



40 Days

Greeting

I Claimed by Christ

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IV Family of God

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Benediction

Day I

Sisters and brothers,

Greetings in the name of Christ! We rejoice in your good confession, in this life of repentance you have chosen, in your first steps as a disciple of Jesus. Many people have brought you to this day, and many more will walk alongside you on this path we pray will lead you further into God's kingdom. You are not alone.

One Sunday night in January 1990, I was standing in the baptistery of our little church in southeast Texas with water up to my chest. I had just turned 13 a few weeks ago and went forward that night to be baptized. My dad stood beside me, his hand on my back, as he addressed me in front of the congregation: "Many have died for this confession . . ." He went on to affirm my belief in Jesus as the Son of God and plunged me under the water. Of the many words that were spoken that night, I remember these the most—"Many have died . . ." Nearly 30 years later, I can still hear those words, and with three decades of life to help me understand, I have learned how true they are. No, I obviously haven't died, but it hasn't been easy. Other Christians around the world *have* died for their faith. I try to remember them when I think I'm in a hard place. And of course, I pray that I will always keep the first martyr in mind, the one whose death destroyed its power.

From our Jesus, we learn that the road you walk will sometimes be steep. Wherever the kingdom of God stands in the world, it creates resistance. Sometimes our faith demands we resist people, powers, and systems outside us. At other times, we have to resist thoughts and desires inside our very own hearts that want distance from God's rule. It is a struggle that Jesus knows and that others around you know—your parents, friends, fellow Christians. I hope and pray that this little book will give you a push, a little wind at your back to help you walk. These 40 days will not approach the difficulty Jesus faced when he was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism, but perhaps this time will strengthen you to withstand your next challenges as a young Christian. We love you, we cherish you, and we will do everything we can with the strength God has given us to stand alongside you, encourage you, teach and train you, disciple you, and even carry you when you are weak. This is going to be hard. You are not alone. We love you. Resist. Resist. Resist. In the name of Christ, stand with us that together we may become for one another and for this longing world the presence of Christ.

Grace and peace,

Ryan Sullenberger

Day I

Take some time today to write about the many people who have helped you become a Christian. Who are they? How did they lead you to this point? You might think of particular times when they encouraged you, taught you something, or answered a question you had.

Remember

Before we get into the readings, it would be helpful to reflect on the day of your baptism. What was the date? Who was there? What kinds of thoughts were going through your mind throughout the day? Do you remember particular conversations you had with other people? Try to recall as much as you can. Was there one feeling, thought, or impression that summarized this day for you?

I
Claimed by Christ

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

I once had a conversation with a believer who was an alcoholic. Years of excessive drinking had wrecked his body, and although he had been clean for some time, he lived in regular fear of falling back into his addiction. “If I start drinking again,” he said, “I’ll be dead within a week.” While I would never wish this man’s condition on anybody, I had to respect the urgent clarity that his struggle gave to him. We don’t normally see the connection between sin and death.

At the end of Romans 6, Paul says that “the wages of sin is death.” One leads naturally to the other. Why is that? The bible’s word for “sin” means literally, “missing the mark.” It’s the image of an arrow mid-flight, but instead of heading towards the target, it’s heading somewhere else. We are the arrow, and God is our target, the goal and endpoint of our thoughts and actions. He is our creator and sustainer, the one who loves us and gives us life at every moment. When we sin – that is, when we direct our thoughts and actions away from God – we turn away from life itself. That’s why when God warned Adam and Eve against disobedience in the garden, he said, “you shall surely die.”

Sin has an addictive quality. Though we may enter it voluntarily, we soon become enslaved to it, like an alcoholic who can’t stop drinking. Then we are captives not only to sin, but also to death. Like prisoners being hauled to the gallows, we need a rescue. Enter Christ, our Savior. Jesus died to break the chains of our sin, and defeated death as well when he rose from the tomb. “Come with me,” he says to us, so we unite ourselves to him in baptism. This is the beginning of our rescue. Now, day by day, we must make the choice to be united to Christ, to be molded into his image, to follow his lead away from sin and death, and towards life in God. This is the hard work of our salvation, but we persevere because we know that, united to him, we will safely reach the goal.

Day 3

Reflection Questions

I. Today and every day, ask yourself this question: "Do I unite myself to Christ?" Uniting with Christ often requires dying to ourselves. What will you do today to be united to him?

2. Have you ever experienced the addictive nature of sin? How about the freedom of putting away a bad habit? If you continue to be ensnared by some recurring sin, there are many Christians who have been there, too, and can help you. Talk to someone you know and trust about it.

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'

Deep are the waters of baptism. In the days and months leading up to your good confession, you heard many people discuss what it means to be baptized: forgiveness of sins, receiving the Holy Spirit, a clean conscience, new life, being part of the church, salvation. Sometimes it's hard to pull it all together. We learn in Acts 2 that all of these incredible blessings, every breath of new life, every second of peace and forgiveness, and the embrace of the strong arms of the church are all born from one source, and it is the name of Jesus.

I doubt that every one of these 3000 Jews baptized that day fully understood what was going to happen. Peter's sermon cut like a dagger: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah." Shattered, they beg Peter, "What should we do?" Translation: "Is there *any way* we can get back to God?" The way back, Peter says, is repentance (which literally means to turn around, reverse the direction of your life) and baptism *in the name* of Jesus. At these words, they would have known how deep the water is—he's talking about possession. In the ancient world, *in the name* was a term for ownership. When you bought something, it was put into your name. It's similar to the way we buy homes or cars, which we own under our name—these things are under our control. You belong to Jesus and no one else. Christ owns you.

This phrase *in the name* also meant possession in the way one spirit has power over another, like demonic possession. As the story of the man with many demons unfolds in Luke 8:26-39, a standoff between Jesus and the possessed man comes to a climax in contest of names. The man immediately knows who Jesus is: "Son of the Most High God". Jesus then demands to know his name. "Legion," he says. Jesus is able to drive the demons out of this man because his name carries more power—the power of Almighty God. When you were baptized into the name of Jesus, Jesus took control. Your spirit is under his command. You have been mastered by the divine Spirit, Son of the Almighty, Lord of spirits, the one who has triumphed over every dark power. That's right—you are possessed by Christ. In his name you are claimed, protected, chosen, sealed by the Holy Spirit, illuminated, forgiven, liberated, guided, healed, born into the church, convicted, admonished, encouraged, redeemed, saved. The waters are deep, and he has pulled you under. Sovereign is the power of his name. Christ consume you. Christ consume you. Christ consume you.

Day 4

Reflection Questions:

1. Which image of possession are you drawn to most? Ownership or spiritual control? Why?

2. Imagine that people suddenly began adding “Jesus” to your name when they address you. How might that change the way you act toward them? What does it mean to wear the name of Christ?

Day 5

Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit down, Christ where I arise.

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me.

Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

Salvation is of Christ, Salvation is of the Lord,
may your salvation be ever with us Lord.

Prayer from the breastplate of St. Patrick

Reflection: Where have you seen Christ today?

Galatians 3:27-29

Day 6

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.”

Humans have always been divisive. Our current culture is full of divisions including political parties, race, gender, and religion. Christians in the early church also experienced divisiveness. As God’s “chosen people”, Jews viewed Gentiles as outside of God’s covenant; even within the Jewish people, there were major sects and divisions. Females could not vote or hold office, and slaves were treated as property, not people. Early Christians had to fight hard against these divisions to maintain a unified church that included slaves, women, and Gentiles. Paul’s letter to the Gentiles reminds them that in Christ, all are equal.

I remember attending a worship service at a multi-cultural church in Italy as a young adult. Three languages (Twi, spoken in Ghana, Italian, and English) were spoken throughout the service, and the small building was filled with people from different life stages, cultures, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds. The people gathered in that building had very little in common, but we were brought together because of a shared love for Jesus (and for food; the potluck after worship was one of the most memorable meals of my life). Church is living life with people we might not ever spend time with otherwise. Christ brings diverse people together and unites us as equal sisters and brothers, all of us adopted by God through Jesus.

Jesus is the great equalizer. He spent his ministry elevating members of society that had little status: the blind, the sick, children, the poor, Samaritans, and women, to name a few. His greatest desire was for his believers to be one (John 17:21). When we are baptized, we take off the labels the world puts on us and put on the identity of Christ. Because we all share the same identity as Christ image-bearers, we are all equal and unified, despite our differences.

Beth Conway

Day 6

Reflection Questions:

- I. Where do you see divisions in your life? What specific action can you take this week to bring unity to those around you?
 - II. Join Christ in his prayer for unity by praying through John 17:20-26.

There is a song that I have loved for as long as I can remember whose only lyrics are the words of Galatians 2:20. *"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ, liveth in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."* Growing up, I loved the way we sang the song. We would start at a normal, reasonable pace or even at an exaggerated slow pace. Each time through the verse we would sing faster. Faster and faster until some couldn't keep up and singers would drop away. Some would continue, faster and faster until the song would devolve into giggles. It was a playful joyous song.

It still is, but it's different now. To wrestle less with the speed and pacing of the song and more with what it means to be crucified with Christ adds something new. I am convinced that Jesus' birth is the beginning of his crucifixion. It is in his birth that we see the beginnings of sacrifice. In his birth, Jesus leaves glory and power to be present with the poor, the oppressed, the sinful and the weak. These are the first steps to the Cross. His birth reminds us that salvation is not just in Jesus' death but in his life, that a life spent in the presence of the poor, the oppressed, the sinful and the weak, is a crucified life.

A life lived by faith in the Son of God is a life of presence. It is a life of presence with those who Christ left glory and power for at his birth, and it is a life of promised presence as Christ lives in us. But it is still a life lived in the flesh, a flesh that struggles to keep up with the pace of the song. And even now, there is no greater joy than the voices of the lives of the Children of God straining to keep up with his song.

Reflection Questions:

1. What does it mean to be crucified with Christ?

2. What does it mean for Christ to live in you?

3. What does it mean to live by faith?

"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

In the midst of poverty, despair, oppression, and possibly even persecution, John comforts Christians with these words. For many, it felt like the church was on the losing side of history. The Roman Empire appeared to hold all the power. At times, the Christians felt like losers. Evil seemed to be stronger than good. Wrong overshadowed right. Would Jesus and his people be able to overcome? John says, "YES."

This verse is personal for me. As a teenager, I struggled considerably with anxiety. I worried a lot. I harbored considerable fear for the future. Would I make the grade? Would I make the team? Would I find a date? Would I get the scholarship? Would I find a job? In response, my second mother shared this verse with me. When I was afraid, she taught me to repeat this over and over. "*The power that is in me is greater than the power that is in the world.*" Honestly, every time I repeated it, I felt better. Even now, in my "valley" moments, I find myself repeating these words.

In I John, the word "world" represents the forces of evil in the world. It does not mean every person in the world, but rather, it references all the negativity out there. "The one who is in the world" represents the forces of evil, the principalities of evil, and specifically Satan. The acknowledgement of this might scare us, but remember John's point-God is inside of you. Think of God living inside the temple. Think of God inside pregnant Mary. Think of the Holy Spirit coming on Christians like fire at Pentecost. God is inside of you in the same way. God is more powerful than evil. God is inside of you. Therefore, you are more powerful than evil.

Because of this, you will overcome evil. Today, it might seem like evil is winning. You may even have long seasons where victory seems improbable. But, in the end, Jesus conquers evil. We can trust this promise. A preacher named Charles Albert Tindley once wrote a gospel hymn called "I'll Overcome Someday." Later, the song "We Shall Overcome" descended from Tindley's hymn and became a key theme of the Civil Rights movement. One verse cries out over and over, "We are not afraid." (you can find songs on YouTube)

Can we sing this? Do not fear. Christ has claimed you. God lives inside of you.

Day 8

Reflection:

- I. In the coming week, every time you feel afraid or anxious, repeat, "*the one who is in me is greater than the one who is in the world.*" Keep a list of these things that scare you. (friend problems, school stress, financial issues, health scares, world events, etc.) Consider adding these things to your daily prayer list.



Claimed by Christ

Free journal space: Questions? Thoughts? Insights?

II

A New Allegiance

The Opening of Eyes

by David Whyte

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing of light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
 I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
 waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
Seen for the silence they hold.
 It is the heart after years
 of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
 as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
 opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

One of my favorite writers, Will Campbell, believes that this passage is one of, if not the, most important sections in all of scripture. He believes that it shows us and invites us to the end of the story in a way that is unique in scripture. Will was one of the few white ministers who partnered with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement, so the beginning of the passage that exhorts us not to view anyone "from a worldly point of view" resonated with him. The "worldly" divisions of race and nationality and wealth that so divided the world in the 60s and continue to divide us now, are not just unimportant, but they are contrary to what we are called to be.

God has created something new and in doing that, verse 18 says that he has "reconciled us to himself through Christ." This phrase amazed Campbell because of the tense of the verb reconciled. It is in the past tense, and that means whatever the action of the verb is, it is completed, it is done. God has reconciled. He is not going to reconcile, He is not reconciling, He has reconciled. That is hard to wrap your mind around. With poverty and hunger, war and hate, racism and sexism everywhere we turn, it is often difficult to believe that the reconciliation that God has promised is past tense. But that is the promise in this scripture. The hate and racism and violence in our world are caused by viewing things and people from the "worldly point of view" that denies the new creation that Christ has created in us.

And we have a role in this. God has given to us "the ministry of reconciliation". This means that we view the world and the people in it from a "kingdom" view and not a "worldly" view. It means that because we have been reconciled through Christ, we act like it. We have been reconciled to our enemies, and we must act like it by loving them. We have been reconciled to the poor, and we must act like it by sharing all we have with them. We have been reconciled to the foreigner and we must act like it by welcoming them.

We must never accept the "worldly view" that we must fear, hate and be at odds with others. We must constantly look for ways to see the world through the eyes of God and live in the world reconciled to Him through Christ.

Randy Spivey

Reflection Questions:

1. What are examples of the "worldly view" that the Corinthian writer warns us of?

2. What does reconciliation mean?

3. What does it mean to be a part of a ministry of reconciliation?

A guide to praying the scriptures: Lectio Divina

There are many ways to hear the voice of God. One way we do that is to read and study the Bible. We concentrate on what things mean and try to understand what these words are saying to us. Another way we can listen to God's voice is to *pray* the scriptures. This may sound a bit strange. How can we pray the word of God?

A long time ago, Christians would sometimes sit down with a short passage of the Bible and read it over and over several times (like the way we often read our favorite verses). Then they would close their eyes in silence and let those words fill their hearts and minds. Eventually, a word or phrase would arise from that passage and remain. Holding this word or phrase in their heart, they might ask God what he is calling them to know or do from that word. A short time of meditating on a response to the word may follow. Somewhere along the way, the mind may go silent: not empty, but still. The word disappears, and every stray thought and distraction flees away except for the sense that one is sitting in the very presence of God. This was the practice of Lectio Divina (divine reading), a way Christians prayed the scriptures to hear the voice of God.

Here's a short outline of Lectio Divina:

1. Lectio: Read over the passage slowly several times
2. Meditatio: A word or phrase will arise from this passage. Let it resonate in your mind and heart. Hold this word in your mind and return to it over and over.
3. Oratio: You may feel God is calling you to respond to that word: to see something differently, to repent, to receive his mercy, to help someone, etc. Take note of this.
4. Contemplatio: All noise and thoughts disappear. Your mind and heart are quiet, sitting in the loving presence of God.

These moments in Lectio are not meant to be a strict sequence. Once the passage is read, you will pass through the other stages in no particular order, and you may stay in one place longer than in others. The last stage, contemplation, may also not come very often, particularly if we have a lot of chatter or distractions in our minds. Please also go easy on yourself if you find some of this difficult. You'll have moments of clarity and other times when there's so much noise in your head you feel like you're getting nowhere. Just gently try to return to the passage. If you fall asleep, don't worry. You probably needed the rest more!

A good way to begin Lectio is with the seven “I am” statements in John. Jesus uses several images in John to tell us who he is. Praying these passages can bring us closer to the divine presence of Christ, who calls to us every day. Look over the Lectio outline and pray over these passages. It should take maybe 15-20 minutes for each day. Use the space on the page to write down your reflections on your prayer: how each day went, what was easy or hard, what you heard in your prayer, what you feel called to do. I would also encourage you to share with friends and listen to one another’s experiences after praying these passages. Blessings on your prayer!

“I am the bread of life.

He who comes to me will never go hungry,
and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 6:35

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness,
but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the gate;
whoever enters through me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

John 10:9

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
3. Oratio: Respond to the word
4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

John 10:11

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

John 11:25-26

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 14:6

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

“I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5

1. Lectio: Read the passage slowly
2. Meditatio: Meditate on the divine word
 3. Oratio: Respond to the word
 4. Contemplatio: Rest with God

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Bearing the light of God is not an easy matter. When we contemplate divine light, we are readily drawn to images of comfort, peace, and joy: baby Jesus lying in a manger, angels aglow with the resurrection triumph, or the comfort and safety of our own lives. There is, however, another angle at which we discern how in other moments this light is not at all safe and blissful. It can be altogether uncontrollable and electrifying. This is the horizon of the Transfiguration. It is the glory of the Tabor light.

When Jesus was lit up by the presence of God on the mountain, it was not a light show for the disciples. Elijah and Moses appear in conversation with Jesus but vanish with the divine word: "Listen to him!" Why? By this point, the weight of Jesus' imminent death hangs like a pall over the Gospel. The transfiguration story is preceded and followed by blunt predictions of his death and resurrection. Verse 31 tells us Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah about his departure in Jerusalem—meaning his crucifixion. That long road to the city will begin in 9:51. "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." This mountain, afire with the glory of God, will light his path to the cross.

Contrary to what we expect, we are not told to listen to Christ for his power. We will listen to Jesus because God has so marked him to suffer, not because he performs miracles, feeds the hungry, speaks beautiful words or lives simply. No, the radiance is not a spotlight for a conquering king. He has been illuminated by divine suffering. It is a sobering and haunting light, which by the overshadowing of Christ will gradually invade us as well. Transfiguration is how God illuminates your baptism with the suffering of Christ. Let us listen in those waters and be changed by the one who by the cross was given the voice of God.

Day 18

Reflection Questions:

- I. If you were there with the disciples when Jesus was glorified, what would you have done? What would you have said to Jesus?
 - II. Christians often talk about listening to God in the Bible or through other people or through their own prayer. What have you heard Christ say to you since your conversion? Listen for his voice in these days.

"Our Father who is in Heaven, Hallowed be Your name."

Our Father's name is holy. He adopted you as an heir - therefore your name is holy. Be holy.

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

The "kingdom" is the church, not heaven. When Christ prayed this, He knew His role in the church. We pray this knowing our role as members of the kingdom. When praying this, you are telling God that you will bring the kingdom to earth as He has intended. You are acknowledging your role in God's will.

"Give us this day our daily bread."

Ask God for blessings: meals, clothes, shelter... everything! In doing so, you establish the proper relationship with our Creator and Sustainer and can model how to ask for, give, and receive blessings for potential heirs to whom you will bring the kingdom.

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Forgiveness allows us to be part of the kingdom that we pray will come! We can understand the overwhelming depth, love, and sacrifice of God's forgiveness best by forgiving others – it is God's will that we do this. Forgive others. Receive God's wonderful forgiveness.

"And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Everything mentioned thus far can be tempting: a holy name in a blessed kingdom, daily blessings, forgiveness of debts. We pray these blessings are used with His guidance and to do His will.

"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

The kingdom (the church) is God's: powerful, glorious, eternal. Pray that it comes. Pray for it to come through you.

Reflection Question:

How are you bringing the powerful, glorious, and eternal kingdom to earth?



III

Way of the Kingdom

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe the good news! As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come follow me,” Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him.

A noun is a “person, place, thing, or idea.” It's easy to understand person-place-or-thing-nouns because we experience them with our five senses, but it's harder to understand ideas because they can't be touched.

So it may be hard to grasp ideas like “repentance,” “belief,” “good news,” and “Kingdom of God.” But is easier to imagine a person (Jesus) walking around a place (Galilee) talking to fishermen, making a good thing happen. He tells the fishermen something so good, they drop their nets, leave behind their work, say good-bye to their family, and follow him to a place that isn't on any map -- the Kingdom of God.

The person-place-and-thing-nouns in this story help explain ideas like “repentance.” Repentance is about feeling sorry for bad choices. It leads to giving up an old thing for a new thing, an okay thing for a great thing, a thing that hurts for a thing that heals. It means leaving behind things that trap us so we can follow Jesus to a place of freedom, a place that can't be drawn on a map.

This story also tells how to share good news. Sometimes it's fine to talk about “repentance” and “belief,” but we have another option when those ideas feel out of reach: we can be the kind of people who walk through a place and make good news happen. Is someone cold? Buy him something warm to drink. Is someone alone and scared? Smile, sit nearby, and ask a question that makes her know she is important. Is someone picking up trash while the crowd tosses it on the ground? Help him finish the job. When these people tell the story of their day, there will be good news in it.

To be like Jesus, be a noun: be a person in a place, making good news happen.

Day 2I

Reflection Questions

- I. What does “repentance” look like in your own life? Who are the people who help you make good choices? Where can you go when you need to hear good news? What are some of the things you need to leave behind so that you are free to follow Jesus?
 2. What have others done to add good news to the story of your life? What have you done recently to add good news to someone else’s life?

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Sermon on the Mount is an invitation to walk through the house of God, to look around and see what life is like under God's rule. It begins with a series of blessings, includes a rule of life for those that dwell there, has a prayer right in the middle (Lord's Prayer), and ends with guidance on how we can build on Christ's foundation.

As the door to this house opens, Christ greets us with the divine blessing: the Beatitudes. Each begins with the same words: "Blessed are . . ." You'll notice that those on whom God's blessing falls are not the powerful and wealthy but rather the weak and simple—the poor in spirit . . . the mournful . . . meek . . . those hungry for righteousness . . . merciful . . . pure in heart . . . persecuted. Jesus is saying here that these folks inhabit God's house. Curiously, you may also see that there are no *commands* here. We aren't told directly to *be* poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, thirst for righteousness, etc. Why? What does this tell us?

It tells us that God's kingdom is bigger than any one of us. Jesus is saying there are people out there already living in God's house. God's kingdom is already on the ground, and his blessing is falling freely on those who walk beneath it. So he invites us to come along with a world that precedes our own obedience. Come on in, and live with us, and to the extent that you share this life, you shall also be blessed. We may ask ourselves, "How do I live in a way that affirms God's blessing on the poor in spirit?" "How do I act if God blesses the meek, the merciful, and those who mourn?" "How can my life contribute to God's blessing on peacemakers and those who suffer for Christ's sake?"

Day 22

This may mean any of a number of things for us. We may seek ministry to those in poverty, support those who are ill, deepen our love for the lost, suffer alongside the oppressed, remember and learn from those who have been martyred for Jesus' name.

As we join God's work in the world, his blessing will shape us into the kind of people who will truly inherit the kingdom. God's house is vast, there are many rooms, and Christ bids us to enter.

Ryan Sullenberger

Reflection Questions:

- I. Which of these beatitudes speaks to you most powerfully? Write it down. What may God be calling you to do, or how is he asking you to live through this beatitude?

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Have you ever taken a bite of food and immediately reached for the salt shaker? Or for a glass of water? Salt is a seasoning people can't help but notice. We notice when it's present, and we notice when it's missing. Likewise, have you ever tried to go to sleep with the lights on? Or stubbed your toe while fumbling around in the dark looking for something? Light cannot be ignored; we know when we want it, and we know when we don't.

Salt and light are naturally distinctive, and it's the same for the follower of Jesus. As you pray and repent day by day in secret, you will be transformed into the image of Christ, and you, too, will begin to stand out. You won't talk quite the same. You might dress differently. The distractions your friends still find captivating will loosen their grip on you, and you'll start to spend your attention, time, and money in ways that others do not. As you become less concerned about the opinions of the world, your interactions with others will more reflect the love of Christ. You will replace flattery with kindness, distraction with presence, selfishness with acts of mercy, and retaliation with prayers. Such a transformation has no need to be announced with trumpets. Good works performed in quiet humility will shine a light the world cannot ignore.

Of course, the world would rather that you didn't stand out. "Believe anything you want, so long as you keep living like the rest of us." But the Christian faith is not primarily what we *think*, it's what we *do*. It manifests in our lives, not in our heads. The world wants to push a basket over your light, so it's going to try to distract you or embarrass you. Push back. Give yourself to prayer, and to worship. Let God's light shine on the dark places in your heart, and as your heart is transformed, nothing will prevent your own light from shining.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever congratulated yourself for having the right opinion on an issue that you have never actually done anything about? How can you do to bring your faith out of the realm of opinions (your head), and into the realm of actions (your life)?

2. Think of one thing, good or bad, that distracts you from being salt and light in the world. Resolve to give it up for an entire week. Whether you succeed or fail, it will be an opportunity to learn.

Praying with the Imagination

Day 24

Ignatius of Loyola was a Christian who lived several hundred years ago. He developed a way to help people pray with the imagination. Start off with the first step in Lectio Divina: read the passage slowly several times. Then close your eyes and prayerfully use your imagination to walk around in the scene for several minutes. What do you see? What do you hear? Smell? Whom are you standing next to? What does Jesus look like? Are you touching anything or anyone here? Is anyone addressing you?

Try this with the passage below about Jesus calming the storm. When you are done, write down what you experience.

"On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

Mark 4:35-41

The Christian faith consists of three loves: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of enemy. We're all familiar with the first two together because Jesus names them as the greatest commandments. I mention love of enemy separately because it is a love easy for us to overlook, ignore, or flat out disobey. We learn from the parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus includes enemies as neighbors precisely because we are prone to think of neighbors only as the people we like or *are like*. He says in Matthew 5:46-47 that if you want to imitate God, you must go beyond loving those who love you and saying hello to those who will smile at you. We are good at loving our friends at work and school. So what? Jesus says we're no different from pagans that way. Want to know what really sets Christians apart? Reach across the table to the kid makes fun of you. Refuse to return insults to that aggressive player on your arch rival's team. Walk away from a fight when the other person started it and your knuckles are turning white on a clinched fist. Now we're talking.

"Love your enemies." Jesus, that's not easy. It may well be one of the most defining marks of Christian life, as the gospel story hinges on this very love—a story in which God, instead of annihilating a world of enemies (including us), suffers it into redemption. Our entire existence, and the continuation of the world, stands on God's love of enemy.

So who is my enemy? And do I really have enemies? For some of us, this is harder to answer than for others. We think of enemies as only people who wish us harm. Some Christians have these kinds of enemies indeed. Their enemies are near and dangerous, and their lives are truly at risk. Even today, many Christians die at the hands of their enemies. It is a threat Jesus understood, lived, and ultimately paid for with his life. Remember his prayer as the guards were driving the nails into his hands: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Others of us have been hurt by people in fights or arguments or daily frustrations in the office or classroom. We know who they are. We stay away from them. They come to mind at the end of a hard day. We may even harbor hatred toward them.

Jesus says we must love them. We are not children of darkness, and our love must be stronger—it must be divine. Loving an enemy is a hard road, but one good way to begin is to follow Jesus' next command: pray for those who persecute you. This may feel foreign and awkward, but bringing an enemy's name into your prayer will help to release your hatred or fear of them. As that hatred is shed by divine grace, you will find yourself more open to responding with love.

Reflection Questions:

1. Who are your enemies? Are they people you have hurt or who have hurt you?

2. Pray for them by name and ask God to show you how to love them.

The Ten Commandments

I And God spoke all these words, saying,

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands[b] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 "You shall not murder.

14 "You shall not commit adultery.

15 "You shall not steal.

16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

Commandments sound so much like parents laying down the law. On Monday, you will do the dishes. On Tuesday, you will clean up your room. On Wednesday, you will go to church. On Thursday, you will give the dog a bath. On Friday, . . . On Saturday, . . . You get the point. Chores. Responsibilities. Burdens. Things we wouldn't choose to do for ourselves were it not for the commandments and the threat of punishment if we don't do them. No wonder some people look at the Ten Commandments and turn away in disgust. Go to their rooms and close the door and pout or whine.

But the Ten Commandments have nothing in common with the commandments our parents usually give us to teach us responsibility. Do you remember when a lawyer came to Jesus and asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus threw the question back in his face,

Day 26

"You tell me." The man answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) In another place, Jesus says all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:40)

These commandments are about our relationship with God and our relationships with the people we encounter. Love God encapsulates Exodus 20:3-8. God is first, always first. God is so holy that we do not find some image to replace God nor casually swear by God's name. Love your neighbor surrounds the remaining versus. God made humans in God's image, and we should dignify every life, treat others' bodies with respect, not seek to possess what belongs to another, deal honestly with everyone.

Jesus says not a jot or tittle of the Law will disappear, and the commandments, especially as Jesus talks about states of mind and heart which also violate them (Matt. 5), remind us that we need Jesus to make these commandments a reality in our hearts. Jesus loves God and the neighbor, so much that he died, so that when we fail to keep the commandments, either in letter or in spirit, we have an Advocate with God, so that we can continue to have fellowship with God and with one another.

Paul Prill

Response: How have you thought about the Ten Commandments as you have learned them in the past? How does thinking about them as relationship change your focus on dealing with God and with others?

"14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. 16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. 19 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Shortly after his baptism and 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry. His first public moment, his coming out party as the Messiah, comes back in his hometown of Nazareth. One Saturday at the synagogue, he reads the scrolls, specifically Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus preaches his first sermon. You might even call this the inauguration speech of the King of Kings. The passage talks about “anointed”, which is the literal definition of “Messiah.” The passage talks about “good news”, which is the literal definition of “gospel.” Jesus ends the sermon with “today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, Jesus is the Messiah and this is his gospel. But what is this gospel? What will this new king’s kingdom be like?

Jesus gives us a clear and concise summary of the good news of his kingdom.

1. Good news for poor-Jesus seeks out the poor. He desires to lift the poor up. The kingdom welcomes the poor.
2. Freedom for prisoners-Jesus comes to bring freedom. Many innocent people were in prison. The criminal justice system was not fair. Jesus came to bring justice.
3. Sight for blind-Jesus comes to heal the sick and disabled. The kingdom represents a place of compassionate care and healing.
4. Set oppressed free-Jesus came to liberate. Jesus came to liberate physical slaves from slavery. Jesus came to liberate spiritual slaves from sin. Jesus came to liberate people from addiction, greed, lust, violence, and evil rulers and systems.
5. Proclaim year of Lord's favor-Jesus came to bring forgiveness. The “year of the Lord's favor” refers to the year of Jubilee, as found in Leviticus 25. On this year, God commanded the cancellation or forgiveness of debts. Jesus came to advocate a kinder, more generous economic system. It is more blessed to give than receive. Also, Jesus came to forgive us of our sins against God and people.

This is the gospel. This is life in Jesus’ kingdom. Does your list look like his list?

Reflection Questions:

I. Jesus does these five things to us, and then through us, Jesus does these five things to others. In your life, are you involved in bringing any of these five to other people? Pray for opportunities to share this good news of the kingdom of Jesus.



IV
Family of God

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body---whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free---and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part, but many. Now if the foot should say, "because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body" it would not for that reason stop being a part of the body. And if the ear should say "because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body", it would not for that reason stop being a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand "I don't need you!". On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

As a social worker I have spent a lot of time learning about *systems*. Systems theory and its variants are the key theoretical foundation of most of the models that we use in social work practice. This theory is so drummed into my head that whenever I hear or read this passage from I Corinthians 12, my mind automatically reads “the body is a system, made up of many parts” and then I start thinking of the assumptions of systems theory and how they apply to this passage. (I am lots of fun at parties.)

One of the main assumptions of systems theory is about *identity*; the belief that a system is defined by its boundaries and structure and it is this identity that helps members of the system understand their roles and function.

I think this passage helps us understand our identity in the system that is the church, both the big collective church and our particular congregation at Acklen. Our identity as Christians is less about who we are as individuals, and more about the fact that we are all a part of one body, the body of Christ. This identity shapes us. We are all in this together. Even when we doubt our worth, even when we feel like we are on the outside, we do not for that reason stop being a part of the body. Even when we fall because of our weakness and sin, we are indispensable to this body. And in those occasions when we achieve great honor personally, this body rejoices with us.

I feel like one of the most pervasive messages in the world is “I need to look out for myself”. We get this communicated to us in so many ways, from the “rugged individualism” that is a core of American pride, to the titles of so many self-help books. It is a difficult message to

tune out, but the truer message is “I need to look out for my body”; we need to have equal concern for each other. By embracing this identity as “one body”, we are better able to understand our calling and to be a witness to others.

Sabrina Sullenberger

Reflection Questions:

- I. Where do you see yourself in this body of believers?
 - II. What gifts and abilities do you see in yourself that could be used in our work and life together?

"31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." 33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. 34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

It seems Jesus' family felt concern over his ministry. Is he in over his head? Does he know what he's doing? Apparently, they wanted to flex some control over him. Jesus uses this opportunity to broaden our understanding of family. Anyone who does God's will is our family.

It's common for folks to say they were raised *in* the church. In saying this, they normally mean they grew up attending frequent worship services. They went to church. Instead, I like to say I was raised *by* the church. As I've shared many times, my mother died during the first weeks of 3rd grade. I was 8 years old. I had a steady, kind father and 2 wonderful grandparents. Still, those 3 could not fill all the gaps and needs in my life, and I think they knew that hard truth.

However, God surrounded me with everything and everyone I needed. In the church, God surrounded me with kind people who knew my name. I never lacked for hugs and pats on the back. I grew up with hundreds of people who thought I was special and thought God had prepared me for exciting adventures. I was not unusual. Many of my other friends in the church felt the same way. God surrounded us with nurture and support. Looking back, I smile at all the people I called "uncle" and "aunt" who were not blood related. I think of Coach Speck who played the roles of church deacon, Sunday school teacher, family dentist, little league coach, and best friend's dad. I think of Miss Gerry and Miss Powers who taught me about Jesus and the Bible and flashed a huge smile every time I walked in the room. I think of Miss Becky who gave me a hug and told me I was handsome when my face exploded with acne as a teenager. I think of Tommy who took us all camping and cliff jumping, and David who stayed up late listening to all my questions about God. I lost a biological mother, but in many ways, the church became my mother. As a mother, the church falls short of perfection, but she's always been there for me. The church is the body of Christ, and nothing has shown me Jesus more than my church family.

Here's the good news. If you are a Christian, you will have a family forever. Some people may die. You may travel the world. But no matter what happens, wherever you are, you will have a family. The church will always be your family. I smile just thinking about it.

Day 30

Reflection:

Make a list of all the Christians you know that feel like family. Remember, God will ask you to return the favor. You will be a sister or brother to others. Write down the names of 3 people for whom you can be a big sister or brother.

Breath prayer is a very simple idea: praying with one's breathing. It is a way to pray short phrases that are easy to remember and recall. Breath prayers can be very helpful when we need to pray through difficult situations or don't have the time to pray longer prayers. Usually, we choose phrases that easily divide into two roughly equal parts. We say or think the first half while breathing in, and say the last half while breathing out. Try a few of these to feel the rhythm and pace of a short prayer. Praying them over and over again will help focus our minds and hearts on God.

Examples:

Breathe in	Breathe out
Be still and know / that I am God	
Do not fear / for I am with you	
Do not be afraid / for I am near	
Come let us sing / for joy to the Lord	
Create in my / a clean heart	
Come to me / all you who are weary	

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father / who art in heaven
 Hallowed be / thy name
Thy kingdom come / thy will be done
 On earth / as it is in heaven
Give us this day / our daily bread
 And forgive us / our trespasses
As we forgive / those who trespass against us
 And lead us not / into temptation
 But deliver us / from evil
 For thine / is the kingdom
 And the glory / and the power
 Forever and ever / Amen

The Seven Last Words:

Father forgive them / for they know not what they do
My God, my God / why have you forsaken me?
 Jesus / Remember me
Into your hands / I commend my spirit
 It is finished / Amen

Other prayers

Lord / have mercy
 Christ / have mercy
O Lord open my lips / and my mouth shall declare your praise (Psalm)
 O Lord / make haste to help me

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

When I was a child and teenager, my parents gave me lots of advice. While their lectures were never something I looked forward to, their advice turned out to be really helpful when I was figuring out how to be a responsible, independent person at a college 800 miles away from home. When parents have trained their children and are about to let them set off on their own, they want to give them lasting advice, so that their children will thrive in the world without them.

Jesus felt the same way about his disciples. He had spent every moment of the past 3 years with them, teaching them by word and example what it meant to walk in God's kingdom. His last night with them, he shared the most important piece of advice he could give them: love one another.

Jesus's disciples were born and raised on the Ten Commandments. They were reciting them as early as they could talk. These commandments are primarily focused on behaviors: worship God alone, keep the Sabbath, do not kill or steal, honor your parents. Jesus honored these commandments throughout his entire life, but in his parting words with his disciples, he gives them a new, more perfect commandment: love each other.

This commandment is different from the previous ten, but it encompasses all of them. Love is an attitude of the heart, which manifests itself in our behaviors. We can honor our parents while inwardly resenting them. We may not ever kill someone, but we can hate and feel jealous of others. The Pharisees had perfect behavior, and followed the Ten Commandments, but they lacked love for others. Jesus knew that the only way his disciples would ever live fully in His kingdom is if they could transform not only their behaviors, but also their hearts.

Loving others is not always easy, and no one realized that better than Jesus. Love requires constant sacrifice and humility. When we understand Jesus's love for us, we are empowered to love others, even when it is difficult. In 1 John, John reminds his readers that love is not a mere feeling, but a choice and action (1 John 3:18). We cannot love someone and disrespect them, mistreat them, or feel jealous of them. When we love each other sacrificially and unconditionally, people notice this and want to be a part of it. One of the most powerful witnesses we can give to the world is to love one another.

Day 32

Reflection Questions:

- I. Who are the people in your life that are difficult to love? What specific actions can you take this week to show love to these people?
 - II. Reflect on times that others have shown you love, especially when you were acting in a way that made it difficult to love you. How did their love affect you?

Brothers and sisters:

*Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,
bearing with one another and forgiving one another,
if one has a grievance against another;
as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.*

*And over all these put on love,
that is, the bond of perfection.*

*And let the peace of Christ control your hearts,
the peace into which you were also called in one Body.*

And be thankful.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another,
singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

*And whatever you do, in word or in deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

The word of the Lord.

Often, we hear this passage read as part of a Wedding. This may be because it is seen as a passage of new beginnings. When we are baptized into Christ, we also choose a new beginning. At the onset of any journey, we benefit from a plan, a map, a set of rules so that we do not lose our way. Sometimes this plan is based on the known advice and experience of those who have been there before us. When we are new parents, we read all of the baby books, take advice from doctors, nurses, and parents of older children. When we choose our careers, we seek advice from mentors, professors, and professionals who understand the sequence of events required to succeed in the field. When we begin a business, club, or organization, we set out guidelines that keep us and our community safe.

Colossians is more than a reminder of new beginnings. The framework or structure from which we build our lives as part of a family is set in the above verses by the One who has knowledge and experience. At the very beginning we are reminded that we are chosen by God to be in the family. Once we accept that choice, once we act on baptism, and create our new beginning, what then? Is it up to us to figure it out?

No, thank goodness we don't have to make it all up from there. Jesus has given us a plan with a set of rules to guide us, to "put on". These words encourage us in how we are to live within the Family of God. This letter lists our code of conduct, our set of rules, our plan by which everyone must learn to behave within the family. We come back to this passage, not just at every new beginning, but as often as we need encouragement. It enables us to learn and practice heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience in our community. The plan encourages us to be there for and with one another, to practice the experiences given to us from the Lord Jesus Christ. We are forgiven, and we practice this forgiveness with each other. The guidelines keep us safe, and allow us to learn from each other by singing together, by reading to each other, by expressing thanks and giving the Glory to God.

But, once the new beginning is no longer new, what keeps us from losing our way? What helps us stay within the community when we have lost our way? What keeps us strong in our Faith? How do we stick to the plan? The bond, the glue that holds us together and keeps us when we are far away from our new beginning, is love. Love is the mortar that holds the Family together. Love holds the fruits of the spirit in place so that the plan is perfect. The peace of Christ controls our hearts through love. This is the peace that allows our community to work as one body. Love allows us, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, to continue to learn and grow as we follow the plan.

Bonnie Wagner

Reflection Question:

I. In what ways has this family at Acklen loved you?

2. How can you return this love?



V

No Shadow of Turning

Go to the Limits of Your Longing by Rainer Maria Rilke

God speaks to each of us as he makes us
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
And make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

To early Christians in Rome facing persecution and the challenges of leaving tradition and culture to welcome Gentiles and Jews together, Paul writes a letter that, with all its doctrine and theology, is first and foremost about the righteousness of God. For the church then and for us now, these verses are a powerful declaration of the unshakeable security and love we have because of who He is.

We are building the kingdom of God in a fallen world. We will encounter our own weaknesses, good people who do bad things, good people having bad moments, and bad people doing bad things. We will encounter evil. We will suffer, sometimes unjustly and without relief. We will have hard times and find dark places, and there will be periods, however brief or long, when we are tempted to feel alone, to run away and hide, to react with anger or hopelessness, to ask "Why me?" In those times, we might turn away from God, even if just for a moment. God, however, never turns away, and that's the point.

Our identity and security are not found in who we are or in our ability to hold on to God. They are found in who God, in His power and faithfulness, is. God is a righteous, powerful creator and savior, and even when we don't see it, feel it, or acknowledge it, He loves us. He never lets go, never turns from us, never withdraws his offer of salvation. God died for us. God saved us, and He calls us to live with love, courage, confidence, and boldness.

The passage begins, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" It ends, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." There is no greater comfort, encouragement, or security we can have.

For Reflection:

1. Do you ever feel out of step with the world or as if someone is against you? How have you responded?

2. If we have absolute confidence in the power, love, faithfulness, and authority of God, how does that change our response to hard times, to evil, to the world?

Psalm 23

I The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord

Forever.

One of the best-known passages in the Bible, the 23rd Psalm is one we recite over and over when we yearn for the presence and comfort of God but cannot find our own words, an oft-memorized passage in childhood that perfectly expresses our relationship with God. Many of us still hear the words in the King James Version, a Shakespearean-era translation that suits the poetry of the psalm. Here, it's shared in the New King James Version.

Psalm 23 introduces us to the Lord as our shepherd. Shepherds are constantly with and aware of their flocks even as the sheep spread out and wander in the pastures and hillsides. In *Matthew* and *Luke* we read the parable of "The Lost Sheep" and understand that a shepherd will not lose even one sheep. He will always search and find the lost. In *1 Peter*, elders are called to shepherd the flocks of their churches. The

Day 36

shepherd is a powerful image of provision, protection, and authority, and we are cast as the sheep, smart enough but submissive creatures who could not survive without the Shepherd.

“I shall not want” is one of the most powerful statements in the psalm. I shall not *be in* want. I shall lack nothing. I shall have all that I need. It will be provided. The Shepherd guides us to green pastures, new pastures where we may constantly be fed, and still waters, living water from which we may drink ceaselessly, not moving waters that overcome us or carry us away. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for our daily bread, for this very provision Psalm 23 captures in bucolic imagery.

The Shepherd restores our soul and leads us in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. He fills us and saves us. He directs and re-directs us to the righteous path to His glory, not to ours. Without the Shepherd, we would not know the path, so we trust and follow His lead.

We do not fear the darkness. We do not fear evil. The Shepherd is with us, and His rod is for our discipline, direction, and salvation—a tool that keeps us on the right path, that turns us from the wrong one, that pulls us up from the dark places when we fall.

We sit safely and triumphantly in the midst of our enemies because the Shepherd has conquered them. He rules over them. This dinner with its reward and abundance is a scene of victory and an acknowledgement of the Shepherd’s ultimate power.

Under the protection, provision, and authority of the Shepherd, goodness and mercy will follow us, and we will dwell with Him forever.

Nancy Denning-Martin

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you think of an image other than shepherd that expresses the same protection, provision, and authority?

2. If the Shepherd has to use his hook on you, would it be for discipline, direction, or salvation? Why?

3. Is there another passage in the Bible you think parallels Psalm 23?

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
 and all that is within me,
 bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits,
 who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works righteousness
 and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
 his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children,
 so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
 he remembers that we are dust.

As for man, his days are like grass;
 he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
 and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
 and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
 and remember to do his commandments.

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
 and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
 you mighty ones who do his word,
 obeying the voice of his word!

Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
 his ministers, who do his will!

Bless the LORD, all his works,
 in all places of his dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

“*Memento mori*,” the ancients used to say. It’s a Latin phrase that means, “remember your death.” Whenever you see a skull in classical or medieval art, it’s a reminder pointing to this idea. Visit the oldest churches and monasteries throughout Europe and the Middle East, and you’ll find the walls covered in the skulls of real human beings. Each one belonged to a man or a woman with a family, a best friend, a favorite food, and a favorite song. But each life, with its joys, its fears, its triumphs and sorrows, is now forgotten. All that remain are the skulls, which look on the visitors and whisper together, “You, too, are going to die.”

Strange as it may seem, the Christian does well to think about his or her death. Unless the Lord returns sooner, each of us is going to die, and like one of so many flowers in a field, we will be forgotten. This is a truth the world works to hide from you. There’s a great deal of money to be had by keeping you blissfully unaware of death, drifting from one purchase, one show, one game to the next in a haze of pleasant forgetfulness. The old, the sick, the pained, and the dying are kept out of sight.

But the truth cannot be restrained forever: like a splash of cold water, the memory of death awakens us. What is this life we are living? What is it for? What is it we're supposed to be doing? For the Christian, the answers to these questions bring a certain seriousness into our lives. So many things that were once fun and pleasurable become empty and meaningless. But along with this seriousness comes abundant joyfulness. In Christ, we have the hope of the resurrection and eternal life, and this fills our lives with meaning. As we are conformed more and more to his will, we live each day with the joy that comes from the knowledge we are doing exactly what we have been created to do. We do not fear death, because even when we humans forget, and are forgotten in turn, God does not forget. He is loving and compassionate. He redeems our life from the pit, and satisfies us with goodness. Bless the LORD, O my soul! *Memento mori.*

Justin Gregory

Exercise

Imagine your funeral, as the eulogy is being given. What are some good things the people you know are saying about you? Are there some less-than-good things they're trying not to say about you? What do you want to be remembered for? What can you do today to have that kind of life?

Day 38

His steadfast love endures forever

The Lord is my shepherd

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

DO NOT HIDE YOUR FACE FROM ME

Your wrath has swept over me

O God, do not keep silence

THE LORD IS MY LIGHT AND MY SALVATION

my tears have been my food day and night

RESCUE THE WEAK AND THE NEEDY

Have mercy on me, O God

Against you, you alone, have I sinned

my soul thirsts for God

MAKE HASTE TO HELP ME

O FEAR THE LORD, YOU HIS HOLY ONES

**LET EVERYTHING THAT BREATHES
PRAISE THE LORD!**

Day 38

Listen long enough to the Psalms and you will eventually hear your own voice. They have the entire emotional range of human life: hope, loss, fear, anger, desperation, pleas for mercy, cries for justice, hatred, love, sorrow, joy. They were for Israel and the church a prayer book and a hymnal, and a doorway for people to stand as they are in the presence of God. We read through some of these and think to ourselves, “Wow! How can you say that to God? Isn’t that a forbidden thought? A wild statement? You’re right. Many of these words are quite raw. I want you to know, sister or brother, that God is not afraid of any question you have. Nor does he flinch when you cry out with anger or doubts in your faith. You will have these days, and some of them will be very dark. God can hear it. God *has* heard it. We spend a lot of time focusing on our God who speaks and the words he has spoken to us through others. We learn in the Psalms that the Lord is also a God who listens. So don’t be afraid to speak aloud into the air whatever care, burden, pain, or joy you have. God is near, and he is listening.

The Psalms will help us speak to a God who listens. When you have something deep down in your heart that feels too dark or scary to say, it’s probably here. When you’re too broken and hurt to pray your own words and God feels far away, pull out Psalm 22, and let Israel and the church pray for you. Are you angered by unfairness and injustice? Go to Psalm 82. When you’ve done something wrong and feel the weight of it hanging over you, turn to Psalm 51 or 32. And when your heart is singing, find words for the music in Psalm 8, 33, 111, 148, or 150. The promise that rings through these thousands of voices over many centuries is that God is with us. In our happiness and joy, he is there. In our sin, he is there and forgives. In pain and loss, he walks beside us. In our most desperate moments when we can’t feel his presence, he is nearer than our own loneliness. True to the words of James 1:17, there is in our Father of lights “no shadow of turning.”

Ryan Sullenberger

Reflection Question:

Look through some of the Psalms you know or love. Where do you find your voice in them?



Benediction

Day 40

Following is a series of blessings from the Book of Common Prayer. Please write your name in the blanks and read it aloud as a prayer for you from the Acklen church.

Deliver _____ O Lord, from the way of sin and death.

Open _____ heart to your grace and truth.

Fill _____ with your holy and life-giving Spirit.

Keep _____ in the faith and communion of your holy Church.

Teach _____ to love others in the power of the Spirit.

Send _____ into the world in witness to your love.

Bring _____ to the fullness of your peace and glory.

Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death
of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his
resurrection and look for him to come again in glory; who
lives and reigns now and forever. *Amen.*

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy
Spirit you have bestowed upon _____ your servant the
forgiveness of sin, and have raised _____ to the new life of grace.

Sustain _____ O Lord, in your Holy Spirit.

Give _____ an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to
persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy
and wonder in all your works. *Amen.*