewards transcend the material, free from attachments to non-essential things. Or maybe a person indulges mysticism in order to find God, only to discover that God is already within them. These are but a few examples; drops within an ocean.

Whoever the mystics are, whatever their motives, as long as there are deep questions to be answered, mystics are among us. They have always been with us and probably always will be. Because the human story doesn't end with the last chapter of scripture. In many ways, the endings are merely beginnings.

Reflection Question: *Have you ever ventured outside your traditional faith to find meaning?*

Prayer: The inner and outer worlds are troubled by storms. Let my heart be a safe harbor for the benefit of all who suffer.

Thomas Merton

“We are warmed by fire, not smoke; carried over the sea by a ship, not the wake; so too what we are is sought in the invisible depths of our own being not ... in our own acts.”
-Thomas Merton

Roles, responsibilities, chaos, stress and never ending to do lists DO NOT define us.
They are not who we are or why we are.

Thomas Merton, an American Trappist Monk, theologian, mystic, poet, and scholar of comparative religion did not define himself by his writings or his actions. I am thankful his writings remind me to do the same: to contemplate, to be authentic to my heart, soul and understanding of who GOD calls me to be.

Reflection Question: *Look up and read, “the Merton Prayer” beginning, “I have no idea where I am going.” Ponder and praise who you are and why. What is your unique prayer today?*

Prayer: Gracious GOD, still our hearts and minds. Renew in us a hunger for quiet to sit with you and with who we each are within our own heart, mind and soul. AMEN

Christian Mystics

“Geography is simply a visible form of theology.”—Jon Levenson

Christian mystics are ones who go away to discover God in silence, contemplation, prayer and focused, small community. They are from varied backgrounds and centuries. A mystic is one who desires a deep and abiding connection with God, sometimes, and usually, apart from the religious practices and dogmas we associate with religion.

Many have gone to quiet places, like deserts, in order to see what the land and space can teach as one explores an inner connection to the Ultimate divine presence. As we fill our days with technology and city or suburban life, this can sound foreign and unsettling. And, to be honest, visiting desert places or quiet retreat centers with little to no news, internet and TV time can bring out things inside that have remained long hidden. As we consider God without distraction, and let the time of wandering influence our minds and bodies, things shift inside. We begin to look upon our lives in spiritual ways we maybe hadn't allowed ourselves before. We dream, work on memories, reflect on our feelings more deeply, and tune into God's love, light and vibrant presence.

Some of the more famous mystics are: St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Evagrius, and John Cassian. A contemporary writer on the desert experience, where mystics often go, says this, “God is a desert whose fullness of glory is hidden from human sight, known only in an unknowing and risking of love. The self is a desert that must be stripped and made empty before God can be found at its center.” (Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, ch1).

Think of Moses climbing a mountain, or Jesus going into the wilderness to commune with God. These are the practices of meeting the Holy in spaces we are unprepared for. Our God, the one who seeks us, calls us into open spaces so that we can live in awe and wonder.

Reflection Question: *What landscape causes you to most wonder about God?*

Prayer: God of all creation, settle our thoughts and concerns, empty us so we may feel you near. Amen.

St. Theresa of Avila

“The object of our life must be to do what God requires of us: let us not ask that our will may be done, but God’s. If we have not yet attained to this, let us be humble, as I said above. Humility is the ointment for our wounds; if we have it, although perhaps God may defer God’s coming for a time, God, Who is our Physician, will come and heal us.”

Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle: Or The Mansions* (p. 48). Kindle Edition.
(adapted to use inclusive language for God—the italics above).

Have we ever imagined humility as an ointment for our wounds and an agent of God’s healing? Before reading this passage, I had not. Part of humility is setting aside our wills and our egos. According to St. Teresa, this leads to healing. The vulnerability required to demonstrate humility feels dangerous. Certainly, it is unwise to be vulnerable around some folks. But to be vulnerable with God is to invite the fullness of grace into our innermost selves and to accept the call to love others.

The healing that comes from humility makes our egos “right sized,” thinking no more of ourselves than a fellow human being created in the image of God, and no less of ourselves than beloved ones. The humility to which we are called as disciples requires us to admit to God “I don’t know exactly what to do or be next – but I trust You are leading me.” Vulnerability then is not weakness, it is an act of setting aside our will so that God may direct us as we serve. Teresa of Avila invites us to submit our lives and our wills over to the care of God as we understand God. I pray we all accept this invitation as a means of living faithfully as a disciple of Jesus and as a pathway to healing.

Reflection Question: *In what ways can we practice humility and vulnerability? Is this difficult for you or does it come naturally?*

Prayer: God, please help us to be humble. Please help us accept Your will and receive the power to carry out Your will. Thank you for the women of faith who have gone before us to demonstrate love in action. Please heal us and lead us from where we are, to where we can be. Amen.

Jesus and Julian of Norwich

“The goal of mysticism is union with the divine.” A mystic is one who “is fortunate to possibly maintain a conscious connection with the infinite spirit.” – Mystical Tradition in the Great World Religions.

*“The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.
God is the ground, the substance,
the teaching, the teacher,
the purpose, and the reward for which every soul labors.”*

– Julian of Norwich

Meditation and contemplation are tools mystics use to seek God, Spirit and the Divine. They go away. They find space to discover what is hidden within, and they call forth wisdom beyond their own. Julian of Norwich lived during the black death. She was an anchoress in England in the late 1300's, and lived in a room in the church.

Though today, we come and go as we please into sanctuaries and churches, we may also seek to find a quiet space in our homes for prayer and devotion. It takes us a bit of time to settle down and consider things beyond our immediate needs, or the needs of those around us. We have Jesus, our Jewish mystic, to turn our faith toward. He, like other mystics, went away for prayer, fasting, and meditation. Julian drew upon Jesus' response to her prayer life, saying to her “all shall be well...and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Once, while hiking on Iona, I was taking time with clergy women to worship, pray, pilgrimage and consider my life. I was on a solo prayer walk taking in the bright blue water and green countryside of that small Island. While I was moving up a slight incline, a wind came up behind me. I had never felt this kind of feeling with wind before. It felt like a scooped hand holding me while also pushing me up the hill. I was taken with that sensation and have remembered it during times when I wondered “what's next?” I feel that was a mystical experience. Yes, wind! I feel you near! But also, hello Spirit. Thank you for the nudge forward. It was God's answer, perhaps, asking to feel God's presence, wisdom and love to be near. The wind came behind me and it was so supportive, up and down my entire body. I felt it in my neck, back, legs and calves. I could not deny the presence of the divine with me in the wind – like a Spirit chair asking me to take notice.

Reflection Question: *During times of prayer, what have you been asked to pay attention to?*

Prayer: Nudging Spirit, guide us in our small and big steps that we may feel your presence when we most need it. Amen.

Hildegard of Bingen

“Love abounds in everything; from the lowest depths to the highest stars; and is loving to all; for the supreme King gave a kiss of peace.”

–Hildegard of Bingen, *Caritas habundant in omnia*
(translated by Carol Anne Perry Lagemann)

Kisses are vulnerable things. They are gentle, but can do so much damage. Consider Christ’s friendship with Judas, and the betrayal that took place with the kiss of peace. And so here, in Hildegard’s poetry, I see this magnitude of love that richest from the highest to the lowest places in our world, and yet it appears too in the vulnerability and intimacy of the gentle kiss. According to commentator [Nathaniel M. Campbell](#) about the piece quoted above: “...in Hildegard’s visionary allegories, Caritas takes her place alongside Sapientia (Divine Wisdom) as a manifestation of the eternal counsel and God’s self-manifestation into creation.” Hildegard had long periods of illnesses throughout her life, which led her to spend a lot of time in her mind, seeing visions and feeling God’s presence, as well as leaving us with her scholarship and wisdom. As we consider how Jesus Christ is the embodiment of Love itself, let us look for that love both in the grand and remarkable world around us, and in the intimate quiet moments, like in the gentle brush of a kiss.

Reflection: For today’s response, consider listening to [this instrumental version](#) of Hildegard’s song (lyrics above). The first time, watch and listen to the beautiful instruments and marvel at the beauty of the piece. Listen again, and this time close your eyes and listen for what God is saying to you in your inmost self. The third time, consider journaling or sketching in response to the music and consider sharing your reflection on social media or with a friend.

Prayer: Gracious God, we seek to believe: “*All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of Your brilliance, and these sparks emerge from You like the rays of the sun. If You did not give off these sparks, how would the divine flame become fully visible?*” – Hildegard of Bingen



Conspire to Inspire



A 2024 Lenten Devotional – Experience

Love For a Neighbor

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
-John 13:31-35

Jesus gives a new commandment the night of the Last Supper and his betrayal. “Love one another.” It is easy to say “love everyone” until you are called to love a particular someone who disturbs your sleep. One weekend my parents were visiting. The neighbors’ dog barked much of the night. My guest bedroom faces the neighbor’s back porch. It was a warmish evening and the dog was out most of the night. I wanted to write a note, and so I decided it would be the kindest note I could come up with. The most loving note, signed with my name and cell phone. I shared the truth that my parents didn’t sleep well because of his dog’s barking. I also shared that I had a Labrador who would bark until he got in a good walk. Dogs love daily walks, I wrote. I shared that in the hopes I would come across as sincere that things would improve (happy rested parents!) as well as concern for the dog’s well-being. Do you know what happened? For the first time, I saw him take his dog for regular, daily walks. Love takes many forms. Sometimes it is a kind note, a shared story, and a little bit of effort. And, love extends to all beings, all creatures.

The greater LOVE we strive for begins with small efforts. Jesus knows us so well, and so it is in the actions of love where Jesus is recognized. In us. Regular folks like us who make kind and loving decisions each day.

Reflection Question: *What is a situation you can have a small intervention in, with a kind and loving word or note?*

Prayer: Jesus, give us courage and send us your love so we can help love hurt and disturbed places in others. Amen.

Love Between Partners

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, 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. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.”

-1 Corinthians 13:4-8 NIV

When my husband and I got married twenty years ago, our pastor did a bit of marriage counseling with us beforehand. I remember thinking that it was a bit of a waste of time because twenty-one-year-old Holly often thought she knew everything. I do not remember most of what we learned during counseling, but a story our pastor, Rev Newton, told has stuck with me.

There was a man who came into his pastor's office one day and said to him, “Pastor, I don't think I love my wife anymore.” “Why do you think that?” asked pastor. “Well, I don't get excited when I see her. All she does is nag me to pick up my stuff or take out the rubbish. She doesn't seem to understand that I am exhausted when I come home from work and all I want to do is sit down with my feet up for a little bit.” “I tell you what” said Pastor, “I want you to try for the next 30 days to do everything you can to please her, buy her flowers, tell her how pretty she is, put your stuff away after you use it, take out the rubbish, help her with the laundry, take her on a date every week, then come back and tell me how it went.” “All Right, I'll come back in 30 days, but nothing will change” The man said begrudgingly.

The man came back to see the pastor 30 days later. “How did it go?” the pastor asked. “Great!” The man said, “I did everything you told me to do and realized that I do love my wife! We had a wonderful month. She has been smiling non-stop and telling all her friends how wonderful I am. All I had to do was pick my pants up off the bathroom floor.”

You see it is hard to expect kindness, compassion, and love when we are not willing to share kindness, compassion, and love. Falling in love is not something we do once, but something we keep doing repeatedly.

Reflection Question: *What kind of love do you expect from your partner? Is this same kind of love they need?*

Prayer: Dear God, lay upon our hearts, heaps of grace, so we can breathe it in. Amen.

Love of Parents

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that your Lord God is giving to you.” -Exodus 20:12

I think I was a full-fledged adult before I realized that not everyone had parents who behaved in loving ways towards them, much less cared for their most basic needs. It was pretty easy for me to honor my own parents because of all they did to care for me; the ways that their words and behaviors HONORED me. I spoke, and they listened. I asked questions and they (usually) tried hard to respond in thoughtful ways. They even apologized when needed. When my oldest child was born 23 years ago, I remember being flooded with love so big I couldn't contain it, even though I had been warned that sometimes the love takes time to form. I remember writing to a friend, “Now I'm beginning to understand just how much God loves us.” But, I also recognized the enormous privilege of parenting and understood that I honored my father and my mother because they first honored me.

Reflection Question: *How can I listen and be the hands of Christ for those who had/have traumatic experiences with their parents?*

Prayer: Honoring God, help us show up for those who didn't get the love they needed from their parents, even as we honor parents who love us well. Amen.

Love Between Friends

Mark 2:3-5 3 Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

This story speaks volumes about the act of love between friends. I often wonder whose idea it was to begin with. Was it the idea of the paraplegic? Since he wasn't able to physically get to Jesus, did he ask his friends to get him there? I wonder if his faith was so exhausted from trying different things to change his situation to no avail that he had given up and his friends decided to step in. Regardless of whose idea it was, what a huge act of love, faith, and devotion to get their friend to Jesus.

Can you think of a time when your friend had to get you to Jesus. A time when you weren't physically able to get to Jesus and you had to depend on a friend to get you to church. A time when your mind was so cluttered with thoughts that you weren't able to pray for yourself or your situation but a friend did. This Lent, thank God for them and pray for them.

Reflection Question: *In what ways can you return the love that you have received from a friend?*

Prayer – Holy Spirit, show me ways I can better love my friends with quickness to stand in the gap for them; fill me and empower me to be a friend who loves freely and unconditionally.

Good Friday – Love extended on the Cross

Gospel of John 19: 25-27

19:26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “*Woman, here is your son.*”

Before Jesus cries out, “It is finished” and breathes his last, he notices his mother, along with her sister Mary and Mary Magdalene standing there at the cross. Three Marys, reminding us of the Holy Trinity. The disciple whom Jesus loved was also there, so Jesus makes sure in that moment that his mother is provided for after he has left his earthly existence behind. Jesus is tangibly showing his love for his mother and for his closest family and disciples. Jesus’ Love is extending outward from the cross towards those who loved him from the first and those who loved him to the last. And yet we know Jesus’ death on the cross is not the end of the story. In raising Jesus from death to life eternal, God assures us that Jesus’ Love will continue to extend outward for not only his family and his disciples but indeed for all the world. Through the crucifixion, God’s Love will continue to extend outwards in ever-widening circles as Jesus’ message of love of God and love of neighbor spreads across the world. As Christians, we are charged with continuing to spread Jesus’ Gospel message of Love today.

Reflection Question: *How will you extend Jesus’ Love beyond the cross, beyond the church, and out into a hurting world in need of love?*

Prayer: God of Love, May the darkness of doubt and fear give way to a new life of love and light, and may we as followers of Christ Jesus be bearers of your Love, Light, and Peace in our world. Amen.

Holy Saturday and Easter Eve – Love for All

Psalm 31: 1 and 16

*“In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness...”*

*Make your face to shine upon your servant,
and in your loving-kindness save me.”*

Tomorrow, we will celebrate the reason we are gathered, the Resurrection of Jesus. Today, we reflect on the in-between time of waiting for a new day. I recently went to a conference where Native Americans were sharing about the process of writing a First Nations translation of the NT and Psalms. I asked what was most difficult to translate out of the 150 words Terry Wildman said they considered most important. He said, “the kingdom of God.” It is this concept of God reworking us and including us they wanted to speak to all.

In the south, Christians say there is “good trouble” to be a part of in following Jesus. We also hear upon leaving worship, “you are the body of Christ now in the world, go and serve.” Terry shared they agreed upon “The Creator’s Good Road” for “Kingdom of God.” The good road is following Jesus. Many long to follow Jesus with love and care for all. Why did they need a First Nations translation? Since they speak English, they wanted to try and communicate the gospel (good news) in ways that “spoke” to a variety of Indigenous languages. Some who participated on the council were: Potawatomi (MI), Yakima (Washington State), Navajo, Lakota, and Ojibwe. God is the “One above us all” and “the giver of breath.” With this new translation, we get to see different tribes create space for more people to love and know the beauty of our Creator as it gives breath and life through story and goodness.

A council of 12 (a good biblical number) met to discern, pray, and consider how to make “God” and “Jesus” and “believe” accessible in their words. This is a good news, almost Easter morning feeling where all are included in God’s love for the world.

Reflection Question: *Breath in an out, slowly, three times. While you breath in, think “make your face shine.” And while you breath out, think “in your loving-kindness, save me.” How does it feel to ask God to be present with you right now?*

Prayer: Holy Creator, your breath, your “ruah,” continues to fill us and create life. May we find this transition to Easter to be a gift for those who gather, all walks of life, all peoples, all nations. Help us forever be on your good road. Amen.



Author Bios

Joshua Archey is a Commissioned Pastor serving Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Commerce Township, Michigan since 2020. Prior to that, he served as a ruling elder, Director of Christian Education, and pastoral care intern at First Presbyterian Church of Farmington (MI). Josh and his wife Dawn, a math professor, are blessed with two beautiful children.

Rev. Mary Austin is a Presbyterian pastor, currently serving a UCC church in Michigan. She is a mom, partner, avid reader and dessert lover. Her personal writing is at Stained Glass in the City on Substack.

Kristi Button is a Certified (or Certifiable) Christian Educator in the PC(USA), with a MACE degree from what is now Union Presbyterian Seminary. She is also a Spiritual Director with a certificate from Columbia Theological Seminary. She currently works about two-thirds of a week as the Director of Christian Education at First United Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, AR, and the other third as the Co-Campus Minister at United Campus Ministry at the University of Arkansas (yes the same one Judi mentioned!) She grew up in Fayetteville, AR, and after a nineteen-year tour of Texas, Virginia, Florida and North Carolina, has been back in Fayetteville for 15 years!

Rev. Dr. Ron Gilmer is a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA). He has pastored churches throughout the American South and in Pennsylvania and Michigan. He is a native of South Carolina who currently teaches AP Psychology and Modern World History in Lexington, SC. He also serves as an adjunct instructor at a community college and as a part-time pastor in Columbia, SC. He is a graduate of Florida State University (Ph.D.), Union Presbyterian Seminary (M.Div.), University of South Carolina (M.A.) and Wofford College (B.A.).

Henry Harris has served in the healthcare field since 2006. He hosts the "Brother Henry and You Show" which was established in 2009. The show's objective is to inspire and encourage people through different relevant subjects. Henry has had the honor of interviewing many notable people from around the globe. His engaging and easy manner instantly make guests feel at home. Henry has a passion for producing and writing and is very creative. He is also an author, motivational speaker, and humanitarian. In 2007, he taught himself to play the piano, which brings him much enjoyment. He never took lessons. The light of his life and one of his greatest treasures is his daughter.

Kathleen Robertson King graduated from Western Michigan University and Louisville Seminary, and was ordained as Minister of Word and Sacrament by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2000. Kathleen was a campus minister for 25 years at United Campus Ministry in Kalamazoo, MI, which provides students with service/learning and leadership opportunities. Currently, Kathleen is serving Parchment United Methodist Church as an intentional interim. Kathleen is married to Kevin, a librarian, and mother to two delightful daughters, Abigail, and Rachael. Kathleen is a lover of art in all its forms, cooking, reading, gardening, and dogs. The whole family loves music in various forms.





Rev. Dwight McCormick is a Presbyterian Church USA pastor serving in the Eastern panhandle of West Virginia in Martinsburg. His first 23 years of ordained ministry were served in parishes in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio. He currently serves as pastor of a New Worshiping Community housed in a coffee shop called Community Cup Coffee and More. His wife Sarah is a massage therapist and they enjoy dancing with one another. Their two grown children live in Springfield Ohio. Chloe, who is 23 is a senior at Ohio State University. Phoebe who is 19 works full-time at Night Dispatch a trucking and shipping company. In his self-care time he enjoys cycling and stand-up comedy—both watching it and performing it. He is grateful to be able to serve God as a vocation and tries not to take himself or anything else too seriously.

Amanda McDonald is a member of FPC Springdale. She currently serves as the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry at FUPC in Fayetteville, and she is attending University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. She has three wonderful children, and she is learning new ways to trust God.

Rev. Dr. Judi McMillan is a pastor serving in Bella Vista, AR. Her first call was as a campus minister in Fayetteville and she came full circle to serve a congregation who was, and remains, fully supportive of student ministry at UCM. She has served churches in Arkansas, Nebraska and Michigan, serving in Metro-Detroit for most of her career. Her work as an Interim led her to enjoy learning and growing in a variety of contexts. Judi has two children who live in Western Michigan with their partners. She loves art, making sawdust, cycling and hiking above tree line. Her latest adventure is an international trip with her parents.

Rev. Dr. April Roebuck is a bi-vocational minister residing in Pittsburgh, PA. She is an IT professional by day and with the rest of her time she serves others. She takes the Great Commission seriously as she goes into all of the world to preach, teach and minister in places such as America, South America and Africa to name a few.

Rev. Jasmine Smart is an Associate Pastor at Grosse Pointe Memorial Church outside of Detroit, Michigan. Her creative spark is mostly nurtured through adult paint by number creations, and appreciating the art of others.

Rev. Holly Smith serves a delightful congregation in the North East Corner of Scotland although she hails from Texas. She lives with her husband, four kids, two dogs, three cats, and eleven chickens. When she is not herding humans and animals, she loves to sew and make messes in her craft room. She still does not know what she wants to be when she grows up.

Reverend Miss Polly Warren Williams is a 1997 graduate of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. She currently serves on its Board of Trustees, is primary caregiver for her most amazing mom, serves two congregations in North Texas and represents Grace Presbytery as commissioner to Synod of the Sun where she moderates Grants and Scholarships.



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