



*i GOT SHOES, YOU GOT SHOES
ALL GOD'S CHILDREN GOT SHOES
When i GET to HEAVEN GONNA PUT ON MY SHOES
i'M GONNA WALK ALL OVER GOD'S HEAVEN
EVERYBODY TALKIN' ABOUT HEAVEN AIN'T
GOIN' THERE*

LENT 2017: THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Parables and Songs for the Journey

The Concord Baptist Church of Christ

The Kingdom of God:
*Parables and Songs
for the Journey*

The 2017 Season of Lent

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Dear Friends,

This 2017 Season of Lent marks the 15th year that we have been writing and producing our own collection of meditations for our people. This year, we are focusing on the kingdom of God. Our writers, in various ways, have tried to help us imagine the kingdom of God by focusing on the stories and parables of Jesus and the Negro Spirituals. Because our ancestors had a unique understanding of God's kingdom, we will be allowing those songs and melodies to be our traveling companions as we journey through Lent together.

Our songbook of Negro Spirituals includes songs that were published before 1920, and are in the public domain. Though the words are familiar to us, many of these melodies and arrangements may not be as familiar. It is important for us to keep these melodies alive so that we do not lose the ability to sing the songs that were key to our ancestors' survival. The theology illuminated in these songs demonstrate the firm grasp our ancestors had on the key truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and why it was that they were able to hold on to their humanity as they experienced the degradation of enslavement in America. Resistance meant, among other things, speaking and singing in the coded language that only they could understand. It meant refusing to accept the slave master's version of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we be reminded of who fed them in their wilderness as we face our own uncertain days.

A note about the organization of our study: Each Wednesday, instead of reading a meditation, you will find a few songs highlighted. Use your Wednesday devotional period to read the lyrics of the songs and imagine the circumstances under which the words were birthed. You'll learn the melodies for the songs during our worship together on Wednesday nights - so make it a point to be present!

We are grateful for our members who write for us every year. This year, we welcome new writers — **Malcolm Robertson** and **Requithelia Allen**. As always, we extend an open invitation to Concorders to consider writing for our congregation. New writers are always welcome!

We look to see you each Wednesday evening during this season! We begin with a Soup and Salad Fellowship at 6:00 pm. Worship begins at 7:00 pm. This year, we will be blessed by the preaching of Pastor Simpson's students from Drew Theological Seminary. Remember to bring a friend with you to worship. If you drive, offer to pick someone up. Think about the people who live in your area. This season is always a good time to share hospitality and build community.

In the friendship of Jesus Christ,
Pastor Simpson

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SONGS FOR TODAY

Ash Wednesday

March 1, 2017

"If You Want To See Jesus, Go In The Wilderness"

(Why would our ancestors encourage each other to go into the wilderness?)

"Lord, Until I Reach My Home"

(What was the "home" they envisioned waiting for them at the end of their journey?)

March 2, 2017
Isaiah 2:1-4

KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

Michael O. Ojewale

¹ The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

The one thing that sustains the human spirit in its bleakest hours is hope. In my first months on the job as prison chaplain, I had a young man in his early twenties in my office. His family was having a hard time and he was having a rough time dealing with it, especially, not being around to help. I allowed him to call his mother. As he talked, I heard him encouraging his mother, "Mom, I'll be home soon; Mom, I'll soon be home." When the call ended, I asked when he would be leaving jail. His "soon" was over a year away. That was not how I would define "soon" but I bit my tongue. I later realized that an incarcerated person with a fixed release date would talk of going home soon even if he had two more years to spend in the penal system. To that person, a definite, specific, fixed release date is a great sign of hope, even if it is two years away. It will come to pass!

The one thing that sustained Israel in its bleakest hours was hope based on the promised Messiah, a certain, future Deliverer. The prophet Isaiah, like other prophets, projected hope of a better, brilliant, victorious future. At the end of history, the entire human race would finally acknowledge God as supreme and the Temple in Jerusalem as the place to worship the sovereign God. Judah was called to live considering that future reality. To a displaced, exilic people longing not just for home but for a return of their nation to its earlier prominence as it was during the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, no words could be more hope and faith sustaining than these words of Isaiah.

Other prophets like Micah, Hosea, Malachi, and Jeremiah also sustained Israel's hope. New Testament figures like Zechariah (Luke 1: 67-79), Simeon and Anna (Luke 2: 25 -28) all attest to the realization of these prophecies in the work of forerunner John, and in the birth of Jesus. Even after Jesus' resurrection and prior to His ascension His Disciples' sentiments and hope was revealed in their last question to Jesus, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). That is the sustaining power of hope!

Eugene Lang was invited to speak to a class of 61 sixth graders in 1981. He wondered what he could say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school. He said: "I asked the principal of the school how many of these kids would go to college, and he told me maybe one." Mr. Lang wondered how he could get these children even to look at him. Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." At that moment, the lives of these students changed. For the first time, they had hope. One student said, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Mr. Lang went further by providing tutors, trips to colleges, an open door to his office and, above all, his energetic encouragement. That class achieved great success. Their own hard work and dedication propelled them forward. But, the real hope they found in Lang's promise and his concrete support inspired them to work hard.

May we journey through this Lenten season reminded of the challenge issued in one of the Reverend Jesse Jackson's most famous sermons: let us remember the promises and work hard to "Keep Hope Alive!"

March 3, 2017
Isaiah 11:1-9

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fating together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

FULFILLMENT OF A PROPHECY

Ernest Greene

The son of Obed and the grandson of Ruth and Boaz, Jesse was King David's father. However, before David became King, his father Jesse was simply "Jesse". His name meant simply "God exists". From these humble roots would be born Jesus, the Christ. Isaiah's prophecy of what would become of the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" was fulfilled in Jesus: The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him without measure - evidenced by grace, knowledge, wisdom and strength. If Isaiah was describing this fulfillment in today's context, he'd say:

Jesus Christ shall be endowed with super-powers through the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, might, knowledge, fear of God, spiritual vision and superlative hearing:

Wisdom: to know what's good for His own people and the ability to choose the best means to secure the best ends.

Understanding: the judgement that results from wisdom.

Might: the strength of heart and purpose to meet difficulties, encounter dangers, to be bold, open and fearless in the discharge of His duties.

Knowledge: possession of the knowledge of the attributes, character, plans, and will of God.

Fear of God: aim to please God and a reluctance to offend God; the first step towards true "knowledge".

Spiritual Vision: ability to judge justly and with mercy, not according to outward appearances.

Superlative Hearing: the ability to hear every voice and to not judge by common fame and report.

In Isaiah's vision everything and everyone is restored to its intended state. All will be transformed by the grace of Christ. Strength will be understood as the willingness to submit to the truth, and the proclaimers of the gospel will reveal the great things of the Gospel without using any coercive power, but as little children. The Lord promises to protect the poor and vulnerable, and God's people will pursue justice for those that bear the injuries done to them, for they are entitled to divine care and protection.

The Prince of Peace shall bring peace. God's people shall be delivered, not only from evil, but from the fear of it as well. The earth shall live in love, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

God did not renege on God's everlasting promise to David. A new "David" was born, anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit to usher in a new world order. In this new kingdom, there will be equity, justice, righteousness, and faithfulness. War will be no more. All believers must witness to the fulfillment of the prophecy, so that the "earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord." In God's kingdom, believers fear only the Lord, seek truth and the right knowledge of God, advocate for justice for the weak and poor, and work to spread the Gospel everywhere.

March 4, 2017
Daniel 2:44-45

"DRIPPING WITH IMAGINATION..."

Jonathan Tennial

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever; ⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. The great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy."

I have been watching the HBO series, *The Young Pope*, where the character Pope Pius XIII has aspirations of restoring the Catholic Church to its glory days. In expressing his hopes and aspirations he says, "God and I are dripping with imagination."

As we think about what we expect God's coming kingdom to look like, we, too, must imagine. Daniel reminds us that God's kingdom will never be destroyed but yet the only kingdoms we are familiar with are those that can be conquered and overtaken by a more dominant and prominent kingdom. Anyone who studies history understands that in every period of time, there is one kingdom that seems to dominate the world. Each of these kingdoms will eventually have a great fall. Another will rise up for a time.

The kingdom that God has imagined is not one that will ever be destroyed but it "shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44). It shall be a kingdom void of walls and fences, keeping people in and others out. It shall be a kingdom where all people - regardless of race,

gender, sexuality, creed, or any other socially constructed characteristic - shall be free to be who God created them to be, free from xenophobia. It shall be a kingdom that shall never be destroyed by fear of difference, where differences are celebrated and welcomed.

Can we too drip with God's imagination for God's coming kingdom? As songwriter John Lennon said, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one..." If this too, is your hope, let's do our part to make it come to pass.

"FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM..."

Jonathan Tennial

March 5, 2017
Daniel 7: 13 - 14

Every great kingdom is also known for their leadership and the personas of the monarch. Just as every great kingdom comes to an end, the reign of all monarchs must also end. As Daniel imagined the coming kingdom of God, he also looked to the monarch who would lead this kingdom and have dominion over it.

Daniel's vision of other kingdoms feature four beasts who all exude some power over their respective kingdoms. These beasts are eventually destroyed and dominion taken away. But in his night vision, he sees "one like a human being" presented before God and given authority from God to rule this kingdom. This messianic prophecy continues to drip with God's imagination about this kingdom being one that never ends. Further proving its eternal existence, the monarch too, will live in eternity.

The reign of this kingdom is given to a human being, someone like us, who will rule with justice and righteousness. The powers of this world are ferocious, evil and oppressive and cause terrible things to happen to people they deem less than valuable. These rulers never last! Thanks be to God that this kingdom will belong to the supreme monarch, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and forever!

¹³ As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

March 6, 2017
Luke 2:25-38

ANTICIPATION

Harry Franklin

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Have you ever wished or hoped that some long-held dream would come true? The fact is that all of us at one time or another in our lives have wished for something. And, many of the things we have wished for are just that: "things." If I were to ask you to name three wishes that you most desire in your life, what would you answer? You might desire a better job, more money in the bank, or to see your children off to a good start in life. Perhaps, very few of us would name wishes that have real power to transform our lives. Such wishes are likely to begin with the verb to "be": To be more loving to family and friends, to be a more sincere follower of Christ, to be one who has a clearer vision of the Savior. These are life-changing desires.

Simeon was given the promise of a lifetime. He would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah! What a remarkable promise for anyone to receive! Can you imagine how excited Simeon might have felt when this was revealed to him? Maybe he wondered why he was chosen for such a promise. Undoubtedly, of all the things he might have hoped for in his life, this promise had to be singularly supreme! Maybe he wondered from day to day: Is this the day? Is this the hour? How will it happen? Maybe his heart overflowed with holy anticipation.

When the day and hour finally arrived, Simeon enters the temple and finds the promise - Jesus - with his parents. He holds the child in his arms and gives praise to God. He has seen the salvation of the Lord! The Messiah, a light of revelation has come for the Gentiles, and for glory to Israel has come. Now, he says God is dismissing him in peace. He blesses Mary and Joseph, who are amazed at what they had heard, and he tells them of the things to come.

What a remarkable account of spiritual fulfillment! Simeon was blessed in at least three respects, according to this account: with the privilege of holding the child Jesus, the Savior of the world, in his arms; blessed to have the Holy Spirit in his heart; and, blessed to be able to depart from this life in peace, having experienced the glorious fulfillment of an incredible promise! Praise be to God!

How many of this world's lost souls will never see Jesus? How many church members have not seen the Savior? Although we cannot hold the child Jesus in our arms like Simeon did, we can "see" Jesus by accepting God's promise to all who believe. The Apostle Peter declares that "the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away..." (Acts 2:39).

The promise to every believer includes the forgiveness of our sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are promised power to become the children of God, and to share in the coming Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Michael O. Ojewale

There are many bad and poorly managed roads in Nigeria, especially roads that connect towns and villages. These farming communities are often tagged the "food baskets" where the bulk of agricultural produce come from. Most products rot on the farms in the villages for lack of adequate transportation to move them quickly from the farms to the cities where they are needed. Unfortunately, Nigerian governments, time and again, have displayed a lack of maintenance culture when it comes to infrastructures. The only time these bad roads get attention is when the new governor in power intends to visit. Before the governor's visit, the local contractors would be paid to do cosmetic service to make the roads motor-able for a couple of days until the governor's visit was over. Then, among the list of demands from the governor, the top priority would be the repair of the bad roads.

I have always thought the action of the people in those communities was foolish. Why fix the roads for the governor and then complain of bad roads? Why not let the governor witness it first hand, probably experience a break down of his vehicle, a loss of a tire, and bone-shaking experience for hours on a journey that shouldn't last more than 20 minutes? One such governor turned the joke on the community when they pressed for repair of their roads. The governor said they should be grateful because he did not see a single accident on his trip compared to what one would observe on tarred, double carriage express roads, the type the community was asking for.

Reading today's passage changed my opinion about the actions of those communities. Yes, a king, a governor, deserves the honor of a smooth ride to visit his/her people. In our Scripture reading today, the King of kings is visiting His realm. The heavens set the stage for the reception of the King. The good news begins with two prophets, as witnesses. We have two prophetic texts from Malachi and Isaiah that announce a forerunner who will go before the coming of God's Messiah. A messenger of God will go "ahead of you" (Malachi 3:1), one who will: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Isaiah 40:3). Then we have the messenger, witness, and forerunner of this time of fulfillment in the person of John the Baptist. John fulfilled his ministry as forerunner to introduce Jesus to the world. He called the people to repentance, to a change of heart and ways.

We sang, "Go, tell it on the mountain," during the Christmas season. Now is the time to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord into our lives, communities, and churches.

As we journey forward in this Lenten season, may we, like John the baptizer, 1) exemplify and live the repentant life so we may be authentic in calling others to repentance; 2) simplify our lives and embrace a simple lifestyle henceforward; and 3) draw attention away from ourselves and point people to Jesus and truly live out the church slogan, "It's not about me, it's about Jesus."

March 7, 2017

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK:

March 8, 2017

"Down By The Riverside"

(Why do you think so many of the spirituals reference a "river"?)

"Daniel Saw The Stone"

(What do you think is the meaning of "the stone"?)

MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

Emma Jordan-Simpson

The first time I read Maya Angelou's poem "I Rise," I cried. I did not understand at the time, but I heard the concluding lines and I felt such an incredible weight of responsibility:

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise, I rise, I rise."*

I was a high school student, and I understood the "dream and the hope of the slave" to mean dreams and hopes for a world where there were no more oppressors. Israel dreamed and hoped for a world where there were no more oppressors, too. Jesus, stood up in the middle of the faith community that nurtured him and read himself into Isaiah's 'dream book' of prophecy. "Today, this scripture, this hope, this dream has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Whenever I read Luke's account of Jesus' proclamation, I think of Harriet Tubman. She traveled back into dangerous territory time and time again to effect the freedom of enslaved people. Once you started with her, you were going to end with her. She could have just made a life for herself in free territory - and confined herself to talking about abolition and the hope for freedom for all. But she didn't just talk liberation. She became liberation over and over again, leading her family and so many others to safe territory. Liberators are dangerous when their walk matches their talk. And, Harriet was so dangerous that the bounty for her capture was an unheard of \$40,000 - one million dollars in today's currency.

Jesus knew the hopes and dreams of his forebears. On this day, he found his place in Isaiah's words. He remembered the songs his mother sang: "...my soul magnifies the Lord...[God] lifts the lowly, fills the hungry and remembers mercy according to the promise made to us and our ancestors..." (Luke 1:46 - 53). Standing with the hopes of his ancestors, Jesus took on the responsibility to honor the hope for good news, freedom and healing.

There would be a bounty on head, too, because his walk would match his talk.

But he's still leading people to safe territory.

March 9, 2017

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

March 10, 2017
Luke 4:38-44

TOUCHED
Michael O. Ojewale

³⁸After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. ³⁹Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. ⁴⁰As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.

⁴¹Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

⁴²At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. ⁴³But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose."

⁴⁴So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

served Jesus and His disciples. One minute she was, "sick with a high fever," another minute she was waiting on hungry people and serving them. Are we saved to serve? Is our salvation predicated on serving God? Most Christians believe that we are not saved as a condition or precondition for service, otherwise salvation wouldn't be pure grace but would come with strings attached. Any suggestion of Jesus plus (whatever) is another form of work through the back door.

Yet, if our lives have been touched by God's hand, we cannot help but to serve the purposes of God's kingdom. We serve God as an expression of thanksgiving for the grace that saved us. God sent a message to Pharaoh through Moses, "Let my people go, that they may serve Me," (Exodus 8:1).

Not wanting any undue publicity that might distract Him from His mission, after Jesus healed the leper in Mark 1:40-45, Jesus told him, "See that you say nothing to anyone..." But, he told everyone! He couldn't keep it to himself. Previously ostracized from society, and now healed and restored — how could he be quiet about it?

What's your story? Where is your kingdom-witnessing evidence that you have been touched by God?

Believe it or not, human beings need touch. There was an orphanage with a high rate of mortality. They soon discovered that the cute babies weren't dying, only the not-so-cute ones. These babies were all fed the same and taken care of in a similar manner. An observant attendant noticed that guests and visitors carried the cute babies and played with them but not the not-so-cute ones who were dying. How did they remedy this? They hired staff whose only job was to carry and touch these not-so-cute children, who never got the attention of guests and visitors. The result? The mortality rate went down drastically. We need touch. A touch says or implies, "You are important to me. You are wanted. I care. I value you. Something in me feels connected to you."

Some people recoil from touch. Some want loving touch but have been touched in the wrong way all their lives. We need a consensual touch that is not about exploitation or extortion. We used to sing this chorus during church services not too long ago: TOUCH SOMEBODY. It goes like this — "Touch somebody; tell them that you love them (I love you); Raise your hands together; and praise the Lord. Hold somebody...Hug somebody..." I want to believe that opportunities for uncomplicated and safe touch with no ulterior motives are not gone.

Jesus' way with people was to touch (Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 4:40). Here, he touched Peter's mother-in-law and she was instantly restored to health. She grabbed an apron, went straight to the kitchen, prepared a meal and

March 11, 2017
Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

COME FOLLOW ME

Malcolm Robertson

As I write this meditation, I do so with great reluctance. I know my own imperfections and how far I fall short of God's expectations. So, I do not write this as one who is perfect. But I do ask that you consider the message I feel led to share with you.

As I read my assignment, my first thoughts were, why was I chosen to write this? As I sat perplexed after the nation's election of the 45th president, my second thought was, "this text of fishermen has nothing for me!" It was not until I turned off the world of MSNBC, and focused on the word that I saw the gospel message.

Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee. He sees fishermen working and he calls them to follow him. The easy lesson was that the fishermen immediately dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus on the first call. Those who have both the strength and dedication to do so are truly blessed, and can hold their heads high. As I confessed, I am no such person. My journey is one filled with work, setback, slips and falls.

However, it was this idea of Jesus seeing and then calling people based on their work, that helped me to see my message.

Jesus did not judge them, nor did he pick them based on their holiness or righteousness. Jesus saw them working and then called them. Mark says, "Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw... [w]hen he had gone a little further, he saw..." (Mark 1:16- 19). What Jesus saw was people working. More importantly it was these men of work that Jesus called to do his work. One can only infer that there were others available as Jesus walked through Galilee. However, Jesus saw the work these fishermen were doing and said that he would make these men instead "fish for people" (Mark 1:18). Perhaps Jesus required workers more than simply numbers. So, the lesson here is multi-fold. First, to be clear, Jesus sees our work, and Jesus is looking for workers. In addition, he is not looking for the purest, the most righteous, sainted or even the ones who have the most time to give. Jesus is looking for willing workers. Perhaps, Jesus is looking for workers who are willing to forsake all and simply follow him.

Now, I will not pretend to know the will of God or Jesus. I will leave that to religious scholars more astute than myself. However, I will suggest Jesus knows that the kingdom of God will require workers who can get things done, workers who are willing to drop everything and simply follow when JESUS calls.

As we move into uncharted waters and uncertain times, the message should be that the kingdom of God requires workers who can use their skills to build and support the church. The Preachers will preach; the Diaconate will serve; the Singers, will sing; Dancers will dance; and, Ushers will usher. But lest we forget, it took Workers who worked, not just saints to build Concord Baptist Church of Christ from the fiery ashes. It took workers who worked to pay off the mortgage, build a school, nursing home, rehabilitation center, clothing exchange, and credit union to name a few.

As we move deeper into 2017, the question is -- what work can you do? What talents do you have? How will you use them when Jesus says to you, "Come follow me"?

THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM

Daria Benson

The 9th chapter of Matthew shows Jesus as very active and helping all in need. He heals the paralytic, awakens a dead girl, and heals the woman with the issue of blood. He is being assisted by the disciples, but we know there are not 12 of them at this time. By verse 9, he meets Matthew. As we have previously learned through Bible study, as a tax collector, Matthew was not considered a desirable person for Jesus to have in his inner circle. In verse 10, it is noted that tax collectors are grouped with general sinners.

As we learn from Jesus' deeds and teachings, everyone has at least one skill to contribute towards helping others to realize the plentiful harvest. The laborers may be few because we are snobbish as to whom we want to help us with the work. If we are not familiar with them, or they are not like us, then we don't want them to share the work load. In some cases we don't want others to share in the credit for the work that is done. We may see a task as overwhelming if there are not others who can assist so we give up easily. It is vital to encourage additional talents to accomplish what is needed. If Jesus had not called Matthew to work beside him, to follow him, the telling of this Gospel would not have been realized.

An everlasting need for work by all is to ensure that people achieve education to realize their valuable worth in the Kingdom. We may not all be teachers, but there are many tasks that can contribute to a student's success. One can help with an after-school program or buy a magazine subscription for a class.

We can adapt the tasks for a harvest of produce to that of an educational harvest:

- ☞ **Prepare the Soil:** there needs to be a fertile foundation/good learning environment for encouragement
- ☞ **Plant the Seeds:** provide current information and resources for development and knowledge
- ☞ **Water and Fertilizer:** keep students well nourished, rested and fit
- ☞ **Manage Impediments:** be aware of forces that hinder productivity and growth
- ☞ **ALWAYS PROVIDE LOVE AND COMPASSION!**
- ☞ **Reap the Harvest:** a healthy yield provides dividends that will nourish others and continue the cycle

Yes, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus' work, our work, is about taking an active part in God's kingdom, and doing what we can with what we have at hand. There is no need to wait.

March 12, 2017
Matthew 9:35-38

³⁵Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

PLENTY GOOD ROOM IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Requithelia Allen

I am captivated by this image of a house. Maybe it is a colossal dwelling that would successfully accommodate everyone. This house that I envision would allow each of us to live in comfort and without conflict over who belonged where and who was entitled to what. I envision a dwelling where all of humanity would be at peace with God and with each other. In this house there is enough of absolutely everything to accommodate absolutely everyone: enough money, enough medical care, and enough food. There is enough.

By now I am certain that you are thinking, "That would be some house!" Friends, the Kingdom of God is this house. In God's kingdom, there is enough for all of us. It is possible for us to live in harmony with each other and with God. It is possible for us to acknowledge our differences without demanding that it be done "our way". A hallmark of God's kingdom is that there is enough.

We are currently living in a deeply divided nation and are witnessing the effects of a "house divided". A nation that has long ascribed to being "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" is clearly functioning as a nation under siege from within. We are, in the words of Christ, living with the perils of a "divided house."

In a "divided house" no one is safe. There are no people who are not subject to the harsh methods incited by fear of difference, and fear that there is just not enough to go around. There is much at stake when living in a divided house. Individual agendas are prioritized over the good of all. In a divided house justice looks like federal gag orders, and walls of division to some; while justice looks like resistance and community to others.

How are we to be the Kingdom of God living in a house divided?

We must remember that each of us is accountable to each other. The Kingdom of God for us is found in community, and in the Kingdom of God there is always enough. We are each other's keeper and we must use the "finger of God" to cast out demons of xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy.

We must agree that there is never a time that we can conform to the methods of a divided house, because the Kingdom of God is now.

March 13, 2017

Luke 11:14-26

¹⁴Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. ¹⁵But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons." ¹⁶Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. ¹⁷But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. ¹⁸If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁰But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. ²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. ²²But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder.

²³Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

²⁴"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' ²⁵When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. ²⁶Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first."

March 14, 2017
Matthew 25: 1-13

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’

¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

Linda Thornhill

“The kingdom of heaven will be like this” is such an intriguing launch for the imagination. Admittedly the use of virgins meeting the bridegroom is interesting imagery. It is clearly rooted in first century marriage customs in Palestine. How does this imagery speak to us today? What about for people who do not identify as ‘virgin’ or ‘bridegroom’? What about those who cannot image a kingdom of heaven. What about traumatized peoples who cannot imagine anything past beyond surviving another day?

This is a story of inclusion and hope. It begins with ten women who are waiting for their change to come. There are some things they need for a real change to happen. This change is not something that they have experienced before, it is a new thing and it will change their lives forever. There are five women who are ready to receive their change and five who are not ready. The scriptures describe these women as wise and foolish. Although five are ready and five are not, both groups fall asleep. The change for these women has been delayed. It is not a question of whether the change will actually happen, but when will it happen? This is usually the case with change. It will happen whether we are ready for it or not and often when we least expect it.

When the change became eminent as signaled by the loud shout at midnight, the five who were not ready needed help, but help was not available to them. They found the door shut to them. This is often the case with many in our society. The door is shut to many. Some of us may be prepared when the change is eminent and others may not.

Problems arise and in some cases, they may seem to devastate some, while others get the help. This situation may seem as though God does not care. But God does care and has sent us the change in Jesus Christ. God’s intent is to reach us and change us and our circumstances. The change message is that that everyone is included and help is

available. It is up to us to work on our change, to believe, and to stay awake and not give up hope.

The message of change is that help is inevitable, and its available to all

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK

March 15, 2017

"I'm Going to Do All I Can"

(Why would the ancestors sing about "mourning" all they could "for the Lord"?)

"Get On Board, Little Children"

(Where is the "gospel train" coming from and where is it headed?)

March 16, 2017
Matthew 11:2-6

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

A LEADER OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Emma Jordan-Simpson

John has a vision of the kingdom of God. He has spent his life working to raise the consciousness of a generation about this kingdom. He and his followers have experienced the full brunt of violence under Herod's kingdom. His earliest memories are of the violence afflicted upon the community by Herod's father - Herod the Great - who murdered a generation of children in an effort to stop the growth of the kingdom of God for which John would be the Inaugural Herald. He now sits in prison because his commitment to God's kingdom meant that he was not going to 'play nice' with Herod Antipas.

We know that John declared a vision of a new kingdom, and that he affirmed Jesus as the one "who must increase." But we don't know the details of what John expected from Jesus' leadership. Most people living under Herod's regime and in Caesar's kingdom expected rescue to come in the form of a military leader. They expected an outright overthrow of Caesar's government. So, as John is sitting in prison and he hears about what Jesus is doing, he asks a question heavy with the weight of life under the empire. "Jesus - are you really the one we've been expecting, or are we to expect a leader of a different (heteros) kind?"

Jesus' answer? "Here is the evidence of the kingdom I declare: people now see and have agency to move; people who were ostracized and left alone are finding community; the dead ends of life are being erased and good news is beating a path to poor people."

The evidence that God's realm is at hand is found in the indications that the powers of every other kingdom, every power that works to diminish the full humanity of all of God's people, is put on notice. Herod was right to be afraid of John's message, because with Jesus, Herod has lost the power to define what it means to be a human being of worth. People who see these indications of hope are invited to join Jesus in witnessing to this kingdom. And only those who have rejected every other kingdom can answer that invitation.

The violence experienced by John the Baptist and his contemporaries was still the reality of life for the followers of Jesus by the time Matthew's gospel was written. John paid the price for the hope of a new kingdom with his life, as did many others. The faithful had to look back and remember all of the ways that Jesus upended Herod's kingdom, cancelled consequences of human brokenness and inspired their hope, because while they were in the thick of it, their questions echoed John's. I am an African American. I'm alive because my ancestors survived "the terrible transatlantic tragedy" and refused to give up hope. I cannot consider John's question without also hearing their voices: "How long, O Lord? How long will the kings of death reign? When will God move this wicked race?"

This kingdom Jesus preaches where the powers of death and destruction do not get the last word is exactly what we have been waiting for. Citizenship in that kingdom means that we have the power to resist, to fight, to stand up against every Herod. And while Herod's death powers may indeed touch our bodies, he is not the king of our souls.

March 17, 2017
John 3:1-10

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

BREAKING THE NICODEMUS CODE

Martin Robertson

According to The Pew Research Center 58% of Christians voted for Donald Trump. I struggled for days contemplating why so many saw him as the best choice to lead our nation. After speaking with a few Christians who were open enough to discuss their vote for Mr. Trump I began to see a trend. The leading point for them was the issue of sexuality and marriage equality. It was as if they had all been issued the same talking-points and were now regurgitating them in perfect harmony. They spoke with such passion and conviction. And I must admit to being moved by their arguments. So I did as I have learned to do, I weighed the heart of this platform against the Light of the Word, and saw only darkness.

Nicodemus, a member of the religious elite, comes to the Lord at night because he has a question. A lot can be said about Nicodemus, but today's meditation is not about him, it's about you, me, and the 2017 condition of the Body of Christ.

Nicodemus is code for today's church, and the timeless religious elite. These are the self-proclaimed "Christians" who only find the strength and courage to approach GOD at 'night', in the darkness, when no one else is around to see. Nicodemus represents the "Christians" who walk with their imperfect "faith-of-works discipleship" heads high, their egos firm, and their wits ever seasoned with trite, facile godly responses. Nicodemus is code for a church that believes it has successfully captured truth, and uses truth as the brick and mortar for its immaculate walls in which to hide from GOD in their ignorance.

Let us keep the message simple. Nicodemus had the written word, but he missed the message, GOD's True message is of LOVE.

Jesus is looking into your eyes and saying to YOU "Nicodemus, do you not know these things?"

LEADERSHIP THAT SERVES GOD'S DREAM

Emma Jordan-Simpson

March 18, 2017

Luke 22:24-30

Religious leadership at its best is a response to God's call to be in the service of God's love and justice. God called leaders to do one thing: be in the service and restoration of God's image in everyone and everything. Lay woman Verna Dozier wrote a book in 1991 calling this "one thing" the "Dream of God."

"The role of the church, I think, is to be the people who work with God to bring that dream about. I think the people of God is the church. That can be very hard for the institution to comprehend. When the institution gets to be more important than the idea it embodies, then things have gone wrong and it loses something."

This dispute among the disciples is situated in Luke's gospel right before Peter declares he would never deny Jesus. It happens before Jesus prays in agony - basically alone - in the garden while these same disciples sleep. They wanted to claim ownership of the title "the greatest" - but they wouldn't even be able to last the night with him.

"The one who betrays me is here at the table with me." The disciples start whispering among themselves. "Who could do such a thing?! Not Me!" We usually focus on Judas as the "betrayer". But this dispute among the disciples about which of them is the "greatest" evidences a spirit of betrayal that we all need to address in our own discipleship.

*"I am among you as one who serves," he says. Yet you are arguing over who is the greatest?
"I am among you as one who serves, he says. Yet you want to do what I have never done - accumulate power to lord over people just like the kings of that other kingdom?"*

We may bring amazing skills to the work of the kingdom, but we often make ourselves unusable to God for God's kingdom because of our selfish ambitions make us unavailable. We are too busy practicing the leadership principles of other kingdoms -- and inflicting those leadership behaviors on the church. We need to repent and learn anew.

After our ancestors felt the brunt of their masters' whip, they also heard those same masters sing the hymns of Jesus. And our ancestors concluded that "everybody talking about heaven ain't going there." They had a profound understanding of what was at stake when the people who claim Jesus are really the disciples of other kingdoms.

Leadership in the kingdom of God is not about the greatness of position. It is a posture toward serving God's dream of justice and restoration for all of God's creation.

Disciple - what does your leadership look like?

²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

²⁸"You are those who have stood by me in my trials; ²⁹and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, ³⁰so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

March 19, 2017
Matthew 19:16-30

¹⁶Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

²⁷Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

LOOK AT ALL I HAVE DONE!

And yet God requires more from me?

Eulene Inniss

Church folks can quickly slide into their religious groove when listening to Louis Armstrong's 1939 rendition of, "When the Saints Go Marching In". They envision large, pearly, majestic gates swung wide open and throngs of saints happily marching into Heaven. But, the process of entering the kingdom of Heaven, especially in a culture that misunderstands the relationship between the priorities of this life and the life to come, will require a paradigm shift in our priorities and commitments.

Our scripture text introduces us to a young, rich man who has power, wealth and knowledge. He knew that something else was needed to complete his life. That something he wanted was access to Eternal Life. In search of an answer, he went to Jesus to find out what else he could do. He rattled off all he had done: he did not steal, commit adultery, covet nor murder. He was a good law-abiding citizen. But, Jesus told him to get rid of all his stuff and follow Him and that requirement demanded too much for one of his stature. "Give up all that I have achieved and follow you?" He was definitely not ready to make that type of commitment. It required a radical shift in his priorities. He sadly walked away.

On the other hand, Peter, the good church going disciple, had given up ALL. He left everything to follow Jesus and knew that such action had merit (v27). Both the rich young man and Peter were unprepared for Jesus' response (v29).

God's requirements are not found on a superficial check-off list of good deeds. This faith walk that we take has one objective, i.e., attaining Eternal Life. We try to do good and to be good, however, the standard of goodness is God and God's will. If God is good, then one must conform to God's will to do what is good. If one wants to do what will guarantee Eternal Life, one must find the will of God. This requires undivided loyalty and complete obedience to the will of God, and a total and complete surrender of self. God's word says that, "whosoever believes in the Son HAS Eternal Life".

It begins the moment you exercise faith in Christ.

March 20, 2017
Matthew 21: 28 - 32

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

WHO'S ASKING? Natasia McCormick

There is not a day that goes by where a request isn't being made of us. At home, in the office, at school, traveling from point A to be B, in church, at social events and even on social media, I can guarantee that someone will request something of or from you; it is inevitable. Yes, there are instances where we gladly accept someone's friend request or invitation to an event, drop someone off or take someone to run errands; we give someone on the street whatever we are willing to spare; and, we pick up food for the children even though there's dinner left from last night. We assist coworkers with their assignments. There are other times when we are not as cheerful about the ongoing requests. Yet, we fulfill them any way. Some will even force themselves out of bed to live another day despite their internal struggles just because someone asked them to do something.

Then there are times we just say, "No." Maybe we just don't feel like it or we are fed up with the constant requests. Maybe we just decided to put ourselves first for once. It doesn't matter. We usually end up doing what was asked of us any way.

It is easy to experience burnout and resentment when we are doing too much, especially when we are operating outside of God's will for our lives. We don't know what the situation was with this son.

Yes, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). However, we are not called to do everything. Every assignment is not ours. Sadly, there are folks who will try to manipulate others by using the name of Jesus. They attempt to guilt trip us into doing what they desire by twisting God's word.

As Christians, whatever we do in life should be done to the glory of God. Our life should be a living testimony of God's grace, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and unfailing love. The way we serve, give, sing, pray, teach, help, parent, work and even play should witness to others. We ought to live a life that not only prepares us for God's Kingdom in Heaven; but one that reveals God's Kingdom here on earth. As much as we desire to please and serve the Lord we need to be prayerful about the things people ask of us and what we ask of others. We must practice using discernment. If we find ourselves feeling exploited, that's a good indication the task is "not the work of the Lord."

Our prayer is that we will do God's will. During this season of Lent, repent and ask God's forgiveness for the times we've allowed human nature and self-serving motives to drive us away from God's will. Pray for a clean heart and a right spirit, the God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

HOW WE TREAT PEOPLE MATTERS

Sonya D. Johnson

Since my family is from South Carolina, I was exposed to Negro Spirituals at a young age. As a child, I didn't understand the reason for continuing to sing these songs. As a teenager, I often wanted to increase the beat of the Spirituals or add some "hip hop" flavor to it. But as an adult who has experienced some tests and trials of life, I understand the importance of singing Negro Spirituals to commune with our ancestors and revive our souls. This is particularly true in the present climate of our country. I admit that in the last two months of 2016, I listened to more Spirituals to soothe my troubled spirit.

Upon reading today's text, the Negro Spiritual that comes to mind is "Everybody Talkin' about Heaven Ain't Goin' There." The enslaved Africans understood that there is a connection between our treatment of each other and the kingdom of God. Our horizontal relationship with each other is just as important as our vertical relationship with God. Our ancestors understood these principles and felt that based upon the severe abuse and hatred that they experienced as slaves at the hands of the slave masters, who were alleged Christians, they sang "everybody talkin' about heaven ain't goin'."

In Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God and the effects of our treatment of each other. How we treat those deemed the least or different matters. We are not to judge or condemn those deemed the least or different. This scripture indicates that Jesus Christ is the final arbiter or judge. We are called to love. Our goal should be what the king in this scripture said to those on the right. We must strive to practice the kingdom of God by feeding those who are hungry, giving drink to those who are thirsty, giving a room to those who are homeless, giving clothes to those who need it, and visiting those who are sick or in prison. I admit that this is a challenging goal but we must strive to achieve it. We can start by examining our actions.

Let us use this season of Lent to recommit ourselves to being sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Let's be hungry to help those in need, to demonstrate God's love. Let us witness to the kingdom of God right now.

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK
March 22, 2017

"Run, Mary, Run"

(What words in this song do you think might have dual meanings?)

"Move This Wicked Race"

(Under what circumstances do you imagine this song being sung?)

March 23, 2017
Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT

Samuel Phillips, III

I once read a card that said "not everyone gets another chance." For some strange reason the sentiment of this card has served as a reminder that some mistakes are irrevocable. There are some decisions that we have made in life that we cannot go back and undo. I am sure that all of us wish that we could take back some insensitive comment to a friend or relative, or reverse some mean spirited action that causes us to grimace when we think about it.

The truth is that we cannot undo it, but by the grace of God, we might receive another chance to do better going forward.

In this parable set before us, Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God, and what it is like. He lays out a story about a farmer planting seed for his wheat crop. While everyone is asleep the enemy comes and plants weeds to stunt or destroy growth of the crop. The servants, quick to react and correct the situation ask if they should pull the weeds up. The farmer, knowing that they will pull both weeds and wheat, tells them to let them grow together.

What a strange reply from the farmer. Letting weeds and plants grow together implies that the kingdom of God will not consist of perfect people, and that there is always the possibility that there will be some weeds in our gardens and even in our churches. Put another way, the kingdom of God is a mixed bag of people trying and failing, struggling and falling. Yet, God gives them the grace to get it right. Maybe the farmer sees the possibility in the weeds, and knows that if they keep hanging around the wheat that a transformation might take place.

Perhaps we are the weeds, and God has given us more time to be transformed. We can't undo some things, but I believe that God gives us the grace and self-efficacy to turn some things around.

If God has given us more time to grow, mature and change, then let us take advantage of it.

March 24, 2017
Mark 4:30-32

³⁰ He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

THE PARABLE-WHISPERER

Edna Wells Handy

Okay, let's write! It's Sunday morning, 5:30 a.m. I got time before getting ready for church and I got to do this. There'll be no way to avoid seeing Rev. Emma with the same success I've had in avoiding her cleverly disguised emails, which are really "where's my meditation" missives, that start with "Girl...", making me feel like we are "homeys" (which, if truth be told, I kind of like cause it makes me feel special).

Whisper 1 Okay then, let's start with her directions; and I quote, "[Y]our assignment...is [t]he Kingdom of God is like... [Note] your scripture is a very short, but meaningful one." That's code for your three verses of scripture should not become three pages of mediation, as they have been in the past!

I got that.

Whisper 2 Okay, let's at least read the passage, Mark 4:30-32. It's the mustard seed parable. Gee, so many of Jesus' parables deal with farming, wine-making, or something dealing with agriculture. There's the parable about wheat & tares that I'm told means many are called but few chosen. There are the ones about lamps and silver talents meaning let your light shine, and in the case of my parable of the mustard seed, we can see how "the word" grows and spreads.

Whisper 3 Hey, did I just explain away my parable in what, less than a page? That can't be. I've never written anything in a page or less. WWJD? While I think about that, my Jesus would want me to continue.

Whisper 4 Okay, here's the good stuff. Let's rewrite this parable for today's non-farming audience, starting with this new verse 30: "The Kingdom of God is like...a box of chocolates. You never know what...." Hold up! What are we Forrest Gump? I've got to do better than that.

Whisper 5 Okay, how about this new verse 30: The Kingdom of God is... like a soap opera, a telenovela, like Empire! "All dressed up, but broken down inside." Cute, but pointless.

Whisper 6 Okay, okay, I got it. Since we are talking about "the word", how about this for verse 30: "The Kingdom of God is like the Internet, words at the speed of light!"

No, that won't work. Too much bad stuff goes on the Internet and then there's the "Dark-net" where evil lives.

Whisper 7 Okay, let's try a different approach. Maybe if we take apart the parable we may see how to make it work for the 21st Century hearer. Let's quickly read through all of the parables in the Gospels to see if there are patterns. Hey, here's one, I think. The subjects of them appear to be inanimate objects, like wheat, pearls, lamps, rings, and dragnets. Oh, wait, no, here's one with rich rulers and another with vineyard workers. They're not things. They're people.

Whisper 8 Okay, no pattern there. Maybe I need to take the parable as a whole and not just its parts. Yah, but when I look at some of them that way, there are things I don't get. Take the prodigal son. If I were the father, I'd be like— "No party for you! You no good-for-nothing, squanderer!"

And the parable about the vineyard workers. I'd be like—"Yo, what's up with this? You gonna pay them the same as me and I've been here all day long and they just got here. I don't think so."

Whisper 9 Hey, wait, I'm seeing something here. A pattern? Could it be that the Kingdom of God is not about length of service, but the fact of service? Is it, to paraphrase Martha & the Vandella's, "it doesn't matter what you wear (or how long you work), just as long as you are there?"

I never thought of it that way.

Whisper 10 Okay, you might ask what does that have to do with mustard seeds? Everything! It means: "The Kingdom of God is like writing a Lenten meditation. What appears to be a simple assignment turns into a really big message from on high!"

March 25, 2017
Matthew 13: 36 - 43

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

SOWING

Requithelia Allen

The Kingdom of God is likened to someone who sows good seeds in a field. These are the words of Jesus in Matthew 13:24. Then in verse 37 Jesus identifies the ones who sow good seeds as the Children of the kingdom. The good seeds that they sow identify the children of the kingdom. Conversely, those who sow seeds that are not good cannot be identified as children of the kingdom. Jesus identifies these bad seed sowers as weeds and calls them children of the evil one.

What are some of the implications of this parable explanation's for us today?

First sowing is an act of planting seeds. If one wants a certain kind of plant, food, or tree one must plant the appropriate seed. For instance, if I want tomatoes, I must plant tomato seeds. If I want an oak tree in my yard, I would plant an acorn. It would be unreasonable of me to plant tomatoes and expect oranges to grow. Or if I planted green beans, I shouldn't be looking for collard greens to appear in the garden. Simply put, what we plant is exactly what grows.

Second, a seed produces exactly what it is supposed to and it produces a larger quantity than just the first seed. One tomato seed produces several tomato plants. The acorn grows into an oak tree with many more acorns on the tree than the one that was initially planted.

The principles of sowing can be applied to our spiritual lives as well. Sowing seeds of peace produce peace in our spirits and in the atmosphere. Sowing seeds of love and generosity produces the same in the hearts of those to whom we sow them, as well as in our own hearts. As we observe our world today we can easily identify persons who are not children of the kingdom by the seeds they sow. Seeds of racism, division, discord and hatred are both rampant growing. One of the ways we can combat the spiritual seeds of wickedness is by sowing the spiritual seeds of kindness; we can plant seeds of faith in the face of hopelessness; we can plant seeds love in the face of hate.

Jesus admonishes us to sow the seeds that cause us to look like God's children. What kinds of seed are we sowing? Can we be identified as weeds or as children of the kingdom?

¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE...A JIGSAW PUZZLE

Shakeema North

Okay, so a jigsaw puzzle was not the first thing I thought about when I was deciding on how to approach this text. I first thought to write about what for some, might be the obvious: that through the telling of this story, Jesus was attempting to get the disciples to understand how we are to treat those that have been marginalized and denied the care they need - simply because no one chose to choose them. *And* that the landowner's decision to care for "the others" was an example for us on how the work of justice is intentional, and will almost always cause us to defy human order to meet people's felt needs. *The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*

The more I thought about it, however, the more I began to wrestle with whether there might be another way to describe what Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand. And then it came to me - a jigsaw puzzle! Yes, a jigsaw puzzle. Let me explain. Puzzles are created by painting a picture and then cutting that picture into small interlocking pieces that will ultimately be put back together. They are radically inclusive. Each individual piece is unique in shape and design. While shaped differently, each piece takes up the same amount of space in the puzzle. Similarly, each piece reflects only a small part of the whole. As each piece is put in place, the image starts to take form.

In solving a jigsaw puzzle, you don't get to choose not to use a piece of the puzzle. Each piece matters and every piece is necessary for a complete picture, whether it's the first piece picked out of the box or the last. In that way, the first piece used to start the puzzle is not more important than the last. In fact, it is not until the last piece has been put in place, that the puzzle is complete. You will never have a complete picture if you leave some of the pieces in the box.

Creation is God's divine jigsaw puzzle and everything that exists therein has been carved out of God's image and likeness. As members of God's creation, each one of us represents a small interlocking piece of a larger picture. When put together, we become God's greatest masterpiece, created anew in Christ Jesus for good works.

When serving the needs of God's people, our job is to make sure all of humanity finds its rightful place in the picture. We don't get to choose who gets help and who doesn't. Each one of us matters and we are all necessary for God's masterpiece to come together. When that happens, we get to see a true work of art - we get to see community as God intended.

We get to see the kingdom of heaven. We get to see us.

PRECIOUS VALUABLES

Henry Snead

Is there something of so much value to you that you would give all you have to keep it? Think for a moment. Could it be your marriage? Your children? Your Home? Your life? Maybe it's the people in our lives, the relationships we cherish, or those things that cannot be replaced. We might give everything to secure these things.

How valuable to you is your relationship with God? Though we cannot purchase a relationship with God, we know of some who have suffered and died for the cause of Christ. Would you suffer for the cause of Christ? How much would you put up for the Kingdom of God?

March 27, 2017
Matthew 13:44-53

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵²And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

The large drag net finds valuable things as well. It would often stay out in the waters for several days covering a vast area during that time. It would catch many kinds of fish when pulled back on to the shore. Some fish were edible and others of no value at all. When the fishermen got back on shore, they would sort the fish, with the good ones being sold at market and the bad ones thrown away.

After Jesus had explained the three parables he asks his disciples "if they understood all these things..." They said they understood, but I would be surprised if they did. But if they did, they'd have to do as he said the scribes did: learn these valuable truths from him and go teach others. My prayer is that we would all see how valuable we are to God. God has made us heirs in his kingdom, and given us view of what the Kingdom is like.

The Kingdom means everything to Jesus and he gave everything he had for it. These three parables here all illuminate in some way the kingdom of God as something precious, even if it is not easily seen.

Jesus says that a man found a treasure hidden in a field. This was one of a few ways people in those days had to secure their valuables. They buried them. It really doesn't matter why the treasure was hidden in the field or how the man found it. But after he found the hidden treasure, he sold everything else he had so that he could have the field that hid that treasure. Some scholars say that we are the 'man' in this story and Jesus is the treasure worth everything we have. Thanks be to God that we cannot buy a relationship with Christ. We are saved by the grace of God.

Other scholars say that Jesus is the 'man' in this parable. The field, as in other parables before, is the world. So what did Jesus find in the field that He would give up everything to get? Yes, it is us. Jesus values and loves us so much that He left heaven, took on our likeness and paid for our sins with his own life blood. The Kingdom of God on earth is hidden from the view of the world, but Jesus has bought it and it will one day be revealed.

The parable of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value is quite similar. Jesus is on a journey searching for special and valuable goods. He finds a beautiful, valuable pearl. Recognizing its value, he gives everything he has for this one pearl. Some scholars have referred to this greatly valued pearl as the one church, the kingdom of God.

The large drag net finds valuable things as well. It would often stay out in the waters for several days covering a vast area during that time. It would catch many kinds of fish when pulled back on to the shore. Some fish were edible and others of no value at all. When the fishermen got back on shore, they would sort the fish, with the good ones being sold at market and the bad ones thrown away.

²⁰Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

THE KINGDOM IS WITHIN YOU

Michael O. Ojewale

I believe, as Christians, we live our best life, with intentionality, when we live with one eye on the cross and the other on the soon coming King (John 14:1-3). Simultaneously, we fix one eye on the past event of the salvation our souls and fix the other on the consummation and rescue of our bodies from this sinful world. We keep one eye on the cross where Jesus paid the penalty for our sins for which our constant response is a life of gratitude and service to Him. And we keep the other eye looking and watching for His second coming as Lord of lords when we shall give an account of our stewardship to Him. That would be a balanced Christian life. We are enjoined to live with anticipation of the second coming of Christ. Such anticipation has the benefit of helping us live a pure life with a keen sense of accountability. Unfortunately, some Christians live far in the past and spend their time recounting revivals and moves of the Holy Spirit in the past generations. Some other Christians live far into the future and talk of end-time ministry, end-time move of God, and such things that would happen to the Jews or the nation of Israel and to the friends and enemies of Israel/Jews in the last days. With attention and energy engrossed in the ages past or distant future such Christians have little time and energy for Christ's work today.

I'm often asked by those incarcerated in the facility where I am chaplain, "When are we going to study end-time prophecies or the prophetic books of Revelation, Daniel, and Ezekiel and so on?" My answer to them has always been, "Maybe never!" Eschatology and end-time events are not my cup of tea. I respect those who have such ministries but for me, it is full of speculations and extrapolations and such things that I cannot wrap my mind around and that I am not prepared to spend my life investigating. But if they had asked me, "What do we do between now and the second coming of Christ?" I would have plenty to tell them. Rather than looking at the clouds for Jesus to return, I'd rather go into the streets and get busy doing the work of the kingdom and getting people ready for His coming.

The Pharisees thought the kingdom would come right away. Jesus told them the kingdom would not come right away. The kingdom would not come by observation and gazing into the skies but by actively participating in the kingdom.

What is the Kingdom? Its about who has your first allegiance - the kingdom of God or self. It is either one or the other. You cannot straddle because there's no fence. If you claim to belong to God and you aren't working for Christ, you might just be hindering the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the realm where God rules. Whoever will pray "Thy will be done" must first pray, "My will be gone." And, before "Thy Kingdom come" must be "My kingdom go." The only reason we may pray "Give us... forgive us... lead us... deliver us," is because we live under His rule and domain and acknowledge Him as our Lord, Sovereign and Ruler of our lives. The Kingdom, being the domain of God's rule, is greater than the gospel message, greater than our salvation experience and greater than the church or the Body of Christ. Our salvation and the church and all eschatology or end-time events are within the concepts of the Kingdom. The kingdom is God's influence powerfully on earth through His redeemed and sanctified people, because, as Jesus answered the Pharisees, "the kingdom of God is within you."

The Kingdom Christ invites us to is spiritual; it is not of this world though it impacts this world. It is eternal. His rulership is not voted on and he cannot be impeached by any political power. Pilate could not understand this kind of kingdom (John 18:36) - one of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). But it is the only one that matters and it is within you (Luke 17:20-21).

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK

March 29, 2017

"Give Me Your Hand"

(Whose 'hand' is this song talking referencing?)

"I Want To Be Ready"

(What words in this songs do you think might have dual meanings?)

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴"For many are called, but few are chosen."

SHOWING UP IN THE KINGDOM

Requithelia Allen

I have often thought of the Kingdom of God as something that is to come. The Kingdom of God represented a far away heaven. Only thinking of the Kingdom this way has implications for eternity. It leaves out the responsibility to recognize the fact that the Kingdom of God is now. Today.

Here, the Kingdom of God is likened to a wedding feast, a modern day wedding reception, and guests are invited. This was no ordinary reception. It was a great feast given by the king for his son. Hence, no expense was spared. The oxen and calves had been fattened up and killed for the occasion. The king summoned the social elite and dignitaries of the day to come and celebrate. However, the invited guests had other things to do. They had to tend their farms, and manage their individual businesses. They mocked the invitation and executed the slaves who came to speak with them on behalf of the king. The king decided that he would not let the banquet go to waste. He had invitations personally extended to everyone - without exception - to come and feast at his table. Everyone was welcomed and received an invitation.

In those days it was the responsibility of the host to provide the proper wedding attire for all of the guests. The only thing the guests had to do was show up! They didn't have to spend the time or money to become presentable. All the guests had to do was show up.

This is precisely what the Kingdom of God looks like today. God has provided a feast of love for our consumption in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our sole responsibility is to accept the invitation and show up.

We are obligated as servants of God to extend invitations to others to attend this reception. We are called to extend the invitation beyond our church walls, beyond the "who's who" to those we don't know, or even want to know. The love of God is available to all without exemption. God compels us to invite everyone to come and be a part of the faithful at the banquet.

Our ancestors sang a spiritual *"I'm gonna' sit at the welcome table, I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days."* They sang this song because they were excluded from the feast in the Master's house. How wonderful it is to know that we are all welcome at God's table today.

March 31, 2017

Mark 4: 26 - 29

²⁶ He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

DON'T COUNT THE SEEDS OUT!

Emma Jordan-Simpson

I grew up hearing educators whisper (in their outside voices) that children from my neighborhood were not sown in good ground. Newark was the largest city in New Jersey and when I was in elementary school, I heard a lot about "white flight". In my head, I envisioned those words meaning that white people actually "flew" somewhere. My 8th grade teacher was the one who said to me, "No, they didn't fly somewhere. They just moved out of Newark." That explanation modified the image in my head. I no longer envisioned them taking flight, but I did wonder why they moved away. It wasn't until I was in my last year of high school that I overheard a conversation between two substitute teachers that put things into perspective for me. I was sitting in the back of a classroom in my high school, making notes for a class. Two substitute teachers walked in. Not noticing me, they started to talk. "I'm not getting invested in these kids, this whole experience is probably going to be just a waste," said one teacher. "Well, what about this one and that one," he responded, naming students he was getting to know. "Exceptions!" she said. "For the rest of them, by the time they get to us, there's nothing left to do, except bide our time. This is Newark, for Christ's sake!" I cleared my throat. As I packed up my books to leave the classroom, one of the teachers attempted to apologize to me. My response was unchecked by my usual restraint. "Are you apologizing that I heard what you said, or are you apologizing that you believe what you said?"

No thanks to these teachers, but by the time I had reached my senior year of high school, many of my Newark-born peers were doing well right where they were "scattered." None of us considered ourselves to be "exceptional" in anything except our refusal to be defeated. In my own language of faith, I felt a very strong sense that whatever I lacked in my natural environment was being provided for me by God. I met mentors, had profound experiences that broadened my horizons and felt connected to a community of faith. And every time someone said to me (to my face), "Wow, I don't know how you do it" (meaning grow up!), I thought "What a cop out!" I also thought about the God who was 'growing' us with the help of many hands who were not just biding their time.

Children don't have control over where they are scattered. We can participate in God's intent that they grow wherever they are by meeting their needs (water/sustenance, warmth and community) in the ways that we can. Seeds need to grow roots if they are to survive, but don't count seeds out because of where they have been scattered. God can root a seed in whatever God desires. We don't know how, we just know that the kingdom grows in the most unlikely of places. There will be a harvest of God's design and there is nothing anyone can do to stop it's growth.

April 1, 2017
Matthew 7: 15 - 23

¹⁵"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits. ²¹"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' ²³Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

JESUS SAW IT COMING AND WARNED US

Michael O. Ojewale

Upfront, I have a confession to make: I am deeply disappointed by a lot of what's going on in the church today under the guise of us being led by the Holy Spirit. (This is the backdrop to everything that follows.) I am so disappointed that, if I can help it, I hesitate to identify myself as a member of the clergy. We are always pigeonholed as "one of them" before people have a chance to know us personally. And, if the truth be told, I don't blame people for sneering at the Christian religion, as evidenced by the focal message, ulterior motives, life and lifestyle of too many who claim to be Christians. We - the clergy, bear much of the blame for the spread of a gospel that is not of Jesus Christ. My heart aches for the masses who are being sold out in the name of the kingdom to build the empires of religious charlatans. And, I am equally willing to admit that I am probably the problem. My pride keeps me from swallowing a lot of what's published or preached on TV. The problem could be my self-righteous sinful pride, who knows? Jesus' words in today's reading may exonerate me.

You can defend and support any position 'biblically' by proof-texting verses. But that does not make the proposition truth, and in fact, it is often grossly irresponsible. Consider this: As the story goes, a confused Christian was seeking God's will and used a method of "praying and letting the bible just open to a verse to indicate God's will in the matter." He opened his eyes and read words that are clearly in the bible but not the message he expected: Matthew 27:5 "...[Judas] departed, and went and hanged himself." He prayed more and then allowed his Bible to open to a random page. With closed eyes he again placed a finger on a verse, supposedly to give him guidance. The second verse was, Luke 10:37 "... Then Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Not a good sign! He prayed more earnestly, wondering if God was speaking to him. Then, asking God for clarification, he repeated the ritual, placed his finger on a third verse. It was John 13:27 "... Then Jesus said to him, 'What you do, do quickly.'" The only logical proposition from the "cut and paste" of these three verses to the man was to harm himself. Even though he considered three verses, was that 'biblical'? No! Texts without contexts are dangerous.

The sub-theme for Week 5 of our Lenten meditation is, "The Kingdom of God is like..." By now, we've learned that the Kingdom of God is like a field planted with good seeds but to which the enemy sowed bad seeds; or like a wedding feast with an improperly dressed guest.

In other words, the kingdom is a mixed multitude of a kind. Jesus saw it all into our present context and it could not be put any better. And Jesus earnestly warned us: "Beware of false prophets..."

Jesus saw it coming and He earnestly warned us. Be wise, be discerning.

OUT OF THEIR RESOURCES: HOT DOG MONEY

Candace Y. Simpson

April 2, 2017
Luke 8:1-3

After my first semester in college, I came home to a world that did not make sense to me. My few months of independence and friends-across-the-hallway quickly came to a halt. I was getting restless in my house. I wanted to go to dinner and bowling, and to the movies with friends, but those things cost money! I was carefully and thoughtfully budgeting my few dollars to cover the essentials.

One Sunday afternoon after worship, Mama Cozetta Green stopped me. "I have something for you," she said. I was young(er) and didn't know what she meant. She pressed twenty dollars into my hands and said, "You can't go back to school without hot dog money."

I reflect on this interaction not because the money was important. The Money is not what matters. It is the relationship. Mama Green knew of my circumstance as a college student. She, and others, made it possible for me to engage the other ends of my college education, which included socializing with friends.

Some of the most prominent lessons did not happen in the classroom, but instead at the diner or on Saturday mall trips. We learned how to cultivate meaningful friendships and lead programs on campus. And although I wish we lived in a world that did not require money to do things, we do. Mama Green's sharing of resources was a model to me to always share with others. Sometimes we share food, or advice, or we barter services like hair styling for tutoring services. There is something beautiful about this glimpse of Heaven. I want to live in a world where we share resources. I want to live in a world where my skills and resources can meet your need, and where your skills and resources can meet mine.

When I read this text, I cannot help but see Mama Green and so many other beloved members of our community. I can see them orchestrating and plotting.

Who's baking bread this week? **I will!** Can I borrow your basket? **Sure!**

I can hear them playing with babies and sharing tips with new parents about when to give the first solid food. I can imagine them passing down family stories about the monster that lives underneath the lake. I can feel the warmth of the elders' laughter. I can see children plotting on who would take responsibility for a broken vase. This passage makes mention of "providing out of resources," but it's almost never about "resources." Resources come with community. There's a community being formed here, and it is beautiful.

There are always people among us who "provide out of their resources" to help do God's work. Sometimes we notice these people, but sadly, sometimes we don't.

Who in your community has made it possible for you to do the work God has called you to do? Who has made your load a little lighter? Who has made your journey a little sweeter? Can you think of someone whose support has made you stronger? Who do you think of when you want to share good news? Take time to thank those people and remind them that their work is not in vain. May we all provide out of our resources so that we make this world a better place.

¹ Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

April 3, 2017
Matthew 21:33-46

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." ⁴²Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?' ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

THE KING EXPECTS FRUIT AT HARVEST

Cleveland Thornhill

One foundation stone for most readers of this meditation can be found within the borders and under the banner of our deceptively complex and difficult to navigate American vineyard. It is an intricate, weblike system of political, religious, economic and judicial institutions that often takes on the appearance of being hospitable and accommodating. But it is not. The system is anything but accommodating. Life in the American vineyard is difficult for people on the margins. It's tough to make ends meet. But the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoken on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial echo in the spirits of the marginalized, too: "Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream; a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

We must clear the pathway for those striving to navigate the American vineyard. Be clear that the root word of kingdom is "king." Be clear that the landowner in our text is God. Jesus is the Son. The intrinsic meaning of God's kingdom is God being in authority and having rulership over our lives. And, if God and his Christ be our king, then all Caesars, Herods, supreme courts, economic riches, and more currently, presidents are definitely 'not'. We still "wrestle with principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places." We must be discerning as to their intention and desire for rulership over their citizens as would a king within their kingdom.

In our parable, Jesus is giving an illustration of a father preparing a kingdom for its inhabitants to tend and be prosperous. At harvest time, he sends servant-prophets to account for the tenants living in vineyard-kingdom. Notice the escalating nature of violence and bloodshed in this parable spoken by our Lord at a time very close to his passion.

The text poses a question to us who have been given such relative opportunities and prosperity as compared to so many other people throughout the world, past and present. Do we not have the power to vote? Do we not have, as a collective community, (even in our poverty) an economic power that rivals the national economy of some nations? Have we not been given a divine moral and ethical mandate to call for justice to be established in the land?

It is my belief, in accordance with scripture, that the true king of our vineyard expects fruit from us. The king expects the kind of fruit that is rooted in and grows from our character into the 'works from our hands and words from our mouths'. Does not our king have the right to ask us to give account at harvest? Let us be a people who produce "the fruits of the kingdom."

SO CLOSE, YET TOO FAR

Michael O. Ojewale

Unfortunately, it is possible to know the church 'language,' but not know the Lord. We can be in the church and not be in Christ. For example, the scribe gave Jesus the right answer from scriptures though he himself was not right with God. Jesus told him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Wow! Not far, but not in. That's pitiful. With all his knowledge and religious involvement, he was still a stranger. He was an outsider to the Kingdom of God.

In Acts 24:24-26, we read of another sad commentary about political ruler Felix. Governor Felix "sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, 'Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.'" Unfortunately, history does not record the convenient time. Felix was close to the Kingdom but not in. He peeped in but refused to commit. In the matters of the Kingdom of God, the only convenient time is NOW! Felix missed his opportune time in history because he failed to seize the moment!

In Acts 26:27-29, King Agrippa was confronted with the claims of Christ, which he was well aware of (Acts 26:2, 3, 26). The Apostle Paul asked, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." (Acts 26:27, 28). What sad remarks from a King well familiar with the truth, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian!" You almost made the cut is not a welcome news to anyone in a tryout. "I almost became a Christian" may be the saddest lament on the other side of life. He heard Paul but he refused to listen.

So close, yet too far. He was not in. Are you in the church or in Christ? Are you in the kingdom or merely warming church pews? Front row membership in the Most Righteous Baptist Church or the Heaven-bound Pentecostal Church is not a guarantee of membership or belonging to Christ's Body. Don't be like a signpost that gives direction but does not make the journey. Knowledge of the truth is important, but it is only a starting point, not the end. The goal is to use what you know to journey toward a personal relationship with a risen and living Savior. The goal is not learning about Christ; rather, it is to know Christ in a relational way.

Are you an outsider like the scribe? Are you "not far from the kingdom" or "almost persuaded" or waiting for a more "convenient time"?

Church membership is a starting point but not the end. The end or goal is what Paul exudes in Philippians 3:10, when he writes, "that I may know Him [Jesus Christ] and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK

April 5, 2017

"The Old Sheep Done Know The Road"

(Who are the old sheep and who are the young lambs? What is the road this song references?)

"All The Way"

(What does it mean to 'keep pressing onward' and 'if I perish friendless'?)

April 6, 2017
Mark 10:13-16

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

KINGDOM LOVE

Emma Jordan-Simpson

A few years ago, I arranged for a group of clergy leaders to go with me to a juvenile detention center to conduct what the Children's Defense Fund calls a "Child Watch" - a strategy advocates use to get people with the ability to influence legislation and resources to engage in the "purposeful surveillance" of children's lives.

We arrived at the facility and were led into a recreation room and introduced to a group of teenagers - Black and Latino boys who were 13, 14 and 15 years old. After the introductions, the boys began to share with us their experiences. They held nothing back. When we came to the last boy, he shared his story, but before he yielded the floor back to us, he asked a question. "Why are you here talking to us right now?" There was silence in the room. He went on to say, "Every good thing we have ever gotten, we got it after we got into trouble. No after school program except for kids who are already in trouble. No tutoring except for kids who are already failing. No attention or help until we get into trouble. You don't see us until we are in trouble."

The kingdom is only the kingdom of God if we see the children. And, we can only see them if they are front and center in our priorities. What does that mean? Dr. James Forbes has declared that our budgets are 'moral documents'. They outline our priorities. Where are children's needs reflected in our budgets?

Are we investing in programs that make us feel good at the expense of investing in what children actually need? One of the most important lessons for a foundation on whose board I sit was the lesson learned when we created a "college scholarship fund" for the residents of a particular public housing development. We had a good goal - to support young people going to college. We were disappointed when only one person applied for the scholarship. That young person told us what we should have known. She said, "Offering a college scholarship is nice, but if you want to change things for us, then help us before applying to college is no longer an option for us." Her point was 'put us first from the start.'

The kingdom of God has little tolerance for heroes who rush to rescue children from troubles they didn't need to experience in the first place; or heroes who rally around children who are already well on their way. Any kingdom that does not position all of its children to live into their dreams and God's potential for the lives, and to experience the unmerited grace and unconditional love of God from the very start of their lives is not the kingdom of God.

Kingdom love is not sentimental. Children deserve kingdom-love - our commitment to ensuring that our love yields justice for them.

Cornel West is right. "Justice is what love looks like in public" - and the kingdom.

April 7, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN!

Emma Jordan-Simpson

By the time Jesus climbed up a mountain to speak these words of "blessings," crowds of people had already been following him regularly. He was preaching a very different kind of message than what they have heard before. The presence of this kind of kingdom he preached about liberates - right now! The people were very familiar with other kings and kingdoms. There never seemed to be a good word for them in those kingdoms. Now, they have witnessed for themselves the hallmarks of God's kingdom: healing from disease and affliction.

For a culture where disease and affliction - of any kind - means expulsion from the community, from family and the opportunity to worship God with others, healing was radical. Healing targeted and erased the 'reasons' people used to oppress and erase other people. Healing was the first indicator that the kingdom Jesus preached about was going to center the people on whose bodies other kingdoms were usually built. It is, perhaps, the reason that Jesus' kingdom message was so threatening to the current ruling power. Jesus was erasing exclusions to blessedness.

Now on this mountain, he redefines "blessedness." To the poor, broken-hearted mourners, hungry and thirsty, he says -- "you are blessed!" Too often, we have misinterpreted 'blessed' to mean "happy" -- and by doing so, the church has negated and dismissed the realities of people's lives. We have also - by default - defined "blessed" in ways that mean only people who have every material need met can claim. Therefore, the great effort in life is for material things. But, the word used here is 'makarios,' which means "indwelt and fulfilled by God." It does not mean 'happy'. Let us be clear: there is no 'fulfillment' in pain or persecution. Fulfillment is not in the condition - which is often not naturally occurring, but inflicted on vulnerable people by those with power. Shame on those who upheld the system of slavery for so long in this country with declarations like, "But they sing on the plantations; they are happy slaves!" Fulfillment follows this fact: the one who sees the condition has the power to interrupt it and its affect on our lives.

God's words are God's actions and when God shows up, nothing is ever the same again. Jesus chooses to show up in the lives of the people who climbed up the mountain after him by speaking a word of change *to them and their condition*: you are blessed! The presence of God's kingdom interrupts the power and plans of every other kingdom that has had a hold on our lives.

The people had the courage to climb a mountain to do a dangerous, treasonous thing - consider a kingdom other than Caesar's. Our ancestors sang, "I'm rolling through an unfriendly world." In that song, they turn to the preacher and ask "O, preacher won't you help me to fight?" Here are some fighting words for everybody rolling through this unfriendly world: climb the mountain! There's a word of change being declared up there.

April 8, 2017
Matthew 6:5-13

⁵And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

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

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

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

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

POWER IN PRAYER

Emma Jordan-Simpson

There is power in prayer. The easiest way to make prayer weak and pathetic is to turn it into something it is not. There are no special words to say to force or cajole God into doing something we want God to do. We often approach prayer as if the words we speak are from a special magic list. They are not the real words of our lives. When I am really struggling, I turn to the Psalms. There, I'm reminded that honest communication is a mark of real relationship with God. They trusted God with their rage, anger, humiliation, desires for revenge, and pure despair. Somehow, I believe that if the psalmists were eventually satisfied after their encounter with God, it was, in part, because they put everything on the table. They laid bare what they were really feeling and the trusted God to make the difference - even in the ugliness.

More than words to say, here Jesus gives us a posture of prayer to emulate. That posture translates into a way of being in the word - courageous and dependent upon the power of the Holy Spirit. In the kingdom, our prayer posture is not for show. Therefore, we don't need to use empty phrases and flowery words because the point is not to impress God with our vocabulary. The point is to stand with God in trust.

God's kingdom, not another, is to be trusted. God's will, not ours, is to be pursued. Trust God to be God not just in heaven, but of our real, messy lives right now. Trust enough so that we even expect our daily needs to be met by the one who rules the Kingdom of God, not Caesar. It means that we will walk with our sisters and brothers as if we are on a journey together through rough and rocky roads; and, because it is hard to be in relationship with all of the "whosoever wills" that God calls, we are all constantly in need of grace.

Superficiality in our prayer lives is the biggest threat to our relationship with the God who cares more about us than our words. Prayer is not about what we say to God. It's about what our communication with God leads us to do.

Prayer is powerful when it helps us to drown out the sounds of every other power so that we can listen for the beat of God's heart in this world. Prayer is powerful when, because of the relationship it nurtures between us and God, it compels us to witness to the kingdom's conviction: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

What does powerful prayer look like? Frederick Douglass once talked about prayer being the most powerful posture a person could adopt. He says, "I prayed for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." He trusted God enough to walk to freedom.

How's your prayer life?

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

KINGDOM LIVING: IT'S AIN'T ABOUT U. IT'S ABOUT (US)

Shakeema North

I recently wrote a response to an article written by Darrell Guder, author of the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, where he argues that in effort to reverse its rapid decline in America, the church must refocus on mission and what it means to be a "missional church." Guder suggests that over the course of the years, the church has shifted its focus from making disciples of all nations in the world to being more focused on individual salvation, or what he calls, "the savedness of the saved."

I agree that the church is currently in somewhat of a missional drift, and sadly, this shift has resulted in the widespread theological narcissism that has made the gospel of Jesus Christ more about an individual's favor, than about how God shows up in, and for, the entire community.

In today's scripture, Jesus is attempting to redirect the person in the crowd from heading towards a missional drift. Earlier in Luke, Jesus gave his mission statement and thus the mission statement of the Christian church. Remember - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor..." (Luke 4: 18-19). Never once, then and even now, was Jesus' mission about meeting the needs of any one person solely for the benefit of themselves. It is clear from the question raised that the people had it twisted.

When I think about the fact that 58% of Protestant Christians voted for our current president, I can't but help to think that we are in a missional drift ourselves. Our focus has shifted from the mission statement that Christ gave us - which was centered in developing God's beloved community; to the "savedness of the saved", and consequently the "savedness of the church" - which has led us to become widely ingrown and self-serving. There are many in the church who support our current president because their support benefits *them*. Only when they aren't going to personally benefit in the ways they anticipated will "justice" become a concern. **enters side eye emoji**

Ronald J. Sider in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, argues "if Christians today could recover even half of the profound New Testament understanding of the church as community, we would discover a powerful protection against the pervasive individualism that devastates the Western church."

Jesus, through this parable, illustrates how individualism has no place in kingdom living. We are blessed to be a blessing to others and our lives are being demanded of (US), for such a time as this. Kingdom living is not about any one of us individually; kingdom living is about community and about making sure people's felt needs are being met. We cannot care only in those times that it benefits us. To be rich toward God is about working for the betterment and well-being of all God's people. All. Of. God's. People.

It ain't about U. It's about (US)!

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABSOLUTION

Emma Jordan-Simpson

I remember the night I heard about the violent slaughter of nine African American Christians in a South Carolina AME church. I was teaching Concord's Bible Study that night. As far as I could tell, while we were in Brooklyn talking about the cradle to prison pipeline crisis and how racism drives the mass incarceration of Black people all across this country, a white supremacist walked into a church where people were gathered for prayer and study in South Carolina, violated their hospitality and murdered them with the intent of starting a race war. As if this horror story was not enough, a news anchor raised a question that displays the cheapness with which we handle the issue of forgiveness. She was discussing her intent to interview the grieving family. Her plan? Though this man expressed no remorse or gave any indication that he ever would, she was going to ask those grieving if they could forgive the shooter. Roxanne Gay wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times that captured the rage I felt about this news anchor's interview:

"The call for forgiveness is a painfully familiar refrain when black people suffer. White people embrace narratives about forgiveness so they can pretend the world is a fairer place than it actually is, and that racism is merely a vestige of a painful past instead of this indelible part of our present."

Some of the family members of those killed did express forgiveness. But they weren't absolving the shooter of responsibility. They were doing what they needed to do to survive. What does it mean to knowingly and unrepentantly demand forgiveness, and to do it repeatedly? Why we are only discussed as "brothers and sisters" bound by the Christian 'forgiveness code' when we are the ones being killed. Yet, the bonds of family are quickly forgotten when decisions are being made around the public policies that so negatively impact our lives.

Roxane Gay continued:

"Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, micro-aggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us...What white people are really asking for when they demand forgiveness from a traumatized community is absolution. They want absolution from the racism that infects us all even though forgiveness cannot reconcile America's racist sins."

Preaching forgiveness without repentance is promoting cheap grace, so says Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Forgiveness doesn't excuse offenders from the consequences of their actions.

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God does not require Christians to repeatedly offer themselves up to unrepentant evil. Jesus did that once. It was enough.

²⁵Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

EVERYTHING I NEED

Deidre Pilgrim

*God provides all that I need,
my worries are in vain.
I'm nourished by my Father's grace,
and not my mental pain.
When I cannot a purchase make,
to clothe my naked back,
It's not my job, for only God,
provides the things I lack.
If birds don't work and yet survive,
and flowers bloom on earth,*

*If wild grass thrives just from His grace,
and I owe God my birth,
No worry can prolong my life,
it did not come from me,
Anxiety can't quench my thirst,
it is not heavenly.
God gives me all I'll ever need,
and all God wants from me,
Is that I serve him all my life,
in sacred piety.*

It is normal and ordinary for me to think that the things I need in life must be provided by me. I believe that if I work on my job I can provide food, clothes and shelter for my family. I am even proud that I do so. I feel I'm making an honorable sacrifice. I believe when I provide these things, my family will love and adore me. They will obey me and see things my way. We will live in harmony. SILLY FOOL!

There will be little or no harmony unless everyone in the family (mine and the human family) obeys God and lives according to God's will. The fact is, I have provided nothing. God has provided EVERYTHING. I am in awe of my God!

Worry less and pray more. God has promised us all things, if we walk in the authority of God's word. We must hold on to that. There is a peace we will all feel when we truly "LET GO AND LET GOD".

SONGS TO END THIS WEEK
April 12, 2017

"I'm-A-Rollin' Through an Unfriendly World"

(The ancestors "brothers and sisters" to pray for each other; but they ask the preachers to help them 'fight'. Why? What are they fighting?)

"I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

"Shout All Over God's Heaven"

(What do these songs seem to be saying, and under what circumstances do you think these songs would be sung?)

MAUNDY THURSDAY
April 13, 2017 ~ Luke 22:14-23

¹⁴When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" ²³Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

TABLE REFLECTIONS ON OUR LIFE TOGETHER:

Divide It Among Yourselves
Gary V. Simpson

Almost every Communion Table I have seen has etched in it somewhere these timeless instructions. They are often in all caps: **"DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."** Our attention here should be placed on our Lord's desire for 'us'. The communion ritual is more than an act of personal piety. It is also an expression of the bond of the covenanted community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer closes his book *"Life Together"* with these timeless words:

"The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete. The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament."

Bonhoeffer declares elsewhere in *Life Together*:

"Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair."

If we are going to live together, we must learn how to share the limited resources that God has given us. Christ instructs us, "Divide it among yourselves." Take responsibility for distributing the limited resources in their hands fairly and equitably.

How desperately we need to be reminded to *divide it among ourselves* beyond the Communion Table. Coming to this meal together teaches us how to share with one another. In a culture so bent on individuality and "getting mine," we are called to share that which is profoundly and unquestionably ours together. When Christ extols and admonishes us not to forget Him, He is also declaring that remembering Him is accomplished by covenanting with each other around the Table of His grace.

NOT THIS MAN!

Emma Jordan-Simpson

Peter Randolph was a slave who lived in Prince George County, Virginia. When his owner died in 1847, Peter was given freedom and became, among other things, a Baptist minister. He published a book in 1893 entitled "Slave Cabin to the Pulpit" where he describes what it looks like for the slave master's religion to be divorced from the reality of who Jesus is. He says the slave masters preached about a Jesus who was really nothing more than just the king of the plantation and, a preacher of slave-owning way of life: **"Servants, obey your masters'. Do not steal or lie, for this is very wrong. Such conduct is sinning against the Holy Ghost, and is base ingratitude to your kind masters, who feed, clothe and protect you...."**

They didn't know who Jesus was. *He says they proved it when they*

... "cried crocodile tears" on Sunday and then beat the slaves within an inch of their lives on Monday morning. He says, "...[T]hese are the men that spread the Gospel among the slaves. Ah! such a Gospel had better be buried in oblivion, for it makes more heathens than Christians. Such preachers ought to be forbidden by the laws of the land ever to mock again at the blessed religion of Jesus, which was sent as a light to the world...."

Pilate was not a Jew. He wasn't a follower of this Jesus. It could be understood why he was clueless about the identity of this Jesus. But surely the identity of Jesus was known to this crowd. When offered a choice, they chose someone else. It was as if they didn't know who Jesus was. They shouted, "Not this man!"

There are many Jesuses proclaimed to the world. Which Jesus we have chosen is made clear when we examine the world each of us participates in creating. Is Jesus a liberator? Then why do we oppress? Is Jesus a comforter? Then why do we afflict? During this Lenten season, we've been singing the songs that gave our ancestors strength to survive the brutality of their enslavement and to pass on a complex legacy that continues to nurture new generations. One thing is clear from the songs born from their experience and their encounter with God -- Peter Randolph and the ancestors chose a better gospel to preach. They chose "this man."

GOOD FRIDAY

April 14, 2017 – John 18: 28 - 40

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

HOLY SATURDAY
April 15, 2017 – Hebrews 12:18-29

¹⁸You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." ²⁷This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

STANDING IN SILENCE AND DARKNESS

Gary V. Simpson

We last gathered together as a congregation on Maundy Thursday. We left the sanctuary in total darkness with all the signs and symbols of celebration stripped away, exiting in the silence that is Tenebrae. Darkness and silence. That is what Holy Saturday feels like. I think the hardest day to experience in this journey that began on Ash Wednesday is Holy Saturday.

We are uncomfortable with sitting with silence. The apparent inactivity of this day, especially in a culture that worships busy-ness, unsettles us. It only magnifies our sense of loneliness, despair, fear and vulnerability. Every once in a while, Christians ought to be reminded that experiencing darkness, silence and solitude is necessary. It, too, is a part of "our receiving a kingdom."

The writer of Hebrews gives this chilling account: everything created must be shaken so that the unshaken things of God's 'kin-dom' will remain. That is not easy to hear. Every dimension of life as we know it will be shaken. (WRITER'S NOTE: If that idea haunts or imbalances you, you have permission to read over into the next chapter of Hebrews - 13:5d, 6)

In the silent moments when you cannot see what God is up to, quietly sing to yourself the memories of the faithful:

*His hope, His covenant and blood
Support me in the overwhelming flood
When all around my soul gives way
He then is all my hope and stay.*

In the silence and darkness that often plunges us into despair, we stand on and in Christ.

SONGS TO END THIS JOURNEY

Resurrection Sunday

April 16, 2017

"No More Auction Block for Me"

"Oh, Freedom"

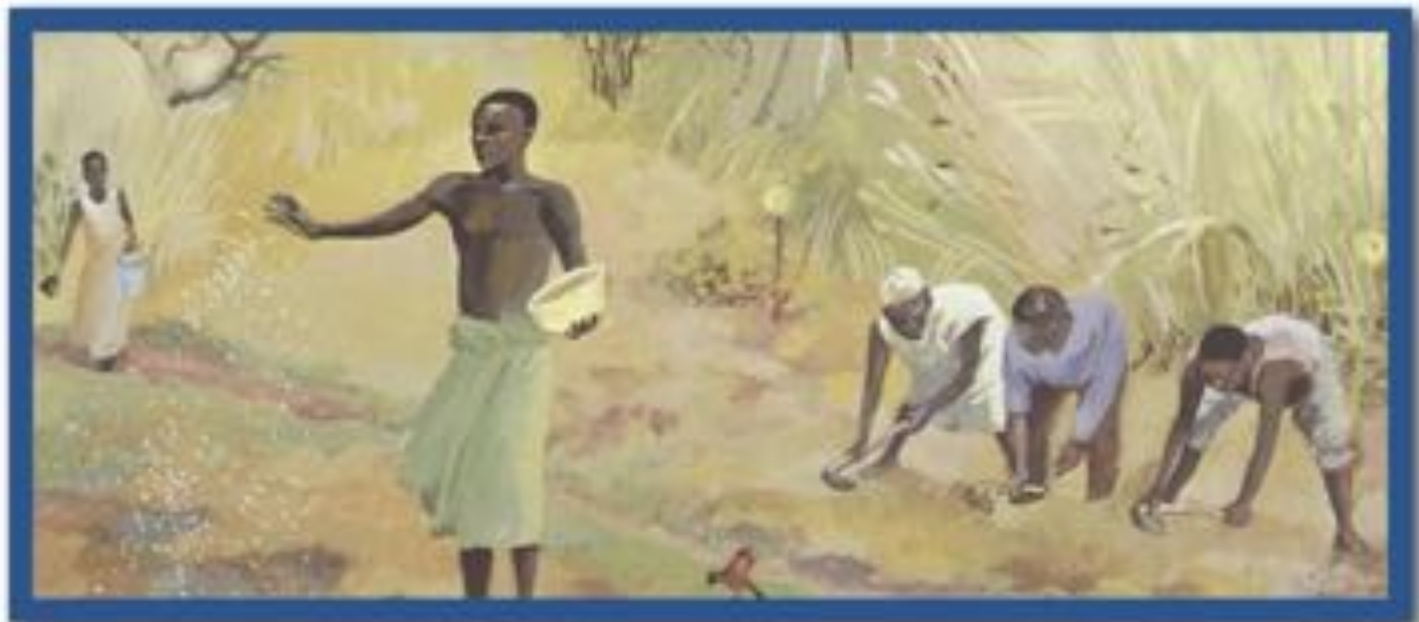
"My Soul Wants Something New"

(If you could write a song about freedom, what words would you use to convey the things you consider to be your chains?)

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Parable of the Sower | Jesus Maafa

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