

A COMMUNITY OF

LOVE *AND* FORGIVENESS

.....
A 31-Day Journey with Jesus



31
DAYS





A Community of Love & Forgiveness: A 31-Day Journey with Jesus

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FOREWORD: A 31-DAY JOURNEY

Thank you for your willingness to take this step toward a life with Jesus Christ and his church. We are clearly in a season of deep change. We enter a new year, carrying with us the experience of several hundred thousand deaths due to COVID, and at the same time witnessing one racially motivated act of murder and hatred after another. There has also been significant loss of employment and livelihood, and an increasing toll on the mental health of many people.

We move forward into a new year not in denial about any of this but bearing these burdens (Galatians 6) and at the same time casting them upon the Lord (Psalm 52). Our hope, in making this resource available, is grounded in two convictions:

1. ***We were never intended to live the Christian life on our own.*** As the baptismal liturgy promises, “*we will surround (you) with a community of love and forgiveness.*” Right now, imagine that you are standing in a circle, surrounded by the people in your own life who love you and have forgiven you.
2. ***We are in the process of constructing the next church.*** Post-COVID, the church will look different. And my hope is that the next church will set aside constraints and judgments we have placed on others in the past, ones I have noted—in sermons in local churches across Florida, in denominational work and in the book *Embracing The Wideness of God’s*

Mercy—that do not express the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ or the heart of Methodism, expressed so beautifully in the hymn, “So free, so infinite his grace.”

The next church will be composed of disciples of Jesus Christ who live with a **humility** about our own sins and biases—this is our journey toward antiracism, this is our journey toward **inclusion**, *this is our grasp of 1 John 1. 8-9. This is not a political statement—it is the gospel.* Again, imagine that you are standing in a community, in a circle of love and forgiveness, and for a moment allow the grace of Jesus Christ to wash over us, in your baptismal identity.

We begin or continue the journey toward the next church, the church of the future that God sees even now in the present. We will reassemble as the body of Christ in the months to come, as (God willing) the vaccine restores us to health. In humility we do the good work of discipleship and antiracism toward our own sanctification. And we will need to draw strength and life from each other.

The journey will take us from the observance of **Martin Luther King, Jr.** day through **Ash Wednesday**. These are two significant marker events. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist preacher, a prophetic voice, a national martyr, and a non-violent strategist. We remember his life as gift and as challenge. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent, itself a preparation for the celebration of Easter. It is a reminder of our need for self-examination, our call to repentance, and our dependence on God.

The journey will be guided by our third baptismal vow, which takes us from **confession** and **trust** in grace, through a willingness to **serve** the Lord, toward an embrace of expanding circle of community and forgiveness that Jesus Christ has actually **opened** for **all**.

So free, so infinite is the grace of God!

I am on the journey with you. We need each other. Let’s stand in this circle together, and more importantly, let’s expand the circle. The church needs renewal. And the world needs this kind of gospel.

Bishop Ken Carter

Florida Conference, The United Methodist Church



WEEK 1: CONFESS

Rev. Jana Hall-Perkins
McCabe UMC, St. Petersburg



This week we begin our journey by emphasizing that Jesus is the center of our faith. We will explore devotions on the nature of Jesus, the work of Jesus and our need to confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

So, what does it mean to confess Jesus as Lord and savior?

When I think about what it means to confess something, I think about communication. Confession in the most basic sense means to communicate or share something; to make something known.

Before I became a full-time pastor, I worked in the field of communications — specifically public relations and journalism. In this career, I learned that communication means so much more than sharing words with others. Communication includes the beliefs and value systems that shape our words.

Confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior begins with the belief in and acceptance of God's grace that invites us into relationship with Jesus. This invitation is open to all. Everyone! Literally, everyone everywhere. There are no prerequisites. All people are invited to receive and respond to God's amazing grace.

We respond to this grace-based invitation by confessing, or communicating, with our words and the belief system in our hearts, that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Specifically, this means we live our lives committed to learning and understanding who we are in light of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. We confess that Jesus is the Son of God sent to this world to share the good news of God's grace, transformation, redemption, and love. We confess that Jesus has authority over all of creation. We confess that Jesus has authority over us. We confess that Jesus' life shapes and impacts our lives. We communicate with our words, our hearts and our actions that Jesus deserves our full commitment, loyalty, attention, and confidence.

Confession certainly includes our own individual words, beliefs, and actions. But confession doesn't happen in isolation. Confession draws us into community with other followers of Jesus. We confess individually and we confess together.

And, when we confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, the same amazing grace that invited us into relationship with Jesus is gifted to us on our life-long journey with Jesus. Throughout our lifetime, this grace continues to help us love, learn, grow, and be transformed as people who've confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior.

So, let's get ready to explore together who Jesus is, and how we might confess with our words and our hearts that Jesus is indeed our **Lord and Savior**.

MY NOTES:



WEEK 1: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ON YOUR JOURNEY

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior?

Throughout this journey, we will be focusing on our third UM baptismal vow:

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

1. Share the story of your baptism or when you may have heard these vows for the first time.
2. Define the words **Savior** and **Lord**:
 - What weight does the word Lord have today?
 - How does the world need a Savior today?
3. How do you understand the word “confession?”
 - What does it mean to confess Jesus as Savior or Lord?
 - How does this confession change the relationship you have with Jesus?
 - What response does such a confession require or invite of you in your daily actions, interactions, conversations, and decisions?

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

MATTHEW 16:13-20

Leah Wiley, Laity
Trinity UMC, Tallahassee

In Matthew 16:15, Jesus challenges the disciples with the question, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answers, “You are... the Son of the living God.” By then, the disciples had spent years with Jesus, learning Jesus’ nature as part of the ministry. Like the disciples, my journey to Jesus was years in the making and paved with challenges and questions.

I was raised by a pastor and an AME trustee. Growing up, my parents never smacked my brother and me over the head with religiosity or demands for perfection. We went to church and Sunday school every week and sang in the Sunbeam choir. My enjoyment of this tradition was likely equal to my disdain for the itchy stockings Mama made me wear.

We had to cross the railroad tracks to get to church. In town there were shops, schools, parks, and opportunities; while “across the railroad” around my church, there were lean-to’s where some classmates and church members lived. Men and women sat idle on street corners, gripping bottles in brown bags. We would wait for them to enter the house of the Lord, walk to the altar, and accept Christ as their Savior. But then what? I wondered. Would their homes become uncondemnable, and they, sober, after confessing Jesus as Lord? Every Sunday, from the back seat of Mama’s car, I wondered why there was so much poverty when there were so many churches around. Several months before I graduated high school, Daddy sat me



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down for a life talk. He told me he didn't care which religion I ended up practicing, but, he asserted, "You will believe in and acknowledge God."

What a send-off! He never knew my musings from the back seat of the car. Yet in a few words, he had created a crisis. He put the questions I had about my tradition right in my face. Where was this "living God" when our community was in such great need?

I continued down this path of questions, searching for my own purpose. I wanted to make a difference. At times I was drawn back to the comfort I'd once known, attending Bible study in Los Angeles and singing on praise teams in Gainesville, Florida. But I noticed there was an "across the railroad" everywhere I visited. So, I studied filmmaking to document conditions in the Black community and share stories of our struggle against injustice.

As I neared the end of film school, a question in an email stopped me in my tracks. *Do you want to work with religious congregations to win healthcare, affordable housing, and better public schools?* It was the answer I'd been looking for: Transforming circumstances in the community does align with my faith.

As a child, I thought Jesus' ministry was only preparation for the afterlife. Yet I was searching for a tradition that was alive, aware, and full of the same anger I felt as I crossed the railroad tracks time and again.

Community organizing within the Church was my call to follow Jesus' and become an actor in his ministry of justice. On that very day I put away my video camera—and my questions—and I answered, "Jesus, you *are* the Son of the living God."

MY NOTES:

ONE BODY OF CHRIST

ROMANS 10:9-13



Riley Standifer, Laity

Community UMC, Fruitland Park

Growing up at church, baptisms were a regular event for my congregation. I loved them because it was always fun to watch the babies get wet or enjoy the family huddled together with my pastors at the front. I also loved getting to read the liturgy together as a congregation and bless the people who were being baptized that day - arms stretched out.

One of the baptismal questions is “Do you confess Jesus Christ your Savior?” Romans 10:9-13 gives us much to consider. In this passage, Paul is writing a letter explaining salvation:

“Because if you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and in your heart you have faith that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Trusting with the heart leads to righteousness and confessing with the mouth leads to salvation. The scripture says, all who have faith in him won’t be put to shame. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives richly to all who call on him. All who call on the Lord’s name will be saved.” - Romans 10:9-13 CEB

One of my favorite verses in this passage is Romans 10:12, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives richly to all who call on



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FINDING MY RELIGION

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

Casey Strong, Laity

St. Luke's UMC, Windemere

I grew up in religion. I attended a Southern Baptist church in western Kentucky. You could find me there at minimum twice a week. I sang in choir, participated in missions, attended and taught VBS. From the outside looking in, I was a follower of Jesus.

At age 16 things changed when I no longer fit into the religious box that others placed me. My understanding of who I was and who I loved didn't fit the narrative of the Church and these differences pushed me away from religion. I went through the motions and "accepted" Jesus as my Savior in words, because it was what I was supposed to do. But I couldn't get past the Divine Diversity I felt or reconcile the sermons and lessons that I was being taught.

When I moved to Orlando to "restart" again, I found St. Luke's. On my first Sunday I noticed these people were different from other churches. Through prayer, reflection and study, I was able to reconcile who Jesus was into something real and personal. I saw Jesus in this congregation and in individuals and in actions that embodied authentic acceptance, hospitality and love. From personal conversations, to showing interest my life and the people I cared about, the barriers that I had created with the stories of what religion was "supposed to be" were turned upside down. I started to understand that the sacrifice on the cross was for me and was real in both my



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CHOOSE TO CONFESS

JOHN 1:1-14

Rev. Dr. Marta Burke
Plantation UMC, Plantation

As a child, hearing the voice of my mother or father asking who put the empty milk carton back in the refrigerator always stopped me in my tracks and had me begrudgingly confess that yes, it was me. Later, I would come home past the agreed curfew, and I try to slip in the house quietly so as not to be heard. That is when I would hear one of my parents' voices say, "Glad you're home safe, we will talk about this in the morning."

I learned early on that owning up, or confessing, to those things in my life that I may have wanted to hide, helped me grow. It helped me make choices that were life-giving, to build a solid foundation. I also learned to own or confess those things in my life that were spiritually life-giving. Making a conscious decision and confessing, to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior, as well as a Savior for the world was, and is, life-giving. It is the light in the darkness that the Gospel of John writes about in Chapter 1 that gives us the choice to choose and confess that life-giving gift.

We must choose and confess both the brokenness in our lives and the gift of forgiveness, that God's gift of grace in Christ is ours. It is the light that shines in our darkest moments. It is the assurance through Christ's light, that the darkness will not overcome us.

There are uncomfortable truths in our lives, in the Church, and in the world, that we must confess. Yet, we must also



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MAY WE FOLLOW JESUS!

MARK 1:16-20

Rev. Dwayne Craig
East Naples UMC, Naples

This story invites us to participate in the activation of what Han Kung calls a “dangerous and disturbing memory.” We are invited to immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus as recorded in the Scriptures, attested by tradition, celebrated in the eucharist, praised through song, shared in testimony, and encountered around our Seas of Galilee. Out of the extraordinary vastness of Christian imagery and thought we, by faith, hold a subversive memory of what James H. Cone refers to as “the one Jesus” who is at the center of Christian speech.

This Jesus that we speak of, as recorded by the Markan writer, walked into the mundane everydayness of the four fisherman’s space. He comes uninvited, unannounced and, perhaps, unknown by the men. Jesus, the decisive other, walks into our space, our todayness, and meets us amid what Charles Taylor refers to as “the fading of God’s presence,” or what Toni Morrison called the muting and making invisible of racialized bodies, or the structuring, demonizing, and politicizing of “unprotectable life” referred to by Grace Kyungwon Hong, or living life without passion according to Soren Kierkegaard. Jesus walked into their space, for they did not beckon him, nor did they seek him out, and he created a shift in their lives, as is the case in our own lives today.

Jesus walked not only into their lives unannounced, but he issued a call that created a break. In Jesus, the four fishermen



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were gripped by a new reality, as are we today; they were seized by Jesus, who created the space for them to step into a new way of life. Amid casting their nets (i.e., occupational/relational commitments) and working alongside their father (i.e., familial ties), the fishermen were captivated by Jesus's summons to participate in a way of life with the other. However, such a call initiated a concrete break and, thus, present commitments were made secondary in the light of the urgent demands of the nearness of God's reign.

In our present age, God encounters us in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and meets us in the busyness of our lives. We are called, like the four fishermen, to make the break from the ties that have us bound: the nets of conformity to the temporal, racial/ethnic tribalism, mistreatment of the vulnerable, and a vested interest in the present order of things. May we experience the saving grace of God in our lives whereby we "set affections on things above," cross the racial/ethnic borders, enter solidarity with the marginalized (Mk. 10:31), and engage in a praxis of social transformation. May we follow Jesus!

MY NOTES:

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

I JOHN 4:7-21

Nicolas Glover, Laity
Hyde Park UMC, Tampa

My wife, Caitlin, and I met in New York City in 2012. Grounded by our shared desire to be of and amongst the “beloved community,” we began attending services at the Riverside Church, a historic church constructed and completed between two consuming and costly World Wars. Beyond the grand edifice and history of the building is the inextricable and lasting link to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. From the perched, limestone pulpit at Riverside, Dr. King announced his fervent opposition to the war in Vietnam because of his “all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind.”

King’s peaceful, but lovingly percussive antiwar/pro-love cadence was just beginning. Two weeks later, while addressing protestors who had marched to the United Nations from Central Park, King had this to say:

“I come to participate in this significant demonstration today because my conscience leaves me no other choice. I join you in this mobilization because I cannot be a silent onlooker while evil rages. I am here because I agree with Dante, that: “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a period of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality,” In these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, there is no greater need than for sober thinking, mature judgment, and creative dissent.”



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King's words were a clarion call to this country to overwhelm and replace the impulses of retaliation with love of neighbor. Our ailing nation needed desperately to witness nonviolence in action. King's ministry and leadership of the Civil Rights Movement were anchored in and buoyed by nonviolent love. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1964, King remarked, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

Even in the midst of our entanglement with war and overdue racial reckoning, King knew well that loving each other -- whether foreigners or family; friend or foe -- is the affirmation and demonstrative example of Christ's radical love that I John 4:20 details saying, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen."

As each of us is called to confess Jesus as our lord and savior, let us be mindful to do so leading first with the prerequisite love of our neighbor as Christ has commanded.

MY NOTES:

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WEEK 2: GRACE

Rev. Dan Wunderlich
Lakeside UMC, Sanford



Throughout 2020, I spent a lot of time with Philippians 4:13: “I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.” (CEB)

Despite its brevity and familiarity, I was constantly surprised at how dynamic the verse could be. As the year progressed, the Holy Spirit seemed to highlight different words, phrases, or ideas.

At first, I was drawn to “the power of the one who gives me strength.” God will give us the strength and will to muscle through this.

When the shutdowns continued, and we found ourselves doing things like celebrating Resurrection Sunday online, my focus shifted to “I can endure.”

When, as another pastor put it, the marathon became a biathlon and then a triathlon - with the public movements for racial justice and the election adding to the complexity of the year - I noticed that the Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul, had accounted for seasons like these. We can endure “all these things.”

And then when the end of the year hit, I found myself completely drained. Like so many of us, I was tired. Tired of the stress. Tired of the worry.

Tired of making decisions whose importance far outweighed the clarity I had when I faced them. Tired of feeling like my best effort wasn't good enough.

Where was the power and strength I was supposed to receive to endure all these things? If you want to play spiritual Sherlock, the clues are all there - most specifically in what's not there. At one point or another, I had focused on every word in that scripture except for one: through. I had been trying to endure all things via just about every other preposition. I can endure all these things *for* God. *Near* God. *In the name of* God. *Inside a building dedicated to* God.

The evidence is there in the self-focused nature of the list of what was tiring me. *My* stress and worry. *My* lack of clarity in decision making. *My* effort and how people judged *me*.

This week, we explore the question: do you put your whole trust in his grace? Through these stories and reflections, you will no doubt see that grace is itself a dynamic presence in the lives and theology of United Methodists.

The various ways in which we understand and apply the concept of grace can and will fit whatever it is we face, individually and as a community, nation, and world.

But the question on which we reflect isn't asking whether we believe in the power of God's grace. The question is, do we *trust* it? Even more: Do we put *our whole trust* in God's grace?

The work to which we are called - from individual discipleship to bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven - can be exhausting. And it can only be exhausting if we are trying to do that work on our own - individually or collectively - without placing our whole trust in God's grace.

MY NOTES:



WEEK 2:

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ON YOUR JOURNEY

Do you put your whole trust in His grace?

1. Rev. Jones wrote of a powerful encounter with grace extended by someone. When have you encountered such grace extended to you or someone else?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 12 with emphasis on verse 9.
 - What does it mean when Paul writes that Christ's grace is sufficient for you, "*because power is made perfect in weakness?*"
 - How is Christ's grace understood more deeply in our weakness?
3. Sometimes, to understand how to **do** something, it's best to start with how **not** to do something. So, how is it we sometimes do **not** put our trust in Christ's grace?
 - What holds us back from trusting fully in grace for our own lives?
 - What keeps us from extending grace toward others?
 - What is the correlation between the two answers?
4. When we all take this part of the vow seriously, when we all put our whole trust in His grace, what does the community we are building look like?
5. How does grace change how the church interacts with the community around it?

AMAZING GRACE

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

Rev. Corey Jones

Pasadena Community UMC, St. Petersburg

A little over 20 years ago while in high school, I worked as a cashier at Winn Dixie. One night, I found a checkbook and went to turn it into management, but before I did, I stopped. A few days later, two friends of mine (previous employees), came through my register and purchased about \$9 worth of snacks. Using the last check in that checkbook, they wrote a check in the amount of \$300. Then, I gave them the \$291 in change and we split it three ways.

About a month later, the general manager, Mr. Richardson, called me into his office and calmly interrogated me about the check. After I confessed, I lost my job that day as a cashier. However, not only did he not report it to the authorities, he did not terminate me and simply moved me to the stock department. At the time, I did not understand the magnitude of his decision and my need for it. It wasn't until I was preaching on grace 15 years later that I realized how fortunate I was because of his grace. Now, it helps me understand and appreciate God's grace more and compels me to offer grace to others.

While we may associate God's grace with moments of mercy like this, it is much deeper and broader than one isolated moment. God's grace is ever-present before, during, and after we profess faith in Christ and receive justifying grace. Indeed, God's prevenient grace works on us to



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GOD'S LOVE ABIDES

ROMANS 5:1-11

Stephanie Pizarro, Laity
Riviera UMC, St. Petersburg

Growing up, I went on lots of adventures. These adventures took me to many different schools, residences, and home-life scenarios. They came with various challenges, missions, joys and losses. I learned the power of a moment, and of my story.

As a teen, I finally understood what it meant for Jesus to have died for my sins. I rejoiced that God's grace was for all, and all meant me, too. Throughout my struggles and triumphs, that warmth and reassurance persisted.

I also knew very early in life that pain was inevitable. When I confessed my faith in Jesus Christ, the reality of suffering didn't change. If anything, it became more complex as I began to differentiate between God's limitless love and the conditional love of some of my siblings in Christ. Those adventures were the most perilous.

In One Coin Found: How God's Love Stretches to the Margins, Rev. Emmy Kegler talks about the "lost chapter" of Luke 15 and how God's divine love finds us even in the darkest corners, much like the search for a lost and dusty coin or a stray sheep. The daring truth is that when we may feel forgotten or tossed aside, divine love patiently yet persistently seeks us out.



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Rev. Kegler writes, “[m]any of the faithful come to God fragmented, broken by the world’s pressures – or worse, by blows from a church that has maligned or condemned us. We still dare to come back to faith, despite the danger. And God witnesses us. God sees our wounds and recognizes the pain that God in flesh knew...”

But does that love erase our scars? Does God’s prevenient grace, guiding us to the front door to hear the gospel, promise us this? Does God’s justifying grace award us a magic eraser? Or is it God’s sanctifying grace, which works in our hearts and lives through the Holy Spirit, that finally means we will never hurt again?

No. Across our differences, we have all known forms of grief, loneliness, despair. But God’s love abides.

How have you struggled in a way that built endurance? Character? Hope?

How can we learn and grow as disciples by sharing in others’ stories of suffering? Let’s start at the margins, where Jesus found himself. Truly, the resilient grit of those told to sit outside the Church walls – or change once they enter – shows how divine love has the last word. For many of my LGBTQ siblings, the word “sin” when combined with words like “truth” and “love” have often been used as a sword rather than a salve. I’ve felt their sorrow and seen their despair. Yet I’ve also often felt the palpable, daring glow of hope and faith in them, and I want to magnify their light.

“Love finds us where we are and invites us not to stay there, urges us onward into better action for ourselves and for the world,” writes Rev. Kegler. Ultimately, suffering is inevitable, regardless of how or who we were born. But, friends: as the Holy Spirit works in and through us, how can we do better?

MY NOTES:

THE EXTENT OF GOD'S GRACE

PSALM 51

Rev. Jose Nieves

First UMC Kissimmee, Kissimmee

I can only imagine the pain in Joab's soul when he opened the letter that Uriah himself had put in his own hand (2 Samuel 11). A dead man was looking him in the eyes. There was no doubt that this was David's handwriting. Joab knew David's writing as well as his own. The same David that became a legend by slaying the giant. The same David that chose not to kill Saul in the darkness of a cave out of faithfulness to God. The same David that was willing to wait for years before rising to the throne to which he was anointed as a child. That same David was abusing his privilege and power to *send* him, Joab, to do his dirty work. David *sent* for Bathsheba for his own gratification. David *sent* for Uriah to cover his own sin. And now, it was Joab's turn. Joab was not ready for this version of David.

In order to appreciate the extent of God's grace towards us, we must understand the extent of our sin. David, a man of God's own heart, was a lying murderer and rapist. He was such a coward that he chose to involve Joab, his own kinsman, in the murder of the husband of his victim. Bathsheba was taken as if she was David's personal possession. Uriah died fighting to defend David's throne. Joab was never the same after discovering that the hope of David's kingdom was nothing but a lie. Then David moved on with his life without remorse like a cold-hearted killer. The very same skill that God gave him to masterfully deal with the most complicated of problems, he used to cover his own transgressions. Until God *sent* Nathan to confront him with his sin.



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"HIS GRACE WOODED ME BACK"

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6

Nancy K. Metz, Laity
Grace UMC, Cape Coral

I remember my baptism, but not for spiritual reasons. My mom was a Roman Catholic, and my Methodist dad started taking my older brothers to church when each turned eight. When it was my turn, I was told I was to be baptized. At the time, the best part for me was a new outfit, my mom's contribution. I'm pretty sure she didn't attend the baptism. There's lots I don't remember. But I can describe the outfit. The water on the head? No. Conversations about what baptism means? No.

Weekly church attendance affected me about the same way. So at age 18, I stopped attending any church – until I was 41. My life had gone upside down and I took my son to an ecumenical Thanksgiving service in Cape Coral. The music made me weep. I had retained something my years of childhood church attendance: prevenient grace.

I have a special affinity for Matthew 1:1-17, "the begats," as we called them in my KJV childhood. Because embedded in those tedious, tongue-twisting, foreign-sounding names of three sets of 14 generations of mostly unremarkable men and 5 women are the deeper stories I can relate to.

Tamar: forcing solutions and becoming irritable and unreasonable without knowing it, according to Al-Anon. Bathsheba: victim of her cultural circumstances. Ruth: an outsider (Moabite). Jacob: heel-grabber, bending social mores to suit his own selfish plans. David: committed



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"THIS IS THE WAY; WALK IN IT"

ISAIAH 30:18-21

Bill Walker, Laity
First UMC, Winter Park

As I read Isaiah 30: 18-21, I am struck by the confidence expressed in God's grace as present amidst "the bread of adversity and the waters of affliction." It seems to me that in these days we are truly partaking of the bread of adversity and the waters of affliction!

In this season of life in the United States, our souls are beset by rancorous voices insisting on A way to act or be or NOT to act or be, without the soothing and facilitation of God's grace to enable us to find THE way with joy and with love. While many seek to hear and ascribe to the voices from the radio or television proclaiming a right way or warning of a wrong way for us as citizens to travel, the words of Isaiah remind us that by reason of God's love for His children, regardless of their obstinate ways, God provides a voice behind us saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

In my own journey of these days, I have come increasingly to value the message, "Be still, and know that I am God." That is, instead of my fretting on which path is the correct path in matters of our common life, I am learning to be quiet, to pray, to reflect, to go apart from the noise, and to listen for that voice which Isaiah says is behind me. And then, with confidence of the grace, which is the embodiment of God's love, move forward. How much wiser it is for me to not rely on a self that is shaped by seeking power amidst rancorous and demanding voices, with all the thorniness thereof. Instead, I may rely on the voice of God's grace,

emanating from God’s love, a voice which is right behind me, quietly offering God’s way.

In recent years, I have been privileged to be a part of a local group of citizens addressing issues around civility in our public and private discourse. At one session, a sage voice commented: “Perhaps the heart of what we are getting at is: ‘Be kind.’” As I reflect on our text from Isaiah, which interestingly the NIV translation entitles: “Woe to the Obstinate Nation,” the words “Be kind” may reflect that position of being open to God’s love of God’s children which, through God’s grace and, indeed, by God’s very nature, we receive as a gift in the face of our obstinate ways.

In the days ahead, may I be more quiet and spend more time with God’s word, seeking to better hear God’s voice helping me know God’s way.

MY NOTES:

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MERCY, NOT MERIT

ROMANS 3:21-26

Alejandra Salemi, Certified Candidate
Harvard Divinity School

Grace is central to our Methodist beliefs: prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace. It is a word likely spoken or read in our religious spaces, but often overlooked for its weight and power. Simply put, grace is love through mercy rather than through merit. It is the recognition that God loved us all, whether Christian or not, and chose to love us and show us grace. Though this is incredibly relieving for us, as imperfect humans living in an imperfect world, perhaps grace isn't about our sins but rather about God's desire for liberation for all of us.

We live in a world and in a country obsessed with merit and success. The metrics of capitalism are what humanity has chosen as the litmus test for success, worthiness, and prestige. Much like the messages of the prophets and of the Messiah, I believe that God's posture of grace towards God's beloved, each of us, ought to jolt us awake. I am currently a graduate student and have been in higher education for six years as a student. The need for grace isn't just to forgive me when I sin, but to liberate me from the chains that I or the world places on me. Grace allows me to recognize that I don't have to win the favor of God or obtain a certain accolade to win the trophy of God's love.



Watch Video

As we continue wading into this new year, one that feels like a reset of a difficult year preceding it, open your heart to grace. Things may not be what we expected for ourselves.

Our mental health may still be seeking some equilibrium with the weight of the pandemic and interpersonal life events. Whatever expectations we have put on ourselves, in our work, our performance, or roles in our family or community units, I pray that you give yourself the same grace that our Beloved God gives us.

I pray that grace covers you when your New Year's resolution falters, when your fears override the peace you deserve, and when the world's prerequisites fool you into questioning your inherent worth as a child of God. You are loved, worthy, and liberated. Let the grace of our God remind you of the love you are offered through mercy and never by merit.

MY NOTES:

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A NEW CREATION

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-21

Rev. Dr. Steve Harper, Retired

I was privileged to know Dr. J.C. McPheeters, the second president of Asbury Theological Seminary. “Dr. Mac” was there when I was a student in the early 1970’s, and he was still living when I returned to the seminary as a professor in 1980.

He preached his last sermon in the seminary chapel at age 91. Not long after that, he suffered a major stroke from which he never recovered. He preached on “the new things God is teaching me.” There he was, more than 90 years old, not dwelling on old things, but rather being energized by new things. I was deeply moved by his message, and I left the chapel praying that I would be a person who could always talk about the new things God is teaching me.

In our baptism, when we consent to trust God’s grace to be at work in our lives, we are vowing to be open to new waves of grace. As E. Stanley Jones put it, we are always “Christians in the making.” Responding to grace, we are always becoming deeper and wider followers of Christ. God is never finished with us.

In today’s reading, Paul calls it becoming a “new creation.” It is an experience in which the old is passing away, and the new is coming. It is what keeps the status quo from turning into a sacred cow. It’s what prevents us from being God’s “frozen chosen.” It is what makes us sanctified without becoming petrified: a new creation.



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Connecting God's new creation to our Wesleyan theology of grace means that prevenient, converting, and sanctifying grace are not linear. These waves of grace are recurring cycles that enable us to experience God in new ways again and again.

Prevenient grace is the work of God that repeatedly awakens us to new things, like it was doing for J.C. McPheeters at age 91. Converting grace is the work of God that repeatedly attaches us to new things through ongoing commitments. Sanctifying grace is the work of God that repeatedly advances us in faith, maturing us inwardly and outwardly, personally and socially.

We never arrive. How could we, when we are in relationship with an infinite God? We cannot come to the end of infinity; we can only continue our step-by-step journey into it.

I have experienced God's transforming grace more times than I can remember in my nearly 60-year profession of the Christian faith. I am not 91 like Dr. McPheeters was, but I am 73, and it is a great joy to talk about the new things God is teaching me.

One of the most profound transformations is my change of thinking about human sexuality. Since Lent of 2014, my old way of looking at it has passed, and a new view has come—a view that affirms LGBTQ+ people, not only as persons of sacred worth, but also as living lives compatible with Christian teaching—as persons who are fully-devoted Christ followers, just as heterosexual people are—and who should receive all the ministries of the Church and serve in them.

Prevenient grace awakened me to this new way. Converting grace attached me to it. Sanctifying grace is advancing me in it so that I find great joy in being an ally with LGBTQ+ people and talking about the “new thing God is teaching me” as an older adult. A new creation. A fresh expression of my baptismal vow to trust in and respond to God's transforming grace.

MY NOTES:



WEEK 3: SERVE

Rev. Meghan Killingsworth
First UMC of Sanford, Sanford



I got saved on the corner of Brevard and Bronough Street in Tallahassee, Florida, somewhere in the fall of 2005. A lot of people use that language and mean different things, so I want to clarify. At Grace Mission, an Episcopal mission congregation, I had the opportunity to worship in a community more diverse than I had ever experienced. Many people there were experiencing homelessness, most were Black and brown, some were college students, some were just out of jail, and some couldn't leave because this place was intriguingly different. I learned from my friends at Grace Mission that while I had walked with Jesus for most of my life, I had somehow missed JESUS: God revealed in the particular life of a poor man with no place to lay his head. I was baptized at 8 and recommitted my life to Jesus at summer camp, but my faith had been shaped heavily by the White middle-class American lens that can easily miss the connection between our faith and our public life together. I had come to know a faith more about the Lord *helping those who help themselves* than coming to declare "Good news for the poor, liberation for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18)." I got saved at Grace Mission by the God of our scriptures from a faith which promised me heaven later but had no concern for the present hells so many experience now. For the first time, I had ears to hear that we were not only *freed from* sin but *freed for* the work of God's mission in the world.

This is what the Apostle Paul implores his readers throughout Romans 6. He opens the chapter explaining how Christ's death and resurrection have saved us from sin. He says, "Sin shall no longer be your master because you are not under the law but under grace (6:14)." He begins by explaining what we are free from—sin, death, the bondage of our old lives. But then, in verse 15 he shifts the conversation. Paul explains to the Romans, and to us, that we are not merely saved by God from sin but that we are saved for righteousness. We are free so that we can serve Christ and live in righteousness now. What kind of sacrifice are we called to? What kind of life is righteous? Micah succinctly declares, "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God (6:8)." Jesus reminds us, "You feed them (Mark 6:37)."

If we listen closely, this deeper calling to serve God and our neighbors in real, concrete ways echoes in our baptismal vows. We are called to *confess Christ as our savior* and *put our whole trust in his grace* and then we promise to *serve him as our Lord*. If Christ is Lord, then our schedule and finances and politics and allegiances must look like we actually believe he is the truth and the life. If Jesus is Lord, then his way of living—upsetting the status quo, fighting for the oppressed, feeding those who are hungry, giving attention to those who would otherwise go unnoticed—should be the model for ours. We are not simply freed from our old ways, we are freed for pursuing God's ways right now.

So, what has God freed you *for*? Where is God nudging you to see differently and serve wholeheartedly? Where is God asking you to join in the work of liberating those held captive or loosening the yoke of oppression? If Methodists are known for anything, it is our call to holiness in both heart and life. As we journey from Martin Luther King Jr Day to Ash Wednesday, know that God has freed us from sin so we can be freed in our time and place for the work of the kingdom now: ending poverty, seeking racial justice, ensuring that our neighbors are fed, and discovering Christ in the incarcerated and the oppressed.

MY NOTES:



WEEK 3:

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ON YOUR JOURNEY

... promise to serve him as your Lord

1. Do you still make “promises” today to people?
2. When have you been served by someone? How did it make you feel?
3. How does being willing to serve another person change your relationship with them?
4. Read John 13 and the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet.
 - What do you feel as Jesus stoops down and picks up your feet to wash them?
 - How does this action of Jesus change the way we view servanthood?
 - How does the church serve Jesus as Lord in the community or with one another? What difference, if any, is there between “confessing Jesus as Savior and Lord” and “promising to serve Jesus as Lord?”
 - How does serving Jesus as Lord change the way we relate to other people?
 - How hard must it have been for Jesus to wash Judas’ or Peter’s feet?
 - What does this promise to serve mean for those who might betray you? Or for those who deny what you? What does a servant church look like today?

THE HANDS & FEET OF CHRIST

MATTHEW 5:1-16

Rev. Dr. Pamela Green

Trinity and New Hope UMC, Lake City

I have found that service is a matter of heart. As we are shaped and transformed into image of Christ we grow in holiness of heart. It is within this transformation that a strong desire to serve versus a need to be served grows within our heart. Service to others becomes a joy rather than a burden.

Service as inspired by the Holy Spirit is counterintuitive to worldly teaching. Service to the Lord is not seen as demeaning but as an honor and privilege to serve God through service to others. Jesus demonstrated service to others throughout His ministry. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45, Matthew 20:25-28, NIV). Jesus did not come to be admired or honored, but to utilize His divine and infinite powers in service to others for the glory of God.

Even more so, when we serve others, we become the hands and feet of Jesus Christ on earth. It was a powerful and humbling revelation when I recognized that Jesus Christ works through me. Little ole me. Thank God for grace! Do you remember the moment you recognized you were the hands and feet of Jesus? Even more so, do you remember the moment when your eyes were opened to the fact that when you serve others you serve the Lord?



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The word says, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:31-40 NIV)

God calls upon us to serve others and be a stone of help in this world. A stone of help to all persons- guiding the world out of the darkness into the light. In so doing, we are an extension of Jesus Christ's ministry of service on this earth for the transformation of our hearts and the world.

MY NOTES:

“WHOEVER WANTS TO BECOME GREAT MUST BE A SERVANT”

MATTHEW 20:20-28

Lucas Bonates, Clergy

First UMC of Coral Gables, Coral Gables

I was about 19 years old when I participated of my first church leadership meeting. I was passionate about the life of the church, and I wanted to learn how everything worked, how decisions were made, and how I could help. To my surprise, I witnessed one leader proposing to restrict weddings at our church facility to members only, and if either the bride or the groom professed a different faith, we should not perform the ceremony. I was shocked.

Should we think we are better than others because we are Christians? Should we believe God loves us more than he loves others? Since Jesus had not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt.9:13), why would we build walls that keep sinners away from Jesus? Those leaders were intolerant, and that is not the witness we are called to offer as Christians.

So often we see people behaving as if they are better than others; they are special; they are V.I.P. Even the apostles James and John were focused on status and power at some point.

However, Jesus’ teaching is clearly in the opposite direction, for he said, “whoever wants to become great must be a



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servant.” Jesus invites us to walk a path of humility, of dignity, and service.

We cannot serve or love anyone if we don’t see them as equally worthy. We cannot love or serve God if we don’t love and serve our neighbors, no matter who the neighbors are.

God is inviting us to really love our neighbors. How? By protecting the disfranchised. By standing on the side of those who suffer. By supporting our brothers and sisters in the fight against racism and social injustice.

Resolve to seek spiritual strength and direction to love your neighbors, to serve them. When you do, you are loving and serving God. You are being a Christian.

MY NOTES:

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THE LAST WILL BE FIRST

MARK 10:42-45



Rev. Drew Weseman

Memorial UMC, Fernandina Beach

The context of this passage has always been funny to me. James and John are jockeying for positions in the Kingdom of God right after Jesus has described that Kingdom as one where “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31). As a competitive person, I understand that desire for wanting to be first. Those who win and achieve the highest ranks are the ones with the most influence. People listen to people of status and honor and as someone who wants my voice heard, there is tremendous appeal to striving for success. However, such ambition for our own benefit and glory is not consistent with life as disciple of Jesus.

In the Gospels, Jesus describes an alternative way of living in the world. In this new way we love rather than hate, we invite rather than exclude, and we give rather than keep for ourselves. Jesus calls the disciples together for another conversation about God’s Kingdom.

You see, the others were mad at the two brothers for their attempted power grab. Their anger could have been frustration that they were not understanding what Jesus said. But I would guess it was more likely jealousy they had not asked first. Knowing this, Jesus begins by contrasting his Kingdom with the ways of the world. In the Roman empire, being a citizen and well connected gave you rights and privileges unthinkable to the average person. Failure to adhere to social customs brought serious



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consequences and attempts to subvert the social hierarchy could end in death.

Our world is not much different. Our society still values US citizens over those without documentation, and the politically connected more than those who are disenfranchised. And as the Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and other justice-oriented movements have brought to the surface, power in America is also given out by race, gender, and sexual orientation in addition to wealth and class.

What does Jesus's message have to say to our church today? In this context, servanthood looks like elevating voices of color and patronizing a minority-owned business. It also looks like asking about the wage gaps in your church or workplace. Too often these conversations are initiated by those whom they directly affect. However, in God's Kingdom, those who are closer to the "top" are called to promote and encourage those closer to the "bottom." In doing so, we follow Jesus' example by not considering our own status and advantages as things to be exploited. Instead, we are called to empty ourselves, becoming servant-allies to those who have been pushed to the margins, allowing those voices to lead us all into the Kingdom to which Jesus is inviting us.

MY NOTES:

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SERVICE = LOVE

ROMANS 12:9-18

Grace Stiles Williams, Laity
St. Luke's UMC, Windermere

Serve the Lord. That seems like a simple statement.

Serve the Lord!

Take a moment to reflect on what serving the Lord looks like to you. Is it acts of goodwill? Giving food to another? Do you think of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples? Perhaps your service looks like a weekly tithe, or volunteering to lead a small group. Personally, having grown up in the heart of Orlando's theme park hotspots, I equate service to jobs within the hospitality and tourism industry. In this sense, to serve is to entertain, wait tables, make beds, chauffeur, and offer other goods with a smile. Customer satisfaction is the bottom line in this service scenario, even if it is at the expense of whoever is working. To serve, whether with pride or begrudgingly, indicates a lower position than the one who receives the action. It is a one-sided transaction.

However, when scripture calls us to serve the Lord, it does so with love as the bottom line. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes in chapter twelve of the marks of a true Christian. Paul describes how we should serve, not through specific deeds such as feeding or washing, but based on love. The members of the church are told to be joyous in their love for others, clinging to what is good and rebuking evil. They are told to share with the Lord's



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people, practice hospitality, bless those who persecuted them, and forsake pride in favor of associating with those in lower positions.

For Paul, service to others is a sincere act of love. It is not part of a business transaction, where service is paid with God's blessing. Instead, love between Christ and followers is reciprocal: Christians hold steadfast in Christ, and Christ is faithful to the world. Paul wrote this letter because of in-fighting between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the Roman church. Jewish Christians maintained that part of following Christ included following the laws of the Torah, such as keeping kosher, practicing the sabbath, and circumcision. Gentile Christians shirked these ideas, holding that faith in Jesus is true salvation, not following the laws. The animosity between the factions had grown so great that Paul immediately wrote to the church what we now read as the book of Romans. His description of what it means to live in Christian love is a call for unity between the two. What makes a true believer is not just faith or following the laws - it is how you treat others.

The fractures identified within the church of Rome continue to bear toxic fruit today. We continue to fight over who is in and who is out. We have haphazardly pasted over the cracks of beloved community with sermons about how much God loves us, leaving out the crucial part of scripture that demands that we show how much we love others. To serve the Lord is to live in abundant love! To extend Christ's open arms to all. For Paul, it meant unifying Gentile and Jewish believers. For the church today, love must be extended to all God's children. Our call to serve in love should reach our siblings on all spectrums of life and serve all with the joy and love of Christ.

MY NOTES:

OPEN DOORS

JOSHUA 24:14-24

*Emily Ann Zimmerman, Laity,
First UMC, Orlando*

In today's scripture, God urges us to serve only the Lord our God, no other. To serve the Lord means allowing nothing to separate you from God. To serve the Lord means to serve God's people. God calls us to serve each other, especially the oppressed, offering justice and shalom. We are called to look for the face of Jesus in the faces of others.

We are a church that opens doors and welcomes those kept out. In my lifetime I have experienced opening doors for the first time to people of color to full membership, to full participation, to leadership in the church. It was a difficult time and there was division. In my home church at St. James in Palatka, a group left and started their own independent church. But God's church was and is open to all people, of all colors, of all nations. The church drew close together as we began to live and serve together.

I shudder to think what would be lost if the doors had not been opened for me personally, for the church, but most importantly, for the Kingdom.

As we deepen our commitment to Jesus, our convictions about Jesus and grace move us toward acts of justice and mercy. I see an opportunity for the Church to push the doors wider as a truly inclusive church. There are people outside pleading to be let in. The Church is the place for open doors. We are called to offer shalom and justice, to serve and to be served by all people.



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My hope for the Church and our world is that there is justice for all and enough for everyone.

I have been a part of this wonderful church in the smallest to the largest congregations, for ninety years. I love it dearly and have great hopes for its continued service to the world.

MY NOTES:

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CARING FOR THE LEAST OF THESE

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Rev. Dr. Jon Tschanz
First UMC, Winter Park

The most prominent scripture about judgement does not mention the things we consciously or unconsciously judge others for: wealth, status, race, culture, sexuality, popularity, ability, or addictions. Scripture reveals judgement is based on how you have served. When we love others, we serve God.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us people will be separated into two groups, when the Son of Man comes into glory. Those who will inherit the Kingdom will be those who cared for the least of these: the naked, the thirsty, the hungry, the sick and those in prison. And those who did not will be judged. There is a connection to loving your neighbor and loving God.

Living in a hyper-individualistic culture, we often think freedom is doing whatever we want to do regardless of other people. But freedom in Christ is the freedom to love our neighbors.

Righteousness = Right Living = Loving your neighbor = Loving God

This is not self-righteousness. Instead, it is a community-based righteousness, in which no one can live a righteous life if there are people in the community hurting. You can never be righteous yourself if your neighbors are in need. Nobody is righteous until everyone is righteous.



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We are asked as United Methodists at baptism, "Do you promise to serve him as your Lord?" In other words: Do we promise to work towards community-based righteousness instead of self-righteousness? Do we promise to love all in order to love God?

If our United Methodist baptisms are soaked in grace and unconditional love, why do we revert to self-righteous judging and exclusion of others like they we were never baptized of the same grace-laced water? Jesus reminds us that we must serve the Lord so we can truly understand righteousness.

God comes to us as our neighbors. Only through a community-based righteousness will we be able to keep our promise, to serve the least of these, to love and include all our neighbors and serve Jesus as our Lord.

Amen.

MY NOTES:

SOCIAL HOLINESS

MICAH 6:8

Elizabeth Preston-Hughes, Laity
College Park UMC, College Park

Greetings to all in our family of believers.

Since Sunday, we have revisited teachings from Matthew, Mark, Romans and Joshua. Today's words from Micah 6:8 serve as the perfect capstone to these lessons.

This verse's brevity in no way diminishes its importance. Quite the contrary, these words in Micah speak to what is foundational to our ability to live successfully in community as believers, let alone as humans.

Collectively, justice, mercy and humility serve as the building blocks for the Wesleyan concept of social holiness. The Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, a leader in the United Methodist Church, sums up the depth of this tenet's connection to our denomination's identity saying, "social holiness is unique to Methodism. United Methodists have a long commitment to social holiness. It is in our DNA."

Methodists honor our calling to social holiness by meeting others where they are and walking their journeys with them. Attention to this calling raises our awareness of the reality that this DNA Dr. Henry-Crowe refers to is not embraced by all in our 21st century secular society. The people of Israel in Micah are much like our populace today. Through superficial



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sacrifices, the Israelites hoped to appease God. But the scripture offers a clear explanation of what God desires from them: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Changing the way we live involves work below the surface. With society wrapped up in racial and political division and the enormous impact of the pandemic, how do we, on a practical level, demonstrate this example of holy service, this heart work?

Personally, I have experienced optimal teaching moments for social holiness. My wife and I recently took occupancy, on a short-term basis, of a home in Cocoa Beach. This was the first time in my 50 years where I was a new kid on the block, made even more worrisome due to the aforementioned political division. Our new neighborhood had clear divisions. Instead of coming from a place of knee jerk animosity, we espoused radical hospitality, kindness and justice - for all. The rewards have been abundant. This new experience - living only 64 miles from my lifelong zip code - yet feeling foreign, has also reintroduced me to the healing power of mercy and humility, and giving the benefit of the doubt to all I encounter - just like Jesus did. I was reminded that all material possessions will soon return to dust, leaving my actions as the only example of my vow to serve him.

Today, will others see our commitment to justice, mercy and humility when looking in our eyes?

MY NOTES:



WEEK 4: OPEN

Rev. Madeline Luzinski

Florida UM Children's Home, Enterprise



Matthew 15:22-28

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

I have often been reminded of the scandalous nature of God's love. The good news of Christ's birth came first to shepherds in the field, not to the faithful in the synagogue. The parable of the workers in the field shows us that God will pay a day's wages to someone who only works for one hour. Jesus was crucified and offered salvation to a thief with his final breaths. The scandalous nature of God's love is a hard pill to swallow, especially if we see ourselves as pious and beloved by God and others as other and unworthy of grace. And yet, we too are unworthy.

When a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus crying for mercy on behalf of her daughter, Jesus at first responds that she is not one of those for whom He came. She doesn't take no for an answer and continues to plead. Jesus's response is one that has troubled many of us when we read this scripture for the first time. Is this Jesus, our loving Messiah, excluding someone from His power and grace? But this woman's courage and insistence changes something in Christ. Her faith moves Him to see that even she was worthy of His mercy and healing.

Many of us are uncomfortable with Jesus's humanity in this moment. Some of us are uncomfortable with the human nature of Jesus in general. It is hard for us to imagine God in flesh being grumpy, in need of a shower, or encountering a teachable moment. When I was in seminary Dr. Willie Jennings used this passage to show us that even Christ had to learn through experience. Luke tells us that Jesus as a child "grew in wisdom and understanding." Jesus had to learn just like you and I. In this moment, maybe for the first time, Jesus is confronted with a need He had not anticipated. He had come to understand His calling to the lost sheep of Israel, and yet here was someone else, pleading for what He had to offer.

So too in the course of history the church has been confronted again and again with the needs of people we thought were beyond the scope of our mission and care. Over and over again the Spirit moves and works in our midst to reveal to us how we can be the church for people today. We are moved to open ourselves to the possibility, the way Jesus was moved to open and expand His mind and His mission to the Canaanite woman.

MY NOTES:



WEEK 4:

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ON YOUR JOURNEY

... in union with the church which Christ has opened

1. Define the word “open” in relation to the church.
2. How has the church of today been less than open?
3. What does it mean to serve in union with the church?
 - How is your service or witness to be your own or an extension of your local church? How has Christ “opened” the church?
 - How do the words such as grace and service create the open church of Jesus?
 - What does a church opened by Christ look like and feel like? What is its purpose?
 - How does an open church interact with the world and change the community?
 - As people who make this vow, how do we help our congregations live into the vision of a church Christ has opened?

"I AM BECAUSE YOU ARE"

ACTS 10:9-16

Rev. Michelle Shrader
Good Samaritan UMC, Tallahassee

As we recite our baptismal vows, we name recognition that Christ has opened the church to people of all ages, nations, and races. Acts 10: 9-16 tells the story of Peter, one of the most courageous of the disciples. He is lost in prayer on the top of a roof and is gifted a vision of a sheet, containing animals of every sort, being dropped to the ground by its four corners. God tells him to go forth and eat and Peter says, "Lord, there is no way anything unclean is going to touch these lips."

God responds, "Hey, don't make things I have named clean, unclean or profane."

God pushes Peter to use his courage to lead others into this new thing God is doing.

How often do we make the beautiful profane? How often do we mar the image of the Holy?

There is a seminary in South Africa, Seth Mokitimi. When designing the Chapel, the doors were made nearly 20 feet tall. It's as if you are reaching to the heavens with your eyes as you look up at them. When I was invited to preach there, a friend mentioned that the doors are only open certain times of the year because of the air and heat and so I told the Chaplain



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not to worry about the doors when I arrived. As I walked up, the doors opened wide and I stood standing in awe, just staring up at them with tears in my eyes. The Chaplain smiled and said, “You are special, but the doors open for all.”

How often do we make the beautiful profane? How often do we mar the image of the Holy?

The sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners in Peter’s vision, reminds me of the beautiful reality that God was doing a new thing. There was a widening of the embrace of God, the good news was spreading beyond the Israelites, to the gentiles, and beyond. The love God calls us to is a love beyond what we can often grasp. The South African people speak of UBUNTU, which means, “I am because you are.” This word recognizes the inextricable bond between every human being on this earth. Our love should extend to persons of every age, race, and nationality, across boundaries of gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and our political opposition.

How often do we make the beautiful profane? How often do we mar the image of the Holy?

May we remember our baptism and find our way friends to the love that is open to All, not our own itemized list, but ALL.

Amen

MY NOTES:

WALKING WORTHY

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Jeremy Green, Clergy
St. Luke's UMC, Windemere

As a kid there were tons of words and phrases I would hear adults use that didn't quite make sense to me. Particularly mystifying were those sayings that some might now identify as "Christianese." One congregant would complement another on how well they sang a solo in service or how salient their observations had been in Sunday school. Instead of simply saying thank you they would reply, "You know, I'm just trying to walk worthy."

Worthy of what? What does that even mean?

As I grew, I became fluent in Christianese myself and started using those saying like the older saints. To my surprise about halfway through a focused study of the book of Ephesians, I stumbled upon what I believe inspired this saying.

After praying that the church would be given the power to comprehend love's width, length, height, and depth, Paul begins the fourth chapter of Ephesians with a very familiar encouragement. He says, "I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God." He then goes on to describe what that life of worthiness looks like.



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First is acting with humility, gentleness, patients, and acceptance. These are some of the most important attributes to cultivate both within our faith communities, and as we

strive to live as witnesses to the love and saving power of Jesus in the world. It is God-inspired humility that allows us to come to the awareness of our need for a savior. In our vulnerability, we are met with divine gentleness and patience. Experiencing this radical love and acceptance compels each of us to share it with everyone life brings our way.

Next, Paul instructs them to be intentional about maintaining unity of spirit within their community utilizing peace as their tying bind. Doing life with people was just as hard then as it is now and doesn't happen by accident. Sustaining relationships requires intentional compassion and consideration.

Maybe what the older saints meant when they said they were trying to "walk worthy" was that they were trying to live in such a way that God's love was apparent in every interaction they had with others. Maybe they were saying that "walking worthy" means being so loving and accepting that you become a living symbol of God's loving arms open to all.

If we who continue the work of those who came before us take seriously this call to live and walk worthily, the Church will be a place where all means all and truly reflects the divine diversity intended by our creator. If we learn to walk worthy, the Church will look more like Jesus.

MY NOTES:

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RADICAL HOSPITALITY

JAMES 2:1-4

Dr. Judith Pierre-Okerson, Laity
Miramar UMC, Miramar

James 2:1-4 (NLT)

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in ragged and dirty clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well, doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgment is guided by evil motives?

I view my baptism as the most sacred moment in my faith journey. I do not remember my baptism, but at the age of 13, in the presence of the congregation that has promised to nurture me in the faith, I confirmed the vow my parents took on my behalf when I was three months old—a vow to confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior and to serve Him.

Renewing my baptismal vow with my fellow United Methodists, I came to understand the baptismal vow as more than a personal commitment; it is also a communal commitment. We promise to serve Christ in union with the Church He has opened to all. Living in South Florida during Hurricane Andrew, and having served on the UMCOR board, I had the opportunities to see firsthand the United Methodist Church making our communal baptismal vow a reality.



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In time of natural disaster, the Church opens its door to those who are hurting to experience Christ's love regardless of their age, ethnicity, cultural, gender, or sexual identities. This is the Church at its best! I have also seen the same denomination, shut the door that Christ has opened to all in the face of its own members, thus ignoring Scripture's warning against partiality. James reminded us when we fail to offer the same hospitality to all, we allow our "judgment to be guided by evil motives" *rather than by our baptismal vow.*

As we prepare to enter the Lenten season next week, a time when the Church of Jesus Christ is focused on the meaning of baptism and discipleship, let us remember radical hospitality is at the core of the Gospel. My hope and prayers are for The United Methodist Church to be, not just in time of crisis, but daily, the hospitable church we are called to be. To serve Christ as we confess in our baptismal vow, we must be a church open to all because Christ Himself has opened His church to all without judgement. Let us pray!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, once again we confess that You are our Lord and savior. We renew our promise to live a life of discipleship in union with Your church. We ask for Your forgiveness for our personal and communal sins of partiality. May Your Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to practice radical hospitality and make disciples for You for the transformation of the world. Amen!

MY NOTES:

THERE'S ROOM AT THE TABLE

LUKE 14:12-24

Manu Bhatnagar, Laity
Plantation UMC, Plantation

Rejection is a terrible feeling that people dread from an early age. Whether it be from friends, a partner, society, or family, it is a feeling that all of us experience at some point in our lives--a universal truth. It happens so often that we have to make laws and societal rules against it.

Here in the US, we have been feeling rejection in some intense ways. People have been marching in the streets over it. Killing each other over it. Rioting and destroying relationships over it. Whether we feel rejected for the color of our skin, our gender or sexual orientation, our culture, or religion, we each experience it in different ways.

Just like we have felt the harsh sting of rejection, so has the Father. This passage in Luke, has Jesus telling a story of a host throwing a banquet, but everyone invited to the grand feast collectively denied him. He then tells his servant to go out into the streets and invite all the poor and disabled people. The servant returns and says he invited many but there are still seats available. The Master tells him to go further from the city, to the country roads, and invite all the outcasts to the table. The host had prepared a heavenly banquet and he was going to have a full house one way or another.



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The Pharisees Jesus was talking to would have been part of the invited guests that denied the host, considering

themselves to be above him and therefore having no qualms about turning him down last minute. If they heard about the people who were invited to the party in their place, they would have scoffed. They considered the others sinners, not good enough, and judged the host for his openness and inclusion. I think of Jesus' words in John 15: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world."

The Church is a beacon of refuge for some and a symbol of hatred for others. We, like the Pharisees, have not always been the most welcoming to all of God's people. I'm encouraged by the open communion table that the United Methodist Church has offered, as it is open to all people. If we are really going to call ourselves a church of open hearts, open minds, and open doors, we need to open those doors to everyone. Just as Christ welcomes all of us.

If you find yourself feeling rejection, know that Christ has room for you at the table. If you find yourself the victim or the victimizer, know that Christ has room for you. Our God welcomes all to the table. We believe we are unworthy and yet, Christ wants us there; he makes the way and invites us to the banquet.

MY NOTES:

THE VINE & THE BRANCHES

JOHN 15:1-17

Rev. Dr. Cynthia Weems, Superintendent
South East District

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. John 15:5

The heart of the gospel is that we unite, literally commune, with God and with one another. Through Jesus Christ we experience the communion that exists between God and humanity, humanity within itself, and even the communion of the saints. It is like a pesky vine that just won't stop growing!

Our scripture reminds us that this vine and its branches also bear fruit. We do not exist for ourselves. We exist for the fruit we will bear. This is often a tough word. In church life, we often prioritize what we want, how we want it, and what suits our tastes. Our passage from John reminds us that fruit borne from Jesus, our vine, is fruit that gives life and joy. Not a bad litmus test for our Christian lives and our church's ministries.

When I was a child I lived in a small Southern town. I loved my life there and it was at about eight years old, in that town, that I first began to publicly state I planned to be a pastor when I grew up. The church life I learned there was a life of potlucks, flouncy Sunday dresses, Easter bonnets, Wednesday night "prayer meetin'" and a whole host of other really wonderful things. Over the years, I have experienced some of the church



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customs of my youth in different ways. I loved the pretty dresses because I had pretty dresses. Potlucks were enjoyable because my family had food to contribute. These customs are actually limitations on how many people experience the church – a place where only those who can dress and contribute in certain ways are welcome. I loved these customs, but I can do without them if it means opening the experience of Christ's church to people who have long felt far from welcome in it.

Our theme for this week is "Open." I believe the image of Jesus as the vine, we as his branches, and the fruit as the work of our lives and ministries is profoundly connected to the idea of a church that continues to grow in its openness. Fruit gives life and joy. Are the customs and practices of our churches life-giving and points of joy for all people? I want to suggest that the Church of the future is a Church that bears witness to Jesus as the vine by branching out into new ways of being and bringing forth a new kind of fruit.

I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. John 15:11

MY NOTES:

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CHURCH ON A MISSION

ROMANS 15:5-13

Rev. Vidalis Lopez
First UMC, Coral Springs

When I was nine years old, I witnessed a group of United Methodist missionaries join the efforts of a local United Methodist church who served a native community all come together to celebrate the completion of a rope-bridge. After torrential rain, a river would rise dangerously blocking the way for the local community to carry on their daily endeavors, like going to work and school. But with a rope-bridge in place, even with rising waters, the families had a way to walk through safely and continue with their purposes. You can imagine the hope around the idea of having a bridge in this area!

I remember joining the celebration, and with everyone there, we crossed over, tried out the bridge, and walked through what used to be impassable.

That is what intentional and missional connection looks like for me.

Storms and rising waters can be scary. They can hinder the ability to live life fruitfully and separate and isolate us, too. But not only can we endure with Christ through all of life's storms, we can make difference, a significant impact, for the world to see how we trust and follow the way. We can show how breakthroughs are possible and how to rise above and offer a sense of belonging for all.



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The Word became flesh, and Jesus is the way for us. So, as

Christ's church, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord.

I could share about how the rope bridge project entailed lots of work and encountered setbacks. But these yielded fruit and blessing, and the outcome of a shared purpose and responsibility, the synergy amongst the people involved, and the power of the unity in the act of obedience as doers and multipliers for God's kingdom.

I remember this experience vividly. It shaped my life, and it is a benchmark (or signpost) that reminds me when times get tough, to remember how God has worked in the past and how God works today.

Last year, on this day, we were a month away from experiencing a nationwide quarantine, suspending all in-person services. Soon after, I witnessed the birth of new ways/things that I did not plan, expect, or even know how to do through a virtual platform.

Once again, I was reminded of our need to prepare the way of the Lord.

Our hope comes from the Lord, the one who said, "Let us go cross to the other side." I pray that our church commits to persevere with faith in God and trust God, for God's glory.

That is a Church on a mission.

MY NOTES:

WHO'S IN & WHO'S OUT?

ACTS 15:1-21

Kipp Nelson, Certified Candidate

First UMC, Miami

Who is in, and who is out?

The two questions we ask a lot as we ponder and dream about a Church that reaches into the future. Who will stay and who will leave? While our circumstances seem to suggest that some sort of division is inevitable, this narrow-minded dichotomy actually hinders us from becoming a healthy and thriving Church. This type of thinking can lead us to further separation and exclusion and perpetuate much harm to God's beloved people.

Some of the most painful moments of my life have come from the feeling of being excluded. Whether it was not making the middle school basketball team, not being invited to a friend's birthday party, or being told I couldn't be a pastor because I was gay. Being left out sucks. Each of these experiences of exclusion have left me feeling unloved and unwanted at times.

In all the ups and downs, the one place I always find relief is at the feet of Jesus. He continually broke down social barriers and welcomed people like me. He constantly drew near to those society, and even the law, deemed unwelcome. His life and ministry prove to me that I can be included, of all places. at the table of the divine. Not only can I be included there, but



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I belong there.

In Acts 15, we read about the divisions of the early church and the extensive debate surrounding who should be included, and who should be left out. Many Jews believed that the Gentiles couldn't truly be saved until they were circumcised. Yet Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James reminded them of God's vast and open love, which includes both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of circumcision. They even speak about how God had been at work among those others sought to exclude.

James speaks about the church, recalling a vision from the prophet Isaiah that depicts the future God longs for them: "From its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord."

This story reminds us that exclusion has no place in God's kingdom. Today we are reminded that God's love is open for all, even those who look, live and love differently than we do. Despite the forces of exclusion that surround and influence us, we are called to the work of inclusion.

Might we the people of the United Methodist Church seek to stop the harm perpetuated by exclusion of all types and strive to be the inclusive and open table that God calls each of us to. Might we come to know that we are sacred and welcome, and become a part of building a beloved community where all people may find comfort and belonging in the vast love of God.

MY NOTES:

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WEEK 5: ALL

Rev. Amy Armistead

Gathering Place UMC, Ormond Beach



One day while grabbing a coffee in downtown Montgomery, I saw a sign in a storefront window that said, “Y’all means all.” I love the phrase y’all. It’s welcoming and warm. It’s like a big ol’ hug from your grandma. I smiled and went on my way. As I kept on walking downtown, I passed the Court Square Fountain, which has since replaced what used to be Montgomery’s slave trade auction area. Across from the fountain is the location where Rosa Parks historically refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, one of the moments that sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Right down the street is home to the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pastored from 1954-1960. As I walked the streets of downtown Montgomery, I was surrounded by centuries of painful American history, a history that deeply intertwines with American Christianity. These historical markers were tangible manifestations of the church struggling to embody Jesus opening the church to all ages, nations, and races.

This week’s theme is “All.” In the United Methodist Church, y’all has not always meant all. As warm and inviting as that word is, we lessen its impact when we trade genuine inclusivity for shallow pleasantries. We say all are welcome, when our history and pews show otherwise.

Jesus had a vision for what he wanted his people to be known for. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he tells his followers: You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid (Matt. 5:13-14, NRSV).

Salt preserves, seasons, purifies, and fertilizes. Salt is never the star of the meal. It only enhances the flavor. And anyone with high blood pressure knows that too much salt can get you into trouble. The right amount of salt elevates the flavors of the dish. It makes a steak even steakier and can make pasta come alive. It transforms a bland dish into something delicious!

When Jesus instructs his people to be the salt of the earth, we're not supposed to overpower the main course – only elevate it. If we are touting how much better Christians are over everyone else —making Christianity an exclusive and superior club for the righteous — we've oversalted our dish.

By naming His followers as salt and light, Jesus gives His disciples the capacity to do good in the world. He empowers and emboldens them. However, if Jesus' disciples fail to welcome the most vulnerable, the stranger, the oppressed, they lose their saltiness. Their faith becomes bland.

The word *you* in the passage, “*you* are the salt of the earth, *you* are the light of the world,” is actually plural when translated from the Greek. There is no formal plural word for “*you*” in the English language, therefore the closest translation is *y'all*!

Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world!
Y'all means all. Seriously, ALL.

Y'all means LGBTQ youth, who statistically experience greater chances of homelessness. Y'all means our black and brown neighbors. Y'all means the migrant family, the incarcerated, and the people huddled in church basements as they work on getting clean or sober. Y'all means the immunocompromised, the elderly, and the vulnerable. Y'all are not only invited, *y'all* are the light. Y'all are salt of the earth. A city on a hill. Y'all are the church!

As I think about my walk in downtown Montgomery, I'm reminded of both how far we've come and how much work there is left to do. As a young clergy, I hope to be part of a denomination that takes our baptismal vows seriously. I hope we grow into a church that really means it when we say *y'all* means all.



WEEK 5: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ON YOUR JOURNEY

... of all ages, nations, and races?

1. What does the word all mean in relation to the church? How have we fallen short of being for “all” as a church?
2. Why do we put limits on what “all” truly means? What is it in our human nature that wants to limit “all”?
3. When we live with smaller definitions of all, how does that diminish our understandings of confession, grace, service and open?
4. What other categories would you add to ages, nations, and races?
5. What happens to our public unity or witness when “all” means different things to different churches or even members?
6. When we limit “all” what does that tell the world about God?
7. Who does it impact in your life when all really does mean all?

CLOTHED WITH CHRIST

GALATIANS 3:26-29

Rev. Ginger Medley

Poinciana UMC, Miami Springs

Today is February 14, a day of love and making promises. Eighteen percent of all Valentine's Day purchases are jewelry, often given as a promise of love. The precious gift of salvation through Jesus Christ is God's fulfillment of a promise made to all humanity. The body of Christ should be like a dazzling ring of diverse precious stones, forged in love and perfected in salvation. Excluding people from the community of faith, hinders our ability to shine bright like a diamond. All people have been fearfully and wonderfully made to be God's jewels (Malachi 3:17). God welcomes all to inherit the promise through Jesus Christ.

Our high calling is to clothe ourselves daily with Christ. We must put on the character and attributes of Jesus, who consistently loved beyond social stigmas, religious barriers, and gender roles. The Holy Spirit yearns to lead and teach us the way of Christ revealing the Kingdom of God on earth and transforming communities.

May the Lord forgive us when we've been more like wolves in sheep's clothing instead of putting on Christ. Let us be Christian disciples of integrity who live as generous heirs of the promise instead of being stingy imposters who exclude people because of sinful pride and prejudice. We are compelled to remember the soul-cleansing power of our baptism into Christ. Wait no longer! Respond today by calling on the name of the



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Lord to wash us anew and make us clean from sin. (Acts 22:16)

The way things are in the world, it's easy to feel like God's promise is just a fading pipedream going up in the smoke of hate, bigotry, and injustice. But we are not called to live by feelings. We are called to live by faith. And God is faithful to his promise; his Word is true (Numbers 23:19). God does not lie and will not change his mind – the promise of salvation, the promise of forgiveness, the promise of love is truly for all people. So, with courage and confidence let us press forward in faith to live out the hope of God's dazzling ring of promise to ALL people.

How does being baptized into Christ and clothed with Christ challenge me to be in community with all people? What marginalized group of people can I begin to nurture in Christ through faith so that they might receive the promise as children of God?

Prayer: Lord of the Promise, create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. Help me to embody the truth of your promise to all people, in Jesus name. Amen.

MY NOTES:

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THE ALL-INCLUSIVE KINGDOM

LUKE 4:14-30

Rev. Tracie Ashley

Grace Community UMC, Lithia

I have a soft spot for the people of Nazareth in today's text. Yes, those dear ones who felt moved to such anger they had a mind to hurl Jesus over a cliff. I mean, how dare he trapse about, healing and performing signs and wonders. Then, he just shows up, comes back home – no tricks, just truth. And they didn't like it one bit.

I understand those Nazarenes because I have been there myself, wanting all the wonder without any of the work. Just wanting a Hallmark version of following Jesus. Just show me the feel-good stuff, you know, the kind that leaves you soaring. But that's just fangirling Jesus, not following. And Jesus wants so much more for you and for me.

When push came to shove, the people listening to Jesus in the synagogue were outraged as he suggested their faith was not an all-inclusive faith; when he dared to suggest that God loves all others, not just their own line, lineage and people. He reminded them of Elijah's care for a widow who was not Jewish, and of Elisha healing the commander of an enemy army. But in pointing this out, Jesus had gone, too far. As N.T. Wright puts it, "Israel's God was rescuing the wrong people" and Jesus was calling them on their refusal to see the far-reaching nature of God's love.

Our relationship with Jesus leads us to have a more expansive view of creation, of people. And while there is mystery and



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wonder, there is also work to which we are called, as we learn to live into our vow of an all-inclusive Kingdom, where all are not just welcomed but cherished. It's where "all" is not a hollow buzz word, but the beautiful diversity of God.

The more we walk with Jesus, the more we discover areas of our own ideologies that need shifting and healing, that need aligning with the cross of Jesus. Those hidden places that reveal our disgust, even cliff-hurling anger, with the thought of God's inclusivity are the starting points of this shifting and healing work. We are called to love people of different ages, nations or races, just as God does; people of different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations or any other way we classify or declassify others.

What are these areas for you? The hot spots that are still closed off to the beauty of all? It is a good and joyful thing, obedient work, to seek them out. It is healthy to speak about them in prayer, to confess and to sit in silence with the Christ who just absolutely adores you. This is why we do not need to be afraid of doing this inner work, because we do not do alone. We do it hand-in-hand with the one who also calls us cherished and beautiful and included. We do it as part of a community of believers, on this journey of becoming more and more aligned with the cross of Jesus, as we live into the lifestyle of the all-inclusive Kingdom.

MY NOTES:

HEALING OUR WOUNDS

ISAIAH 58:6-12

*Erin Wagner, Student
Boston Theological Seminary*

Isaiah 58 is for all of us. It is for those who have witnessed and experienced what this past year has revealed – racism, violence, economic injustice, the unequal impact of a crushing pandemic, the reality of our own vulnerability and just how delicately interconnected we truly are. Isaiah 58 is for those who have known the presence of these things all along but never had enough air to breathe to even speak the words. For all those who have been speaking the words long before we got here only to be silenced by the loudest voices in tallest towers saying, “You don’t belong here.”

Isaiah 58 is for you.

In this passage, the prophet wields the words of the Lord in a scathing indictment of the hypocrisy of the people of God. In the five verses prior to where we enter today, Isaiah depicts an Israel that is confused and hurt by the withholding of God’s favor. God speaks, “Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? We humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” And the Lord responds, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.”

Our 21st century eyes do not have to look far to find the parallels in this 6th century BCE text. We have all



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witnessed, and even participated in, things that are cloaked in a “practiced righteousness” at the expense of the health, wellbeing, and inclusion of the children of God.

And yet, when we read this text together with a liberative lens, we know that God does not leave us in that shame. Our God is not a God that leaves us in our graves. We are not set to “walk on our knees for a hundred miles, though the desert repenting;” restoration is written into our bones. In Isaiah 58, God makes clear what God requires of us: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen? To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...?” The Lenten journey that we are preparing to embark on, a season of fasting, of cleansing, of purifying, can be held in such a way that we uphold the commitments we share in our baptismal covenant as and to the body of Christ.

We mourn and repent the times in which we have not resisted evil, injustice, and oppression, and this year we seek to fast in the ways that God has chosen. We work collectively to heal the wounds that are both newly made and those that are simply uncovered in each other, that we may be called the repairer of broken walls, and restorer of streets with dwellings. We commit to living as if the Kingdom has already come. Because Isaiah 58 is for all of us. Let it be so.

MY NOTES:

ACCEPTANCE BEGINS WITH US

EPHESIANS 2:11-22



Susan Hanafee, Laity
Boca Grande UMC, Boca Grande

For us as Christians, Lent is a time of abstinence and fasting. Normally, we think of giving up certain foods, such as chocolate or sweets, as a sign of penitence. Today, I am asking you to look beyond the traditions we have established to what God would want us to do to truly celebrate the gift of His only son and the promise of redemption He offers to us.

As the sign of the cross is marked on your forehead, think of others who are receiving this symbol of eternal life. Would the Lord deny this sign and promise to someone because the skin of the forehead was a different color or because of that person's gender or sexual orientation? Would He turn away the believer because of his or her age or country of origin?

In our hearts we know the answer. God has made all of us in His own image and instructed us to love thy neighbor as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than this. Why do we sometimes find this so difficult to understand and follow? In today's passage, we are reminded that God does not look upon one group with more favor than another. We are His children and when we accept mercy and grace through Jesus Christ, we all become part of the same spiritual family.

Because we are one in God's love, may this Lenten period of forty days and forty nights be the beginning of a spiritual journey that continues beyond the celebration of Easter. May



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we abstain from prejudice in any form and against any person or people. May we commit to permanently fast from judging others based on the color of their skin, their gender or age, their sexual orientation, their political belief or their country of origin.

Prayer: Lord, we ask your help in keeping our words from being used to hurt, disparage or judge others. Let us never forget that we are all Your children and that all are welcome in Your church and your Kingdom. Acceptance begins with us. Amen.

MY NOTES:

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EPILOGUE

Rev. Annette Stiles Pendergrass
Suntree UMC, Melbourne



Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.

For the last 31 days, we have been on a journey, exploring what it means for the United Methodist Church to fully live into our baptismal vow which asks, *“Do you confess Jesus Christ as your savior, put you whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?”*

Every time someone stands before us in the body of Christ to share in the sacrament of baptism, each of us has an opportunity to renew our consent and our commitment to this vow. We say, “yes” we **confess** Jesus as Savior and Lord and we seek to live out that confession and commitment in all that we do. We say “yes” to the gift of unmerited, prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying **grace** of God in Jesus Christ. We say “yes” to **servng** Jesus as Lord in the church and in the world. We say a resounding “yes” to God’s dream and plan for a church that is truly **open** to all people, regardless of age, nation, race, sexuality, gender, status. And with all of these “yesses” we make ourselves available to the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping us and shaping a church that reflects these commitments.

But none of this is possible without that one little clause in the middle of this vow, *“put your whole trust in his grace.”* I’ve been reflecting on that line for a while now, reflecting on what it means to put my “whole trust in his grace.”

And I've realized that for me, and perhaps for all of us, this a really bold thing to do. Putting my whole trust in "his grace" means that I am abandoning my need to be in charge of how God's grace operates in the world. Think about that. It means that I am choosing to leave for God and God alone, all the decisions about when, where, how and in whose life, grace shows up. It means that I'm willing to trust that while the law of God is still important in helping me to live my life and organize my world, the law is not and never will be enough. That is because while God gave us the law in love, to enable us to live graciously and freely within loving and spacious boundaries, we humans tend, again and again, to weaponize the law and use it against one another. Again and again, we fall into the trap of measuring and judging. Who is in and who is out? Who is worthy and who is not worthy?

For me, "putting my whole trust in his grace" means that these are not questions for me to answer. It means that I can wholly lean into and trust the extravagant grace of Christ to show up and work, heal, transform, and use people that I might never expect or imagine, even me! And I don't have to understand it. I don't have to be able to explain it. I only need to trust that the power of that grace is greater and more expansive than I will ever imagine or understand. For a control freak like me, it is, admittedly, a leap of faith! But it is also amazingly freeing!

Putting my whole trust in his grace is, for me, a lot like what the prophet Jeremiah was describing in chapter 31:31-34, especially where it says, "*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.*" It is the law of love and grace in Christ that through him, is written on our hearts, a law that fulfills all previous law, a law that enables us to truly "know" God. It is a law that brings us peace with God and one another.

There is much about the future of the Church that I love that remains uncertain. But what is certain and sure for me is that ours is a church that invites us to confess Christ as Savior, that compels us to serve in Christ's name and that must continue to grow in the ways it reflects the character of God in its openness to all people. This is a church that will grow and thrive in its witness to God's Kingdom as we each seek to put our whole trust in his grace alone. This is a church I'm grateful to be part of today and one that I look forward to serving in the future.

Putting my whole trust in his grace.

MY NOTES:

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.



The Florida Conference
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH