

Care! Reflections on Caring and Giving

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This resource is intended for personal daily reflection, particularly during the month preceding stewardship commitment Sunday. I developed it a couple of years ago at a time my church was facing financial challenges. It helped the congregants think about their relationship with money, God's vision for how we use our resources and deepen spiritual life and joy. Feel free to download, copy, and use as you see fit. I hope using it will bless your congregations as it did mine! EAG

Day 1: Malachi 3:10

¹⁰Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

Sometimes the very word 'tithe' can fill us with a mixture of confusion, guilt and resentment. What is it? Why is it important? Is it still relevant today? Throughout the Bible, the tithe refers to returning to God 10% of everything over which one has control, financial resources, time, possessions, everything. Tithes went to support the faith community, for the upkeep of the houses of worship, and those who served in them. Offerings were gifts above the tithe that were given to meet special needs or to celebrate special blessings. Sacrificial gifts were those made in order to make amends for wrongdoing. The tithe had spiritual purposes as well. The requirement of 10% to support the faith community was intended to ensure that the Temple was cared for *and* those who served in it could dedicate themselves to that service without undue stress about their livelihoods. The tithe was also instituted to make sure that the needs of the poor and outcast were provided for and met. More even than that, though, the tithe was a gift of grace from God. In this spiritual formula, for which we were created, we acknowledge that everything that exists belongs to God. There is no individual ownership. All is God's. Out of God's loving generosity, God tells us that 90% of all we have and acquire is ours to do with as we see fit. Of course that 90% is to be used to further God's aims, as well, but it is still at our discretion. Before we begin the hard work of determining what God would have us do with the 90%, we are to stop and set aside 10% to ensure that the life of worship and service of the community are never in jeopardy. The principle of the tithe allows us to put God's work in the church first in our lives. The tithe is a place to start in our giving. Not the ultimate ceiling. In his encounter with the Rich Man, Jesus makes this clear when he tells him to go sell ALL and give to the poor. Still, statistics show that most of us give barely more than 2% to our churches. And giving to churches across the country has dropped by more than 7% in the last couple of years. What does this say about our trust that God has designed a way of life that is right and perfect for us? Malachi would say it makes us robbers, stealing from God what belongs to God and has been designated for a purpose.

The prophet tells us that when we orient our lives around the sacred principles of God, particularly the tithe, we unleash undreamed of possibilities and blessings in our lives and in our faith communities. Perhaps your life circumstances and obligations make

tithing seem impossible right now. Don't be too sure. Begin now to pray that God will open a way for you to live into this Biblical command without undue hardship or stress to you or others. God does not want you to be frightened or stressed. Ever. God will answer this request and begin to make a way, perhaps by baby steps, for you to enter into the harmony and joy of giving according to God's formula.

Dear God, You know that we live in a time when ends don't meet. Often, all we can do is keep a roof over our heads, if we can do that. Help me today to ponder the spiritual principle of the tithe and to open myself for you to make a way for me to do it. Be patient and gentle with me, Lord. But push me a little, too so that I can live with courage and trust according to your will. Help me to trust in your provision and live in joy and harmony. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 2: Luke 21:1-4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ²he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

In Jesus' day 'the collection plate' was a large metal trumpet-shaped shoot that people put their tithes and offerings into at various points during worship or in daily Temple life. When coins were placed in the shoot they made a loud clanging noise. The larger the gift, the louder the clanging. Often people gathered near the shoot so that they could hear how much their neighbors were giving. The wealthy walked proudly to the trumpet, knowing that they would be held in high regard when others heard the sound their offerings made.

Jesus was unimpressed with this practice. For him, giving was not about gaining status in the community or control over the outcome of Temple affairs as a result of the size of ones offerings. For Jesus, giving was all about the attitude of the heart. He knew that it was possible to give for many reasons, and they didn't all have to do with trust and gratitude. So when he saw a poor widow, one who was by simple virtue of her widowhood, spiritually suspect and an outcast in community, put everything that she had in the trumpet, he was impressed indeed. He saw her as a role model for the rest of us. When he heard the small sound of the two tiny coins making their way down the metal shoot, he knew that he was in the presence of deep faith and holiness. She did not give 10%. She gave 100%! Even if she had kept one coin to live off of, 50% would have been staggering. But she kept nothing back. Not one single thing.

What could have allowed her, impelled her, to give in this way? Was it gratitude for the gift of life itself, for breathing in and out, for seeing the light on the hills, for resting with the stars in her eyes? Was it gratitude for the sweetness of Temple worship, that indescribable thing that happens when the people gather and flashes of God's presence shoot through the room? Was it for the ability to move arthritic hands to light Sabbath candles? We don't know. What we do know is that when Jesus saw her, he saw what he was looking for, a person whose heart belonged to God. What he saw was a person who had no need to accumulate, to hold back in fear, to count or compare, to live

in anxiety for the rainy day. He saw a person who trusted God for her daily sustenance and who gave to God everything at her disposal.

What would it take for us to live with that singleness of heart? What would it take for us to offer our small lives and resources with humility and confidence in a world in which the rich still call the shots and love to be seen as powerful and generous? What if we are the wealthy in this story? Do we really want the world to know how much we give and to get a special status for doing it? This story reminds us that a little can be a lot and a lot can make us very small. What will you do today with what is in your control?

Dear God, Help me to live today with simplicity and few needs. Make me more generous than I usually am and remove from me the desire to define myself by what I have acquired. Show me today what I have to give, a little or a lot, and fill me with joy and trust in giving. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 3: 1 Chron. 29:9

⁹Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the Lord; King David also rejoiced greatly.

1 Chronicles 29 gives us a picture of an ancient and wildly successful capital campaign. King David is making the case for the building of the Temple and he has done his homework. In his presentation to the people, he carefully tells them of the preparation that has gone on prior to his coming to them for help. He gives them a fly through of what the edifice will be like right down to the precious stones that will adorn it. He connects the new project with their honored and sacred history, pointing out to them that the new sanctuary is modeled after the Tabernacle described in Exodus. The details have all been worked out. Now he needs the response of the people.

There are three key elements to David's presentation that made all the difference. First, as I mentioned, he had done his homework. He knew what was important to the people in their history. He knew what it would take to get the job done. And he communicated that to the whole assembly very persuasively. Second, he told the people what he himself would contribute; how generously he planned to support the project from his own resources. Third, when making his appeal to them, he made the clear spiritual connections. They were not building a simple meeting hall. They were not even building a place for human beings. They were building a Temple for God. All their efforts were focused on honoring God, serving God and making God look good. It was not about them. It was about God.

The people responded with an outpouring of giving that was truly staggering, miraculous even. Verse 9 gives another key to their success. The people gave lavishly and willingly. They *wanted* to do it. They were not conscripted to do it. They wanted to do it, no doubt, for many different reasons. Still, they were single-minded in one thing: they wanted to do this for God. This is the difference between giving as a duty alone, and giving as an act of worship. The former may pay the bills. The later will build a life filled with joy and wonder.

Dear God, please give me a single-minded love of you and desire to serve you with all that I have. Help me to enter into the beauty of your sanctuary and to know that it is all for you. Fill my heart with joy at my contribution to your worship, and open me up to new ways to serve you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 4: 1 Chron. 29:14

¹⁴“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

King David is overwhelmed by the people's response to the financial campaign for the new Temple. He absolutely cannot believe that they all actually came through. I remember my first capital campaign as a pastor. I was a basket case. The campaign consultant from Church Financial Campaign Services even announced to the congregation that I was the most nervous pastor he had ever worked with. The night before Commitment Sunday, I dreamed the whole congregation had turned into cats; stripped cats, polka dotted cats, cats with horns, and as I walked into worship they all began to hiss and spit and yowl at me. I am, by the way, allergic to cats.

It doesn't take spiritual sight to see what that dream was about. I didn't trust that they would come through, and I feared they were angry at even being asked. What I had underestimated was the very thing that filled King David with such joy and humility. I had underestimated their love of the Lord, and had come to believe that the campaign was about a building and not about how they wanted to serve God.

When the pledges came in, I couldn't believe how successful the effort had been. Who were we, that God would do such a glorious thing through us? It was in that moment that I came to really understand that God had done it all. God had created the resources. God had loved us into faith. God had dreamed a dream of our worship life together and God had used us to make it come true.

What is God dreaming for you?

Dear God, Help me today to remember that all things come from you, and that when I act accordingly, miracles happen. Work your miracles of healing and generosity into my soul, Lord. Show me my part in your miraculous story and equip me to embrace it wholeheartedly. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 5: 1 John 3:17

¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

The story is told of the beloved John of Ephesus, the presumptive author of these beautiful letters, that when he was quite old and feeble, members of his flock carried him into the place of worship on a mat or stool. For many weeks he preached the same message. "Little children, love one another." He repeated that one sentence over and over and over again. After some time, the little flock asked him why he kept saying that to them again and again. "Because it is enough," he replied.

In this verse, John is trying to help us understand that all we have is first and foremost a tool of love. The money we have in the bank is fuel for Love's work in the world. One of the problems many in contemporary society face is believing that money is security rather than a conduit of Love's healing and restoring power. We talk about our nest eggs as security blankets. We even call our investment's 'securities.' The confounding thing in Biblical faith, however, is that security is not a particularly Biblical value. In the Hebrew Scriptures security is a result of faithfulness. In the New Testament, insecurity and persecution are often the results of faithfulness. In either case, security is not to be sought. Faithfulness is to be sought. When we begin to think that security lies in what we have rather than in who God is, then the ability to love lavishly, to unleash Love into the world is terribly diminished. Loving and redeeming a fractured world are incompatible with looking to what we possess for our security. After all, if our security rests in what we have, how can we freely and lovingly give it away? If, however, we recognize that our lives are in the hand of God, who is our only security, and if we open ourselves to be channels of God's love, then what we possess becomes the tool through which God continually blesses others and ultimately ourselves. If we, lost in an overdeveloped and fearful desire to be independent and self-sufficient (not bad things in bounds, of course), can see a neighbor (or an enemy) in need, have the power to make a difference, and do not do so, then Love has no home in us and we are empty and frightened indeed.

Dear God, Open my eyes today to the needs that I can meet in the lives of hurting people. Help me to be a conduit of your love, giving to others what you have so lavishly given to me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 6: 2 Cor. 9:8

⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

A persistent heresy of many contemporary Christians is the belief that scarcity and lack actually exist as a force, or a spiritual reality. Of course, inequity and injustice exist, whereby some have an inordinate amount of affluence or ease, and others scrape by with little or nothing. But those are human constructs and not a part of God's creation and design. God created the universe with enough, enough for all to have a life of promised blessing, joy and harmony. It is only after the fall into sin that human beings begin to experience the scarcity and hardship that choosing to live out of compliance with God's will engender.

In God's economy we both *have* and *are* enough. God is not without resources. Nor is God without the power, or the desire, to bring abundance and blessing into our lives. One of the reasons that we live with so little abundance is that we have fallen into the spiritual mire of scarcity thinking. In this way of thinking, we come to believe that there is a finite amount of money, time, energy and talent, so we are forever hoarding or worrying. When we hoard and worry based on a faulty belief that there is not enough, we become smaller and smaller as individuals and as a community. Not only that, we have the great tendency to create, inadvertently, the very things that we fear the most. We

tighten our belts until we squeal and find that we must tighten them ever further.

When we focus on and trust in what God longs to give us and unleash through us, rather than on the seemingly insurmountable challenges before us, then mysterious bounty begins to appear. I am not saying that pots of cash show up in our mailboxes, although sometimes they do. I am saying that when our lives revolve around lack, it is all that we can see and it creates more of the same. When our thoughts revolve around abundance and giving, then there is always more to receive and something to give. This does not, of course, mean that we are to be irresponsible or childlike in our financial lives. What it does mean is that we are to remember what our source really is and to lean into that great Source without fear and with abounding generosity.

Dear God, Sometimes I see more limits than bounty in my life, in our church, in your world. Help me today to open myself to the truth that you are abundant and constantly seeking ways to bring gifts and blessings into my life and the lives of those I love. Forgive me for believing in lack more than abundance, for thinking small instead of loving large, for wanting for myself and neglecting the good of others. Tune me to the abundant blessings of my life so that I can be a blessing to others in your name. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 7: 1 Tim. 6:7-8

⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁶With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.

One of the stories in the lore of my birth is that shortly after I was born a young cousin, maybe 9 or 10 years old, came over to see me. When the child was brought to the bassinet where I was sleeping, he looked inside with resignation and said, “Well, now I guess we’ll have to educate it.”

Indeed, you and I came into this world with nothing, at least as far as the things of this world are concerned. We did not arrive with portfolio, or a shoebox of cash to tuck under the bed for a rainy day. Even so we were quickly provided for. Someone cleaned us up, checked our fingers and toes, wrapped us in a blanket and gave us something to eat. After the initial shock, we were disoriented but content.

It was not until years later that we decided that something to eat, something to cover us, and someone to care for us was somehow not enough. We wanted more. An ice-cream cone. A new toy. And then another and another. And the cones we wanted got bigger and turned into cars and houses and 401k’s. Yet deep inside, what we really want is that deep, disorienting contentment with the world with which we were born. What we really want is to be fed, clothed and loved. We were created for that wonderful contentment and it is what we strive for, even if we strive amiss.

What does it take for us to feel content these days? What do we really need? In his letter to Timothy, Paul wants Timothy and the church to remember that all that we can acquire will never finally meet the deep needs of our heart. Only God, creating a generous and content heart in us can do that. When we know that we really need little, even though we may want and enjoy much, we are freed from a great burden that

hampers our lives and spirits. When we realize that the things we sometimes want so desperately are not permanent or lasting, then a space is opened up in us for an almost supernatural generosity. If we really need nothing but Christ, something to eat and something to wear, then there is much that we can give away, isn't there? When we do, we find a joy much greater than the quick joy of acquiring. It is the joy of simply doing good as an act of praise.

Dear God, it is not unheard of for me to want more than I need. Nor is it rare for me to think that I need things that I really simply desire. Help me, Lord, to know the difference between my wants and my needs so that, living in contentment, I can give to you with a joyful heart. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 8: Rom. 15:25-27

²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; ²⁶for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.

Paul wants nothing in the world so much as to take the Gospel to the far corner of the Roman Empire, Spain. The church in the Mediterranean basin is established by this time with persecuted but indomitable house churches, each little more than a days journey apart. By the time Paul writes this letter he has endured beatings, imprisonment, rejection, and health issues. He has experienced much grace as well. He has felt the power and presence of the Risen Christ as he sat in his own excrement in a dank prison cell, a Presence so powerful that even in that circumstance he could say, "Rejoice, I say rejoice." Now he is ready to move on and to fulfill two life dreams, to take the Gospel to Spain and to visit the church in Rome.

But before he can go on with his plans, there are people who need him at home. The Jerusalem church was plagued with poverty and persecution. Families who could not support their elderly encouraged them to convert to Christ so that the church would be responsible for their upkeep. Pilgrims who came for the Jewish festivals and were converted could no longer go home and had no means of support. Many who were drawn to Christ's Gospel of grace and freedom had few financial resources to share with the many others in need. When word of the Jerusalem church's hardship reach her daughter churches in Greece and the Mediterranean, Paul encouraged the churches to take a special mission offering for the home church. He has collected these offerings and it those moneys that he must take to Jerusalem before he heads to Rome. This was dangerous duty. Paul had powerful enemies. As it turned out he was arrested and ultimately died in prison as a result of this journey.

Isn't it striking, though, given all of that, that he put the needs of those in Jerusalem above not only his own desires to continue his work in the west, but his own personal safety? What are we willing to put on the line for the sake of others who are in need? What are we willing to postpone in order to try to alleviate the pain and poverty of those in our sister churches around the world? Across town? For whom would we be

willing to risk arrest or death in order to offer what we can to help? For whom are you willing to be inconvenienced in even the smallest of ways?

Dear God, So often I just want what I want when I want it and allow nothing to get in my way. Help me today to see those for whom I could be inconvenienced for your sake. Show me how I can put another's needs first and do what needs to be done to help. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 9: Matthew 6:21

²¹*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

One of the most daunting exercises that any of us can attempt is to take a spiritual look at our monthly spending. Give it a try. Take out your checkbook or pull up your bank or credit card statement. What did you spend your money on this month? What checks did you write first this month? Who benefited from these expenditures? Where did your giving to the church fall in priority? How did you decide what you would spend? Where is the Gospel in your monthly budget? Does what you spend demonstrate what you really believe? Are your beliefs in alignment with your faith?

Jesus makes it very plain that where we put our money is where our priority really lies. In the Greek of the New Testament, the 'heart' was understood as not only the seat of the emotions, but as a symbol for one's will and entire personality. In other words, where you put your money is what you emotionally care about. Where you put your money is what rules you. Where you put your money shapes your entire personality and ethics. This is a hard teaching indeed. What we spend our money on is what we really love and demonstrates who we really are.

Perhaps as you go through this exercise you may feel a need for a change of heart. If your spending does not reflect the values that you want to embody, with God's help that can change. Begin with one simple change. Write your check to the church first each month. You may notice in that simple action the beginning of a turning in your priorities.

Dear God, I am stunned and sorrowful when I see how often I put other things ahead of you! Forgive me, Lord and help me from this day forward to live my life in congruity with my faith and your deep desires for me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 10: Deuteronomy 16:10

¹⁰*Then you shall keep the festival of weeks for the Lord your God, contributing a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the Lord your God.*

One of the beauties about Biblical patterns for giving is that they are, at their heart, fair and proportional. Granted, if you are living close to the bone, 10% can feel like a much bigger hit to the budget than it does if you have more than you need each month. Still, proportional giving levels the playing field and each person has control over the same proportion of his or her resources.

In today's verse we get a look at another type of giving: the offering. Remember,

tithes are the expected gifts to support the faith community. Offerings are gifts given over and above the tithe for special needs, festivals, or thanksgiving for blessing or protections. Here we see that proportionality is still the norm. We are to give in proportion to the blessings we have received from God.

One of the difficult things for many of us to come to terms with is how much we should give. It is hard not to look to what others are doing for our cues. When I was a pastor in Birmingham, AL and involved in raising money to build a shelter for homeless women and children, I had the opportunity to visit with many wealthy donors. Often their first question was what the others in their category had decided to do. While after we got our first lead gift, those comparisons worked to our advantage, the Biblical model under which most of us want to operate is more personal. It is between us and God. Each of us is to look at our lives and resources and to give in proportion to what we have been given. If you are serving God as a public school teacher with a modest income and a member of your Bible study group is a CEO of a local bank, God would never expect the same dollar amount from you both. The one with more is expected to give more. In either circumstance, we give out of the abundance of our blessing. This principle applies to all of the blessing of life, not just the financial ones. If we have been given the gift of music, how can we use it? If we can count money or fold bulletins, how do we do it? If we have a house or a car, how do we offer it? Abundance comes in many ways. So does giving.

Dear God, My blessing are too abundant to name or number! You have given me everything I need for today and so much more. Help me today to look at my abundant blessings and to see the ways that I can give to you according to that abundance. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 11: Matthew 25:21

²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

It is astounding, given our track records, that God entrusts us with so much, especially with the incomparable gift of the church itself. Jesus' parable of the talents is told to try to help hearers understand what is expected of them in the new realm of God. Jesus' followers have many of the same questions that we do today. What does God require of me? What does God want me to do? How does God want me to behave?

In this parable, told in the familiar language of absentee landlords, a wealthy man leaves his property for an extended period of time. He entrusts the management of his holdings to employees that he knows very well. Each is given a portion of the estate for which he is responsible. The owner knows their abilities, and each gets exactly what he is able to succeed in managing. None gets more than he can handle. The owner gives to them with out hesitation and in complete trust that they will do what is best. Then he leaves. When he returns, two of the employees have invested his assets and drawn a good return. One, out of fear, buried the talent and never put it to work or allowed it to grow. Each is 'rewarded' according to his actions.

To understand this passage it is important to remember that it all starts with grace; the owner's gifts given in trust. The stewards did not earn the talents that they are told to shepherd. They were gifts pure and simple, the property of another that was theirs to manage and use. When we think about our own resources and responsibilities in this way, as grace, then this parable reminds us of several truths that can help us answer the question: What am I going to do with the gifts God entrusts to me?

Truth number 1: God intends for you to succeed. If the owner in the parable is intended to be the God figure in the story, then it is obvious by his careful attention to giving to each according to his ability, that God cares more about our personal success than the simple multiplying of resources. He could have given everything to the most able employee and gotten a larger return. But the opportunity for each one to do his best was more important. God knows us so well and yearns for our success in every aspect of our lives. What has God perfectly given to you that you can build and grow?

Truth number 2: You can't do the work of the Master if you don't know who he is. The employee who hid his talent clearly had a faulty view of the master. He saw him as harsh, opportunistic and avaricious. He failed to see the grace at the heart of the gift and the tender recognition of just the right amount of responsibility for the personality and abilities of each employee. If we think that God is harsh, constantly waiting with a finger on the 'smite-button', caring only about perfection, then we, too, will have a hard time putting the grace given to us to work in our lives and churches.

Truth number 3: If fear rules you, you lose everything. Nothing rooted in fear can remain for long in the kingdom of God. Why? Because the kingdom of God is only love, in all of its many guises, and perfect love casts out fear. As soon as the employee's response to the master was fear, his talent was lost already. Fear can never be our stance in life or our motivation for action. Only love and grace get that honor. How might fear be rendering you ineffective today? What have you lost by acting or thinking in fear?

Dear God, Help me today to see you clearly, to be faithful to the work entrusted to me, to banish all fearfulness and anxiety from my heart, and to produce a real return for your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Day 12: Proverbs 3: 27-28

²⁷Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.²⁸Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you.

I know you have seen him, standing on the off ramp of the turnpike. He wears a thousand different faces but they are all desperation. He may have a dog. Or a backpack or a shopping cart. He may look ill kept, or like he just left a job he wishes he had. He may have a sign. "I need help," it reads. Or, "Will work for food" Or, "Out of work. Children hungry. God bless you." Do you fumble in the ashtray for a little change and hand it out the window without making eye contact? Do you spring for a buck or two and say that you will pray for him? Should you? The case can certainly be made from both sides about whether the man at the off ramp is actually 'due' anything or not. But still.

The wisdom writer in today's verses is talking to people about paying their debts.

If you owe someone and you've got the money, pay him or her. Don't juggle your creditors just to keep your wealth growing for yourself for another day. The bottom line here is that we are to be responsible with our debts. We are also to give when we can and not wait for a more opportune time when the need is right in front of us.

In today's economy this is no simple admonition. Many of us are juggling our bills as a matter of survival and avert our eyes from the man at the off ramp because we know that there but by the grace of God are we. Still, God's word is imminently practical and calls us to adopt behaviors and disciplines that will support a peaceful life and the capacity to give to those in need. Today's advice is simple. Don't welch on your debts and, by extension; don't run up debts you cannot pay.

For some of us this is an un-learning process. We have come to believe that as long as VISA says its ok, we can live remarkably beyond our means. Not only that, we have come to believe that it is our right to do so. Further, we have done so. Therefore, many of us have a load of debt individually that is making our financial and giving decisions for us. We cannot give as we would like because our other obligations are too great. Even so, it is possible to start from today to change all of that. Try two practices this month. First, if you have credit card debt, make a double payment. Figure out what has to go to make that happen and do it. Second, take a one-week break from all plastic, credit and debit cards. Recent studies have shown that when people write checks or pay cash for their expenses they spend up to 30% less. Then ask God what God would have you do with the money that you save.

Dear God, make me mindful of my spending today. Help me to be responsible not only to myself and my family, but also to those you want to touch through me. Help me to live with integrity, honor my obligations, and search for ways to live as a better steward of your gifts everyday. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 13: 2 Cor. 9:6-7

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In 2 Cor. 9:6-15, Paul is talking to the church about generosity and how one is to develop a generous character. The fact that it is absolutely necessary for those who bear the name of Christ to have a generous character and ethic is obvious to Paul. God gives all; therefore we should as well. God's grace comes with no strings attached, neither should our giving have strings attached. God wants us to be joyful so our giving should be joyful and not something we do grinding our teeth because we are supposed to, or because if we don't, who will.

The church in Corinth needed this teaching desperately. Things were not going well for them financially. Many in the church had few financial resources to contribute and needed much help from the congregation. Others had money but wanted to designate exactly how it was to be spent. The truly desperate 'stewardship chairperson,' had come up with a novel plan that the church would start charging for Holy Communion, and you could then have as much wine at Table as you could pay for. So the wealthy were getting

drunk at communion and the poor weren't getting anything at all. On top of that scandal, some who had the most resources were reluctant to give because the church was so conflicted on just about every issue from sex, to business, to women, to worship styles. The whole faith community was in danger of crumbling around their ears.

Throughout his letters to this church, Paul is very straightforward and confrontive. They fight all the time because they haven't learned what love is. (See 1 Cor. 13.) They have financial problems because they are overly cautious, controlling and fear based. The answer for them, according to Paul, was to learn the deep spiritual path of generosity. It is here in no uncertain terms that Paul tells them that God created the world with spiritual as well as physical principles. One of those principles, generosity, says that we get what we give. If we give in small ways we can expect to get only small things in return. If we give fearfully and counting the cost, we will receive circumstances that lead us to be more fearful and more counting of the cost.

The reverse is also true. The generous person who gives from a joyful confident heart, trusting in the gracious gifts of God, will receive in return much more than he or she ever gave. When we give bountifully, bounty follows us. When we give joyfully, joyful gifts return to us. When we give out of the desire of our heart we will receive a bounty that is both breathlessly extravagant and unexpected.

How do you feel when you give? Are you fearful, reluctant, resentful? Or does your heart burst with joy and a longing to find ways to give more?

Dear God, remove any tendency toward parsimony from my heart. Fill me with your abundant gifts so that I can give abundantly in your name. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 14: Romans 12:13

¹³*Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

Giving and hospitality were matters of life and death in the ancient world. In the desert culture of the early years of Israel's life, one of the most fundamental laws of life was to welcome the stranger in need into one's tent. Without the assurance that one could turn to neighbors when in need, the dangers of life would have been too much to survive. Hospitality is not just entertaining with a special meal or the best china. Hospitality is the extension of giving hearts in such a way that we open all of what we have and who we are to any whom God may send to us.

By the time that Paul wrote, many Christians were beginning to feel the real sting of persecution. Christians were only allowed to live in certain communities. They were charged different prices in the marketplace. Their rituals were misunderstood and they were believed to be cannibals (eating the body and blood of Christ) and sexual deviants (sharing the kiss of peace in worship.) Some refused to pay their taxes to Caesar because he claimed to be God. None would participate in the Emperor cult. For these reasons, and because they just seemed to stir up trouble wherever they were, many were arrested on trumped up charges and jailed. If they were to survive jail, food and water had to be supplied to them from friends, family or church members. That itself was risky business.

When Paul writes to Corinth about giving to support the saints and offering hospitality he is not talking about something casual or optional. He is telling them that

lives depend on their willingness to put themselves on the line for others. People will live or die based on the decisions they make.

The same is true for us. The extent to which we decide to give is a matter of life and death for thousands of people around the world and even in our own towns. When we give, people eat. When we give, people have clean water. When we give, schools are built. When we give, communities are developed, oppressive structures brought down, equality and justice moved forward. When we don't give those things don't happen. It is as simple as that. It is not someone else's work to do. It is ours and if we don't do what is ours to do, the ones that we could save will die.

Dear God, I know that in your blessed economy there is enough for all. I know that some of what others need is in my power to give. Help me to know exactly what you would have me do to support those in need and to provide hospitality and haven for your children. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 15: John 3:16

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Why do we do any of this? Why do we wrestle with our priorities? Why do we search the scriptures for guidance? Why do we support the church with our prayers, time and money? Why do we go to the uncomfortable places for the sake of the Gospel? It's simple. We do it because God loves us enough to give us everything, even Christ, so that we can have eternal life.

The Greek word translated at 'eternal life' is zoe. It refers not just to life after death. Rather, it is the word for a bubbling up life force that cannot be contained and is not vulnerable. Zoe is life in its fullest, without end, without the limits of sin and death. For John, zoe begins in this life. We enter into eternal life when we enter into relationship with Jesus. Yes, we will die. And yes we will be raised. In other words, for John, believers in Jesus are living eternally right now. We have already entered into the realm of God or heaven. Death is nothing more than a change of address. It has no more power than that.

How might it change our day if we considered that we are living in the heavenly place right now? Not in completeness of course, sin still exists as does pain and death. They have simply become less relevant because in every way that matters we are put back together whole. How might it change your daily commute to consider that you are living a redeemed life in a whole new realm of being? How might it change your family dinner if you considered it a part of the great heavenly banquet? How might it reignite your passion for outreach if you truly believed that your life right now was heavenly and that others could share it with you in the here and now? How might it change your day if you were aware that you had been loved back to life by a God who would, and did, do everything for you? Who might you invite to church this week if you really felt that, if they came, their life would forever be changed for the better?

We give because we have been given to. We love because we have been loved first. We invite others to join us, not because we need them in order to survive, but

because we want them to have zoe too.

Dear God, Help me today to open my eyes to the heaven in which I live. Don't let me dwell on the hellishness of life, but rather, lift my thoughts to the beauty of your life-giving love. Help me to identify friends and acquaintances that could find zoe in you through our church. Give me the courage to invite them and to shepherd them to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 16: 2 Cor. 8:1-2

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Paul has had a rocky relationship with the church in Corinth. One of the ways that the church rebelled was with their giving. Paul wants each of the churches he started to take a collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. He wants this for a couple of reasons. First, of course, is simply humanitarian. His heart breaks for the believers suffering in Jerusalem and wants his churches to do something. Second, he seems to hope that if the Gentile churches rally around the Jewish Christians, that the deep prejudice that some in the Jerusalem church have against the Gentiles will be soothed. Even at this early stage, Paul recognizes how hard unity will be in the church, and how crucial it is for the church's long-term survival. Paul urges the Corinthians to put aside some money on the first day of each week for this effort. But their relationships with Paul and each other was strained so they voted with their purses and refused to take the offering. Using money as a weapon of control is not unheard of for us today, either.

By the time of today's verse, Paul and the Corinthians have reconciled and he is broaching the subject of the offering again. He approaches the subject with such uncharacteristic tact that some scholars believe the text has been altered. Whether Paul recognizes the restraint needed to communicate his message, or whether someone helped him do that, the truth remains the same. For a church to be healthy it must look after the needs of others in a regular, systematic and significant way.

In today's verses, Paul's genius shines. In order to get people who were resistant to this type of giving to embrace it wholeheartedly, he gives them a role model. The church in Macedonia was experiencing extreme hardship, persecution and poverty. Yet they, mired as they were in their own needs, happily made sacrifices in order to give to the needs of others. Paul is not holding them up as being somehow spiritually superior. His point is that it is not about what you have or do not have. Giving is about the grace of God. It is that grace that enables the giver to give. It is grace that creates generosity in the hearts of people no matter their circumstances. When one recognizes God's grace and favor in one's life, it is like uncapping a well. Generosity gushes up to the heavens. All generosity is rooted in gratitude. Make a list today of all the things for which you are deeply grateful and the ways that you have been blessed. As you do this practice you will be building a generous character.

Dear God, I want to belong to you wholly. Your grace and goodness to me are without

measure. Help me today to count my blessings, to live in gratitude and to build a generous character. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 17: Proverbs 11:25

²⁵A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.

Who could not use a wise investment these days? The wisdom writers knew that there is no wiser or safer investment than giving. Embedded throughout the scriptures is the spiritual principle of reciprocity, or as some call it, the law of attraction. This spiritual principle is simple. You get what you give. If you give love, you receive love. If you give generously, you receive abundantly. This is not simply a 'get rich' scheme. It is a 'get right' scheme.

When we give generously at least two things happen and happen very quickly. First, our priorities and wants begin to change. Suddenly, and without explanation, things that we thought we had to have, or could not possibly be happy without, lose their attraction. We would simply rather use our resources in a different way. When that happens, and we decide that we would rather give the money we had set aside for the latest tech gadget to the church and its mission, we find that we receive blessings far greater than what we imagined. Nine times out of ten, we wind up with the thing we thought we wanted, too. Or else we lose all desire for it and never even think of it anymore.

Second, when we give generously it opens up areas of our lives and hearts for blessing that we never had room for before. Jacques Ellul, a French theologian of the mid 20th century, wrote extensively about the spiritual dynamics of money. He believed that the idolatry of money (that is raising it to the status of God in our hearts and serving it as a god) was the central sickness of our time. He used the image of a clutched fist to make his point. When we are clinging to what we have, our hands are never open to receive what God wants to give us. What God wants to give to us is so much more wonderful than we can imagine. When we let go of our need to control the life out of life, and then give God back what is already God's to begin with, we are ready to receive all that God has for us.

Dear God, thank you for all of your generosity toward me and toward our church. Open me up to be more generous with all that you have given me. Ease the clutch of fear that creeps into my days. Bring into my life, and through my life, abundance and bounty. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 18: Luke 12:24

²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

One of my favorite TV commercials is of the little white dog that is worried to death for her bone. She takes it to the bank. She buries it and digs it up. She cannot rest for fear that something will happen to this her most treasured possession. Sometimes we

are just like that as well. We have something we want to hold on to, whether material or spiritual, and we worry ourselves silly trying to figure out how to keep it safe. Maybe it is a 401k, or maybe it is a teenager daughter, or maybe it is a steady paycheck. We know how to worry.

Sometimes our worries are well founded, or so it seems. Our economy is still sputtering a bit. Everyday someone we know, or know of, loses a job or a home or a marriage. We look at our children sleeping so sweetly in their beds and wonder what kind of world we are preparing for them. We wonder how much control we really have to protect them. We look at the financial challenges of our personal budgets and the financial challenges of our church and we worry that we are not up to them; that it will all fall apart and we will lose everything. Worry is not insignificant, nor is it always unfounded from a 'practical' point of view.

Still, nothing that we are going through now was unimaginable in Jesus' day, and yet he makes one of his most beautiful speeches about the fruitlessness of worry. It is a waste of energy and produces no positive results. Falling into a state of worry just attracts more worries. It is as if each worry is sticky and draws more worries to itself.

So why do we do it? Partly, we worry because we secretly believe that things must turn out in a certain way or we cannot be happy. If there is no room in us for another solution, then the only alternative is to work and worry about the thing that we think we must have. Partly, we worry because in our heart of hearts we think that maybe God is limited, that there are things that God cannot do and so we must leap into the fray and do it all ourselves. Partly, we worry because we think our resources are limited. To some extent that is true. We are finite and we can't print money in the basement. But in many ways that is not true. We are a part of the Body of Christ. We live in Christ. The Holy Spirit indwells us. What that means is that we have the power to do everything that God wants done. That may not include everything *we* want done just the way *we* want it done.

What are your biggest worries? Take a moment to share each one with God in prayer. After you have simply stated your concern, imagine handing the situation to God and follow with the affirmation: God you are able.

Dear God, quiet my heart and mind today. Remind me again and again that you created me for a life of love, joy, peace and generosity. Remove persistent worries and replace them with creative trust. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 19: Luke 12:15

¹⁵*And 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."*

Jesus is on the road sharing his message of the kingdom when a young man interrupts him to ask that he mediate an inheritance dispute between the man and his brother. In the inheritance laws of Israel, if a family had two sons, the elder son received 2/3 of the estate and the younger one received the remainder. The man who asks for Jesus' help here is probably a younger brother. The implication is that the older brother has not divided the estate with him, or at least not fairly in his view. Jesus refuses to get

drawn into the dispute, but it gives him an opportunity to pursue a teaching theme that he comes to again and again: the terrible dangers of greed and the problem of having many possessions.

The word that we translate as ‘greed’ in today’s text can also be translated as covetousness. This concept has a long history in Biblical faith. The 10 Commandments, that beautiful letter outlining what life in community is to look like, ends with the warning against coveting. In the version of the commandments in Exodus, the Hebrew word used is *chemdah*. It refers to wanting to possess something that is pleasing to the eye, physically beautiful and present before you. Think David and Bathsheba. The warning is against wanting, and then taking, everything that looks appealing. In Deuteronomy the Hebrew word is *ta’avah*. This word is more subtle and interior. It refers to an intense yearning for something, whether it is present or not, beautiful or not. It can be the yearning for something, or simply for something else. It is the kind of yearning that sets up in the heart and builds over time. It quietly erodes the soul and takes up room there that is meant for something else. *Ta’avah* is chronic and progressive and, when unchecked, can become the motivating factor for all decision making and ethics. When *ta’avah* takes hold, what you want becomes your whole life, and nearly any method to acquire what you want can seem justified.

From Sinai to Jesus’ traveling mission and all points in between, the Bible teaches us the dangers of out of hand desiring. The touching thing to me about the Hebrew concept of *ta’avah* is that it doesn’t just refer to things. It is not just that we want a new car. It is that we are never satisfied with what we have or even with who we are. When *ta’avah* takes hold nothing is enough. Something else would always be better. When this happens we become unable to recognize blessings or, if we do, to enjoy them from a place of thankfulness for more than a few moments. *Ta’avah* wrecks lives, communities and cultures because its sole focus is what is lacking.

Covetousness is a creeping insidious thing. Perhaps it was that sole focus on what was lacking in his life that prevented the young man who was following Jesus from truly understanding who Jesus was and what he was proclaiming. Perhaps it was the recognition of his condition that led Jesus to realize that to mediate the dispute with his brother would only cause the man further spiritual harm. Until the man could realize that life was not all about what he had and didn’t have, there would be no room in him for who Jesus really was. Take inventory today of your own desires. Are they in bounds? Do you find hints of *ta’avah* in your life? If so, ask God to point them out to you, and to help you reorder your mind toward blessing, simplicity and plenty, and away from yearning, comparing and lacking.

Dear God, Oh how easy it is to fall into covetousness! Transform my heart today so that I may see your blessings and live in joy and contentment. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Day 20: Hebrews 13:15-16

¹⁵*Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.* ¹⁶*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

“What is in a name?” In Shakespeare’s tragic love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, their names, and the family feuds they carry, set the course of their lives and ultimately of their deaths. Names matter, and they carry with them layer upon layer of meaning. The Bible recognizes the power of names and naming. A name carried the essence of a person or thing. It reflected the deepest realities of one’s life and had the capacity to shape that life. When Adam, on God’s behalf, named the creatures of earth, each received its distinctive character, and not just a group of syllables with which to be called to dinner.

When the Bible speaks of Jesus’ name, it is shorthand for all the deeds, attributes and nature of Jesus himself. To speak in someone’s name is to act as that person. It is that person speaking, just as when an ambassador speaks, it is his or her country speaking. To speak in Jesus’ name is to speak as Jesus. It is to so mold ourselves by all that we can comprehend of all that he has revealed to us, that when we open our mouths what comes out is consistent with what he himself would say. The writer of Hebrews urges us to be sure that what comes out of us in Jesus’ name is first and foremost praise.

For the Hebrew people, praise was the essential quality of life. Death was seen as the enemy not only because it somehow ended this life, but also because it was thought to stop praise. One of the tests to discern whether or not something was evil was to determine whether or not it made praise difficult. Praise is what life is all about. It happens, of course, when we worship together. It is also what we do when we wake in the morning, when we face challenges during the day, when we are confronted with the unexpected, or when we are presented with opportunities to take a stand. In the Bible praise has many characteristics. Acts of mercy, love, kindness, service, peacemaking, evangelism...all of these are understood as ‘sacrifices of praise.’ We do them as worship. Doing them is worship.

Choosing the good for another, sharing lovingly of what we have is at the heart of a true life of praise. How might you praise God with your actions today?

Dear God, There are no words fine enough to express my gratitude and praise to you. Let every action I take today show you my devotion in ways that words never can. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Day 21: Hebrews 10:24

²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Even in the apostolic age, some in the churches to which this traveling message was addressed were getting bored. They still believed in the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ in which they found hope and salvation. They still believed that they had personal access to God, directly, in a way never possible in the sacrificial system of the Law. They believed it in their heads, accepted it in their hearts, but didn’t always find the time to live it in their daily lives. Sound familiar?

They were particularly becoming bored with worship. The once sizzling newness of the Gospel was not as exciting anymore. Some of the instant changes they had expected in their lives and world were not materializing on their time schedules. They had stopped looking to the sky every day for Jesus’ return, and had resumed a more ‘back to normal’ kind of life. Attendance in worship was falling off. People were not giving of

their time and resources in the same measure that they once had done. The leaders of the church were concerned about this. They were concerned not only for the health and wellbeing of the church, but also for the health and well being of the individuals. They saw the threat to the faith that complacency can pose and spoke out to counter it.

In the section from which we get today's verse, the author is calling a drifting people back. The issue is worship. The author tells the flock to draw near. That is the language of Tabernacle worship and reminds the people that they can approach God directly in their worship. He then tells them to hold fast to hope. This is the encouragement to continue giving voice to the hope that is at the heart of the Gospel's message. Finally he tells them to "provoke" one another to love and good works.

The word 'provoke' can also be translated 'stir up' or 'excite' or 'stimulate.' Once when my husband and I arrived for study leave at a cabin in the Rocky Mountains, we rejoiced that the cabin had a beautiful fire pit among the lodge pole pines. The nights were beautiful night, clear and cool. It was perfect weather for a fire. And yet we didn't build one. In part this was because the rains came. In part it was because building and keeping a fire going can be hard work. A fire has to be watched, the embers stirred, more wood added. In a sense that is what the author of Hebrews is saying to us about our faith. If we want to keep it going, we can't just drift along and hope for the best. We must stir up our lives of worship and service. And we must encourage others to be re-ignited as well. What will it take for the flames of your faith to be stirred up in service today?

Dear God, Stir me up today so that I can live a life of passionate service and unshakeable hope. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 22: Acts 20:35

³⁵*In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*"

Today's verse comes at the conclusion of Paul's farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus. He is intent on getting to Jerusalem, but he still has things to tell his people in the small churches where he has served. The situation in Ephesus is too dangerous for him to meet with the elders there so they join him in Miletus.

This last sermon is written in the form of a Last Will and Testament. In it he commends the church to the grace of God. He uses his life as an example of how people should work so that they will be able to support the weaker ones and the struggling churches. He closes his sermon by quoting a beatitude of Jesus'. This particular saying does not occur in the Bible as we have it today, but was probably an authentic saying preserved by word of mouth. *Blessed* when used in sayings such as this one, and in the more familiar beatitudes in Matthew and Luke's gospels, simply means to be in a happy state, a joyous and righteous state of gratitude and contentment. Another way of putting this would be, "You will be happier and more fulfilled when you give than when you receive."

What do you want your legacy to be? When you write your Will and Testament, what do you want it to say about who you are and what really matters to you? How can

the fruit of your life's labor be used to support the weak even after you are gone? Have you remembered the church in your financial as well as your spiritual estate planning? You will be happier and more fulfilled if you do.

Dear God, I want the fruit of my labor to make a difference in the lives of people beyond my own family. Help me today to see what I can do to give rather than focus on what I want to receive. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 23: Exodus 32:1-4

1) When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" 2) Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3) So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4) He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast the image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

I could have used a golden calf this last week, a god that I could hold in my hand, shake in the face of my problems and then put back on the shelf, out of the way and quiet until needed again. I could have used a god that would do my bidding, fight my battles and never do anything unexpected or uninvited. I could have used a shiny little god to wave over my startling checkbook or over my unruly body. In short, I know what it feels like to look for a god of my own making and liking. I know what it feels like to look for a god that sparkles. Maybe you do as well.

The problems with choosing to make up a god that seems to be more to our liking than the wild, mysterious, powerful and undomesticated God of Biblical faith, are too numerous to begin to number. They all boil down to one thing, though. When we try to shape God to our liking we wind up with nothing but what we can imagine, and no power other than what our own feeble wisdom and will can accomplish. When the people of Israel became fearful and impatient as Moses tarried on Mt. Sinai, they decided to take matters into their own hands. God was not doing what they thought God should do. They feared that Moses was dead. So they took the golden rings from their ears and made a god for themselves that was absolutely guaranteed not to get wild and unruly. In short, they decided they liked being god for themselves better.

Now before we shake our heads in sad and sanctimonious disbelief at the short sighted narcissism of our ancestors, perhaps we need to take a quick look in the mirror to see if, indeed, their DNA is not still obvious in our own faces. Is it really so unheard of to want god to do our bidding? Is it really so rare to pick and choose among God's qualities and put together a god to our liking? Is it really so foreign to us to make our gold our god? In these last years, have we become so frightened by the economy, or the pandemic, or divisions, that we have thought all security was gone, that all was lost and we only had ourselves and our energy upon which to rely?

The truth is that we have seen where a god of gold will lead us and it is not into the Promised Land. What our ancestors discovered is that when our god becomes nothing

but a thinly veiled egocentricity, then we have no God at all. But, if we have the courage to stand fast in the times of waiting and testing; if we have the humility to bow before a God who is the only real power in the universe, and who can never be corralled or coerced; if we have the wisdom to see that gold is not God, then we will truly find the God who sparkles.

Dear God, Help me neither to trust in riches nor long for them. Turn my heart toward you and your ways. Teach me to give rather than hoard, and to trust rather than rashly take things into my own hands. With like grace, help me to know what you would have me do and give me the wisdom and courage to do it. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 24: Luke 6:38

³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

The principle of reciprocity appears here again in Jesus' great sermon on the plain. You may be more familiar with Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. They are virtually the same sermon. The location for each author was theological rather than documentary. For Matthew, the mount was where holy things were revealed. For Luke, the plain was where Jesus came to be with the people in their ordinary world.

The context here is important. Jesus has just taught about the necessity to forgive one's enemies if one is to live a holy life. In the verse immediately preceding today's verse, he warned the people that reciprocity applies also to the tendency to judge others. If we judge others harshly, we will be judged in the same way as well. Reciprocity extends to every aspect of life. We receive what we give.

Remarkably, in this text we learn that when we give generously, when we forgive, when we don't judge then, not only are we returned the grace we have given, we get much more as well. The image Jesus uses in this verse comes from the grain trade. It has to do with filling a container to overflowing...that is getting much more than one paid for. The word for 'lap' refers to a big fold of cloth attached to a girdle that formed a roomy pocket to hold a large quantity of personal possessions. So when we give generously of our resources, and ourselves, we get in return so much more than we have expended and that includes all our needful personal possessions. It is important to remember that this is not a 'dollar in, dollar back' promise. It is much more substantial than that. What we receive lavishly in return may not be money, or it may be. In either case it will be just what we need for the moment.

Reciprocity is tilted in favor of the generous. When have you experienced getting more than you paid for? How have you seen the principle of reciprocity at work in your life? What unexpected things have fallen into your lap?

Dear God, thank you for the reminder to forgive, to refrain from harsh judgmentalism, and to remember that whatever I give will be returned to me in exactly the right way. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 25: John 13:34-35

³⁴*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* ³⁵*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

The scene is Jesus' last meal with his disciples. The time of his crucifixion is drawing near. He knows it, but his friends do not, or at least they do not know it consciously. But they could not be unaware of the tension in that room, of the depth of human, and Godly, emotion that surrounded them. Judas is there, already putting into form in his mind the actions that will put an end to this whole fiasco. Peter is there, ego intact, filled, as always with himself and ideas of what the things that his great teacher has taught him will do for him. The one that was most beloved of Jesus, the unnamed disciple that was as close to Jesus as Jesus was to the father, was there with him, right next to him, literally as the text says, reclining on his bosom. They are all there, the Twelve and probably some of the women, after all somebody had to fix the food.

Into this mix of desire, despair, hopefulness and disappointment, fear and courage, Jesus shares his most important teaching in word and in action. It is this night that Jesus gives his ultimate commandment, the new covenant that will ensure the heritage of his followers for all time. It is the commandment to love as he loves. He demonstrates that commandment by taking on the tasks of a slave and washing the feet of his friends. He will do anything for them, and they have seen nothing yet.

A few years ago I led a church family retreat at a camp in the redwoods of California. After the retreat ended, we all gathered for lunch before making the trek back home. A young man with incredible intellectual energy invited me to sit with him at a table with several young children. He immediately began to talk about what he was thinking about. While he was talking he must have noticed one of the children struggling to get to the pitcher of fruit punch. Without missing a beat, the young man filled the child's cup, said, “Always looking for feet to wash,” and continued with his energetic musings on the weekend. “Always looking for feet to wash.” That is the living out of the new commandment to love one another.

Dear God, show me today the 'feet' you have for me to wash. Turn my whole life into love and let it show. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Day 26: Luke 9:33

33) Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

A few years ago, the congregation I served celebrated the life of “Miss Marguerite.” She died on a Saturday at the age of 101. Think of all the changes she saw in her life! She lived under 19 of our 46 presidents. Her mother, born in Arkansas during reconstruction after the Civil War, was a relative of Robert E. Lee, and her daughter, Marguerite, got to see our first African American president inaugurated. She taught

Sunday School until the age of 92 when the distributor cap 'mysteriously' disappeared from her car and was unable to be replaced. She had a hand in building and painting all the buildings on our church campus, including our new sanctuary, which she painted from her wheelchair just after her 100th birthday. One of the last times that I was with her that she was lucid, we talked about all manner of things. It was hard because her hearing was nearly gone. It was a bit like we were each in conversation with ourselves, but I remember her saying with conviction and a measure of joy, "Eugenia, this too shall pass."

Sometimes that is the best of news, isn't it? On those days when our hearts are breaking, our spirits flagging, our bodies rebelling, and our checking accounts dwindling, it can be good news indeed to know that it won't always be like this. On other occasions, though, we long for nothing more than to hang on to the precious and powerful moments of our lives, those moments when colors are brighter, smells sweeter and love more palpable. It is in those moments that I most identify with Peter in today's story of the transfiguration. I have had many moments when I wanted to cry out, "Let's just build a tent and move in right here."

Still, that is not the way of this life. We are never static, even if we feel as if we are stuck in the mud. We are a part of a mighty stream of divine Love that always moves us toward that which is finer than we can ever imagine, even if that movement includes confusion, loss or sorrow. The thing that is so dear to me about this story is that Jesus gives Peter exactly what he asks for, only in a way he did not imagine. All Peter really wanted was to stay in the presence of divine love and majesty. All he really wanted was to stay close to God, closer than he had ever been. Even though he did not get to encamp in that mountaintop experience, he got something finer. He got to follow Jesus, to go with him to the cross and beyond. He got not only to dwell with God, but for God to dwell with him. He just didn't get it on his own terms.

It is just the same for us. We may not get to freeze time, but what we do get is eternity. We can't control out the hardships and changes of life, but we can embrace them with a generosity of spirit and open handedness that allows us to remember that 'this too shall pass,' and one day we will look back on these times as the good old days.

Prayer: Dear God, help me today not to cling to the past, but rather, to embrace all the ways that you long to take me with you into the future. Give me generosity of heart and peace of mind. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 27: Joshua 4:6-7

6b) When your children ask in time to come, 'What do these stones mean to you?' 7) then you shall tell them that the waters of Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

When I was a little girl, I suffered from severe allergies and asthma, so severe that on more than one occasion my attacks were life threatening. I spent a lot of my young life in doctors' offices, hospitals and just home in bed. It was about the time that I was in the

3rd grade that my parents and doctors decided that somehow they needed to get a handle on my food allergies. I was allergic to wheat, which, of course, meant no bread, cake, cookies or any of the good stuff. I could, however, have cornmeal. So, my 8th year on this earth consisted primarily of hoecakes...fat clumps of cornmeal stuck together with something and fried in an old iron skillet. I hated them. I still hate them. The worst part of hoecakes was birthday parties. I ate hoecakes with local honey on them while all of my friends ate chocolate cake with melting divinity frosting. I was convinced that chocolate cake was what angels ate, and I believed even more deeply that there were surely no hoecakes in heaven. I simply could not see in the bland tastelessness of a hoe cake my parents' love, my doctors' commitment, and God's providence all coming together to try to keep me alive. I needed to be reminded of that fact later. I needed a pile of stones in the shape of my own life stories to look back upon, ponder, and share in order to put those experiences in their ultimately grace-filled perspective.

When Joshua led the wilderness weary Hebrew people across the Jordan and into the land for which they had waited so long, he knew that the people would need to reframe their experience and to remember what God had done for them as they went about the hard and bloody work of settling into the land. They were to remember the big events, the move through the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan. But they were also to remember the little things. They were to remember where their feet rested, the very footsteps of their lives, ordered by God for life and blessing. Joshua calls them, as they enter into this new stage in their journey, to never let the miracles of life in God become dim in their memories. He calls them to constantly live as if those miraculous moments of providence and grace are still happening in the present tense, for indeed they are. What God has done for us continues in us, shaping us, transforming us, deepening us into the life of promise itself.

I think that Joshua knew that it was not just the great miracles that would sustain the people. Rather it is our memories, our capacity to recognize and rehearse the God moments inherent in daily life that gives us both strength and identity.

What are those memories that can sustain your life today? How has God moved in your life to set you free? How has God touched your heart to heal it? How has God met your need and transformed it? How has God cradled you in grief? Supported you in struggle? Laughed with you in triumph? Awed you with Presence? Take a moment to name those memories and moments. Don't forget those moments that have to do with your congregation's life and journey as well as your personal ones. Pile them up next to your 'encampment' so that as you go to bed at night and as you rise in the morning the first thing your eye will rest upon is God's remarkable faithfulness to you! You will make it! You have all that you need. That is a given.

Dear God, Sometimes I look at my life and my congregation's life and all I can see are the challenges. Help me today to see everything that happens through the lens of your bounty and provision. Remind me that I have all that I need and show me how to share it. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Day 28: James 2:1-5

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious

Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

I hate trying on bathing suits at the department store. I hate those wretched little rooms with those harsh lights and relentless mirrors and the bathing suits that come with a glossy picture of a super model too skinny to live. There is absolutely no place to hide when trying on a bathing suit at the store. There are not enough pleats and ruffles in the world to hide the truth. It's all right out there, the accumulated effect of a thousand choices, obvious in every dimple, bulge and sag. There is just no getting around the facts.

That is the kind of text we have before us in James 2, a harsh light, double mirror front and back, unrelenting little text from which we cannot hide, that shines the light of God's truth right to the heart and turns up a fundamental flaw: We prefer those who have, who are like us, think like us, look like us, act like us and smell like us. And we think, bottom line, that they are better and more important than those who don't have, don't look like us, don't act like us and offend our sensibilities with their poverty, their disease, their skin color, their politics, their insanity and their rage.

What James is addressing is the horror of prejudice among those who claim to stand for and represent Christ. His point is simple. If we choose to behave in a prejudiced way, favoring the rich and exploiting the poor, then no matter what other good we do or espouse we stand as criminals before God, condemned as having missed the point completely and liable for judgment. He leaves us no loophole. Drat!

So what do we do with a text like this in a world like this with hearts like ours? What do we do if we find that we routinely judge and dismiss people we see on the street, or who move into our neighborhoods, or marry into our families, or join our bridge club? What do we do, not just with natural likes and dislikes, but also with judgmental favoritism?

For much of my ministry I thought that, given the right information, such as a clear text in scripture, people would change their behavior and do the right thing. I am not so convinced of that anymore. New information is not what changes hearts. It is new experiences infused with the transforming love of the Holy Spirit. The way to start to change is, of course to desire to change. When we come to recognize how conditional our loving is, and long to be more conformed to the image of Christ, then we realize that we are called to treat every other person the way we would treat Jesus. We don't wait until our feelings change to change behavior. We simply choose to look through the lens of Christ at those from whom we recoil. This is not just theater. It is the retraining of the human heart to love. When we start this process, even with the tiniest of steps...a smile, a handshake, a moment to listen... then we unleash in the world a power that can change everything, even us.

Dear God, I can hardly stand to see myself in the harsh light of this text. Help me today to see the world as you see it, to see those who cross my path as you see them, to make

decisions about what is most important according to your commands. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 29: Read Luke 24:13-35

30) When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31) Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32) They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Very early in my ministry, I was invited to go to speak at a women's gathering in another state. I knew no one there but was very excited about the opportunity. I had worked hard on my presentation and was flying high even after the plane landed. I got off the plane and looked high and low but nobody seemed to be looking for me. No one even met my eye. So I decided to go to baggage claim, certain that I would be met there. After I got my heavy-as-lead suitcase from the carousel, I noticed an anxious looking woman. Confidently, I strode over to her, stuck out my hand and said, "Hi, I'm Eugenia Gamble." Without hesitation, not even a moment, she looked me in the eye and said, "No you're not!" "Well, I was when I got on the plane," I countered. She was horrified. "Oh my God," she said. "You were supposed to be a middle aged black woman." There I stood, a 30-year-old, freckle faced redhead. She could not recognize me as the person that she was hoping to see. She was dismayed!

Sometimes we miss Jesus, too, when we think that we know exactly how, when and where Jesus will appear...and through whom he will choose to work. Our expectations can blind us to Jesus' presence with us, and we can miss many of the simple gifts of those moments. Maybe we think that Jesus should come to us and fix all of our problems. Maybe we think he should make the Prize Patrol drive up to the church and take care of our debt just like that. Maybe we think that Jesus should come to miraculously heal our physical bodies, or our difficult relationships, or the lives of our children or grandchildren. Maybe we think that Jesus should show up on cue with warm feelings and goose bumps so that we can be absolutely certain of his presence and approval. Maybe we think that Jesus should show up to stop hardship or tragedy in our lives and world. If that is not what happens, or at least not in the way we want, then we think that Jesus must really be dead and gone, or at least gone elsewhere. When we are focused on our own heartache or need and have decided exactly how God should respond, then we too can find ourselves trudging along a dusty road, heads bowed and hearts broken, like those disciples. We, too, can decide we should just go home and leave behind our hopes for Messiah.

What is dear to me in this Emmaus Road story is that Jesus did not wait for the disciples to change their expectations. He did not wait for them to finish their grieving. He did not wait for them to make some kind of sense out of the events of their lives and of his death. He did not wait for them to deal with their fears about the women's reports of seeing him risen. Rather, he came and walked along with them, simply accompanied them, and waited for the mist to clear from their eyes so that he could fill them with awe and hope again.

It is not insignificant, either, that they recognized him in ‘the breaking of the bread’ and that he immediately took them to the scriptures, that gift that would remain with them always, even after his ascension. He still meets us where we are in life, in the majesty of the sacrament and in the comfort and challenge of the Scripture. We can experience that grace tangibly when we are able to lay aside our own faulty expectations.

Prayer: Dear God, How often my expectations blind me to the reality that you are with me! I long for you to leap in and deal with my woes and those of my church, and I focus so much on how I want you to do that, that I miss the grace of your presence with me in the struggle. Open my eyes, Lord. I want to see you! In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Day 30: Mark 8:31-36

31) Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32) He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33) But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” 34) He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35) For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36) For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Several years ago I attended a conference for pastors and church leaders involved with helping congregations make a turn around after a period of decline. The main speaker was a nationally known theologian and church sociologist. He spoke about the results of a massive long-term study of people who did not participate in church or who had dropped out of church. The information was wonderful. I was feeling powerful, able, and ready to face anything that the church could throw my way. Until. Until he reported the one thing people who rejected church stated hands down. They did not want to be a part of a church that talked about suffering, sacrifice or giving. I couldn’t believe my ears. I don’t know why, now that I think about it, but I was stunned. He went on, “The one text you must never preach upon,” he said. “Never preach on picking up your cross and following.” I will never forget how I felt at that moment. My heart sank into my toes. “What,” I thought, “do we have to say, if we cannot say that?”

Of course, Jesus’ call to sacrifice and discipleship was no more palatable to his disciples than it is, apparently, to the American public. Soon after Peter tells Jesus that he thinks that Jesus might be the one for whom they had all waited so long, Jesus begins to teach him and the crowds that it would not be the way they had long thought. They were waiting for a powerful military hero who would restore their country to sovereignty and their worship to righteousness. They wanted a hero who won wars and routed the opposition. They wanted a Messiah who would do for them what they wanted done, who would insure that they had the benefits that they had coming to them. But Jesus, right out of the shoot, starts redefining the notion of Messiahship itself. At its heart, he tells them, it is about suffering, sacrifice and giving. Peter tries to manage him, pull him aside and

shut him up before he blows his chance. In one of the most poignant and harsh moments in the scriptures, Jesus turns his back on his friend and says, "Get behind me, Satan!"

How easy it is to want God on our own terms! How easy it is to be so sure that we know exactly what is right and how God must behave in any situation. How easy it is to serve our own expectations and in so doing become a stumbling block for the gospel truth. Jesus knew that for us to have the life for which he would die, we would have to let go of our expectations of how our lives must be and even our own certainties about how God must act.

In this little encounter, Jesus reminds us of something so purely true that it leaves us nearly breathless. *Some things to hold on to will kill you. Some things to let go will bring you life.* Sorting that out can be painful indeed. When we think that life in Christ is only to be about ease and bliss we trivialize our faith and our Christ. When we think that life in Christ is only to be about what we get and never what we relinquish or what we give, we, like Peter, will find ourselves on the wrong side of the gospel. It costs something to follow Jesus. Make no mistake about it. And when we are willing to pay whatever it costs, then and only then, do we find the life for which we have longed all our lives.

Prayer: Gracious God, sometimes a new thing is more frightening than exciting to me, even when I long for change. Prick my ears and heart today, O God. Ready me to receive and do your will. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 31: Matthew 4:1-11

1) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2) He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3) The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4) But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5) Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6) saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7) Jesus said to him, Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8) Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, 9) and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10) Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" 11) Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Seventeen years ago, I married a professional fly fisher. Lest you think he is on the road (or river as the case may be) all the time winning competitions with the sheer poundage of Rainbows or Yellow Tails reeled in, he is not. Rather, until the recession of 2008 forced him to close his business, he owned and operated a small Fly Shop where he sold everything a fly fisher could ever want, and where he gave freely of his knowledge of the sport and his experience as a patented fly-tier.

While not a fisher myself (except, perhaps of persons in the Good News sense), I have been fascinated during the years of our relationship, by the intricate and beautiful flies Robbie ties...nymphs, shrimp, midges, crane flies. He says that in creating these flies his job is to float (or sink) something that “looks like a cheeseburger to a fish.” The problem, from the standpoint of the fish, of course, is that the lovely lure that looks like it is so delicious and nutritious hides a deadly and unexpected hook.

Not to push the metaphor too far, but the devil’s temptations of Jesus after his 40-day fast in the wilderness must have looked like a Quarter Pounder with cheese to our Savior. We are told that he was famished. Surely he was exhausted both mentally and physically. Granted, he may not have known exactly what was coming next, but he surely knew enough to know that the road ahead was going to be treacherous at best, and probably not too long.

So there he is, trying to come to terms with the whole thing, and in swoops Satan, ready to offer him an easier way. Isn’t that the way it always works?

What exactly were the temptations that Jesus faced? The first was the simplest—food enough to regain his strength and to feed the poor as well. It was the temptation to get his needs met (or those of others) through a shortcut contrary to God’s values and ways. The second temptation was to put God to the test and conjure up some mighty act. The temptation here is to attempt to force God’s hand into an untimely display of glory that would force faith and not invite it. The third temptation was to easy power. Here Jesus is offered the power to rule the world, a rule that is, indeed, his desire and right. The problem was that the Evil One offered him this power by means of the world’s own broken power structures.

Wow! Easy provision, God on a string and power to boot! Not only did the Tempter offer outcomes that Jesus longed for (full bellies for the people, a recognition of God’s glorious power and the world organized according to God’s values,) the Tempter even used Scripture proof texts to try to show that the easy way was the right way.

Jesus didn’t fall for it, but don’t you and I fall for similar tactics all the time? Maybe it is not the kingdoms of the world bowing to your every whim that gets you snapping after every sparkling feathered hook, but I’ll bet there is something. Maybe it is the desire for security and financial ease that has left you ready to snap up any ‘good’ investment whether the company’s values and policies were moral or not. Maybe it is the desire for a promotion that had you undercutting your colleagues, fudging the figures or looking the other way when those higher up did so. Maybe it is the lure of the love and attention of a spouse, child or family member that causes you to stand stock still and mute in presence of death dealing behaviors. Maybe it is the desire to forget, or to just stop hurting, that has you taking one drink too many too often, or trusting the wrong people, or refusing to face your own blind spots. Whatever the particulars, temptation to get what we want with inappropriate means comes to all of us. Let’s face it; most of us succumb to it from time to time.

The precious significance of Jesus’ temptation is not to once again show us how far short of the mark we fall. Most of us need no help with that. The beauty is that it shows us the possible, what we in Christ can be, do, withstand. It shows us what integrity looks like and invites us, too, to choose that way. When we do that, even in the smallest of daily decisions, we will find a deeper intimacy with Christ. We will find, eventually

that some lures lose their allure, and that the angels (God's messengers) do indeed come to minister to us.

Dear God, Help me today not to long for the easy solution but instead to stay focused on you and your ways. Mold me always according to your will. I thank you that in these 31 days you have prepared my heart and fueled my desire to give and to serve. Today I offer my whole self to you. Thank you! In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 32: Genesis 22:1-2

1) After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2) He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

A number of years ago when I began as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham Alabama I found that, while the congregation was checking me out to decide if I could be entrusted with their lives, I had some time on my hands some afternoons. When those quiet times opened, I often went into the beautiful gothic sanctuary to pray. Sometimes I walked up and down the pews trying to place who sat where and get names with faces. As I passed the spots I prayed for the people. I also prayed, with much energy, for all of the ones I believed would soon come to join us.

One particular afternoon I was praying in this way when I felt in my spirit God say to me, "Genie, Give me that." It was a startling moment and sensation. I sat in one of the pews and replied, "Give you what, Lord?" And I felt God say, "All of that, all of your hopes for the church, your vocational aspirations, your ego's need to be messiah, the future of your church." I was struck speechless. I felt like my heart was being ripped from my chest. I could hardly breathe. I opened my mouth to say, "Yes, Lord." But all that came out was a surprisingly forceful "NO!"

At that moment a memory of my father, who has since died, came to mind. While I was growing up, on through college, seminary, first calls, whenever I left home for a trip or to return to my own home after a visit, my father stood out on the front porch and waved until my car was out of sight. At the time of this memory my father was beginning what became a long and brutal physical decline. When I saw that picture in my mind's eye, I felt God say again, "Give me that." And everything in me roared another "No!"

After a moment of truly stony silence, I felt God ask, "Genie, do you trust me? Do you believe that I am good? Do you trust me with your church? Do you trust me with your life? Do you trust me with you father's life and death? Can you put your loves in my hands?" I began to weep because I knew that in some deep ways, I could not. I had become my own controlling little god and until, with God's help, I could come to trust, there would be no tranquility in my soul.

When God asks Abraham to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah for sacrifice, the text makes it clear that the child will never be harmed. What God wants to know from Abraham, and from us, is whether or not we will trust God with those things and people that we love most. God constantly reminds us that our loves do not belong to us. They belong to

God and are to be entrusted to God at all times. When we realize that those we love are not our possessions, but rather gifts from God loaned to us to make life beautiful, we can begin to make some kind of peace with our losses and our fears.

The same is true for our church. God is asking you if you can trust God with our church's future no matter what shape that future takes. Coming to trust is serious business. As you prepare in these weeks to make your decision about how God will use you in the life and future of the church, pause each day and hear God say to you: "Do you trust me? Do you believe that I am good? Give me that, your loves and your burdens, I can care for them and you."

Prayer: Dear God, help me today to put my loves and my beloved church in your hands. Show me my part and I will do it. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 33: Genesis 25:29-32

29) Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30) Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom) 31) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32) Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

The story of that scoundrel Jacob and his impatient brother Esau is chock full of self-discovery. Of course, the primary function of the story is to set up the tension between the two brothers that shapes the narrative throughout their generation and through their descendents for many more. What fascinates me, however, is how like these two men we really are. The text tells us that Esau "despised" his birthright. The word does not imply a momentary lapse, but rather an on-going scorn for what he had. His birthright was more than his place in the family, his inheritance status and his security. His birthright was also his bond with the Promise itself and thus with God. Esau for some reason chose to show contempt for all of that.

Why? Was he just stupid? Did his brother simply outwit him? Was he just a bad seed to begin with? It is not as simple as that and a whole lot more familiar. Esau scorned his bond with God because something else mattered more to him at the moment. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it at the expense of his relationship with God, his integrity and his future.

Esau couldn't wait. He didn't know how to delay gratification. Oops! Have any of you ever been there? You saw the new dress or the new gadget and the credit card just burned a hole in your pocket? You wanted one more martini even though you had to get up at the crack of dawn the next morning? Maybe the desire, and its consequence, was even more serious than that. The inability to delay gratification, to keep one's integrity even in the presence of momentary discomfort, is something that many of us have wrestled with over the years.

Years ago when I was raising money for a new women's shelter I woke up in the middle of the night in a blind panic. I needed another \$500,000 and as far as I was concerned I needed it that very moment. I prayed to God, "Dear God I need half a million dollars right away. Who else can I..." God interrupted me, "No you don't." "What," I replied. "You mean the project is going to come in under budget?" "Of course

not,” God said. “The problem is you. You are taking it into your own hands to meet your needs. I will never allow that. The last hurdle is mine. I am the one who completes. Until you stop trying to do it yourself and let me do my work, maybe through you, maybe through somebody else, you are going to stay stuck right where you are. Either I am God to you or you are. It’s your choice. But if I were you, I’d bet on me. Go back to sleep. You look a little peaked.” It was a pretty amazing moment. How like Esau I had become. I wanted what I wanted immediately and it all seemed so very urgent.

Here is what I have learned. We can only tolerate the discomfort of our current needs when we do not doubt the outcome. That trust in God’s provision and completion is what God longs for for us. Until we embrace it, we will remain stuck, trying to grasp for ourselves, what God alone can provide.

Prayer: Dear God, help me today to wait when it is called for and to act only when it is right. Please prevent my immediate desires from making me do things today I can’t live with tomorrow. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Day 34: Matthew 5:1-12

1) When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2) Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5) Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. 6) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7) Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9) Blessed 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. 11) Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

It often startles me how easy it is for many of us to hear and accept words of cursing that tell us what is wrong with us, what we have done wrong, and that we are unworthy, lacking and defective. I am amazed that harsh words tend to sink into our consciousness’ and shape our self worth while words of blessing that come directly from the heart of Christ, are so hard to grasp. We make a mistake and it defines us. We receive a compliment and don’t believe it. We read that our churches are in trouble and we accept that we are helpless failures and resign ourselves to our fate. Unbelievers say that they would rather be anything than Christian and we think that our problems are all that we are. We know what it feels like to be judged, to see no solutions to problems, to wonder if God has left us behind. In other words, we know how to live far from blessing.

The seekers of Jesus day wrestled with believing what others said of them as well. Many of the followers of Christ were people who were outside the mainstream of society. Many were poor and knew literally what it was to go to bed with a gnawing stomach. All knew what it was to go to bed and to wake up with a gnawing soul. They knew what it was like to thirst in a barren land. They knew what it was like to want to be better people

and to feel judged not only by the community but also by God for their state in life.

Perhaps they knew, like we sometimes know, what it was like to search for answers from God in the midst of terrible trial and to wonder if they were being punished for something unknown. They knew what it was like to mourn, like we do. They knew what it was like to have no power. They knew what it was like to be outcast. They knew what it was like to have people talk about them behind their backs, know the lies that were being said, but having no real power to address those lies or to stop their destructive powers. What they didn't know, and I would submit what we often choose to ignore, is that even then Christ spoke blessing to them.

What is blessing really? It is the reality of wholeness and status that comes to us from the simple power of God. The words of blessing that Jesus speaks are words that actually spread the sweetness of a new way of living. When Jesus speaks these blessings, they are like the word of God in creation. They create a new kingdom. They part the watery chaos of human pain and plant our feet on the solid ground of a whole new world. The beatitudes tell us that the power to name us, to define us, does not lie in the pain of our circumstances. It lies only in the love of God. We are not our difficulties. We are the blessed of Christ. Because that is true, we can be happy and content in each moment and circumstance because the power in our lives does not lie in the difficulty. The power lies in Christ who names us blessed.

Prayer: Dear God, help me today to count my blessings and to find within a spacious and generous place from which to live my life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Day 35: Genesis 18:10-12

10) Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12) So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

I love the story of 90-year-old Sarah and 100-year-old Abraham going about their business as they always had in the heat of the day when three strangers show up at their tent and remind them that life could be better and that God would be true to God's word. I love the picture of Abraham running around doing the fine host thing, while Sarah stays inside, cakes rising on the hearth, standing at the tent flap with her apron stuffed in her mouth to silence her chortles at the very thought that laughter could really be born in her in her old age.

The Hebrew makes it clear that this is not a polite giggle, but side splitting laughter in the presence of the absurd, a laughter so raucous and wild that it even became the name of the miracle child, Isaac which means laughter. Can't you just see her ROTFL at the thought of the two of them spending his 101st birthday in the maternity ward? The beauty of it is that the name of the child of promise, Laughter, can be viewed as a symbol of the desire of God for all of us. Our lives are to be made full with laughter,

deep joy, hope and a bright future. Laughter is what God promises to bring to birth in you!

How in the world can God manage that when our lives are filled with daily worries and sometimes with uncommon hardships? First of all, God is not bound by our limitations. The potential for 'laughter' does not lie in our circumstances. Abraham and Sarah had no potential left to create a child. Both the potential and the reality are brought to fullness solely by God's power and God's initiative. The wonderful reminder here is that we do not need to wear ourselves out trying to bring about what God has already promised! Furthermore, not even doubt can stop God from bringing the good God wills into our lives! Sarah and Abraham had lost faith in the promise because it was so long delayed. They laughed out loud at the thought that God would keep God's word after all these years. (In chapter 17, in a similar version of the story Abraham laughs so hard he falls on his face with his whiskers in the mud.) Still, "Laughter" was born to them, in God's time alone.

All things are possible with God, but not all things are promised. Just because God can do anything does not mean that God will do anything we want. What God will do is accomplish God's own will in our lives and our church. God will give what God promises to give. God does not owe us an explanation about what is willed for each of us. We may not even know all or any of what that will is. What we do know for certain from old Abraham and Sarah is that hopelessness, futility, bitterness and despair will never have the last word for us. God is even now planning laughter for us, next year in the maternity ward!

Dear God, Thank you so much for this journey we have been on together these last 5 weeks. Help me to remember that you can do anything, even with the likes of me. I put my life and our church in your hands and I await with expectation the new life you will bring. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.