

A 47-Day Journey Toward the Cross

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Lenten Devotional - 2026

Huguenot Road Baptist Church

Foreword

I hope you will receive a blessing from these devotionals. Some of the material that you find will hopefully challenge you to rethink and reexamine your faith and discipleship. It is my hope that you will utilize this guide to make this season of Lent a preparation for the coming of the cross and the resurrection events.

My advice on how to best use this guide is to set aside a consistent time every day. Read the noted passage first. Ask yourself what does this mean to me? What new message can I glean from this Scripture? Then read the devotional. My prayers are not necessarily meant to be your prayers. They can help lead your time with God in prayer, but you will be best served to allow your own prayers to come from the devotional experience.

I first compiled and published this Lenten Devotional Guide in the spring of 1996. It was a part of my Doctoral project. I hope your use of this devotional study will help you develop a year-round experience in giving time to our Lord every day.

This devotional guide is dedicated to my parents, J.C. and Sue Hatfield. When I was growing up, I was always awakened by the sounds of their devotional readings at the breakfast table. Thank you for your example.

Day 1 – February 18th

“What in the World is Lent?”

What in the world is Lent? Most Baptists ask such a question. Lent is that period of time that predates Baptist history and tradition. Therefore, we Baptists know little about it.

“Isn’t Lent what those Catholics do?” That was the response I once received from a person on the subject. But Lent actually predates the Roman Catholic Church as we know it today.

So, what in the world is Lent? Lent is not about skipping meals, giving up chocolate, or abstaining from meat on Fridays. Lent is about repentance and dedication. Lent is about commitment and preparation. Lent is about self-examination and self-denying. Lent is a road to a cross.

I always liked Fredrick Buechner’s rough look at Lent in his book *Whistling in the Dark*:

“In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year’s income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year’s days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it means to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves. If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn’t, which side would get your money and why? When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember? Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for? To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.” [Fredrick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper/Collins Publishers, 1988), p. 74-75.]

Join me on the journey this Lent. For the next forty-six days, we are on the way of the cross. But if we are willing to risk the journey, there just may be something like Easter at the end.

Prayer:

It begins Lord. We have received the Ashes and the time to follow your way has come. Lead us on the journey that will transform our lives Father. The journey on the way of the cross. Amen.

Day 2 – February 19th

“Repent”

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance.” (Mark 1:4)

The American church lives in an ethically debilitating climate. Where did we go wrong? Was it in following the urbane self-centeredness of Norman Vincent Peale and its therapeutic successors? Was it in adopting the liberal, civic-club mentality of the heir to the social gospel? Now we waver between the Madison Avenue values of evangelical TV triumphalism and a “live-and-let-live” pluralism that urges open-mindedness as the supreme virtue. We tell ourselves that whatever the gospel means, it cannot mean death. Love, divine or human, could never be so costly. After all, our culture is at least vestige Christian; isn’t that enough?

John the Baptist’s words strike abrasively against the easy certainties of the religious establishment. He will let us take no comfort in our rites, traditions or ancestry. Everybody must be made over. Everybody, but especially the religiously secure and morally sophisticated, must descend into the water.

Jesus’ baptism by John not only inaugurated his mission but also revealed its shockingly unexpected nature. On two occasions, Jesus uses the word “baptism” to refer to his own impending *death*. (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ “baptism” begun in the Jordan and completed on Golgotha, is repentance, self-denial. John presents his baptism as a washing from sin, a turning from self to God; Jesus seeks an even more radical solution. John only asks us to be clean, but Jesus calls us to die.

That day at the Jordan, knee deep in cold water, the Anointed One began his journey down the *via crucis*. His baptism intimated where his life would finally end; our baptism does the same. “You must consider yourselves *dead*,” Paul says (Rom. 6:11). In baptism the “old Adam” is drowned. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

The chief biblical analogy for baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. Discipleship is more than turning over a new leaf. It is more fitful and disorderly than gradual moral formation. Nothing less than daily, often painful death will do.

We must submit to change if we would be formed into this cruciform of faith. We may come singing “Just As I Am” but we must not leave the same. This world is too much in pain to allow us to go unchanged. The status quo is alluring though. It is alluring in all we do. The only way to break its hold is to become transferred into a new dominion, to be cut loose from old certainties, to be thrust under the flood and then pulled forth fresh and newborn. Baptism takes us there. As we are thrust backwards into some dark river, onlookers may remark, “That could kill a person.” To which John might say, “Good, you’re finally catching on.”

I live next door to a rabbi; though he does not profess our faith, he understands it better than I do. We were talking about politics one day. I was patiently trying to explain the intricacies of Niebuhr's Christian realism. The rabbi was wondering how we justified participation in either a "just war" or a violent revolution in light of some of Jesus' teachings. I explained what I understood of liberation theology, but it did not convince him. "Love and justice are not the same," I said. 'The teachings of Jesus, as noble as they may be, must be interpreted with some political sophistication. We need to be practical about social concerns.'

'I agree,' said my friend, with a sly grin. 'But then, unlike you, I don't have a *cross* on the top of my building.'" [William Willimon, "Repent" The Christian Century 102 (March 6, 1985), p.238. There are some articles which I will quote from in certain devotionals. There are some articles which are self-contained in their message. I use them as a whole on occasion. This is such an occasion. The closing comments are my own. The majority is Willimon's text.]

Does it make any difference to you what's on top of the building? Should it? May we find the answer for these next few weeks on our journey to the cross.

Prayer:

How often O Lord do we portray apathy towards the message we represent? How often do we choose to ignore that which is painful, uncomfortable or challenging to our living? May we commit to you Lord that as the days unfold on our journey, we will grasp more of the responsibilities of following you, and less of the privileges. Amen.

Day 3 – February 20th

"Follow Me" Matthew 4:18-22

"Follow me,' Jesus said, and the fishermen left behind their work and their homes and their families to take a chance on this carpenter Messiah. For some of us, becoming a follower of Christ meant breaking ties with family members. But for many of us it simply made things easier. For some, following this Christ has meant changing careers in mid-stream, or leaving behind all that is familiar to go to a new place. For others, church is one more place to network and make contacts." [Peggy Haymes, "Matthew 4:18-22" Formations: Reflections Adult Devotional Guide 2 no.3 (May-August 1994), p.43.]

How easy was finding Christ for you? How simple was it to just drop the nets and walk away with him? For most of us, we were raised in the church. Getting up early on Sunday morning was something we were brought up with. And now that we are on our own, we believe that somehow a few hours of lost sleep are what discipleship is all about. It is the "cross" we bear for being Christians. But is that all there really is?

Michael Card has an interesting song entitled "The Things We Leave Behind." In his devotional book entitled *Immanuel*, Card envisions a portrait in his song that portrays the road of Christ littered with all the items left behind by those willing to take up the call. "With each object the travelers left behind, and leave behind, a small piece of themselves, because a possession isn't a little

something you own, as much as something that owns a little bit of you." [Michael Card, Immanuel: Reflections on the Life of Christ, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990) p. 121.]

What are the things that own you? Your past? Maybe it's something that seems to always take place over God or His worship? Maybe it's something that is so ingrained as "gospel" that is really nothing more than tradition? The places where we hide such things, hold on to them with the grip of a dead man; maybe those are the places we need to be looking this Lenten journey. The place the Lord waits to reveal to us the items we need to leave behind.

Prayer:

The objects are so heavy Father and yet we refuse to let them go. May your Holy Spirit convict us so that we cannot continue our grasp on them. Then, maybe Lord, we can put you and the kingdom first. Then you will lead everything else to fall into its rightful place. Amen.

Day 4 – February 21st

"Sometimes, Attitude is the Problem"

Jonah 4

We all know the story of Jonah. We are all familiar with how he was called to take the word of repentance to Ninevah. Jonah didn't like the idea and so he got on a ship in order to take the proverbial "slow boat to China." You no doubt recall the whale eating him and so on.

What most forget in the story of Jonah is the attitude this prophet of God had. He literally "pitched a fit" when the city repented and God spared them. The story of Jonah really leaves one wondering who it was God was calling to repentance: Jonah or Ninevah?

Attitudes do matter, don't they? Attitude can make you sorry that you ever asked someone to do something for you in the first place. I remember one episode when growing up on the farm. Dad asked me to help with some work around the place. To be perfectly honest, I didn't want to do it, but it was Dad who asked me. (Most of you know that a Father's request is really his demand.) Despite the fact that I would rather have watched the game on TV, I resolved to do the chore. The problem was that I wanted to accomplish this task at my time schedule. All of this means that I had yet to physically move off the couch and outside as of yet. Finally, with patience exhausted, Dad looked at me with eyes that showed the disappointment fathers have with their sons on occasion. Bellowing out, "Just forget it!" he began to storm outside.

"NO!" I told him and reluctantly got up, stomped out of the house, and headed towards the barn. Soon I heard the footsteps and my father's booming voice, "forget it, if you don't want to do it and your heart isn't into it, just forget it." There I stood, watching him walk up on the hill toward the barn, alone and actually looking at my father (as only a teenager can do), and thinking, "well what's his problem?"

I wonder how many times God goes stomping by me with that same frustration. The frustration that comes from being a parent. How often does God get disgusted with the way I simply put the things He deems important off as nothing worthwhile?

How many times has attitude kept you from serving the Lord? How often have you tried to reverse roles, even not meaning to, and made your will God's? It's hard because we are all teenagers at times. Teenagers in the kingdom. Attitude does matter.

Prayer:

How long O Lord will you put up with our attitudes? With our arrogance? Our pride? Our sloth? How many times have we been so quick to be a prophet when we were the ones you were really calling to repentance? Give us your attitude Lord. The attitude found in Christ. In whose name, and attitude we pray. Amen.

Day 5 – February 22nd

"Standing at the Crossroads"

Luke 4:1-12

What a temptation. To be offered food when you're hungry, to be offered the political might of the world, to reach the pedestal of public attention in the most spectacular way; all of these temptations would be too great for me. They would probably be too great for most of us who are honest with ourselves.

Jesus stood at the crossroads of decision. He was about to embark on the journey that his Father had brought him into the world for. Now, he faced the toughest choices one could imagine. Many people, some Christians, shake off the idea of these temptations. They say, "Jesus wasn't really tempted. He never considered these options. So how does he really know about temptation like we do."

But the truth is if we allow the gospels to speak, we might see that these were great temptations. And the humanity of Jesus would allow him to choose these options. The fidelity of Jesus allowed him to say no. So what are these great temptations?

The first temptation was to make bread so he could eat. That is a simple enough request. It is practical as well. Who would not be hungry after a forty day fast? But to accept his hunger as more important than his quest, Jesus would be succumbing to a path that was a little less than what his Father had called him to follow.

The second temptation was to worship Satan for just a moment. And in exchange, he would have all the political power he needed to set up the kingdom of God. It makes sense. "Give up just a moment of your time Jesus, your heart doesn't even have to be in it."

Maybe we can learn a valuable lesson about the difference between the way of the world and the way of the kingdom. No matter how good our intentions, we cannot surrender to employing the world's ways in order to achieve our goals.

The third and final temptation was to perform the spectacular. "Sell out your message for some show Jesus." But Jesus didn't buy this approach. Integrity in what we do, especially what we do in the name of Christ, is crucial. I really liked the adaptation of these temptations when they are

presented in *The Cotton Patch Gospels*. By the time of the third temptation, Jesus looks at Satan and says, "I know you, don't I. It's really just the face that changes." How true. Just like Jesus, we must not be fooled because the face has changed into something that makes sense, someone who appears holy and righteous, or a cause that is heralded as Christian. Like Jesus, we must check out more than the label when we stand at the moment of decision.

Prayer:

Lord, remind us that all that is glittering is not your way. And all who come professing your name are not your children. Lead us to choose the path of Jesus. Forsake the temptations and travel the way of the cross. Amen.

Day 6 – February 23rd

"How's Your Vision?"

Matthew 25:35-46

I don't know about you, but I am blind as a bat without my glasses. I can see images, but when it comes to seeing anything in focus, you can forget all about it. In this passage, Jesus reminds anyone that follows him that they must be sure to see what's going on. Look around with vision and see the people in need. Find them and meet their need. Like it or not, this passage tells us that there are no excuses about "not seeing". All who wish to follow must practice vision and act out of love for others. Once you do, you may find it as simple as putting a hand out to aid someone in the name of Christ.

Have you ever heard of the story about the Fisher King? It begins when the king was a boy. He was spending the night in the forest to prove his courage so that he can become a king. While alone that night, he was visited by a sacred vision. Out of the fire he saw the Holy Grail, the symbol of God's divine grace. A voice spoke to the boy and said, "You shall be the keeper of the grail, so that it may heal the hearts of men." But the boy was blinded by greater visions of a life filled with power and glory. Then, in a state of radical amazement, he felt for a brief moment not like a boy, but invincible like God. So he reached into the flame to take the grail and it vanished. It left him with his hand in the fire and terribly wounded. As this boy grew older, his wound grew deeper. Until one day, life for him lost its reason. He had no faith in any man, not even himself. He could not love. He was sick from the experience.

One day, a fool wondered into the castle and found the king alone. Being a fool, he was simple minded and did not see a king but only a man who was alone and in pain. He asked the king, "What ails you friend?"

The king replied, "I am thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat." So the fool took a cup from beside his bed and filled it with water. He handed it to the king. As the king began to drink, he realizes that his wound was healed. He looked in his hands and there he spied the holy grail. That one thing which he sought all of his life. He looked at the fool in simple amazement and said, "How could you find that which my bravest and strongest could not?"

The fool replied, "I don't know, I only know that you were thirsty."

Are you on a quest for the holy grail? Do you find yourself more concerned with “serving Jesus” but not concerned with “serving others.” Then you are in for a terrible awakening. Jesus says that you can’t serve him without serving those others. The “holy grail” is found in simple service to the one sitting next to you. It is found in sharing and caring. It is found in the road of everyday life that we travel upon in the company of others. Anything else and we are just missing the boat.

Prayer:

How often have we not heeded your calling Lord? How long will we preach to “love Jesus” and proceed to ignore our neighbors. Help us to see that in all those around, all those we come into contact with, there is your presence. Remind us that when we have done it unto the least of these, we have really done it unto you our Lord. Amen.

Day 7 – February 24th

“Where Do I Fit In?”

John 17:1-19

What is the proper relationship of the church to the world? Many are taught an adversarial relationship to the world - the secular world is full of sin and we must protect ourselves from it. We must build Christian schools so our children won’t grow up with the negative influences of the public schools. We must surround ourselves with Christian friends and isolate ourselves from those who are sinful and immoral. We must free ourselves of the influence of books, TV shows, and movies that contain harmful, worldly messages. I feel this way on many occasions. If we could somehow cloister ourselves, become insulated from such things, we may all turn out all right. Fewer of our children would be hurt, killed or led astray. We would have less ulcers or anxiety from dealing with individuals who on a daily basis display hedonism that we once reserved for the “uncivilized world.” Yet, if we do so, how many Mother Teresa’s or Bill Wallace’s would there be next century? How would our children know to care for others in this world if we showed them it was better to “fort up” than integrate?

In John 17 we read Jesus’ prayer for his disciples right before his crucifixion. He commissions them to go out into the world, just as he had been sent into the world. He does not pray that God would take them out of the world; rather, he prays that God would protect them as they go into the world.

It seems that Jesus gives two clear callings to the Christian: the call to be holy and the call to be on mission. Somehow we must learn both. We must be in the world, but not of it. We can’t be so insensitive as to ignore the poverty, crime, drugs, materialism, sexual promiscuity, disease, and other problems in our world today. While they may not be our immediate problem, they are most assuredly our concern through Christ. Like it or not, those people share with us in God’s creation. Jesus certainly did not ignore the leper, the woman caught in the act of adultery, or the greedy Zaccheus. Even though he was without sin, he did not isolate himself from the sin of his world or the victims of sin. [Deena Williams Newman, Formations Reflections Adult Devotional Guide 2 no.3 (May-August 1994), 18.]

If you want to be “Christ like”, then we have to learn to be “Christ acting.”

Prayer:

Sometimes Lord it is easiest to retreat. But your pathway has never been the easiest. It is the narrow way. Convict and challenge us to see possibility in our world. Possibility that only you can create. Hope that only you can sustain and bring to others through our witness. Amen.

Day 8 – February 25th

“When the One God Calls is You?”

Isaiah 40:6-11

“Yes, God - I hear your voice again, telling me to speak, to cry out! (Yikes!) But, God, haven’t we been through this before? Well, I know we never really settled it . . . But God - I’m no prophet. I’m not loud and flashy. God, you know I’m shy. You know I’m uncomfortable with this whole witnessing thing. You know I’m better at writing stuff down than speaking . . . But you’re saying they need to see some expression that’s up close and personal - tangible and concrete . . . like the prophets and Jesus. The prophets and Jesus! Don’t compare me to those guys! After all they were . . . guys, and I’m . . . not.

God, are you *sure*? Are you positive it’s *me* you want? You are, huh? I was afraid of that . . . God, the bottom line is that I’m *scared*. This is way too risky. If I get real close to them, won’t they see all my imperfections? God, that could be a really bad reflection on you, and I wouldn’t want to do anything to . . . You’re not worried about it? Yeah, I know you’ll be with me and all, but . . . *what* shall I cry? What can I say? I don’t have anything to say that hasn’t been said before. So, you want me to say it again, huh? What was it - “Here is your God” - you mean, just show them *you*? But, God, sometimes I think I barely know you myself . . . and I get so confused about what you’re really like . . . and so much of the time, and the things I think are, well . . . unorthodox to many who are set in their ways. You mean *that’s* the stuff you want me to share? My experience of you? Just like the prophets did? Just like the prophets did. [Cindy Ananda Winter, Formations Reflections Adult Devotional Guide 2 no.3 (May - August 1994), 77.]

When we put our reasons why we don’t against the calling of Christ to do, we find those excuses much more weightless. What are your excuses? When we stack them up against the calling of our God how do they really stack up?

Prayer:

How quick we are with our excuses and our stuttering when you come calling Lord. But you are a patient God. You wait until we are overcome by the true silence of our arguments and then you call us to come and cry out in your name. As you call us down the road to Calvary, may we discover that your calling is greater than our inabilities or fears. May we find out that the God who calls us is the same one who will equip, lead and go with us down the road ahead. Help us to put one foot in front of the other beginning today Lord. Amen.

Day 9 – February 26th

"Narrow is the Way"

Matthew 7:13-15

Most people who know me, know how much I love movies. In particular, how much I love to find symbolism in the cinema. *The Poseidon Adventure* was a movie from the early 70's that started off Irwin Allen's big run of "disaster movies." On the surface it is a simple movie about a group from a luxury liner that survives peril after peril when the ship turns over. But there is a lot more taking place under the story line.

From the beginning of the disaster, the ship turning over, there is a tension between the hero, a priest named Rev. Scott, and other authority figures. Scott realizes that with the ship upside down, they must climb up to get out via the bottom of the ship. Despite the authority of the ship's purser telling all to stay put, Scott takes off with nine others to find their way out. It is a difficult and dangerous journey. (In fact four do not make it.) Throughout their excursion there is continuing tension between the policeman Rogo and Scott.

At one moment in the groups' quest, the party comes across a couple of dozen passengers led by the ships' doctor. The only problem was that they were going a different way. They had decided to move towards the ship's bow. But Rev. Scott knew it had to have already settled underwater. For those in the band of survivors who doubted Rev. Scott, this was the fuel to the fire they needed.

Rogo yelled, "Why don't we go with them!? They seem to know where they're going!"

Scott replied, "That's just great! Two dozen people decide to go drown themselves and you want to follow!"

Direction by majority opinion is nothing new. So many times we decide theology, practice and direction by the vote of the majority. But the road of Christ is the little traveled way. It is also the difficult road.

For the longest time, when I read this passage, I envisioned two separate roads. But maybe Jesus didn't. It might be that the road mentioned here in Matthew is the same as the broad path. The difference is, the majority of this world are traveling the wrong direction. You, knowing the way Christ is calling, are trying to go in God's direction. The result is that you are fighting upstream against the masses who want to go downstream. Get the picture now?

Prayer:

We grow weary Lord of heading down the narrow way. We grow weary of walking down the middle of the road where the traffic in the other direction is pulling us away from you. But we are confident that you will continue to lead us. You will bring us through the mass of people going the "other way." You Lord will bring us home, even though we journey through the cross to get there. Strengthen us and renew our spirits for the journey Lord. Amen.

Day 10 – February 27th

“What Do You Do When You Find Jesus Asleep?”

Mark 4:35-41

One moment he was flying high. Everything was great. He had just finished his degree and began to look forward to his new career. This young man had just been back from a great trip with some friends after graduation and all was right with his world.

Then one evening, the young man sat down to watch a movie that had started on television. His mother decided to “turn in early” that evening leaving his father sitting nearby. The two men watched the movie together for a few minutes.

This father, who often found it difficult to talk to his son about serious matters, asked if he could talk to his son. “Oh, no,” the young man thought, “he’s going to tell me how proud he is of me or give me some sage wisdom about my new career.” All the young man wanted to do was get back to the movie.

His dad began to speak, “I have this problem. It’s a disease with a name so long I can’t really pronounce it. I’m afraid it’s fatal and there is no known earthly cure.”

“What!” the son screamed inside himself. “How can all of this happen!? I haven’t begun anything in life. No career, no spouse, kids or anything. And now here is the one man in my life whom I wanted to share these things with, telling me that he won’t be around for the important things in life. Where is God when you need him?”

That is a good question. What do we do when we find Jesus asleep? It is the question asked by the young man in the story. It is the question asked by the disciples in the boat.

Their day had started out well. They were going to take Jesus to the other side of the lake, but on the way suddenly, the winds blew up and a storm began. Before they knew it, they were in over their heads and the boat started filling up with water. Now it is bad enough that the worst fears of a seaman are coming true, but here is Jesus asleep in the boat! What is worse is that he apparently does not care. “Don’t you care if we drown?!” But he was asleep.

How often do we speak words before we think? Like Job who lashes out at God freely then hears the words from the Lord himself asking, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 42:3). Frederick Buechner wrote about the absence of God:

“It is out of the absence of God that God makes himself present, and it is not just the whirlwind that stands for his absence, not just the storm and chaos of the world that knock into a cocked hat all man’s attempts to find God in the world, but God is absent also from all Job’s words about God, and from the words of his comforters, because they are words without knowledge that obscure the issue of God by trying to define him as present in ways and places where he is not present, to define him as moral order, as the best answer man can give to the problem of his life. God is not an answer man can give, God says. God himself does not give answers. He gives himself, and into the midst of the whirlwind of his absence gives himself.” [Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p.43.]

As the disciples' boat sank, and they faced the impending doom that was to be their fate, Jesus didn't seem to care. So they shake him, and Jesus says, "Did you really think I would let it sink with me in it? What's wrong with you?"

Sometimes we are forced to travel on the journey that is our lives, with the knowledge that no matter the waves crashing around us, God is with us in the boat. Sometimes the presence of God is the greatest miracle of all. It's the miracle the disciples discovered. It is the miracle the young man in the story came to know and trust in. It is the miracle that awaits your life today.

Prayer:

Often times we cry out in panic Lord, "Is anybody there?! Does anybody care?!" But your presence is with us. Even when you do not give answers you give something so much more. You give something that costs more. You give yourself to us. You give your son. Remind us, as we continue our pilgrimage on the way to the cross that you are with us. Your presence is found in our boats. And when we look for you our Lord, we will always find you here, near us, along our way. Amen.

Day 11 – February 28th

"You Want Me to Do What!?"

Luke 6:27-38

Most of us do not like this passage in Luke. We would prefer to sweep it under our theological rugs. It is considered so far fetched that the translation of these verses into actual living by the Christian is discarded. We dispose of such notions as unreal in today's world. If the truth is known, such a thought is correct. We can not accomplish this in the real world, at least not by ourselves. "Through Christ all things are possible."

This is not a law of love for those we find in agreement with us or our causes. Far from it. If we do not treat our enemies with love then we can not know the full love of Christ. Nor can we come close to understanding the love that God shows for us. The commandment of Christ that is recorded in these verses demands of the Christian a love for the unlovely.

When I left my first pastorate, I did so in order to join a program entitled PRAXIS. A joint effort by Southern Seminary and the Home Mission Board, my assignment was to pioneer work in the Ashcamp area of Pike County, Kentucky. My partner, Tom Biddle, and I spent three years (oops, months) in the summer of 1987. Our first task was to conduct a survey of the area and meet the people. In the time I spent going door to door, I never had so much of my parentage questioned, my genealogy brought out into discussion or my character assailed as I did during the first month. One particular incident that summed up my feelings was illustrated by Tom's remarks on a hot day. After canvassing the area for many hours, Tom got into the car and said, "Mike, a lot of these people around here are going to hell. And right now I think I'm very glad." It's not easy to love the unreceptive.

Yet, we find that love and forgiveness are not options but demands upon the disciple. In an era when the individual believer is called to believe a particular creed or interpretation, when inspiration of scripture weighs more than what scripture means, how quickly the standard of love, grace and forgiveness becomes dropped from the curriculum of requirements. We will talk more about this forgiveness in the days ahead.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you have called us to forgive and love others. But we confess that we have not always practiced what you have given our lives. By the power of your Holy Spirit, lead us to act upon your calling. Challenge us to go to someone this week who finds life estranged from us. Then bring healing, forgiving words to their lives. For we can only do it in the name of the one who has shown us the way by his forgiving. Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 12 – March 1st

“Following Jesus”

Luke 23:34

“I held the newspaper before me and looked at the picture of a tall, thin, blond-bearded man. The headline said that he was a bricklayer George Richard Fisher whom police charged in the kidnapping, rape and murder of eight-year-old Jean Ka-Har Fewel of Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Fisher looked rather clean cut - far too frail, I thought, to be a bricklayer. At the time of his arrest, Fisher was free on parole after serving eight years of a 30-year sentence for three arson convictions and five breaking-and-entering convictions. Witnesses identified Fisher as the man they saw near where Jean’s body was found hanging from a tree, a few miles from Ephesus Road Elementary School where she was a student in the second grade. Bits of the child’s clothing and hair were found in Fisher’s car.

I rummaged through a stack of old papers and found the picture-taken at school no doubt-that appeared in the paper the day after Jean Ka-Har Fewel died. Only a year ago, this smiling little girl had been adopted and brought here from Hong Kong by her parents. Friends at Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church knew how much Tom Fewel and Joy Wood loved their new child. The whole church celebrated this vivacious little girl’s arrival. Everyone at Binkley Baptist pitched in to teach her English and to try to contain her vitality at children’s choir practices.

Binkley Baptist is known around here as the most liberal Baptist church in the area. The pastor, Bob Bratcher, has long been at the forefront of social causes, and one of his longtime concerns has been the North Carolina death penalty. Bratcher has preached on the death penalty on many occasions. Last fall he urged his parishioners to demonstrate with him in Raleigh when Velma Barfield was executed.

I see the picture of Fisher, staring plaintively at me from a cluster of grim-faced law officers, next to the picture of Jean. I thought of her. I thought of her parents. I thought of my own seven-year-old daughter. And I tried not to hear the muffled sounds of a terrified little girl, the awful struggle, the unthinkable ugliness. But they would not be silenced.

Julie Stroupe, associate pastor at Binkley Baptist, led the funeral for Jean. The sanctuary was full. Everyone stood and sang 'O God, Our Help in Ages Past,' and the children's song 'We are the church.' A tambourine and a flute lay on the church's communion table. 'Jean often used them to worship with the children,' Stroupe said. 'They are now silent.'

On the way out, one of Binkley's deacons turned to another and, as tears filled his eyes, said: "I thought I was clear about capital punishment. But this has really made me think about it again."

The Sunday before, Jean had sat next to her parents, squirming in the pew. Bob Bratcher had begun his sermon that day by saying: "Things can be very difficult for human beings . . . For people who try to be religious or Christian, things can be even more difficult.'

I looked again at the picture of Jean. I wondered what I would be thinking if it were a picture of my own seven-year-old. What theological positions would I be rethinking? Would I have any positions left to think about?

Then I looked again, as intently as possible, at the picture of George Richard Fisher. I tried to feel compassion for him. I tried to see him as a brother - or just as a fellow human being. But, God help me, I could not. I tried to think of the words that I, as a preacher, might say to him if he were one of my parishioners. Nothing came to me. I tried to imagine what it might be like to be a grieving parent, hung on a cross by a three-time loser like Fisher. I tried to look into his eyes and repeat the words, 'Father, forgive . . .' - but I could not.

Here, moving toward the cross during Lent with the good people of Binkley Baptist Church, I am finding that following Jesus is not easy. Not one bit easy. [William Willimon, "Following Jesus" *Christian Century* 102 (March 6, 1985), 236-237. Once again, I want you to note that this devotional is reprinted in its entirety from Willimon's article. I do not have a seven year old daughter, nor do I live in North Carolina.]

Prayer:

How does one pray Lord after such a story? How can anyone be expected to grant forgiveness in such a place as that? How can we forgive those who do so despicable an act to a little girl, a community, or your creation? It is impossible. Yet you did that day on the cross, didn't you God? Oh, Lord, how we are so sorry for the times we have forgotten that it was you incarnate, Jesus in flesh and humanity, that gave forgiveness. We still don't know how Lord, but we will try to practice it around us. Practice it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 13 – March 2nd

"What Love is This?"

1 John 3

I met him during my freshman year at Eastern Kentucky University. We were on the same dormitory floor together and Marty was a year older than I. He was also a fellow broadcasting major and a devout Christian. His father was a part time minister for an Assembly of God church in London, Kentucky. There in London, Marty's dad also operated a service station. It just so happened that a few years later, when I was working at WHIR in Danville, Kentucky, Marty was hired as the new Sales Manager and we struck up our friendship once again. Then one tragic day, Marty received a phone call from home. That morning, as his father was opening the station for business, an intruder came in and robbed the place of less than one hundred dollars. As the two thieves began to flee, one turned and shot Marty's father in the back of the head, killing him. I watched as Marty and his family struggled through this personal tragedy that time and again I have seen claim more than the victim lying on the floor. After a few months, the police caught the two young men. One was around nineteen and the other about twenty-four. They were found guilty of this horrible crime.

In Kentucky, there is a sentencing trial that follows the criminal. In the sentencing trial, relatives of the victims are often aloud to testify as to their opinions concerning the convicted. Marty's mother, his brother and he all spoke up at this trial. Not for the penalty of death. Each one took their place on the stand and implored the judge to not have these two executed. They all said, to an individual, with more forgiveness in their words and heart than I have ever seen before or since, "We are Christians who believe that God wants to bring salvation to us all. If there is any way for these young men to know what we have known in Christ, we want it. The only way it can happen is if you allow them to live. We want to be able to forgive them, but most of all, we want them to know God's forgiveness."

I don't know. I do not know whether I can be that strong. It is asking a lot to be strong enough in my love and faith in God that I can be the same towards others. To practice love in such a way that it dissolves all the walls of bitterness and anger seems impossible. All I am certain of is this fact: "If Christians won't try, no one will." The world won't because it hasn't met the risen Christ.

You and I have. We know the love and forgiveness of Jesus. It's our obligation to share it. Even with the worst of us.

Prayer:

Gracious Father, you are the one who grants us grace and forgiveness. How quickly we forget what you have done for us. Remind us this Lenten season Lord, that repentance is needed. But forgiveness must also be granted to others, if we truly expect to know it ourselves. In the name of the forgiving son of God, Jesus Christ, Amen

Day 14 – March 3rd

"The Basin and the Towel"

John 13:1-10

What would be the last thing you would do for those you loved? If you knew that the end was near, what act would you leave them with? John records one of the last acts of Jesus in this table. It is the act of washing the feet of his disciples. While some Baptists have continued this act within their worship, there is something important to glean from Jesus' act for any who would call themselves Christians.

This is the ultimate act of devotion and humility. Here is the greatest of them, the master, Jesus, washing their feet. The job of the lowliest servant performed by the incarnation of God. What then, should be our model for servitude in the kingdom? I believe you find it in these verses.

The songwriter Michael Card has written a wonderful song entitled "The Basin and the Towel."

*And the call is to, community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
The basin and the towel*

*And the space between ourselves sometimes
Is more than the distance between the stars
By the fragile bridge of the servant's bow
We take up the basin and the towel* [Michael Card, "The Basin and The Towel" Poema
(Franklin, TN: Birdwing Music, 1994)]

When was the last time you took up the basin and towel in the name of Christ? To humble yourself in servitude to others is more than the act of the savior. It must be the act of the follower.

Prayer:

Forgive us Lord when we have forsaken serving others. We cry that they are dirty, or unclean and not worthy of our time or effort. But thank you Lord that you did not see us that way. Although you could you see us instead through the eyes of love and a cross. That is the mystery of your grace Father. The mystery we are called to share when we take up the basin and the towel. Amen.

Day 15 – March 4th

"I Wanna Be Like Christ"

Philippians 2:5-11

The first time I heard the song was while teaching in a High School. "Like Mike, if I could be like Mike. I wanna be, I wanna be like Mike . . ."

I thought, "How great, these kids really dig me. They think I'm the greatest teacher in the world. They've made this little song up just for me. I've made an impact on some of these lives. Wow."

I can't remember if it was the same day or not, but soon I saw the commercial and discovered the awful truth. It wasn't me they wanted to be like but Michael Jordan.

Paul exhorted the congregation at Philippi to follow one example: Be like Christ. This section is often referred to as the "Christ Hymn." It is believed to be an ancient hymn that was actually sung in the church. Whether Paul is the author of this hymn, or merely employing it to meet his teaching purposes, is unknown. What we do know is that these lines contain an understanding of what Christ did through the incarnation.

What is the example given by Jesus? According to Paul it is to empty yourself into servitude. Jesus came and emptied himself into humanity. He came to serve not become the served. How far was he willing to go? How far should we be willing to go? "Unto death, even death on a cross."

It is not through the miracles that God is served, but it is through the miracle of people who will be humbled enough to serve all others in Jesus' name. Maybe we would do well to recapture this hymn and sing it anew in our baptisms. Sing its chorus and remind ourselves that we are called to be "like Jesus." And empty ourselves into others.

Prayer:

We are quick to quote verse and chapter Lord on many things. Yet we are just as fast at forgetting the example of our savior set before us. We wish to adjust your calling to suit and fit our lives. We have been wrong and ask your forgiveness. Create within us a new heart. Create a new desire that drives us to be more like Christ, and less like the image we create for ourselves. As we pray in the name of the one who came not counting his equality with God but emptied himself in taking the form of a servant. A servant, even unto death and a cross. Amen.

Day 16 – March 5th

"Being Broken and Spilled Out"

2 Corinthians 4: 7-12

There is something precious hidden in the most simple of things. God, decided to hide something profound in the form of a human being. He hid his son. Jesus, the incarnate one was God but God in the flesh of creation.

Today, our God looks to do the same thing to those who wish to follow after him. A Christian is called to become a vessel through which God communicates his love and message of salvation to the world. There is a problem. Too many who claim Christ are not yet willing to break themselves open to serve others in his name. That is the rub. In order for this world to see Christ within us, we must break ourselves open and spill onto the world.

I had met him only once or so before. James (fictitious name) had contracted the HIV virus. By the next time I had heard of him, his virus had become the full blown AIDS illness. I was asked by his family if I could visit him in the hospital. James was gay and had contracted his illness through a homosexual relationship. I wasn't sure how I would handle our meeting. Then again, I am certain he wasn't likely to be overly thrilled either.

When I arrived to his room I thought that maybe I had mixed up the numbers. There were two men in the room, helping a patient into his bed. But the patient I saw looked more like a Bosnian refugee than the James I had met once before. It was James. As I entered and began to talk with James, the other two men asked if I could stay while they went to eat some lunch. I agreed and off they went.

While talking together, James' lunch plate with fruit had arrived. Left on the table, he attempted to eat but eating was difficult because the disease had left him with little strength. I offered to cut up his fruit and feed him if he would allow it. He agreed and so I began to feed him. James grew very silent. Concentrating on each bite, I sensed uneasiness about my new presence. After a while, James looked up with a query eye and asked, "What denomination did you say you were again?"

"Baptist," I told him.

"That's what I thought," he whispered. Then he said it, "Who'd have thought it."

Maybe we would be better serving the kingdom by just serving sometimes. Sometimes all people can remember is the rhetoric when our actions can speak 10,000 more words. Maybe all we need to do is the simple things in order for grace to be received. But I am here to say that even the simple things, require a breaking on your part.

Prayer:

Sometimes we are so hung up on the correct way that we forget to serve in any way. Forgive us Lord for not seeing that if we want to serve you, we must serve others. And if we serve others, we must do a little breaking. But somehow in our breaking Father, your grace shines through. Amen.

Day 17 – March 6th

"How's Your Complexion?"

Genesis 33: 1 - 10

One of the other tragedies about your looks is that you really don't know what you look like. There is the "me" that I think I see and then there is reality. I recall the first time I saw this in myself. I was about twenty and playing basketball with my friends. One of them decided to videotape our game and watch it later. While we all gathered in the den and watched, something weird happened. I looked at the screen and saw this pudgy, awkward person playing in my clothes and my shoes. If this did not make matters worse, one of my best friends (Mark Kendrick) turned and stated, "Look at Hatfield. He's got more chins than a Chinese phone book." That is when I had my first taste of what I really looked like. So, what does your face look like? How's your complexion?

Jacob had been running from Esau ever since that day he took everything from his brother. Jacob had gone on the lamb and now the day of reckoning had appeared. At long last, Esau would get his revenge. But a funny thing happened on the way to this reunion.

The night before, Jacob had an unbelievable experience and wrestled with someone all night. That someone was God. And in the wrestling, Jacob met not only God, but himself as well. Confronted by what he had found, Jacob set out the next morning to "make good" on his need to receive forgiveness from Esau.

The next day as Esau came closer, Jacob could almost sense death approaching. But instead of a hug of death, Esau extended the hug of forgiveness. Forgiveness was given to a brother who had taken literally everything of value. Jacob took a step back and told his brother, "For a moment there, you looked like God." And if anyone knew, it would be Jacob.

Forgiving others does that. It transforms us. Now don't get me wrong, God never looks like us. But every now and then, some of our creator, shines through. Have you ever met some of those people? I have. They radiate the love of Christ because they act on it in all they do. Wouldn't it be great to be able look like our Father? You can, when you impart grace as much as you receive it.

Prayer:

Lord, search our hearts. Cleanse us and set us on the course of forgiveness. Not just for ourselves but for others. Help us to see that usually in our service, it is your face these people see. And in that face, they find their hope for salvation, and their touch of grace. In the name of Christ, we humbly pray and commit our complexions. Amen.

Day 18 – March 7th

"The Preacher and the Panhandlers"

Luke 18: 9 - 14

Since I have been in the ministry, I have often been approached by panhandlers. People who are looking for some money to get by. A tank of gas here, some groceries there. Most are far from what you would consider to be pleasantly dressed. Almost all have some hard-luck tale of life to share. I really don't mind helping some but the ones who continually come back can irritate a person. I get upset asking myself why they don't find a job or get a life. On one occasion I have turned one frequent beggar away. After he left, I had to defeat the urge to run after him and give him some food. I recently ran across an article by John Killenger in which he dealt with a similar experience in his life. It caused me to pause and take inventory on myself.

"This remarkable little parable troubles me. It turns upside down our whole instinctive moral system - everything we've learned from our families, society and even our religion about being worthy.

The Pharisee in this story made three very basic mistakes: he thought his heart was pure; he thought ethics was a simple matter; and the thought God was a mere bookkeeper. Unfortunately, I'm always making the same mistakes. I guess that's why I identify with the Pharisee and not the tax collector. I'm as guilty as he was.

For example, like the Pharisee I think my heart is pure. Thirty-five years in the ministry have put it through a lot of efforts at purification - prayer, study, constant disciplining of emotions, occasional self-mortification over the recognition of failure, even prostration and remorse before God. Yet every time I start feeling good about myself, thinking that I am not really such a bad fellow and am probably a good deal better than most, I get a little glimpse into my true nature - the nature God must see all the time - and realize I am nothing, worse than nothing. I am a posturer, self-righteous like the Pharisee who has impressed himself and the community, but not God.

In my more naive moods, I, too, think ethics is a simple matter. I'm a good family man; I try to live altruistically; I have surrendered my life to "the high calling." In the Pharisee's words, "I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers" - or even like panhandlers. My life is structured, balanced, controlled, constructive.

Then I watch the evening news reports of riots in Soweto, kidnappings in Beirut, AIDS victims dying in California and children starving in Bhopal. And I have to cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I am part of humanity, part of the intricate web of global affairs. I have a home and have not taken in the homeless. I have money and have not bought food for the hungry. I have arms and have not embraced the outcasts.

I suppose I also at times think of God as a bookkeeper. That's how I imagine I am on good terms with him merely because I live a fairly routine and harmless existence. I haven't done anything really bad, haven't been to prison and haven't scandalized my family; ergo I am a pretty good fellow and God is happy with me.

Jesus' story discounts this attitude. The worst sin of all is to stand in the presence of the Almighty and not be overcome by a sudden sense of fear and unworthiness. To stand about casually in God's presence is the highest form of impudence. I should be on my face begging for mercy like the tax collector, not be proud like the Pharisee. God is Ultimate Being, not some chum from around the metaphysical corner.

George Hendry of Princeton Seminary expressed it precisely in his recent article, "Is Sin Obsolescent?" (Princeton Seminary Bulletin, vol. VII, no. 3). He says that our problem today is a loss of a sense of authority. As our world becomes more and more egalitarian, we no longer perceive anyone or anything to be over us. We ourselves become the measure of everything. The Pharisee, too, saw himself as the measure of everything. He stood and prayed "with himself," as if no higher authority were present. We also have lost our sense of the Ultimate Being. We do not think of ourselves as sinners because there is no God, beyond our polite and debilitating ideas of God, before whom we are sinful. So we become self-congratulatory and go down to our houses, unlike the self-effacing tax collector, without being justified.

The reason we drape our altars in purple, smear ashes on our foreheads and talk about sin, death and repentance during Lent and on Good Friday is to try to see God from the tax collector's point of view. There is something hopeful about this, despite the emphasis on mortification. Maybe

in the process something will happen to us - an epiphany, a slight conversation, a glimpse of the inner reality of things - and we shall be saved. Or, if that is too much to ask, perhaps we shall, at least for a moment or two, experience a sense of true justification.

Then we shall feel not like guilty preachers but like redeemed panhandlers at the threshold of the kingdom." [John Killenger, "The Preacher and the Panhandlers," Christian Century, 104, (April 1, 1987), 301-302.]

Prayer:

Forgive me Lord when I get haughty and think myself better than others around me. Remind me that before your presence, I am lower than the dust. You Lord are my only hope and salvation in the courts of your justice. Remind me of this Father, so that I can then turn to others and see them for who they are. Fellow citizens in your creation who need the grace of God to save them. Amen.

Day 19 – March 8th

"The Way of the Cross"

Mark 8:31-38

Peter blurted out the first real confession about who Jesus was. The problem with his utterance was that he didn't quite understand what it meant. It is one thing to call Jesus the Christ, it is quite another to come to grips with what such a declaration means not just about Jesus but what it means for our lives.

I remember talking once with a man named Wayne at Centre College where I worked for six summers. Wayne said he believed in God and Jesus but he was no "fanatic" about it. As I pressed him to explain what his statement meant, Wayne informed me that he thought Jesus was someone who lived a great life but it had no place in his life other than a past historical event. To Wayne, calling Jesus the Christ was like calling Abraham Lincoln a Republican. It had little effect upon his everyday life.

Wayne is not alone. Even many Christians act in a similar fashion. Oh, they have prayed the sinner's prayer, or been baptized but that is the extent of their relationship with Jesus. But the gospel of Mark says that to be a disciple must mean more. A disciple, anyone who calls his or herself Christian, must pick up his or her cross and follow in Jesus' way.

To the ancient congregation in Mark's church, there was only one place to go with a cross. To your death. "If you are going to follow me," Jesus is saying, "it must be by putting yourself behind and my way in front. It must be by losing your life so it can truly be saved. It must be all the way, to the death."

When was the last time you thought about your Christian commitment? I do not mean how many Sunday School pins you have or the number of times you have been in worship. I am talking about a commitment to Christ that is greater than your commitment to yourself. A commitment that is life long and not a commitment we keep only in times of convenience. If you want to travel the road of Lent, if you wish to follow the way of Christ, you must do it carrying a cross and carrying it to your death. After all, it's hard to be conspicuous carrying a cross.

Prayer:

So many times Lord we have placed ourselves above you. So often we have chosen to remain in the back and declined to pick up a cross. We give thanks that Jesus was willing. Now challenge us that we may become willing as well. In the name of the way, the truth and the life; even in death, Amen.

Day 20 – March 9th

“Thou Art the Man . . .”

2 Samuel 12:1-14

There is nothing quite like having all of your “feel good about yourself” emotions shot out of the water. You must admit too, that there is nothing quite like that “I got away with it” feeling of euphoria when we know we should have been caught but we weren’t. Like those times you are speeding and pass the police officer on the interstate. You breathe a gigantic sigh when he doesn’t come after you.

This is one of those stories. David thought he had pulled off the perfect crime and being the king did not hurt his situation much. That is until the prophet Nathan appeared. He told a wonderful story to David about a wicked rich man, a poor man and his lamb. Ignoring the precedent of the law, David declares that the guilty should be hung from the nearest tree. That was of course until Nathan turned to David and declared, “Thou art the man.”

But aren’t we just like God? We are quick to point out the sins of the others but hesitant to see any darkness in our corners. We are glad that God is giving it to that person over there. We enjoy seeing them struggle. We are so quick to judge others and yet so reluctant to confess our lives before God.

As you journey down this Lenten road, I hope you have discovered that you are the man as well. I hope that your inward examinations have led you to see what areas God is trying to enter your life, despite your refusals. David had thought that he really got away with something. But he really didn’t. You and I may feel the same, but un-confessed sin, like David’s, will find you out.

It is time for genuine confession. And such a prayer embarks on the hardest of all treks. It is a prayer which allows God to show us our sins and not a prayer where we get to choose what sins we wish to confess. The next time we feel the need to do something less, we had better become prostrate and clean before the Lord of Forgiveness.

Prayer:

Lord, today I can hear the voice of Nathan calling. Today, I can hear it regardless of how much I try to hide. Teach us to stop playing hide and seek with our sins. Bring to us the courage to confess cleanly and receive grace fully. In the name of Christ, who died for all sin. Amen.

Day 21 – March 10th

“Which One is the Real Prodigal?”

Luke 15:11-32

Throughout scripture we see the story of people who get lost. From the beginning of the Bible in Eden, we see that Adam and Eve lost their way even in the garden. They do come back to their relationship with God, but the price is very heavy to pay. The children of Israel were lost for years in the land of Egypt. Finally, they found themselves delivered by God and his servant named Moses. The Israelites go free only to get lost again for some forty years as they wander around in the desert. They eventually enter the promised land, only to find themselves losing their way within their own homeland. First, they serve Yahweh, and then they don't. Even centuries later, Jesus chooses twelve disciples, but they keep getting themselves lost along the way. They fret over the best seats in the kingdom, demand Jesus to perform tawdry little miracles to make themselves look better, and in the end, they run off in fear and frustration as Jesus is shackled.

Perhaps the greatest story of a lost person is this one in Luke. It is even called the Prodigal son. For years we have all assumed that the prodigal was the youngest who went off to spend his inheritance on “righteous living.” After working for the pigs, the young lad comes to his senses and comes home. This time a humbled man who realizes what has befallen him. You know the rest of the story. The father declares his son alive again and they all live happily ever after.

But which boy is the real prodigal? The oldest throws a fit at the welcome home his younger sibling receives. He has to drag out an old resume for his father to prove his worth. It is as if the father means nothing and the money everything. I believe we have to read the whole story to see the message for those of us who profess to believe.

Jesus told this parable to a group of tax collectors and Pharisees. I believe the whole time the Pharisees saw these evil men from the IRS as the younger boy and encouraged Jesus' story. But when he reached the end of the tale their enthusiasm has, no doubt, waned. We have a problem with the oldest boy. We look too much like him sometimes. We don't like the idea that all sinners can receive grace. That we can list our worthy accomplishments to the father and he says, “Good job.” Then he tells the terrible people in this world he loves them just as much.

So, what's the problem? Sometimes we can get so caught up in a bookkeeping game with God that we miss out on the grace that awaits us. The result is that we no longer listen to God because we are spending all the time “earning” our grace instead of receiving it. Who is the prodigal then?

Prayer:

Lord, we know the truth. We are the true prodigals. When we fail to open our hearts to all our brothers, we are missing the hope of grace not just for them but for ourselves. Teach us to see with the eyes of your grace. Amen.

Day 22 – March 11th

“The Traitor's Look”

Matthew 26: 47-50

What do you do when you think of Judas? How did this passage make you feel? It seems that every time he is brought up, Judas' act leaves cold chills down your spine. Who could possibly think so heinous a thought as having one of your closest friends betray you like that? I am certainly glad that I'm not in Judas' shoes. Or am I?

Michael Card has written a wonderful song about the Traitor's look that sums up the truth not only of Judas but of ourselves.

*How did it feel to take the place
Of honor at the meal,
To take the sop from His own hands,
A prophecy to seal?
Was it because He washed your feet
That you sold Him as a slave?
The Son of Man, the Lamb of God,
Who'd only come to save?
Now, Judas, don't you come too close.
I fear that I might see.
The traitor's look upon your face
Might look too much like me.
Cause just like you I've sold the Lord
And often for much less,
And like a wretched traitor,
I betrayed Him with a kiss.* [Michael Card, Immanuel (Nashville:
Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), p. 155.]

We all betray Jesus with a kiss. We pretend to be a Christian and then say no to the cross. We look upon Judas with disdain, but how often have we abandoned Jesus when we found ourselves unable to stand with him? Think about it on our journey.

Prayer:

We all accuse Judas of betrayal but the truth is we all have done some betraying of Jesus. We turn our heads to those around us who we ought to touch with the gospel. We refuse to serve others because we haven't the time or the energy. Yet we find time and energy for anyone else, including self. Help us to stand by you Lord and not turn our heads. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Day 23 – March 12th

“Do you See What Jesus Sees?”

Mark 6: 34-44

Jesus had a sharp eye. I'm not sure if he could see 20/20 but he could certainly focus on people and see straight to their needs. The disciples often struggled with that. So do we.

If the disciples had their way, there would have been no miracle of feeding 5,000. They looked out and saw a hopeless situation. They saw too many people in the middle of a desert place. But where they say despair, Jesus saw hope.

Think of the countless people who fall through the cracks because of our lack of vision? How many have been pushed aside by us because we did not see with the vision of Jesus? "But Mike," you say, "what are a few here and there?" Nothing. Unless those few are your friends. Unless they are people that you see could have a bright future.

I worked at the radio station in Danville, Kentucky with one of the greatest cut-up Disc Jockeys in the business. His name was Mike Baker. Mike had a cult like following from area fans. He was funny, articulate, creative and a dynamite person. The only problem was that Mike liked to drink. He was an alcoholic. It was a binge on booze that made him through away a long career by embezzling thousands of dollars from the station and skipping town.

A year later, Mike returned to Danville and turned himself in. I saw him in the jail and he looked and sounded like the Mike Baker I had come to know. He received probation and a sentence to make restitution. The last I had heard, Mike was working in an electronics store in the Lexington area.

A couple of years ago, a fellow friend and radio employee, Steve Bertram, ran across the obituary of a man who was found drowned in a pool at a shady hotel in Lexington. He had no identification. Later that week, Steve noticed the obituary for a Michael Baker. Calling the funeral home listed, Steve had found our old friend. Mike Baker's body had been lying in a morgue for a week before he was identified. Buried before any of the old WHIR gang knew, Mike was gone. He had died alone and was buried the same.

Some will say that he got what he deserved. But if we all got what we deserved, there would be no heaven and no grace to feed 5,000 or all of us. No, it just seems that Mike Baker fell through the cracks somewhere and the result is someone left hungry. And at Jesus' table, that is the tragedy.

Prayer:

How many have been let go Lord because we could not see with vision of your son? When will we who follow Jesus take the time to see the heavy responsibility that comes with being a disciple? Teach us, burden us with the challenge to look and see people who need a shepherd where others see only a desolate place. Amen.

Day 24 – March 13th

"Come Be a Fool"

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

It is foolish you know. The very idea that God would come into human form and then die on a cross of all things. It is utterly foolish. It is foolishness to believe that those who are to follow this

man from Galilee would give up their lives as well. How foolish to be so concerned about others who are not family. To be caught up in the cares and concerns of perfect strangers does not make logical sense.

Once again, I choose the medium of music to share a new thought on the foolishness of Christ.

*It seems I've imagined Him all of my life,
As the wisest of all of mankind.
But if God's holy wisdom is foolish to men,
He must have seemed out of His mind.
For even His family said he was mad,
And the priests said a demon's to blame.
For God in the form of this angry young man
Could not have seemed perfectly sane.
When we in our foolishness thought we were wise,
He played the fool and He opened our eyes.
When we in our weakness believed we were strong,
He became helpless to show we were wrong.
And so we follow God's own fool,
For only the foolish can tell.
Believe the unbelievable,
Come be a fool as well.
So come lose your life for a carpenter's son,
For a madman who died for a dream.
Then you'll have the faith the first followers had,
And you'll feel the weight of the beam.
So surrender the hunger to say you must know.
Have the courage to say "I believe!"
For the power of paradox opens your eyes
And blinds those who say they can see. [Card, Immanuel, p.203.]*

What will it be? Are you ready to explore the way of the cross further, or do you wish to drop it here? It's foolishness to the world but life to the Christian.

Prayer:

Allow us O Lord to stop worrying about "how it looks" and begin to take up the cross. The world will call us crazy, but you will remind us that he who loses his life will find it. We offer you our lives today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 25 – March 14th

"Known By the Scars"

Revelation 5

I have a lot of scars on my body. There are a pair of scars on my left knee that remind me how much I love football. (They also remind me when the weather changes) I have a couple of scars from some pencil fights I lost when I was in grade school. There is one huge scar on my body. It is the scar that runs across my belly where the doctor removed my diseased gall bladder. When I look at any of my scars, I remember something about how each got where they are. The pencil marks show my stupidity, the knee scars remind me that the love of that game goes on, and the gall bladder scar brings me back to how sick a person can be and not die.

Jesus wears scars. That's right, Jesus wears scars. Present tense. He carries the scars of his love for us. One of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture is the one found here in Revelation. Here comes Jesus, looking like a lamb that has been slain. Still bearing the scars after all these years.

*The marks of death that God chose never to erase,
The wounds of love's eternal mark,
When the kingdom comes, with its perfected sons,
He will be known by the scars.
And after they had slain Him and laid Him in the grave,
The ones He loved had fled into the dark,
Then love and power raised Him,
And God won the victory
But they only recognized him by the scars.* [Card, Immanuel, p.171]

Thomas didn't believe it until he saw. When he did, he recognized Jesus immediately.

What scars will you be recognized for? Will they be scars of service? Will they be scars of following Jesus as a disciple carrying his or her cross? Will there be any scars at all? If you come this way, the way of Lent, you will receive some.

Prayer:

Lord God, you are the one who brought your son to us. And when we asked how much you loved us you showed us your scars. May we return the same to you our eternal Father. May we be able to show our love by the scars. In the holy name of the scarred lamb of God. Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 26 – March 15th

“Under a Delusion”

Mark 9:30-35

Sometimes we forget just how opposite Jesus' way is from this world. Maybe it's because we have tried so hard to make the two fit together that we just don't see it. The way of Jesus is to deny every basic rule of "get ahead" that we have ever been taught. We are to be more concerned with losing life than saving it. We are to be more concerned with being a servant and last than first in line. Frederick Buechner writes:

"If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own – and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion." [Frederick Buechner, The Faces of Jesus. (New York: Riverwood Publishing, 1974), p.136.]

Maybe Buechner is extreme. Maybe he isn't. The longer we try to fit a Jesus that is not in the gospels, the more we end up with something less than God's son. Jesus breaks our molds and holds us accountable. He is here to command us to become servants. And in our serving we will discover what it means to be a disciple.

Prayer:

Eternal Lord, creator of heaven and earth, we do not understand your calling sometimes. You tell us to be last and not first. You say to us that in losing we find. We cannot solve the paradox but what we can do is surrender to your calling. And somehow, when we do that, you make the confusing seem logical. The crooked, straight. In You, the foolishness, becomes wisdom. So lead us to just surrender and leave the rest to you Lord. Amen.

Day 27 – March 16th

"Jesus Wept"

John 11:35 and Jeremiah 31:15

"There is a woman in my church who makes my life difficult for me. In a sermon, I casually mention the starving thousands of Ethiopia; she doesn't sleep for days. I refer to our congregation's ministry to battered wives; she goes, sells her stereo and gives the money to the project.

The story of Jesus' ministry begins and ends with mother's weeping. Tears bracket his ministry. But professional people like me seldom weep. Twice have I fainted beside a hospital bed; only thrice have I wept for the plight of a parishioner. Other than these momentary lapses from clerical demeanor, I've held myself together while urging people to get themselves together.

At first, when ministers are just out of seminary, things get to them if they're not careful. They feel the pain of another's surgery, share parents' grief at the death of their child, sense an alcoholic's hopelessness, and suffer the bleakness of another's poverty. But time numbs even pastors' feelings. Ten years into the ministry, they find that they can function without feeling a thing in even the worst situations.

Congregations treasure the rare occasions when pastors are so moved that they find themselves unable to speak, or choke on tears while executing some official function. They enjoy seeing humanity seep through the professional exterior, yes." [William Willimon, "Jesus Wept," *Christian Century*, 102, (March 6, 1985), 358.]

Willimon's words ring true. But people care just as much that anyone weeps with them. To become God's prophet, to be a disciple of Christ, I am convinced that we must be moved like the woman in Willimon's church. To coin a phrase of a recent politician, "We must feel their pain." This is not some off the cuff reaction but a genuine concern for others.

Sometimes Christians can be good at saying how much they hurt for a family. But we must show our concern beyond such platitudes. We must be willing to do something to show our support. If a family is grieving over a death, let them know at the family night with your presence. If a family is struggling over a financial crisis, find ways to aid them anonymously but through the name of Christ. When we say we are concerned for the plight of victims, spearhead an effort to help a group that is doing something to aid them.

To be God's prophet these days is to help people to know and see that others hurt with them. Our Lord himself shows the way, as he weeps at the grave of a friend.

Prayer:

In a world that so quickly hardens our hearts, soften them by the presence of your Holy Spirit Lord. Allow our humanity to be felt, even if it means becoming vulnerable. In the name of the one who wept for Jerusalem, who wept for Lazarus, who weeps for us. Amen.

Day 28 – March 17th

“The Call of Christ is the Call to Touch”

Mark 8:22-26

Lent is about touching. It is about touching those around us with the healing of the gospel. Lent is about touching our souls with the presence of the crucified Christ. Lent is about being touched by the sacrifice of a God who loves us with all he has because he refuses to love less and cannot love more. We would do well to learn to touch like Jesus did in this story about the blind man. Touching involves many things.

It means taking a risk. To risk being ridiculed by those around us who say, “Why would you do such a thing as care about that kind of person?” Touching means taking the risk of failure. We reach out without knowing whether our actions will be rejected or received. If the activity we are engaged in will be appreciated or used by some “con artist.” We just don’t know. That is the risk that is involved.

Touching means that we also invest something of ourselves into that person. One does not touch something without investment. For Jesus, the investment was into a blind man who begged him for a touch. Jesus was investing his ministry that a simple touch could not only bring healing to the man’s eyes but would change his entire life.

All the man asked for was to be touched. Sometimes, all it takes for people to know that there is a God who cares is for a Christian to reach out and touch them. Someone who will shake the hand of someone else who needs a handshake.

Then, like the blind man at Bethsaida, they see all things clearly. They are able to see a God who loves them and a community of faith ready to make that love tangible in this life. On the road of Lent, we need to be touching.

Prayer:

No one would touch the lepers Lord. No one would touch the blind. This world will not reach out to some people because they are not pretty, rich or acceptable enough. God of ALL creation, help us to reach out in your name and touch those who need to be touched. And grace will be received and people will see. Amen.

Day 29 – March 18th

“Remembering Through the Eyes of Faith”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

“We are fools for Christ’s sake,” Paul says, faith says - the faith that ultimately the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, the lunacy of Jesus saner than the grim sanity of the world. Through the eyes of faith too, the Last Supper, though on one level a tragic farewell and failure . . . is also, at its deepest level, the foreshadowing of great hope and the bodying forth of deep mystery. Frail, fallible, foolish as he knows the disciples to be, Jesus feeds them with himself. The bread is his flesh, the wine his blood, and they are all of

them including Judas to eat and drink. They are to take his life into themselves and come alive with it, to be his hands and feet in a world where he no longer has hands and feet, to feed his lambs. "Do this in remembrance of me," Paul quotes him as saying. In eating the bread and drinking the wine, they are to remember him, Jesus tells them, and to remember him not merely in the sense of letting their minds drift back to him in the dim past but in the sense of recalling him to the immediate present. They are to remember him the way when we remember someone we love who has died, he is alive again within us to the point where we can all but hear him speak and our hearts kindle to the reality of his presence." [Buechner, *Faces of Jesus*, p. 136-138.]

Remembrance is more than mental exercise. It is a way of living for the disciple who follows Christ. But only when we remember through the eyes of faith.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you sent your son to die for us. To the world it makes no sense, but to those of us touched by His grace it is an act of faith. Let us remember you, by doing what you have called us to do. Let us remember by picking up the cross and following in your way. Amen.

Day 30 – March 19th

"Reception"

John 20:19-23

One of the most neglected words in our spiritual living is reception. Webster defines it as "taking into possession something that is given." To accept or receive something is the primary step of Christian faith. We accept we are sinners, we accept that God's love is so great that Jesus died for us, we receive the grace of God found in so great a gift of love. Reception is paramount in all our Christian beginnings. Then why do we so neglect it in our "mature faith."

We tell people that we don't want others to do anything for us. But isn't that what salvation is all about? Don't think you are alone in this. Ministry breeds a self-sufficiency that leads to neglect of personal spiritual living. I am often so busy with care giving, preaching, or sharing that I often put my spiritual reception on hold. I became greatly aware of this at a midnight Christmas Eve service in my hometown one year.

While worshiping in a Disciples of Christ church with my mother that special evening, the time came for communion. In the reflective moments of meditation in this service, something dawned on me. This was the first time in years that I have RECEIVED communion. For some time I had been the one at the head of the table handing it out, but not receiving from someone else. Now the Disciples of Christ do an interesting thing with communion. They make you, the parishioner, get up and come forward to receive it. (Again, I believe that we have a hard time receiving anything. Baptists are so quick to point out their priesthood and autonomy that sometimes we lose the fact that everyone needs a tangible person to occasionally give us a blessing)

As my mother and I approached the chancel to take our turn at receiving communion, I approached the officiating minister. He leaned forward and said to me, "May the grace and peace of Christ be with you." And with these words, I received a blessing. I wasn't the one giving but I was receiving.

One can't say enough about receiving something akin to a blessing. What it all boils down to is that if we wish to take part in the kingdom, we have to learn not only to serve but to be served once in a while. We have to learn how to receive from others. Then go and give to even more in Jesus' name.

Prayer:

Help us to learn to receive Father. It really isn't the easiest thing for us to learn. But if we are to be your children, we must learn to receive in order to give. In the name of the giver of grace and salvation, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Day 31 – March 20th

"Why?"

Matthew 16:21

Why? We often ask this question about our own life. But I ask the question about Jesus' death. Why did all of these things happen? Michael Card wrote a wonderful song answering three questions that had bothered his thinking for some time. Maybe we can see some answers in these verses.

*Why did it have to be a friend
Who chose to betray the Lord?
And why did he use a kiss to show them?
That's not what a kiss is for:*

*Only a friend can betray a friend.
A strange has nothing to gain.
And only a friend comes close enough
To ever cause so much pain.*

*And why did there have to be a thorny crown
Pressed upon His head?
It should have been a royal one,
Made of jewels and gold instead.*

*It had to be a crown of thorns
Because in this life that we live,*

*For all who would seek to love
A thorn is all the world has to give.
And why did it have to be a heavy cross
He was made to bear?*

*And why did they nail his feet and hands?
His love would have held Him there.*

*It was a cross, for on a cross
A thief was supposed to pay.
And Jesus had come into the world
To steal every heart away. [Card, Immanuel, p.159.]*

Prayer:

We have so many questions Lord. So many questions about why you had to endure so much for us. The answers scare us though Father. We see through this event, the amount of love you have for us and we fall in shame at the lack of love we have shown you. Help turn our questions into actions. Help us to know your love and share it in your son's name. Amen.

Day 32 – March 21st

"The Reflection of a Cross"

Isaiah 55:1-9

"I sat down on the front pew while the deacons delivered the portions of bread to the congregation. Another communion service. Although it was supposed to be special, I was not into it this particular Sunday. I was tired and weary due to the usual and unusual rigors of the church life. As I reflected on this, I looked ahead in attempted reverence and focused on the table laden with the elements.

The napkins that covered the plates of bread were laid to the side. One plate remained, just in case. I still did not know why we filled three plates and trays with the bread and juice when we either should have used two or four. An ancient tradition, no doubt, with a peculiar history behind it. Oh well, it did not matter.

The brass crucifix stood tall and majestically behind the covered tower of silver juice trays. Brass and silver. Not color-keyed at all. The disparity distracted me. In the reflection of the brass cross, I could see that the deacons were starting to come back up and serve the center pews. A few moments and they would finish distributing the bread. I fidgeted and thought about where the wife and I would eat lunch. Steak or pizza? Maybe a burger. My stomach growled, its morning ration of cereal now depleted. The age-old adolescent urge to grab a handful of bread and take off with a tray of that good-tasting juice hit me full force. Then I noticed it. In the same reflection was the tilting silver cross that tried to stand atop the juice trays with some semblance of honor. A cross in a cross. One cross was scratched and dirty silver, leaning to one side, very much askew from years of use. The other cross, brassy, golden, shining and proud, overpowered it. I was awestruck.

We often envision the cross of Christ as tall and shining and perfect. Reflections of our Christianity bounce off of it, or so we would like to think. If someone were to ask us to describe our daily ministry in terms of a cross, I think we would instantly use the shining brass metaphor of the tall crucifix for our model.

But what of the tilting, dull-finished, silver cross sitting precariously on top of the much-used juice trays that alternate in either shining or matte finish? This is so typical of our make-shift Christianity. We begin with good intentions, shining and new. We serve others with splash and aplomb, proudly appearing in the midst of the sinners. Years of wear and tear, however, coupled with some additional work that does not quite match the initial intentions, soon becomes manifest in a cross that strains to remain a beacon to all the lost while struggling to just stay on top of our service.

Still, in the sanctuary that morning, both crosses continued their work, seemingly oblivious to my stares, and most likely untouched by the critical thoughts of others.

After I blessed the juice and gave it to the deacons for distribution, I sat down again and continued my ponderings about the two crosses. I still stared, mostly in guilty embarrassment, at the teetering silver cross on the tray top. How I wished I could just bend it slowly back into the vertical. But I knew that sure as I did, it would break and the top would be left with an ugly hole.

I wondered how many times God had pondered bending me back into "correct" service, only to stop with Divine wisdom before creating a "holey" mess.

The silence of the communion left room for more reflection. The shining brass cross did not seem to be bothered with reflecting the puny, leaning cross. Indeed, the two crosses seemed to complement each other. The tired, worn, silver cross, reflected in the strength and beauty of its brass counterpart, seemed to gain a stature of renewed importance and dignity.

Does not God's cross of strength live in all who claim the name "Christian." Surely it stands tall and proud, despite my human inabilities and weaknesses, manifested in my own wobbling cross of fatigue and apathy. God will continue to reflect and thus carry my matted and worn Christianity, much as the bras crucifix mirrored the cross atop the much-used but still capable juice trays. Perhaps, when I feel as though I am tumbling aimlessly in my faith, I should look for my reflection in God's cross.

After singing our final hymn, I turned once again to look at the table, the plated trays of silver, the bent cross, and the bronze crucifix that backed up the whole communion scene. My spiritual hunger had been quenched. The upcoming week's work was not so ominous any more. Communion had, indeed, fed me well." [J. Timothy Allen, *Seasons in the Year* (Macon, GE: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993), pp. 62-64]

Prayer:

Teach us to look for our reflection in your cross Lord. When we do not find it, we may be too far away from it to see ourselves. Help us to draw nearer to the cross today Father. Amen.

Day 33 – March 22nd

"The Way of Service and Sacrifice"

Mark 10:35-45

I remember when it happened and was announced to the press. In the summer of 1987, Television evangelist Oral Roberts had just been spared by God. He had to raise a certain amount of money or God would "take him home." Not long after that announcement, Mr. Roberts announced to the world that he had a vision. In that vision, God had revealed to him that when Jesus came to set up the kingdom, he, Oral Roberts, would be seated at the right hand. I remember telling my friend when we read the account, "Poor James and John just got it wrong. There are seats available, but Jesus was waiting on Oral."

I don't bring this up to chastise Oral Roberts as much as I bring it up to chastise all of us. Society today has a problem. The problem is that we all have to be number one. Failure to win "the big one" haunts teams like the Vikings, Broncos and Bills. Whatever happened to the idea of giving it your all?

I am grateful that the kingdom is set up differently. The victor is not the first to cross the finish line but the one, anyone who crosses it. Competition is not based on win/lose but on effort and attempt. The way of Jesus is different than the way of corporate America and there is no way around it.

Jesus has just told the disciples for the third time that his end is near. So they respond by carving up the kingdom for themselves. How tragic. James and John want the choice seats. But what they get, they don't understand. The baptism of Jesus. The suffering for the Christ. The messiah has come to bring in the kingdom, but the stockholders' meetings will be a little different than what you are accustomed to. They will be efforts to be the servant and slave of all. Just as the Son of Man has come to do, so too must we.

So the next time you want something for being a Christian, think about what the price is. Because the two are inseparable.

Prayer:

Teach us our Lord that we are called to serve not scramble for seats. Remind us that we are servants of your kingdom and not governors of some territory. Bring us to understanding that a call to follow you is to follow in the way of Jerusalem and the way of the cross. For we pray in the name of our way, our truth and our life. Amen.

Day 34 – March 23rd

"Beware the Seduction of the Palms"

Luke 19:28-41

This passage is an example of what can happen when worship and liturgy become stale and without meaning. It shows what lack of integrity in our praise can lead to. These people shouted the right words and had the formula memorized. But they did not mean them. They shout Hosannas and quickly turn away by the end of the week. What a lesson we can draw from here.

Majority theology never works well. I am not saying that if many believed the correct thing that things would not be well. I am saying that dictating, mandating orthodoxy by virtue of the ballot

has never been able to change lives. The people of the streets are shouting and singing in the majority. So much so that the Pharisees will not shout too loudly against Jesus and the Romans don't move right away. This is the time and moment that Jesus could get swept into office. Not a single political candidate would miss so great an opportunity. The problem is that Jesus knows something is wrong.

The people are swept up by the moment and the songs they sing mean nothing more than some ancient formula they remembered from days gone by. The result is that time changes them. A short week later, the mood has shifted and the people with it. The shouts of Hosanna turn to cries of crucifixion.

We would do well to beware the seduction of the palms. This world has long used many things to get "its way." Even the faith of a few and the traditions of the many. But when the dust settles, the world hasn't really changed. No one has come to show the true way, except Jesus.

And by that Friday, no one, not even the disciples wanted to hear what he had to say about suffering and death. If we expect to hear the gospel today, we would do well to hear all of it.

Prayer:

Help us to sort through the palm branches Lord. Help us to discern with the aid of your Spirit. Lead us to see the way of Jesus over and against the hosannas of the world. As we pray and serve in Jesus name. Amen.

Day 35 – March 24th

"The Way of Peter"

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

"Peter was utterly sincere, not lacking in moral courage, and loving Jesus so much that he wanted to take that ultimate step, make that supreme sacrifice. Oh yes! There were moments of rash boldness, of sanguine determination, of emotional commitment. Not even the knowing, cautioning, restraining words of Jesus could dampen his enthusiasm or cause him to take a long, hard look at his motivation, his measure of resolve. For this was a time for affirmation, in order to lift the burdened spirit of Jesus - and he was the man to do it.

It all came to nothing. No, worse than that. It came to a shadowy and shabby denial before the bystanders and the serving girls. As he was pressed, the denial became an oath, and the oath turned to cursing and swearing, until he was pulled up short by the sound of the cock crowing. Then came the desolation, the burdened grief and the scalding tears. Luke captures a heart rending moment for both of them as Jesus is led out of the high priest's house: 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered . . . and went out and wept bitterly.' (22:61-62)

Why is it that these two moments in Peter's experience are so powerful in the portrayal of a man who loved, and a man who denied his love? I believe that it is because the accounts must have

come from Peter himself. There is a simple integrity lending pathos and power to these accounts. It is within a living experience that is communicated through sorrow and tears.

Then there is the reader's immediate response to these two situations. These stories grab me because they draw me into the narrative. I become present because I am Peter." [Brother Ramon, The Way of Love (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), p. 190-191.]

Prayer:

Lord God, so many times we are Peter. Dedicated to following you the best we can. Then we let pride or arrogance get in our way. The result is that we lose our way. But like with Peter, you are the eternal hope of the sinner. We too may come to seek forgiveness from you. We too may seek the grace we need to carry on. Lead us to do so Lord. Amen.

Day 36 – March 25th

"Carrying the Cross"

Mark 15: 21-24a

Who in the world is Simon of Cyrene? We don't know. There is little evidence to discover who he was other than someone who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. While John insists that Jesus carried the cross alone, Mark points out Simon helping along the way. Why?

Mark, is a distinct gospel with key themes running throughout its text. There is no theme greater in Mark than that which is established in the eighth chapter on discipleship. Jesus clearly points out that any who are to come after him must take up the cross and follow. There is no debate in this statement.

Now, at the time of crucifixion, Mark has someone literally do just that. Simon of Cyrene picks up the cross and follows. Mark is using this historical event to make his theological point. All Christians must be like Simon. Pick up the cross.

We don't know what impact this cross carrying had on Simon except that we are told that he had two sons named Alexander and Rufus. Without evidence it is hard to speculate but it could possibly be that these were later members of Mark's congregation. This is why he adds their names to the list of identification.

Who knows how much testimony there is in the one who carries his or her cross? There is a lot to be said about it if just in Simon alone. Are you carrying the cross today? You never know what impact it will have beyond your act.

Prayer:

Father God, help us to be like Simon. Though pressed into duty he made his way to Calvary. We too must pick it up and tread ever closer to the place of our journey's end. Help us carry your cross, our cross. In the name of the crucified we offer our prayer and our life, Amen.

Day 37 – March 26th**“Suffering in the Name of Christ”**

Romans 8:18 – 38

Contemporary Evangelical Religion has seemingly adopted a victory now, no suffering policy in some areas. Some groups have bought heavily into the mass popularity of the “health, wealth and success” theology. Nothing bad can happen to you if you will let God heal you. Others tell us that all one has to do in suffering is name it and claim it. What usually happens is the abuse of scripture. People search the Bible for “proof texts” which have little if anything to do with the meaning the healing guru puts into it. I once heard Robert Tilton talk on the stoppage of blood flowing. He quoted a verse from Ezekiel about blood being wiped away. When I investigated the verse, I found something totally different in the mind of the writer. The passage belonged to a group of verses speaking metaphorically of God birthing Israel like a mother her child. The picture painted was of the mother wiping the blood off of her new-born baby. The verse was in reference to the relationship between Israel and God. It was not a verse about bleeding.

I say all of this in order to bring us back to Paul’s letter you have read. Paul noted that there will suffering, especially for the Christian. But these sufferings are pale compared to two things: The glory of heaven and the love of God found in Christ Jesus. No torturer can separate you from either. No hardship keeps God’s love from you or separates you from the promise of eternity. Meanwhile though, you better be prepared for sufferings. This world is imperfect and the evils of it will befall the innocent and the Christian.

A final word of promise comes from Paul when he reminds us that in everything, good or bad, God works for good with those who love him. It does not hold that God is no longer at work, but He all the more works within our lives. Even in the sufferings we must endure.

Prayer:

We do not always see you Lord, but we take hope in the promise that you are there. We confess that sometimes we just don’t want to go through the groanings of this life, but we can, knowing you are present with us. Buoyed by this knowledge, inspire us to be committed to setting out on the journey of serving you, regardless of what comes our way. We pledge this commitment through our prayer, Amen.

Day 38 – March 27th**“He Who Seeks Shall Find”**

Luke 11:9-13

"In Luke, Jesus tells a strange story. At midnight an unexpected guest arrives. He is hungry, but you have nothing to feed him. So you go to the house of a friend to borrow some food. 'Don't bother me,' the friend says. 'The door's locked. The children are asleep. I can't give you anything now. Go home.' But you keep on pestering him. You are so persistent that he finally gets up and gives you what you want. Then Jesus adds, 'For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.' And his point seems to be that the secret of prayer is persistence. Keep at it, keep speaking into the darkness, and even if nothing comes, speak again and then again. And finally the answer is given.

It may not be the kind of answer that we want - the kind of stopgap peace, the kind of easy security, the kind of end to loneliness that we are apt to pray for. Christ never promises peace in the sense of no more struggle and suffering. Instead, he helps us to struggle and suffer as he did, in love, for one another. Christ does not give us security in the sense of something in this world, some cause, some principle, some value which is forever. Instead, he tells us that there is nothing in this world that is forever, all flesh is grass. He does not promise us non-lonely lives. His own life speaks loud of how, in a world where there is little love, love is always lonely. Instead of all these, the answer that he gives, I think, is himself. If we go to him for anything else, he may send us away empty or he may not. But if we go to him for himself, I believe that we go away always with this deepest of all our hungers filled." [Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishing, 1985), pp. 126-127]

Prayer:

We neglect our prayer life Lord. If someone ignored us as often as we do you, we would never speak to that individual again. Yet your love for us is so great, that you continue to call upon us. May we listen to your calling, so that when we pray we will know what we most need to ask for in our lives. Amen.

Day 39 – March 28th

"Love"

1 Corinthians 13

"The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.

The unabashed eros of lovers, the sympathetic philia of friends, agape giving itself away freely no less for the murderer than for his victim (the KJV translates it as charity) - these are all varied manifestations of a single reality. To lose yourself in another's arms, or in another's company, or in suffering for all men who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you - to lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself. Is what it's all about. Is what love is.

Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.

To say that love is God is romantic idealism. To say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth.

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone. Thus in Jesus' terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. In fact liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends.

When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he didn't say, 'There, there. Everything is going to be all right.' He said, 'You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil!' And he said that to them because he loved them.

This does not mean that liking may not be a part of loving, only that it doesn't have to be. Sometimes liking follows on the heels of loving. It is hard to work for people's well-being very long without coming in the end to rather like them too. [Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1993), pp. 64-65.]

Prayer:

Lord, help us to show love for all others. This is what separates your children from the world. Help us to be in this world but through your love, not of this world. Amen.

Day 40 – March 29th

"My God, My God"

Matthew 27:46

"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As Christ speaks those words, he too is in the wilderness. He speaks them when all is lost. He speaks them when there is nothing even he can hear except for the croak of his own voice and when as far as even he can see there is no God to hear him. And in a way his words are a love song, the greatest love song of them all. In a way his words are the words we all of us must speak before we know what it means to love God as we are commanded to love him.

'My God, *my* God.' Though God is not there for him to see or hear, he calls on him still because he can do no other. Not even the cross, not even death, not even life, can destroy his love for God. Not even God can destroy his love for God because the love he loves God with is God's love empowering him to love in return with all his heart even when his heart is all but broken." [Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p.44.]

We like to make up stories and excuses for this cry of forsakenness. We remember the 21st Psalm and so figure that Jesus is singing it because it is a psalm that reminds us in the end of God's

Lordship. But what man being crucified ever sang a psalm? No, I believe the truth is that we do not want to see what is happening. We do not want to see a forsaken Jesus on the cross, feeling as if the most important being in the world, his Father, God, has turned away. We don't like that because it would make the cross so black, and so discouraging that we might see what our sin really did to Jesus.

Wake up, and realize that this is the price paid by our Savior for OUR sins.

Prayer:

Forgive us O Lord, for we have sinned. So black are the stains our failure and iniquity that we can do nothing more than fall down before the cross and lay in the mud. Forgive us for what we have done to your son. Grant us your love and grace, despite the fact we don't deserve it. In the name of the one who was forsaken for us, Jesus. Amen.

Day 41 – March 30th

“Not What I will . . .”

Mark 14: 32-42

“‘What you are going to do,’ Jesus says, ‘do quickly.’ What Judas is going to do, he does in a garden, but though he goes about it as quickly as he can, there is a little time to wait before he gets there. It is night, and they are all tired. Jesus tells them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,’ and then asks the disciples to stay and watch for him while he goes off to pray. One thinks of the stirring and noble way others have met their deaths - the equanimity of Socrates as he raised the hemlock to his lips, the exaltation of Joan as they bound her to the stake, Nathan Hale’s, ‘I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.’ Jesus sounds like none of them. Maybe it is because it is to the ones who are most full alive that death comes most unbearably. His prayer is, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will but what thou wilt,’ this tormented muddle of a prayer which Luke says made him sweat until it ‘became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.’ He went back to find some solace in the company of his friends then, but he found them all asleep when he got there. ‘The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak,’ he said, and you feel that it was to himself that he was saying it as well as to them.”

[Buechner, Faces of Jesus, pp. 148-150.]

What a scene of unbelievable agony in the garden. If you believe that Jesus found it easy to just give up and go through with the cross because he was God in flesh, think again. Read the passage once more. What do you see? The struggle between the pathway to the cross and the way out of the garden is so intense that Luke tells us Jesus’ bled.

How dare we think that this week, this time in the garden, this cross we are on the road to is an easy decision! How dare we!

Prayer:

Forgive us God for we sometimes do not recognize the sheer price paid by you for our grace. The anguish caused your son, our savior is excruciating to behold. But we must not turn away. We must continue down the pathway He chose. Because his path must be our own. In the Holy name of the one who endured the garden that we might have life, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Day 42 – March 31st

"Betrayal"

Mark 14:43-50

"The soldiers are there with their swords and lanterns. The high priest's slave is whimpering over his wounded hear. There can be no doubt in Jesus' mind what the kiss of Judas means, but it is Judas that he is blessing, and Judas that he is prepared to go out and die for now. Judas is only the first in a procession of betrayers two thousand years long. If Jesus were exclude him from the possibility of his love and forgiveness, to one degree or another he would have to exclude mankind.

Maybe this is all in the mind of Jesus as he stands there with his eyes closed, or possibly there is nothing in his mind at all. As he feels his friend's lips graze his cheek, for an instant maybe he feels nothing else. It is another of his last times. On this last evening of his life he has eaten his last meal, and this is the last time that he will ever feel the touch of another human being except in torment. It is not the Lamb of God and his butcher who meet here, but two old friends embracing in a garden because they both of them know that they will never see one another again." [Buechner, Faces of Jesus, pp. 148-150.]

And Satan entered Judas we are told in the earliest part of the gospels. Such a description makes it so easy for us to forget about him. When we read it, we think of the Exorcist. In truth, Judas was the treasurer of the group and chosen by Jesus as a disciple. He sat at the seat of honor at the Passover and he had at least a mathematical head on his shoulders.

But like us, when Satan enters it is rarely with foaming at the mouth and green stuff. It is usually subtle and even disguised as doing the right thing. But Judas sold Jesus and I am not sure about your opinion but as far as I am concerned, it would be hard for me to forgive such a betrayal.

And yet, I am just as convinced by the nature of God's grace that had Judas sought forgiveness, he could have found it. The grace of God covered up the betrayal of all of them, Peter, James, all of them. But Judas hanged himself instead. Sometimes, people don't want forgiveness. What if Judas had waited on the grace of Easter's Dawn?

Prayer:

Create in me a heart that yearns for your forgiving touch Father. Create within me a heart that seeks your grace. Help me to be aware that just like Judas and Peter, I am capable of betraying you. But I pray you will help keep the temptation away. Amen.

Day 43 – April 1st**“Broken and Spilled Out” (part 2)**

Mark 15: 34-37

I had a professor at Southern Seminary whose name was Daniel Aleshire. Dr. Aleshire taught my counseling course and one day he gave the most interesting devotional. It was at Easter time, and the class was quiet as Dr. Aleshire began to share a story about his small two-year-old child.

The parents had given this boy a pop-up book about Jesus. He loved that book, but like most two-year-olds, he had a tendency to play rough with things. One day, Aleshire’s son took a nap and when Dr. Aleshire returned to his son’s room he saw something. There were pieces of the pop-up book everywhere. The little boy held out his hands, holding some of the pieces he looked at his father’s eyes and said, “Jesus broke, Daddy. Jesus Broke.”

That is what has happened in these verses. Jesus broke, Daddy. Jesus broke.

He broke for you and me. He is broken and shattered from the inside - out. This was more than death, it was blackest day in the history of this world of ours.

As I said in an earlier devotional, we sometimes have to be broken so that God’s love can flow out. Jesus is broken so that we can see the love of the eternal Holy God, pour forth on the dark stains of humanities’ sins. It doesn’t get more broken than this.

Prayer:

Words cannot describe Lord, what I feel about your son’s brokenness. When I look upon the cross I see what has been done for me. Yet I look at my life and see so little that I have done for your son. Lead me to follow down the road of the Via Delarosa with your son. Don’t allow me to turn back from my Lenten journey, but instead move on, closer to the cross. Amen.

Day 44 – April 2nd**“Maundy Thursday”****“Come to the Table”**

Mark 14:18-42

*Come to the table
And savor the sight,
The wine and the bread that was broken.*

*And all have been welcome to come
 If they might,
 Accept as their own these two tokens.
 The bread is His body.
 The wine is the blood.
 And the One who provides them is true.
 He freely offers.
 We freely receive.
 To accept and believe Him is all we must do.
 Come to the table*

*And taste of the glory
 And savor the sorrow;
 He's dying tomorrow.
 The hand that is breaking the bread
 Soon will be broken.
 And here at the table
 Sit those who have loved Him,
 One is a traitor and one will deny,
 Though He's lived His life for them all
 And for all be crucified.
 Come to the table
 He's prepared for you
 The bread of forgiveness, the wine of release.
 Come to the table and sit down beside Him.
 The Savior wants you to join in the feast.*

*Come to the table
 And see in His eyes
 The love that the Father has spoken.
 And know you are welcome,
 Whatever your crime,
 Though every commandment you've broken.
 For He's come to love you
 And not to condemn,
 And He offers a pardon of peace.
 If you'll come to the table,
 You'll feel in your heart
 The greatest forgiveness,
 The greatest release. [Card, Immanuel, p.145-146.]*

Prayer:

We come to the table of grace today Lord. Come looking for forgiveness. We do not deserve to be here and yet you call to us anyhow. We thank you for what you share with us at this place. In the name of the head of your table we pray. Amen.

“Good Friday”

John 3:16

“God so loved the world,’ John writes, ‘that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’ That is to say that God so loved the world that gave his only son even to this obscene horror; so loved the world that in some ultimately indescribable way and at some ultimately immeasurable cost he gave the world himself. Out of his terrible death, John says, came eternal life not just in the sense of resurrection to life after death but in the sense of life so precious even this side of death that to live it is to stand with one foot already in eternity. To participate in the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ is to live already in his kingdom. This is the essence of the Christian message, the heart of the Good News, and it is why the cross has become the chief Christian symbol. A cross of all things - a guillotine, a gallows - but the cross at the same time as the crossroads of eternity and time, as the place where such a mighty heart was broken that the healing power of God himself could flow through it into a slick and broken world. It was for this reason that of all the possible words they could have used to describe the day of his death, the word they settle on was ‘good.’ *Good Friday.*” [Buechner, Faces of Jesus, pp. 176-179.]

God so loved. What an all encompassing, all powerful, all forgiving love we witness to on this cruel cross. Stand back and take the time today to contemplate the cross. Not the one’s we hang around our necks. Not even the one in our sanctuary. But a rough, crooked, blood stained cross. Then the next time you begin to wonder if God really does love you, you will have a mental image to recall and remind you that yes, He does.

Prayer:

How black a day for you our savior, Lord. Yet in the darkness of this day, You Lord show us the amount of love, the immeasurable depth to which you go to bring us salvation. Our Lenten journey has arrived to this place and we are repulsed by its horror. Yet we are also consumed by the love you share. Give us the strength to hang on Lord. Until you rejoin us again. In the name of Christ the crucified one. Amen.

Day 46 – April 4th

“Twenty-Four Hours Till Dawn”

Mark 15:46-47

Tony Campolo tells the interesting story of the sermon his preacher gave on a Good Friday. It went something like this: “It was Friday, the sun was as black as pitch and my Jesus was dead on the tree. But they didn’t know it was only Friday. Sunday’s a Coming. Friday, Satan is laughing and

having a field day. He says, 'as things are they shall always be, you can't change nothing in this world of mine.' But he didn't know it was only Friday, Sunday's a coming. Friday, the forces of darkness have won over. Mary is crying and the disciples are all hiding but they didn't know, it was only Friday. Sunday is a coming."

On and on the preacher went with the cadence of all great African-American preachers. There is a lot of truth to those thoughts. We sit on this side of glory and still see the evil that surrounds the cross. Children are still abducted and murdered. People still are oppressed and run over by the haves who wield their power. Death and disease still come and take people who live in the prime ages of living. But we must take heart, even as Jesus is laid in the tomb. It's only Friday, Sunday is Coming.

The dawn has not yet broke. It's still Saturday. In many societies, particularly Eastern Orthodox and here in the United States, there is a ritual called the Sunrise service. Maybe this Easter morning it would do you well to awaken just before dawn. Just look out and watch as the orange glow of a new dawn emerges. It is a dawn that signals more than another Sunday. A dawn that brings life from death. A dawn that separates the horror of Friday from the hope of Sunday.

Prayer:

This is it Lord. We have come so far on this journey. We await your resurrection and stand ready to follow you. Ready to know that it will not always be Friday or even Saturday. But we live knowing that Sunday is a coming. Coming in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 47 – April 5th

Easter Sunday

"The Risen Christ"

Mark 16:1-8

"As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. Just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now

he appears in his resurrection as the pauper, the prisoner, the stranger, appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or to ignore. The risen Christ is Christ risen in his glory and enthroned in all this glorious canvas, stained glass, mosaic as Redeemer and Judge. But he is also Christ risen in the shabby hearts of those who, although they have never touched the mark of the nails, have been themselves so touched by him that they believe anyway. However faded and threadbare, what they have seen of him is at least enough to get their bearings by." [Buechner, *Faces of Jesus*, pp. 283-284.]

"He isn't there, He has arisen!" What a wonderful and glorious morning! Look at what the angel says to the women. Go and tell Peter and the other disciples. What words of forgiveness! Words that tell not only Peter but us that the very thing that awaits you and I this morning at the empty tomb is the forgiveness of Christ. Peter would receive Jesus' forgiving words and then lead the others to serving Christ. Down the road set before them. Carrying the cross. Even to a Roman hillside where Peter would lay down on his cross as they ended his earthly life. A life that since that Easter morning, he had given to his Lord.

May we do likewise in our lives. Serving the least of these, for in so doing, we serve Christ.

Prayer:

Almighty and loving God, you have brought Jesus back from the dead and secured the hope of all who live that you promise eternity beyond the bounds of this existence. Lord, as you have led us down this Lenten journey, we leave the tomb today, refreshed and recommitted to serving others in your name and to building your kingdom with you. In the name of our savior, the risen Lord, Amen.