

# Journey Together Through Lent

*Mt. Lebanon United Methodist Church  
2024 Lenten Devotional*





# Introduction to Lent

*Judi Phelps*

## **Devotional: We Journey Together Through Lent**

The landscape of Lent is often painted as a desert; however, these weeks leading up to Easter can be a time of spiritual refreshment for us as we focus on the teachings of Jesus, the events of Holy Week, his suffering and death, all of which point us ultimately to our glorious celebration of his resurrection and the fulfillment of our promised salvation on Easter Sunday.

To that end, we are pleased to place in your hands this devotional. The contents of which have been written and submitted by members, staff, and friends of our faith family. It is our prayer that as we daily focus on the same scripture, devotional, and prayer, the Holy Spirit will speak to us collectively and individually increasing our love for and trust in his Son, Jesus Christ, as well as place within us a burning desire to be his faithful servants and share the faith with all who are placed in our paths.

To God be the glory!

### **Prayer:**

Gracious God,

We ask, O God, that as we study the scriptures, meditations, and offer our prayers to you this Lenten season you would pour out your Holy Spirit anew within us collectively as this church family and as individual believers. Give to us a sense of urgency to share the faith and to be your humble servants. Let the light and love of Christ shine forth from us to all who cross our path. Be glorified in our lives.

This we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen

Scott Miller, Associate Pastor

1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

**Devotional:** I am deeply privileged to start our Lenten journey with the devotion for Ash Wednesday. This reading from Isaiah is a rather blunt word from God to His people Israel. In it we discover that sometimes the good news that the Word brings is actually the bad news that is brought first. What do I mean by that? I mean that before we face down someone else, we need to make sure we deal with the sin in our own lives. In other words, the test of our worship and fasting on Sunday is the how we treat people on Monday.

God was upset with His people and their religious overtures. Their fasting was unacceptable to God. Why? Because it left the sin in their lives untouched – they quarreled, they exploited their workers. The only authentic worship is worship that includes at least an implicit attack against our own sin. If we are sincere on Sunday in our prayerful opposition to the sin in our lives, then we will fight it on Monday with action. We may not always succeed as fully as we would like, but we will fight our sin on Monday if our fasting was true on Sunday.

Jesus said in Luke 11:46, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (NIV). We are called to free people from burdens, not oppress them with more.

What is God’s prescription for ensuring fasting and worship acceptable to Him? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, loose the chains of injustice, and provide the poor wanderer with shelter. God says if those things are done, then healing will quickly appear; night will become like day, and the glory of the Lord will be our guard.

As we begin our Lenten journey, we should remember that Lent is a time of repentance, a time to become aware of the sin that separates us from God, and the fact it cost Him His Son to reconcile us to Him. Lent isn’t merely giving up chocolate or meat every Friday, but instead a time to listen for God’s leading. Where God leads us might be more difficult than any fast; and we realize that we cannot do anything in our own strength, but only the grace of God is sufficient.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please be with us today as we enter into this holy season of Lent. Help us to be faithful to the promises we are making to You, ourselves, and each other for the next forty days. Guide us gently back to You if, and when, we stray. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

**Devotion:** At a church I was serving, a parishioner, Carl, came and asked if he could do a 'first person' presentation on Paul as part of worship. I agreed, reluctantly. It wasn't the best presentation, but considering his age—70-- and the lack of a good costume, wig, makeup and staging, he did okay. He spoke about Paul's life, mission and the message that Christ's spirit is to live within us and that we're called to love one another. The next morning I'm at the local Pharmacy. I see Carl standing at the counter talking to a young female clerk. I could overhear him saying that he wanted to have pictures developed. I heard the young lady tell Carl three times, "I'm sorry, unfortunately we don't develop pictures at this location." He snaps back with, "Well, what the hell are you good for anyway?" Carl knew enough about Paul to portray him in church but the next morning, he forgot the most important part of Paul's message and that was the living out of it. When Christ lives in us, we are to bear the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control in all places and at all times. As Lent continues, let us remember that it's not how much we know about Christ that matters the most. It's how we let Christ move and breathe in us.

**Prayer:** Lord, one of the greatest challenges we face in life is being consistent. In many ways our beliefs and actions don't line up. What we know about you means nothing unless that knowledge is lived out day-to-day in acts of kindness and love. Help us not only to know Christ but also help us to reflect Christ so that his love, mercy, and grace might come through us. As Lent moves on, walk with us, Lord, and guide us to be those people you created us to be: people of love. Amen.

*"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 than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

**Devotional:** We are to trust in the Lord. God will provide all that we need in life. It is very tempting to worry. We worry about our families, our homes and our futures. We fear things that are beyond our control. In Matthew 6: 25-34, Jesus tells us not to be anxious. When we trust God there is no need to worry. God will provide for us. God provides for plants and animals and he will provide for us. We need to seek his kingdom and guidance. God provides us strength and wisdom to allow us to differentiate between want and need. When we focus on our heavenly father, we grow closer to him. We begin to understand that worry is not healthy and interferes with our relationship with God. Each day brings new challenges. The new day is a gift from God. God will be with us throughout both our good and bad days. God's love is steadfast and always present.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord,

Thank you for providing for us. Your love provides all that we need. Help us to have faith in your provisions. Lead us not into the temptation of worry and anxiety. Help us to trust in your plan. Your love is always with us. You watch over us with grace and care. Please help us not to worry about worldly things. We want to stay focused on serving you. We trust that you will provide all that we need. Amen.

*But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 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 anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

**Devotion:** Our scripture today is about love. We are to love one another because love comes from God. God loved us so much that he sent his only son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. God's love does not depend on our worthiness nor do we have to measure up to some standard before God can love us. God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not. We put our faith and trust in God's love so that we can live in confidence and without fear of the future. If God loves us that much, surely we ought to love each other! God's love made visible in Jesus is the kind of love we should share with others. Does this mean just our family, neighbors or our community of faith? If we look at how Jesus shows God's love, we know what Jesus calls us to do. How far must our love for others extend? To every single human being.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, we ask for your blessing as we attempt to love every single human being. Often we fail miserably in this endeavor. We need your strength and loving spirit to be with us constantly as we remember to touch others with the love you have blessed us with. Guide us through our days and help us to be more like Jesus by spreading his love to others. Amen.

**February 18**

**Joan Reasinger**

**I Corinthians 13**

*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

**Devotion:** We often think of "love" as a noun – something we possess; or most often as an action verb – something we do.

Perhaps Paul intends for us to think of it as a "being Verb" – an expression of our state of being – Who we ARE.

Love is more about being than about how we act. Love is a way of life that focuses on good for others more than good for self. Love is a way of being as a person; a way of thinking, acting and living.

Love is more than being nice to everyone. Love is more than what our society seeks – where one tolerates all things, promotes all things and denies nothing. Love is a motivation, a perspective, a purpose for life.

At the end of his teaching about the diversity of spiritual gifts and their use to build up the church, Paul says, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." This most excellent way is the way of living a life of love that was ushered in by the Messiah and exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Paul encourages us to develop a life where LOVE guides our approach to everything we do. This LOVE which we ARE will be seen in how we live and speak and think.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to be "Love" to a hurting world. Help us use the gifts we have to build up the body of Christ. May we shine the Light and Love of Christ to all we meet. Amen

**February 19**

**Sharon Slater, Choir Member**

**Luke 9:18-25**

*Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah." Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"*

**Devotion:** In the hustle and bustle of our modern world, it's easy to get caught up in the pursuit of success, wealth, and personal happiness. We often find ourselves striving to "gain the whole world" without realizing the profound message that Jesus shared with his disciples in Luke 9:18-25.

This passage begins with a pivotal question from Jesus to his disciples: "Who do the people say that I am?" The answers vary, but Peter's response, "The Christ of God," echoes through the ages.

Recognizing Jesus as the Christ of God is an essential revelation. It speaks to the profound truth that He is the source of purpose and salvation in our contemporary world. But Jesus goes further, urging us to "deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him."

What does it mean to take up our cross in the modern world? It means embracing a life of selflessness and service. In a world that often promotes self-centeredness, Jesus calls us to prioritize others. This self-denial isn't always easy as Jesus' own suffering and rejection attest. Yet, the promise of resurrection and eternal life is our guide.

Losing our lives for Jesus means letting go of selfish desires in exchange for a life of purpose and meaning. It challenges us to evaluate what truly matters. Is the pursuit of worldly success worth losing our spiritual identity?

Today, let us heed Jesus's call in Luke 9:18-25. Embrace the Christ of God, practice selflessness, and take up your cross in service to others. In this journey you'll discover a life filled with profound meaning, aligned with Christ's teachings, and centered on the eternal purpose of your soul.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father,

As we come before you today, we acknowledge you as the Christ of God, the source of our purpose and salvation in this modern world.

We pray for the strength to embrace selflessness and to take up our cross daily, just as Jesus instructed. In a world that often encourages selfish ambitions, grant us the courage to prioritize the needs of others, to love, to show compassion, and to serve with a selfless heart.

Lord, we recognize that this path is not without its challenges. We may face hardships and difficulties in our journey to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. In these moments, we ask for Your guidance, wisdom, and the faith to trust in the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

Help us to reevaluate our priorities, dear Lord, to see that gaining worldly riches is meaningless if it leads to losing our spiritual identity, values, and connection with You.

In our pursuit of a meaningful and purposeful life, we seek Your grace to align ourselves with the teachings of Jesus and the eternal purpose of our souls. May we live as a reflection of Your love and grace in a world that so desperately needs it.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**February 20**

**Sara Knabb, Kids Praise Volunteer**

**Colossians 3: 10-17**

*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

**Devotional:** In this passage Paul is introducing characteristics of God's chosen people. In previous verses Paul was calling out sin and now in these verses he is encouraging us to fight against sin and is instructing us what to do instead. We have the power of the resurrection to change us. There is a new humanity, one that transcends the ethnic and social boundary lines of our world, to create a world with kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness and patience (v. 12). Following Jesus is a response, not an obligation. It is love that drives us to live how Paul describes in this passage. The idea that there is no Jew nor Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised is how Jesus lived his life. Living in peace with one another is not the absence of differing opinions, it is the loving one another in spite of it. If we fully embodied the characteristics of God's chosen people would there still be conflict? What would our world look like if love was the driving force?

**Prayer:** Most Gracious Lord, please give us the opportunity to respond to you and put on the characteristics you first displayed to those that are different or have differing opinions. You gave us the example to love others despite those differences. Thank you for this time to learn more about you. Please guide us during this time of Lent and help us focus on You and how You want us to live our lives.

## February 21

David Seitz, Lector

## Psalm 27

*The LORD is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD. Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.*

*Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations. I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*

**Devotional:** Dear Lord, I rest here this morning, on this beautiful Autumn day, looking out at your glorious creation from my balcony. The leaves and their color blind me with their beauty as they have not begun to fall yet. But I hear rumblings, complaints and fears that the days will get shorter and darker. People are already concerned with holiday shopping and the finances that surround this season. I concur. The season comes upon us like a monster, threatening to almost gobble up the joy of this time.

The time of Lent is far off but the date of the season puts us directly into dark days and long nights. In Psalm 27, David reminds us that light of your goodness lies not in the season, but in our hearts as we reside in your presence. The light is always there, regardless of the environmental season.

**Prayer:** Dear God, We pray that you are able to put our hearts at rest during this time of celebration and yes, great challenge. Regardless of the season, you are our stronghold, our palace, our temple. Just like the simple tent that represented the temple during David's life it's simplicity is its strength. Your house is everywhere at all times, shining it's light brilliantly, You are our shelter, our safe place, accessible at all times. We rest our head there, dearest, Lord, finding comfort and solace in your majesty and your grace and your light. Amen

## February 22

Emily Shoff, Youth Group

## Ephesians 6: 1-4

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" —which is the first commandment with a promise— "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

**Devotional:** Ya know when your mom gives you that "don't even think about it" look before you even start to think about it? I'm pretty sure my mom can telepathically send me that look, even when she's nowhere near me! As much as I sometimes get annoyed when my mom ruins something that was supposed to be a fun time, in the end she's usually right. (don't tell her that!) As kids, we like to push boundaries, get out of our mom's grasp, and can often push past "the look." I love my mom very much and the thought of disappointing her makes me disappointed in myself. Trust me, I'm not perfect, not even close, so I disappoint my mom a lot, but the love of a mother is just as strong as God's love for us. Your mom will always forgive you. She will always love you. And she will always be proud of you.



**Prayer:** God, I pray for anyone who feels like they have hit a wall and disappointed you. We know not all our actions are through you and please you, but you still love us anyway. Show people who are struggling to love themselves that you will always love them, no matter their sins. Amen

**February 23**

**Kathy Michael, President — UWF**

**II Corinthians 9:6-15**

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.*  
*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

**Devotion:** Giving back to God is something we as Christians struggle with many times. Whether it is giving of our money, our time and especially our heart, it is a challenge in many ways. As I used to tell my children when they were going through a particularly selfish period, "The world does not revolve around you." It doesn't sound like the most loving thing to say to your children but necessary at times. And I have to say that to myself as well.

As I live with the unknown of dealing with liver cancer and all the blood work, PET scans, doctor's appointments and more, I get tired of thinking about my health and want to think of others. The church helps keep us all from making it "all about ourselves." The giving of our time, money and heart to God's kingdom is the way we can begin doing just that.

It is a gift when God calls us to look outside ourselves and think of others. Our first thoughts should be to honor God with all our hearts and all our gifts and be grateful for the love and grace God has given us.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help us to give to God joyously--our hearts, our time and our money. Help us to be not so absorbed with our own lives but to think of, encourage and be of service to others. In Jesus' name, Amen

**February 24**

**Caryl Drabick, United Women in Faith**

**Luke 6:27-36**

*"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

**Devotion:** This Bible passage includes teachings of Jesus that center on love, kindness and a radical approach to how we get along with people. Jesus challenges traditional notions of how people respond to those who mistreat them and presents a new and different way of living.

Jesus tells us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and live according to The Golden Rule, which includes being empathetic and understanding to the people we like and the people we don't.

This doesn't come naturally for most of us. It's easy to love our friends and family, but to love and do good to people who irritate us or who we don't agree with or who have harmed us in some way is almost impossible. But as God's people, we must be rich in mercy, kindness, and grace. We must mirror God's true nature, so that people who desperately need God's love can see it in us, his followers.

**Prayer:** Dear God, grant us strength to love, bless, and show mercy to all as Jesus taught us. Help us embody his unconditional love and grace. Amen.

**February 25**

**Kim Rhoton, Director of Christian Ed.**

**I Corinthians 1: 26-31**

*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

**Devotion:** I am no stranger to foolishness. A good belly laugh restores my soul and lifts my mood. I often make light of a difficult situation, and my family knows that if they can make me laugh, they have an excellent chance of being quickly forgiven for whatever was the latest transgression. Lucky for me, I have spent most of my career around children whom I find to be the funniest people on earth!

One thing I love about children is that they often do not suffer from imposter syndrome – they have complete belief that they can and will do amazing things. When my daughter was in preschool, if you had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up she would have told you a princess, a Broadway star, and a teacher. She believed each of these to be reasonable and achievable goals that she could accomplish concurrently – and probably by next week. Foolish? Perhaps, but Paul tells us that God chooses foolishness in order to shame those who think they are wise.

The early Christians must have thought it foolishness that God chose a poor, powerless woman to bring the Messiah to the world and probably even more foolish that this Messiah would be condemned to death by the powerful Roman government. However, what seems foolish to us is not foolish to God.

God calls us to do things that seem impossibly foolish, but unlike children, we tend to doubt our ability to accomplish them. We think we possess the wisdom to know what is possible – we think we have a better understanding of the world and ourselves than the Creator does. When I trust in God's foolishness, I have greater wisdom, wealth, and power than I ever thought possible. As for my daughter, she is now an adult and on her way to becoming a teacher. To some of us, she will also always be a princess and a Broadway star.

What foolishness is God calling you to today?

**Prayer:** Creator God, help me to hear your call and follow where you lead. Where I may perceive foolishness, let me find your wisdom. Make my heart like that of a child who knows that with you, all things are possible  
Amen.

**February 26**

**Lori Barr, German Team**

**Luke 19: 1-10**

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” 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.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

**Devotion:** Luke 19 begins with the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who changes his ways after an encounter with Jesus.

When I was a teenager, my parents encouraged my sister and me to attend a mission trip with others from our church. We called these trips "work camps". My first work camp took me to the Tennessee and Kentucky border area of Appalachia. We walked a quarter of a mile to reach our work site for the week. The father of the household relied on a horse for transportation and caught and sold rattlesnake skins for a living. My fifteen-year-old-suburban-living experiences did not prepare me for this culture shock. The homeowner had built their one-room log cabin himself and the interior walls were covered with pieces of cardboard boxes as a form of insulation.

The words WHIRLPOOL, GE, and MAYTAG adorned the walls. Our job was to hang dry wall on the entire cabin creating warmer, more livable conditions. My new friends, the homeowners, were simply kind, hard-working, and Christian.

I continued to participate in work camps in my later teens and early 20's as well as several more as a youth group counselor over the next 10 years. I traveled to West Virginia, North Carolina and Alaska. As an adult, I was fortunate to visit and spread the word of Jesus in the country of Haiti. I consider these trips, and the individuals I have met, an important part of my spiritual journey. "You are a child of God, you are wonderfully made, dearly loved and precious in His sight". Psalm 139

Although I was not considered a wayward sinner in my youth, I can relate to Zacchaeus in the way that my life was forever changed because of an encounter with Jesus that has motivated me to pause and give thanks for my life and circumstances.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord,

Thank you for the experiences in our lives that draw us closer to you. Bless those less fortunate than we are. Hold them in your loving arms and grant them peace.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

**February 27**

**Kathy Tremblay, Lector**

**John 15:1-15**

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*

*Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

**Devotion:** Last fall as I walked in our backyard to survey what was left of our very large tomato garden, I was struck by the number of bright red tomatoes lying on the round after dropping from the vine. Firm and bright red while on the plant, they are now turning brown and losing their shape. I thought of this image as I read a passage from John. In John Chapter 15, Jesus is addressing his disciples and using the vineyard, a very prominent part of life in the region, as symbolic of our relationship with God. It is the vines on the plants that are needed to bring life and nutrients to the grapes. Without the vines connected to the fruit, the grapes would wither and die, just as our tomatoes could not survive once they were not connected to the plants. Jesus reminds us in this parable that God is the vine and we as people of faith need His guidance and connection to flourish and thrive in this life. This essential connection to Him provides attributes as Christians of patience, kindness, joy, goodness and faithfulness. Without this connection, life may seem hollow and without meaning.

And how do we nourish this connection? Prayer, Bible studies, fellowship and service to others are all examples of ways to enrich this relationship with God. My prayer in this Lenten season is that each of us may have a renewed connection to God and flourish in our Christian life.

**Prayer:** Father, we come to you today with gratitude for the nourishment you provide for our souls and spirit. We pray that you help us to encourage others to seek that same connection to you so that our hearts and lives will be filled with your grace. Amen

**February 28**

**Sandy Waters, United Women in Faith**

**Matthew 6:1-8**

*“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

**Devotion:** In this passage, Jesus reminds us of the importance of sincerity and authenticity in our faith practices. He encourages us to pray and do good deeds privately -- not for public praise or to impress others, but out of genuine love and compassion for others.

Lent gives us the opportunity to examine our motives and align our actions with the desire to please God rather than seek others' approval. But why is this important? After all, what's the harm in a little praise when we do something nice?

I've been thinking about this in terms of giving "anonymously." For example, donating money or food or other items to a person in need by giving it to a pastor or teacher or other person in charge who can pass it along in confidence.

This method reflects humility — a virtue highly regarded in our faith. By doing a good deed without our name attached, maybe we're better able to focus on the act of giving itself rather than drawing attention to us and our generosity. Maybe, if we keep doing good deeds anonymously, our giving will become more selfless, compassionate, and instinctive.

Other reasons to do good deeds without fanfare:

- It doesn't feed our ego or pride, which prevents us from feeling superior to others.
- It shifts our focus from the giver to the recipient and their needs.
- It reflects Christ's example.
- It protects the recipient's dignity. We focus on their needs and not on the person -- who may be uncomfortable with public knowledge of their situation.

And then there's the reward that's promised in the scripture passage. Giving anonymously aligns with the belief that God values and honors actions that are driven by a pure and sincere heart.

Most importantly, doing good anonymously honors God — and that is a profound reward all on its own.

**Prayer:** Dear God,

During Lent, we humbly come before you, seeking to cultivate a genuine and authentic faith. Help us to examine our motives and intentions. Guide us to live a life that pleases you rather than seeks human recognition.

May our prayers and actions be private, sincere expressions of our love and dependence on you. Teach us to walk in your ways, desiring a deep and authentic relationship with you.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**February 29**

**Judi Phelps, Food Pantry**

**Philippians 2: 1-16**

*Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Do Everything Without Grumbling Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation*

*" Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.*

**Devotion:** St. Paul ends this particular segment of his letter to the church at Philippi with the following words .... "You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of people who are crooked and stubborn. Shine out among them like beacon lights, holding out to them the Word of Life."

These were timely words for the early Christian church as it not only faced persecutions from without but deep divisions within, not at all unlike the challenges that we face in our churches and dark world today. St. Paul offers two seemingly simple solutions to the Philippians then and to us today. He challenges us to "shine" and to offer to those within the Body of Christ and this very dark world we live in today the "Word of Life" who is Jesus Christ. So, how are we to "shine?" What exactly does that mean? I believe it means that when we interact with others they will see in us the qualities that reflect the love of Christ, qualities such as peace, gentleness, assurance, kindness, joyfulness and humility. Paul also challenges us to feed His people with the Written Word which contains messages of hope, comfort and guidance.

Jesus is our light and he always will trump the darkness

**Prayer:** Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. During this Lenten season, strengthen our love and trust in you. Fill us anew with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit without and within. Intensify your light within us so that we may shine brighter for you. Use us each day to glorify your name and to give witness to your faithfulness and love.

In Jesus' precious name, Amen

**March 1**

**Liam DeLuca, Youth Group**

**Romans 12:1-8**

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

*Humble Service in the Body of Christ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

**Devotion:** Romans 12:1-8 tells us how to use the body as a living sacrifice. To do this is to worship and use your body as an extension of God by preaching his word, showing others the light of the Lord, and using the abilities given to you. Additionally, we are all part of one body and have different talents. God gives different gifts to each of us. Just like a body, we need everyone to work together to spread God's word. For example, right now I'm finishing up my freshman year of football at Mount Lebanon high school. Some people can't or don't want to play football but I believe God has given me the talent to play football. However, even though I was given this ability there are other abilities I wasn't given such as singing or dancing. God gives us all different gifts. Whatever your gift, you should use it to praise and worship the Lord in your own way.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord,

Please help me use my gifts to spread your word.

In your name, Amen

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

*Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?"*

*Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

*This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"*

*Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"*

*And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

**Devotional:** What a powerful message!

This passage is such a powerful reminder that God's word is to be shared with everyone. An Ethiopian eunuch is about as different a person as Philip could ever encounter in his travels. Still, Philip took the time to instruct his visitor about God's word. He did not recoil or limit his interaction with the traveler; he treated him as a Child of God.

**Prayer:**

Dear God,

Help me to be as bold a servant as Philip. Help me to teach others of your love for everyone. Please remind me, frequently, that the Bible is to be shared in love with everyone, and not used as a weapon against anyone. O, Lord, help me to keep your love vibrant in my heart, actions and words with everyone always. Amen

*Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

**Devotional:**

There is a lot to unpack here, but this passage all comes down to standing firm with God in the face of temptation. With our overconsumption of media, unprecedented ability to connect to anyone we desire, and the unlimited resources and options that surround us, temptation is stronger now more than ever. We get caught up in temptation thinking that "times have changed" and surely it would be okay to give in to these "new" challenges we face.

I Corinthians 10:6-13 reminds me of a saying I heard recently. "If it's new, it's not true and if it's true, it's not new." The person I heard this saying from was essentially saying that all of these new takes on the Gospel or these messages being pushed through the media regarding what we should and should not believe is not coming from God, meaning it is not the TRUTH. While times have changed, the truth has remained constant. The truth in times of temptation holds us firm in our commitment to God.

**Prayer:** Dear God, Thank you for giving us an unwavering truth to rely on in times of temptation. Help us to turn to you, oh Lord, instead of turning to sin in times of temptation. You are the truth and the light. Amen.

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*

**Devotion:** In our minds, we want to do what is right. However, our bodies are a "slave to the law of sin, destined to sin." To avoid succumbing to sin and temptation, we must look to the Lord Jesus Christ for guidance and understanding. Essentially, we cannot do it by ourselves. We cannot be secular humanists and succeed against sin. It is not possible to do it alone. Secular humanism fails because we are not perfect. This is where Jesus comes to the rescue. Temptations are everywhere and have existed from the beginning of time. Today, those temptations are closer at hand, particularly in the case of technology and social media. As those temptations are only a click away, remember to look to our Lord Jesus Christ and he will always be there to strengthen us.

**Prayer:** During the Lenten season at this time of renewal, it is reassuring to know that our Lord Jesus Christ is with us and that we need to search no further. Jesus is always there to walk wherever our journeys take us.

*And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

*Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

**Devotion:** That profound thinker, Charlie Brown, asks his friend, Linus, "Do you ever think much about the future?" Linus replies, "Oh, yes, all the time." "What do you think you'd like to be when you grow up?" Charlie asks. Linus thinks a moment and replies, "Outrageously happy!" (You're a Winner, Charlie Brown, Charles Schulz [Fawcett Crest Books])

There are basically two ways to try to gain happiness. The first is to try to arrange your circumstances so that you will be content. You try to get a fulfilling job, a satisfying marriage and family life, and enough money to be comfortable. The problem is, none of these things are secure. You can lose your job, there isn't a trouble-free marriage or family on earth, and the good things in life can be changed instantly by uncontrollable factors such as war, fire, natural disasters, disease, or death.

The other way to seek happiness is to seek it in the Lord. Paul describes a life that is happy in God. It's a life of thankful worship engaging the whole person in all of life every day of the week. There's no sacred-secular division for Christians. That's not to say that we do not need to gather for worship and teaching. We do. But it is to say that in every aspect of life we can reflect the joy of salvation as we speak and act in the name of Christ and it means living thankfully while working or playing with your kids or unstopping a clogged toilet or fixing dinner.

Are you happy in God?

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father,

Today's world seems so filled with hopelessness and despair. Everywhere we look, we see killings, hatred, division, and war. Only in you can we find peace and love - and hope. When the world seems its darkest, help us to focus on you and your love - and in so doing become a beacon of your light for those around us. Amen

## March 6

Kim Palmer, *Work Camp*

## Psalm 107:1-9

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story — those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south. Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.*

**Devotion:** Sometimes we feel like an outsider, unwanted, rejected, or like we don't belong. Sometimes people care about us only for a while, or when it serves their needs. Think about a time you've felt this way in your life. Maybe a close friend broke a promise, a step-parent walked out of your life, a spouse stopped loving you, a trusted neighbor stole from you, or a colleague let you down, and then we feel betrayed by people we thought we could trust. We live in a world where people all too frequently let us down in ways that are so hurtful.

God's love isn't like that. God loves us always and will never let us down. We all face challenging times. God hears our cries. He loves us and helps lead us out of a place of suffering.

**Prayer:** We thank you for your goodness, mercy, and unfailing love. You help us in times of crisis and distress. When we feel lost, alone, or betrayed, we turn to you. We thank you for your guidance. Amen

## March 7

Linda Minnotte, *Bell Choir*

## Psalm 139

*O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You. For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; When I awake, I am still with You. Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.*

**Devotion:** "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it."

This is such a powerful psalm. I have sung these words many times while in the choir and each time they make you think that God is always there...always with you. He knows where you have been and where you are going. The psalm goes to say in verses 7-12 that God will never forsake you.

It speaks of the faithfulness of God that God will never let you go. I am His and that knowledge humbles me and keeps me in His love. If God has called me to be His – where can I run? Is He not big enough to grab me back? Can I really flee from His presence for too long? Search me, O God, and know my heart;

"Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting. : King David's words are still relevant today. I think all of us can relate to feeling anxious and worried about what is going on in our lives and in the world. We need to feel comforted that God is always there with us.

**Prayer:** Father, We ask you to bring your healing hand on our heart. We need your comfort and support as we navigate our way through each day. We know that you see each one of us and we ask that you relieve our fears and help guide us in a thoughtful way. Amen



## March 8

Lynne Young

Mark 12:28-34

*One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

**Devotion:** In the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, it's easy to lose sight of what truly matters. We often get caught up in countless obligations, responsibilities and distractions that pull our focus away from what's most important. Mark's Gospel, 12:28-34, serves as a powerful reminder of fundamental principles that should guide our lives.

**Prayer:** Dear God, may my words, my actions, my thoughts and my emotion be representative of you and offered to your glory. While I know such surrender will always be a life-long battle, I ask for your strength and guidance to do it. Make me more and more sensitive to the quality of your love, and help me to love others with the same love with which you love me. Amen

## March 9

Clark Remington, Reading Programs

I Thess. 4:9-5:1

*Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you,*

**Devotion:** In these encouraging verses Paul states that Christians already show brotherly love as God has taught them, but he urges us to do this more and more. He indicates additional ways we can deepen our love. He calls us to be quiet. We shouldn't yell or be boisterous. We should mind our own business. Gossiping is not a way of demonstrating brotherly love. He tells us not to be idle, but to work so that we are not dependent on others.

He also asks us not to be uninformed about salvation. We do not need to worry about those who have already fallen asleep (died). Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, God will bring us all along. Through Jesus those who are alive will be caught up together with those who are asleep to meet the Lord. Salvation is assured for those who have accepted Jesus.

We need not know the time or season or in what manner this will occur. We only need to believe. All who believe are assured of salvation.

**Prayer:** Lord, we thank you that through you our salvation is assured. Help us to deepen our brotherly love for all people by living according to your will. Amen

## March 10

Barbara Watson, United Women in Faith

Matthew 25: 31-40

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him." Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.*

**Devotional:** I am sure most of us remember driving past someone at an intersection or outside a store holding up a sign asking for help. Several years ago I remember approaching a traffic light and seeing a young woman holding a sign asking for money for a journey she was to take. The light was green as I approached and had to pass her by. I felt moved to help her so I turned at the next street so I could return to give her a rather larger bill than I would normally give, as it was all that was there in my purse. Since then I have thought about her so often: was she really in need, would she buy drugs or alcohol with the money she received or would she use it for the bus fare which she claimed she needed? Did it matter? I gave out of my own plenty, it was not for me to judge when and how she used the money I gave her. I will always remember her smile and exuberant thanks for the gift as I drove away.

As we journey through the Lenten season this year may we remember the words of John Wesley, Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can."

**Prayer:** Dear God, Help as we reach out in love to those in need of a friend and to those who are hungry or thirsty. May we freely and generously share with them from our plenty, now and always. Jesus said, "Truly as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it unto me." Amen.

### March 11

Chuck Vogel, Lector

### Lamentations. 3:21-26

*This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the Lord.*

**Devotion:** Everyone seems to be carrying some sort of burden in their lives. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah certainly was devastated by the Babylonian's destruction of Jerusalem, yet he maintained his trust in God. He reflected that he might be worthless, yet God still loved him and would protect him. As sinful creatures of God, we often think of ourselves as worthless and the troubles of this earth seem to be more than we can bear, yet in truth, God continues to loves us and is with us through the worst of times. Final victory will be ours if we trust in Him and in Jesus, His Son, and our Savior. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus give us assurance that we will be saved by God, and the troubles we have will be eased if we trust in Him.

**Prayer:** God our Father, we thank You for the many blessings You have given us. We thank You especially for the love and support You give to us when we have problems. May our faith in you sustain us when difficulties in our lives occur. We pray in the name of Your Son and Our Savior, Jesus Christ.

### March 12

Sara Mercer, Lector

### Psalms 51

*Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight-- Thou You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise. Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, With burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then they shall offer bulls on Your altar.*

**Devotion:** All of us must ask God to forgive us for our transgressions, some large, like David's and some comparatively small. David's sins were always before him. Certainly, no matter how we may try to justify our sins, big and small, they are still sins. "The red light had barely changed from yellow." "I simply have not had enough time or energy to return a phone call or send a letter I promised to send or apologize for a thoughtless word. We have all made excuses and will continue to do so, no matter what the wrongdoing may be.

Although our sins may not approach the severity of David's, we also sin each day and we must ask God to forgive us for those behaviors and for our arrogance in committing those sins and attempting to justify them. Is that enough? David certainly sinned against God, but he also sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah and the soldiers who were affected by Uriah's death, and all of us, even today, who struggle to understand and learn from the errors that each of us has made. We are called by our faith to ask for forgiveness from God and to demand of ourselves to seek for forgiveness of those we have injured. Moreover, we can only by seeking forgiveness from God and each other that we can overcome the damage that our sins have caused to others and ourselves and to achieve the contrite heart that our faith demands.

**Prayer:** Merciful and loving God, help me to be the person you want me to be. Help me to see my transgressions and errors and sins so that I will never commit them again, will learn from them and will help others to avoid this same sins. Help me to be a person in whom you are pleased. Thank you for your guidance and love. Thank you for giving us your son, Jesus Christ, and help us always to recognize and foster in ourselves the endless care and sacrifice He offers to us all.

In CHRIST's name we pray, Amen

**March 13**

**Louanne Baily, Missions Committee**

**John 4:7-15**

*A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."*

**Devotion:** This wonderful story of Jesus and the woman at the well has relevance for all of us. Jesus crossed the cultural line of propriety by talking not only with a single woman, but one who was a Samaritan (his disciples were scandalized!) Then, pivoting from discussing water for drinking, Jesus offers the woman living water, the gift of the spirit: "The water that I will give... will turn into a spring within you, welling up unto eternal life"

The first part of this scripture shows Jesus' lack of interest in temporal and earth-bound religious borders. He transcends norms of the time and points out his path, one that is available to all, to eternal life.

I'm prompted to wonder-

How do we, individually and as a congregation, define ourselves with non-essentials that prevent living a life in the Spirit?

How might we be more like the woman at the well: willing to open our eyes to Christ's presence from unexpected or cross-cultural persons?

Then, how might we be more like Jesus and offer his Spirit, God's Spring of Water, to anyone regardless of religious, national, political or heritage differences?

**Prayer:** Dear God, our Father, During this time of Lent, let us identify and repent of those barriers that prevent us from seeing similarities in others and the need that we all have to drink the water that Jesus offers. Let us embrace and live in the Spirit of God's Love that leads to life eternal. Amen

**March 14**

**Kathy Karns, Holiday Decorating**

**Romans 8:28-30**

*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

Background: Paul wrote his letter to believers in Rome only twenty-five to thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus (circa 55 to 58 AD). Though the initial audience was a relatively small one, this epistle has become, in Eugene Peterson's words, "the premier document of Christian theology". Martin Luther described Romans as "the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel". Romans 8 is considered by some to be the greatest chapter in the Bible.

**Scripture Passage:** To me these verses indicate:

- (1) God has had a plan since the beginning of time.
- (2) He knows us and He calls us.
- (3) For those who answer the call and believe in Christ, God has made the extraordinary promise that He works everything for good, no matter what happens in our lives.
- (4) Our destiny as Christians is to be changed and to become more Christlike.
- (5) God is involved in every step of our Christian life, from our calling, to our forgiveness/justification, and to our salvation.

**Challenge:** Write down five qualities about the life of Jesus as described in the Bible. Pray to be more like Christ and to emphasize these qualities in your own life.

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven,

Open our ears to hear your call. Open our minds to discern how you want us to grow and change, comforted by knowing that you are working in our lives for good. Open our hearts to give praise and thanks for the incredible, extravagant promises of justification and salvation. Amen.

**March 15**

**Kirk Lowe, AV Team Leader**

**Matthew 14: 22-33**

*Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away.*

*And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."*

**Devotion:** As I reflect on today's scripture, I am thinking more about Peter's experience than the story from the common title perspective of 'Jesus Walks on the Water'. While Peter asks Jesus to validate who He is, he does trust Him to take the first step on the water. Then Peter lets his surroundings get to him, and he falters. Jesus reinforces that He is always with us by catching Peter and returning to the boat.

How often do we do the same? Recognize that first inkling of God's voice - a heart tug, a word of encouragement from a friend, a sermon topic (or lots of them in a row), or a song lyric - that speaks to you in a special way that we let completely pass by. Or maybe, just maybe, we take an initial action and then stop when the world doesn't immediately approve of what we know to be God inspired.

Peter's experience shows us that God is with us. He is there to lead us, to be a source of strength, and to help us find refuge when we need it. Lent offers us a time to listen more intently for God's calling, and it may provide that new perspective that allows us to trust Him more fully. An equally appropriate title for this passage could be 'Peter Learns to Trust in Jesus.'

**Prayer:** Dear Lord,

Help us to better recognize Your presence in our lives and to be willing to respond to Your call. Help us to have the courage to take those first steps and not falter at the first signs of trouble. Help us to trust in You more. Amen

## March 16

## Dick DiBella

## Hebrews 13:5-16

*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

**Devotion:** "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...." is how Hebrews 13:5-16 begins. It ends with, "and do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." This first verse speaks to a problem that has plagued mankind from time immemorial, "the love of money." Wars have been fought over it, people have been enslaved over it, and lives have been destroyed over it for thousands of years. But it continues to be a lesson that many have not heeded. Rather, televangelists speak of their jets, their lavish homes and fancy cars and tell us that we can have those things too, ignoring God's clear message to keep our lives free from the love of money. It is not a message that money is evil or that we should not work and be proud of what we have accomplished in our lives, but we are not to measure our lives or our successes by the accumulation of money such that we do not recognize that it is God's gift to us. That what we have earned, God has given us by way of our talents, our abilities, our skill sets to be able to earn these monies. And it is the final message in verse 16, "... do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased," that should be our life directive. We are to give because this gift from God is to be gifted to others, and for that God will be well pleased.

**Prayer:** Lord, during this Lenten Season and throughout the year, help us to remember the message of Hebrews, 13:5-16: there are places to place our love, the love of you, our God, the love of our family, the love of our friends, but not the love of money. Lord, help us to remember that money and all that we have is a gift from you. You have given us the talent, the ability to earn what we have earned, but you have also tasked us not to forget to do good and to share with others. For that Lord, we pray you will be well pleased.

## March 17

## John Esaias, SPRC

## Matthew 9:35-38

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming 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."*

**Devotion:** How true we find the scriptures to be throughout time! Great is the harvest, but the workers are few. That's what Jesus tells us. The pandemic has been an extremely challenging time for churches. Finding workers to complete all of the necessary tasks to further the Kingdom is difficult; however, many faithful members of MLUMC have stepped up and our congregation remains strong. Not only did we survive the pandemic in contrast to some churches that never re-opened, but we have expanded some ministries such as the English as a Second Language ministry and served larger crowds than ever at our community outreach meals and fellowship. As well, we have been able to revive our youth choir.

During this Lenten season, let us not be discouraged by the forces that are challenging our church, but rather let us rejoice that we do have workers willing to increase the harvest and grow God's Kingdom.

**Prayer:** Dear God, We thank you every day for the strength that is offered to your willing workers. May they feel your presence in all that they do to bring in the harvest that is the harvest of expanding your Kingdom on earth. Amen.

## March 18

Jan Rutter

II Corinthians 5:17-6:2

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 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 people'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. As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*

**Devotion:** In II Corinthians Paul teaches that being "in Christ" results in a person becoming "a new creation." God has provided salvation and reconciliation for us through the sacrifice of his Son. We have a new responsibility to present to others that same author of reconciliation with God. We are now representatives of God-ambassadors. There will be times when we have to be reminded that our behavior should honor God. How we respond to frustrating situations or to people who have wronged us reflects positively or negatively on our own relationship with Him.

Our task is to show others, by the way that we live, that Jesus has changed our lives and to let them know that the same reconciliation is available to them.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the new spiritual life you offer to everyone who comes to you. Let your Holy Spirit transform us from within so that we can become the new creation you promised.

## March 19

Paulette Colonna

Ephesians. 2:4-10

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

**Devotion:** In this passage we are reminded that the saving mercy and the graciousness of God is the foundation on which the Christian Community is built. Because of God's great love for us, even when we have sinned and were dead in trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). This is so that in ages to come, He might show the riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace that we have been saved through faith and not through anything that we have done. It is the gift from God and not through our works, lest any of us should boast. We should remember that we are God's workmanship created in Jesus Christ for good works.

**Prayer:** Dear God, we come before you forever grateful for your grace and divine wisdom. For it is by your grace that we have been saved through faith: not through the works we have done. It is the gift of God and we are forever grateful for God's kindness and His great love towards us.

In Jesus Christ, Amen

## March 20

Holly Schultz, Food Pantry

I Peter 2:1-10

*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. The Living Stone and a Chosen People As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans 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. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and, "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out 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.*

**Devotion:** In these ten verses of I Peter, several key points resonate with me. First, we are reminded of our all-too-human tendencies to sin. We are called to purposefully rid ourselves of all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. Like hungry, innocent newborns, we are expected to crave the pure spiritual milk that is God's word.

Second, the poetic imagery of believers deriving our lives through Jesus Christ, the original Living Stone, comforts me. It reminds me of the notion that we have a firm foundation when we keep Christ as the center of our lives. Some commentaries suggest that Peter was contrasting the belief held in the Old Testament that people came to God through a priest; whereas in the New Testament, modern believers come directly to God through his son Jesus Christ. That's always been my belief.

Every year in the Lenten season, Christians have the opportunity to reassess our faith...to repent, reset, and be thankful.

I don't know about you, but I personally need to be reminded to cleanse my thoughts when anger or frustration cause me to think and speak unkindly of others.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Word. Thank you for surrounding me with a family of fellow believers at MLUMC. You know what's on my heart. You love me despite my many shortcomings. During this time of Lent, help prepare my heart to continually learn and grow as a mature Christian with the faith and enthusiasm of a new believer. Amen.

**March 21**

**Marci Picardi**, Confirmation Teacher

**II Timothy 4:1-5**

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

**Devotion:** I've been blessed to have had "preachers" in my life:

Grandma loved, cared for, taught, prayed, protected, and disciplined. She shared stories. She shared her faith. Her life preached to all of us.

Mom was a strong woman. She loved me and taught me how to live in the midst of turbulence. Mom believed strongly that faith, church, prayer, service, compassion, justice, devotional time—all these things—would work to the better good. She lived these things. Her life preached to all of us.

I have big Preacher Shoes to fill.

Preach can be an intimidating word. But I've learned that living a faith-filled life filled with love for others is PREACHING! It can be harder to live a life that teaches others than one that wants to preach but not live the WORD. Am I living a life of patience? Am I encouraging others? Does my life show a blueprint for others for them to learn how to walk in the way of LOVE?

God guides us to live in LOVE. To Preach by a life of LOVE.

Think of the "preachers" in your life.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, Your life was the ultimate blueprint on how to preach the Word. Give us strength and guidance to live our lives as models of your love. Thank you, Lord, for the preachers in our lives.

Amen

*But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. "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 anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

**Devotion:** Jesus challenges us in the Sermon on the Mount to "Love your enemies and pray for those who curse you." (Matthew 5:44)

Writing this in November of 2023, every news broadcast leads with the decades-long struggle in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians. Every escalation of this endless conflict in the past half century brings new horrors as weaponry becomes bigger and 'better' at wrecking vengeance. Each political entity has insurmountable issues with the other so for the past 75 years since the establishment of the Jewish homeland was carved out of the land known as Palestine there has been no peace, no love of one's enemies or neighbors.

Watching the news has become very difficult as I am unable to view or even hear about what horrors these neighbors are inflicting upon one another. And I just feel helpless... In Romans, Paul speaks to me.

He admonishes the Christians in Rome, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21) We are quick to find 'the evil' in conflict and every other thing that upsets us. But where and how do we find 'the good' that allows us to love those we would hate? Martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero said, "If there were love of neighbor there would be no terrorism, no repression, no selfishness, none of such cruel inequalities in society, no abductions, no crimes." The archbishop was assassinated for his beliefs in 1980 and the world is still filled with hate. What can I possibly do to make a difference?

When the children were small, we watched Mister Rogers Neighborhood every day. Fred said: "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle." To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now. By calling love an active noun, Fred acknowledges our struggle with this commandment. We must work and work and work at the huge task of loving our neighbor: the obnoxious, profane one whose dog barks incessantly, that family member who makes holidays a nightmare, the enemy who would take away our liberties, our loved ones, our lives. I recall that Fred talked a lot about how we needed first to love ourselves, then we could more easily love our neighbors.

I find comfort and encouragement in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12 and recommend it to you. Paul admonishes us to be better persons, to understand that we have all been given gifts of the Spirit that can help us on our journey. He says, "Be joyful in hope, persevere in hardship; keep praying regularly; share with any of God's people who are in need, look for opportunities to be hospitable." (Jerusalem Bible) Ah ha...pray without ceasing might be a good start. We are called to respect the "enemy" (neighbor, family member, etc) as a fellow traveler on this planet, to treat the "enemy" with enough compassion that we do not place the "enemy" in harm's way intentionally, that we offer support when the "enemy" is in need.

**Prayer:** For our prayer, let us pray that these words of Paul's will guide us to know how to begin to love our neighbor.

"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Ephesians 3:12-14



*When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "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." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.*

**Devotion:** As children in Sunday School, some of the earliest stories of Jesus that we learned about were the miracles that he performed. These verses from the ninth chapter of St. Mark tell of one of those miracles -- the casting out of a demon from a young boy. This miracle reveals the power of God's love for each of us from our childhood and through our senior years and beyond.

No matter what may happen to us in this life on any given day, we have the assurance that Christ will be as close to us as a prayer. No matter who we are, where we are or what we have done, Christ will always be there for us and with us. Yes, even in the midst of a rummage sale.

Christ loved and loves us and died an unselfish and gruesome death on the cross for us that we might receive the free gift of eternal life and salvation.

Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been given a new song to sing: "I serve a risen Savior. He lives within my heart."

**Prayer:** Merciful God of compassion, restore within us the sense of your presence and the joy of fellowship with you and our fellow believers as we continue along our Lenten journey. Amen.

*They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 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."*

**Devotion:** My favorite coat is made of mud cloth and has a vibrant kente cloth lining. It is my favorite because it is stylish and versatile. I can wear it three seasons of the year with both causal and dressy attire. While I have other coats which I often choose to wear instead of my favorite coat, if I lost or damaged my favorite coat I would be more than a little upset.

In the first century few people had choices about which coat to wear. Most had only one coat or cloak which was versatile because it also functioned as their bedding when traveling. Many of Jesus' disciples would have slept on their cloaks at night as they traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Not having a cloak meant exposing themselves to more than mere discomfort, but to illness and potential harm from sleeping directly on the ground as they traveled back home from the festival. Yet, the disciples enthusiastically gave their cloaks in service of Jesus.

Luke recorded that some disciples put their cloaks on the colt Jesus rode. Others threw their cloaks on the ground as the colt approached them. This sacrificial act of the disciples signified to all who were watching that Jesus was their Lord. He alone was worthy of their allegiance and praise.

On this Palm Sunday, I ask myself what I am willing to enthusiastically sacrifice in order to demonstrate to the world the position Jesus has in my life? Is my discipleship true discipleship or simply cultural Christianity where I do what I do to fit in?

To what discomfort or potential harm am I willing to expose myself in order to show the world who Jesus is? What church and political leaders am I willing to annoy or even anger through my acts of discipleship? How far am I willing to follow Jesus?

**Prayer:** Thank you God for all of the ways you have demonstrated your love for us. On this Palm Sunday we especially thank you for the gift of Jesus who is the One you promised - our Savior and Redeemer. On this day help us to be enthusiastic disciples who are not afraid to show the world who You are to us. Help us to be enthusiastic disciples whose sacrifices point others to Jesus. Help us to enthusiastically demonstrate Your love and mercy. Help us to enthusiastically confront principalities and powers in order to demand justice and mercy so that all might experience your peace. Help us to act in ways that shout Your praises and bring You glory. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

**March 25**

**Mitchell Stecker**, *Director of Music & Liturgy*

**Isaiah 55: 1-2; 6-11**

*“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

**Devotion:** As Pittsburghers, we live in a very wet environment. Rivers, streams, creeks, and verdant hillsides surround us on every side; we are never more than a shifting of the wind away from a passing rainstorm. The land of the Bible, of course, is a very different sort of place. Even now, the Holy Land is, by and large, an arid place—imagine how much more true this was in the time of the Old Testament, before modern irrigation and desalination technology made water readily accessible, at least in developed places.

Thirst, then, was a feeling much nearer at hand for the Hebrew people in antiquity, for whom water was not a matter of convenience, but rather of life and death, and was not a substance that they would dare take for granted. Thirst nearly snuffs out the light of the Israelites in the desert (Ex.17). Consider the longing desire for this life-giving substance as expressed by the Psalmist: he thirsts for God as though he were a dry-mouthed deer longing for some trickle of water (Ps.42); his soul, without God, is parched as though in a “weary land where there is no water” (Ps.63); he praises God as the one who can—and does—provide water and food for every living thing upon the earth (Ps.145).

Water, then, is a powerful and fundamental symbol of God’s provision and care for the Hebrew people—a simple, yet essential substance that only God has the power to give. The Prophet Isaiah recognizes that even our food is dependent upon the water that God sends forth from the heavens. “Ho! Ye who thirst, come drink of this living water”, the Prophet says, presaging the coming Christ who meets a sinner at a well and offers himself to her—and to us all—as Living Water, the only water that can truly satisfy our deepest and most vital cravings.

**Prayer:** Lord God, we are often a wayward people, seeking to slake our thirst and feed our hunger with those things that do not refresh or nourish us: we strive for material wealth, we pursue after power, we yearn to gain the empty praise of our fellow humans—none of which satisfy the void within us that you alone have the power to quench. But you, O Lord, are good and faithful. You have promised that any who come to you may drink of a living water, which has the power to cause us never to thirst for any lesser drink ever again. As we, your pilgrim people, remember our long wanderings in the desert during this Lenten season, meet us once more at the wellspring, and help us to accept your invitation to refresh our souls with the water of life that you continually offer to us through your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Wash us, refresh us, renew us with this spiritual water; make us to be your servants, that we in turn may offer this same rejuvenating water to a parched world that longs for your ocean-depths of justice, peace, and love.

Amen.

**March 26**

**Stacy Rosleck, Lector**

**Matthew 25: 1-13**

*“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ “ ‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

**Devotion:** As a project manager, I must closely monitor the various tasks necessary to execute and complete a project. I must also anticipate the unexpected: A critical team member is out sick. A client changes criteria at the last minute. A technical glitch costs a day’s worth of work.

It’s about constantly being prepared and on the lookout for anything that could jeopardize the quality or delivery of the final product. If something is needed for an event or time-sensitive announcement for instance, there is no wiggle room. I have to always be “awake,” so to speak, and have a plan B.

The same was true, but with greater stakes, of the bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom. They became drowsy due to the long wait, and when they awoke, those bridesmaids who brought extra oil in case of a delay could keep their lamps burning. They were prepared and anticipated possible delays. Meanwhile, those who had not prepared sufficiently found themselves out of oil and their lamps going dark. When these maids went to buy oil, the groom arrived and the processional and banquet began without those bridesmaids. They were denied entry when they returned.

While my job is important, it is also temporary. This life is temporary. We don’t know the day or hour of our physical death. Therefore, we must always be vigilant about doing the Lord’s work and glorifying God in everything we do. It is a reminder I know I need, as it’s easy to assume there will always be time to buy oil.

**Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, Help us to be vigilant and awake, and to always be ready for the Lord’s coming. Let us be constant disciples with our eyes open and our souls alert. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**March 27**

**Donna Chesleigh, Acolyte Coordinator**

**John 3:16-21**

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

**Devotion:** Who doesn't know John 3:16? It can be seen at football games, rallies and protests. This may be one of the most humbling, and yet, thought provoking scriptures in the Bible. It is easy to look at this scripture and say, "I believe in Jesus. I am saved". But is that really all there is to it? Taken out of context it might seem so but verses 17 and 18 tell us that God did not send his Son to condemn the world but to save it and that whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is already condemned. So then what does it mean to believe? It is more than believing Jesus existed. It is believing that his teachings are truth and following them is the way to our salvation. Verses 19 and 20 say that Light (Jesus) has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light. So our way to salvation is to turn away from our evil deeds and follow the teachings of Jesus. Verse 21 concludes by telling us whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. It can be so easy to be swayed by the world. Many times the evil is very subtle. Are we talking about a brother or sister instead of helping them? Do we see the mistakes others make while justifying our own faults? May we all pray that our acts and deeds reflect Jesus light and are acceptable in the sight of God.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please guide us to understand your word and apply it in our lives. Help us to follow the Light so that we may be a bright reflection of you in the world. In Jesus’ name. Amen

*It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "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!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

*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. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*

*Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

### **Devotion: Wash Up and Get to Work**

The story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is rich with meaning. The account has Jesus doing the work of women and servants, greeting guests to the Last Supper by washing the dust of the journey from their feet. Jesus saw that it had not been done so he rose to minister to his guests. It embarrassed his disciples because they took a person's status seriously and because Jesus upset the rules. Jesus in words and deeds was giving his final lessons about life in the emerging Kingdom of God.

There is something very satisfying about washing. When I was a young boy on my Grandfather's farm, where I now live in retirement, I used to get filthy. There were creeks to stomp around in, dirty barns and sheds to play hide and seek in, and fields to work in that were dusty and sandy. We had a well and didn't use a shower or tub often. Mostly we washed in the sink. A washcloth and soap restored me, little Odie, when I was so sweaty that the kid on the neighboring farm sometimes called me 'Greasy'. A couple of times a week some tea kettles of hot water were added to lukewarm water in the claw foot tub in the back bathroom and I could lay there until all the grit was gone. Jesus provided the needed water and attention to revive the weary travelers. He was preparing them and reminding them that in word and deed his gospel was about sacrificial love. Meeting the physical and spiritual needs of others is still our mission. Water is a sign of our task. Providing water for the refugee, offering the water of baptism for the repentant sinner, wiping the water of tears from those who are suffering, protecting the water of our polluted earth, all embodied by Jesus' act of foot washing. May we rise to the occasion this Lenten season. I can recall my Grandfather Oden's voice calling me from the cot where I slept on the farm to say, "Wash up and let's get to work." Jesus has scrubbed our feet and baptized our heads and we are now clean from head to toe and ready for service.

**Prayer:** God of forgiveness and grace, we come before you this Holy Week mindful of our imperfections. Wash away our sins and assist us in rising to serve all those we see who are in need. We thank you for the guidance you have given through your son, Jesus Christ, and we ask that the Spirit equip us for the challenges ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "You have said so," Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

**Devotion:** When I was a young child, I remember sitting with my Grandmother and she would ask "Do you love me?" and I would answer emphatically, "Yes!" She then would ask, "How much do you love me?" and I would stretch my arms out wide and reply, "This much!"

It was then my turn to ask my Grandmother those same questions. "Grandma, do you love me? How much?" and she would stretch her arms out wide and respond, "This much!" I remember thinking that grandmothers must be able to love so much more because their arms could stretch so very much further than could mine.

Perhaps because I am now a Grandfather myself I understand the importance and beauty in showing and sharing love with my grandchildren. Genuine and real love is an amazing blessing. Webster's dictionary defines REAL as "actually existing as a state or quality of things...having a foundation in fact; actually occurring or happening."

I believe that one of the reasons we have so many problems in our world, the reason some persons seem to be without hope and the reason our lives seem to have little or no direction, is that God's REAL LOVE is not a part of our lives. Yet the passion story demonstrates to the world, in no uncertain terms, the very real love of God made known to us in a way that not only touches us but changes us.

Good Friday reminds us that we live in a broken and sinful world. Selfish and uncaring humans reject the very one who was willing to enter our world and bring about change. But our God, being a God of love was still willing to stretch out his own arms and tell the world "I love you this much!" ...And be nailed to a tree and die that we might live.

In the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit* is found an incredibly important conversation between the stuffed bunny who wishes to become real and another toy in the nursery.

*What is real asked the Rabbit one day?*

*Real isn't how you are made, said the skin horse.*

*It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.'*

*Does it hurt? Asked the rabbit.*

*Sometimes, said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful, "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."*

*"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?." He asked "or bit by bit?"*

*"It doesn't happen all at once", said the skin horse.*

*"You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.*

*"Once you are Real, you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."*

Good Friday is a reminder that our God became real in the person of Jesus, and it did hurt, but it was worth it for him and for us! And once God and God's love became real, it cannot become unreal again....God's love lasts for always.

My prayer for you this day is that you will know the REAL LOVE OF GOD. A love that came into the world to be with us, a love that went to a cross to save us, and a love that was real in an empty tomb two thousand years ago and a love that remains real to us this very day.

**Prayer:** Loving God, on this day of many emotions keep us mindful of the lengths you were and are willing to go to show us your love. In response to this amazing gift, may we do all that we can to show the world how much we love. Give us hearts to care and arms that reach out in concern and love to others. Amen.

**March 30**

**Rev. Dr. Kimberly Greway, Former Pastor MLUMC**

**John 19: 30-42**

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."*

*Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.*

*At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

**Devotion:** "It is finished," Jesus says in our reading just before he breathes his last breath. In Greek, the whole sentence is a single word, tetelestai which assumes that something has come before. There is an "it" that has been finished.

We often assume that Jesus was defeated, exhausted, and overcome in this moment. However, many view Jesus' Tetelestai as a triumphant cry at the end of a nearly-overwhelming God-given mission. The task is completed; the mission is fulfilled; the work is done.

In the exact moment that the Romans thought that they had overcome this pesky troublemaker, the Son of God completed his work of extravagant love.

We who read this devotional today find ourselves located liturgically on Easter Vigil. Lent is nearly finished; our time of penitence, repentance, and introspection will fall away and celebration will break forth. Our forty days in the desert are nearly finished and the hope of the resurrection is upon us. Thanks be to God that it is nearly finished!

**Prayer:** Almighty God,

whose plan of salvation shines forth through the difficulties and celebrations of life, grant us comfort in knowing that your way will overcome whatever assails humanity; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

# EASTER SUNDAY

Pastor Tom Strandburg

I Corinthians 1:26-31

*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*

*It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*

*Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."*

**Devotion:** "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters," is the plea that begins this passage in our congregational devotional for this Easter Sunday. Let us all take a moment sometime this week to do just that. God has indeed called each one of us to a life of Christian service in a way that is very particular to our own lives. Often, this call might appear as "foolish" to others who cannot understand it. I began to sense the call of God upon my life when I was just a teenager. By the time of my senior year in high school, my goal of entering the pastoral ministry was quite well-known in my church and community. I felt supported by many as I followed God's call, but there were some who simply could not understand. I remember a particular incident when my mother returned home from a shopping trip sometime during my senior year in high school. She told me that she had had a conversation with a former school teacher of ours, who felt that she was enabling me to "waste my life" in pursuing the path into ordained ministry. Mom assured me that she did not agree with our teacher's words, and that she supported me always. The thirtieth anniversary of my mother's untimely death is nine days from this Easter Sunday. I thank the Lord for my mother's ability to discern the wisdom of God in the midst of humanity's foolishness, and I continue to serve others in her memory!

**Prayer:** O God, your apostle Paul has informed us that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18) Fill us with the power of your resurrection on this Easter Sunday. Enable us always to discern your wisdom in our world today, and to follow it as we follow you in Christ's Name. Amen.