

Welcome to a Year in the New Testament

By Rev. J. David Israel

I'm so glad you've taken up the challenge to read through the New Testament in a year. This is a journey of faith that will take you places you never expected to go. In the end you will be glad you went. Reading through the Gospels will ground you in the knowledge of all that Christ said and did. The book of The Acts of the Apostles will help you learn what those first believers did as they sought to imitate their Savior. The many letters that follow will give you insight into the struggles and triumphs of the first faith communities. The instructions these letters give to the early churches will inspire your heart as you seek to be as faithful. The concluding book, The Revelation of John, remains the most mysterious book printed and engages the mind with the promises of the future God is creating. Welcome to this journey.

It is my pleasure to provide you with some reflections along the way. I've written these, chapter by chapter, in prayerful hope that they will offer you deeper understanding and insight. More than anything I hope they will spark in you a desire to learn more. This is designed to be read Monday through Friday, taking the weekend off (or to catch up.) I've offered three Psalms to be read each weekend for those who want something more. If you persevere through these as well you will have read the full book of Psalms before year end.

As a side note, I've been reading through the New International Version of the Bible as I've been writing this. I think any version is helpful in its own ways, but I determined to read from just one as I've written. This should allow you a reference point if you get tripped up by some of the words that are used.

I recommend that you purchase your own study Bible or use the online Bibles provided for free at www.bible.com or www.biblegateway.org. Both sites provide many different translation choices and also reference materials to help if you like. To receive these devotions daily by email, visit www.lwinfo.org.

A Guide to Daily Reflection
By Rev. Karen Nothdurft
What? So what? Now what?

“What? So What? And Now What?” is a simple guide to help you reflect upon the scripture each day. “What?” defines the information in the chapter. “So what?” helps us discover the meaning of a passage. “Now what?” challenges us to consider what we will do in order to apply God’s word in our lives.

Read the daily scripture asking “What?” What is happening in this chapter? What people are in the story? What information is found in this scripture passage? What troubles arise?

Then look back over the reading asking “So what?” So what does this mean? So what is the point of this passage? So what questions does this scripture raise?

Review the chapter once more asking “Now what?” Now what am I to do? Now that I have encountered this truth, what action will I take? Now, what will I change in my life in order to live according to the Spirit of Christ?

Keep a notebook of your findings, reflections and questions. You may wish to jot down a prayer, a song or a word that you want to lift up to God.

MAY 6

THE MYSTERY OF OUR FAITH

Acts 1

As you begin the book of The Acts of the Apostles (known simply as Acts) you will find reference to a first book. The writing style will also be somewhat familiar. You read another book by the same author recently, the Gospel according to Luke. Now Luke focuses upon the activities of the Apostles of Christ, the twelve, less the betrayer. Because numerology was important to them in that day, they felt like the first order of business for this new group (they won't form churches for some years yet) was to choose a twelfth to keep the number proper.

You can tell that their ranks had grown significantly. One hundred twenty were devoted to prayer and keeping alive the teachings they had been taught, even from the very beginning. You also learn that the twelve were not the only ones who were with Jesus from the beginning. At least two others, Justus and Matthias, were present from the beginning and throughout the time of Christ's earthly ministry. You also learn that they found that an appropriate way to decide between two equals, the practice of casting lots. It would be akin to a coin flip today. Heads, it's Justus; tails, it's Matthias. It's tails; Matthias you're in.

Also, remember those two men in white robes who were at the tomb when the Marys went on Easter morning? They're back again with a question. "What are you standing around here for? If you're looking for Christ, you're not going to find him here." It echoes what was said in Luke 24 and tells us to stop staring at an empty tomb, stop looking for Christ to come from the skies. Though they don't come out and say it, the implication is that we have far better things to do than focus on Christ's death or His second coming.

"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," is part of our communion liturgy. The phrase is technically known as the "mystery of our faith." For me the implication is this: we know that Christ died on the cross for our sins and we know that He was risen for our entry into a life of eternity. This means we can trust in Christ to come again. In the meantime, we move forward with His Good News by the power of His mercy.

MAY 7

ELEVATOR SPEECH

Acts 2

The power of the Holy Spirit comes over the whole crowd. Only one, though, steps forward initially to speak. It's Peter, the one who didn't look so good at the end of John, the one Jesus gently chided to "feed my sheep." It was Peter who had the boldness to speak of what he had witnessed and what he believed about what he witnessed. His short speech was all they needed and many were "cut to the heart" by his words. They asked the first question that comes to those who are staring faith in the face, "What shall we do?" Peter offers them "next steps."

In the business of sales there is a term that refers to the first few minutes of your pitch. It's your "elevator speech." Assume you're in an elevator and you have only that amount of travel time to make your pitch. What words would you string together ahead of time to share the value and importance of what you are selling? Peter's speech was brief, an elevator ride at most. Yet it was enough to move people's hearts.

What's your elevator speech? Most of us don't have one. Quite honestly, like talking to a complete stranger in an elevator, we face this with the utmost of uncomfortable fear. Let's say it's not a stranger. Let's assume it's someone you've known all your life. What would you say about your faith in Jesus Christ?

Here are a few tips in putting your speech together: First, consider your own witness. What have you seen or felt about Christ in your life? Second, consider the person you're about to share your faith with. What words will connect with their heart? How will your experience of Christ connect with their life? Then there's one final step and it is the first step in the story, wait for the Holy Spirit to enter in. This isn't done on your timing. The Spirit will let you know in your heart when the time is right. It's not that you will feel a rush of wind and tongues of fire. However, you may feel a rush of adrenaline and a rise in body temperature the first time you step boldly into sharing faith. And when you do, the words of Christ at the end of Matthew 28 have always been a comfort to me, "Remember I am with you always..."

MAY 8

GET UP AND WALK

Acts 3

It was a way of life for many who were unable to make another way. The lame and infirm were brought to one of the many gates that entered onto the Temple grounds. There they would sit all day and beg while their friends and family took care of their daily business. The total income from each day would be added to their own household income (if they were fortunate enough to live in a house) to make up for the lack of money to feed the afflicted one.

Peter and John happen along and met this unnamed man at the Beautiful Gate, which was named for the ornate carving around the stone gate entrance. The line from Peter has become part of the Christian lexicon due to a song “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” To no surprise to the reader, but a complete shock to the man, he is able to walk for the first time in who knows how long.

As together they all walk through the Temple grounds there is singing and dancing and praising of God. This man’s salvation from his affliction brings his voice alive in praise, no longer begging but instead offering. This, too, is appropriate because his affliction would have made him unfit to come before the Lord’s altar to make an offering. Now he shouts his offering to all who would hear.

Here’s a thought; now what? The party eventually ends that day and we haven’t heard from the man since. He heads home that night, not a penny in his hand, but he walks into the house for the first time in a long time. Surely there would be singing and praising God in the home as well. But his vocation has brought in nothing for the dinner table. He will have to change his ways effective tomorrow and do it on an empty stomach. At some point in the night would he say to himself, “I would be less hungry if I had earned money from begging”?

Christ comes into our lives offering healing and wholeness. When He does, changes are expected. There’s no going back to the sick and broken life of before. Longing for the way of sin, which was your infirmity, does you no good. It’s moving forward to the new vocation as one healed by the power of Christ that moves you forward. Life will be different, it must be different, it’s what you have wanted, now get up and walk into the new life you’re offered.

MAY 9

CAUGHT DOING RIGHT

Acts 4

There's a bumper sticker that I used to see that poked fun at we Christians. It said, "Jesus is coming, look busy." Often the critique of our faith is that we believe more than we act. However, it also suggests that we know that action IS the proper response to the Good News and not just a belief statement.

In this recent story, Peter and John are caught, not by Jesus, but by the ruling leaders of the Jewish people. As a side note, bear in mind that as of yet there is no such thing as "church" in the way we understand it. Peter and John were Jews who believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament.) So Peter and John were not seeking to pull people away from Judaism. They were wanting to help people see that Judaism has met its champion, the Savior Jesus. So when I say they were caught, they weren't hiding what they were doing. They were out in the open healing and proclaiming Christ as the Savior of the Jews.

I wonder if we are ever caught out in the open doing what is right? In broad daylight, do we offer food to a hungry stranger? In the middle of a crowded restaurant, do we say grace over our meal? On the way up in the elevator do we tell the person next to us about our great experience in worship, youth group, Sunday school, or a ministry in which we serve? This week, come up with a way to get caught doing what is right.

MAY 10

WHAT ARE YOU OFFERING?

Acts 5

How much do you give? That's a touchy question, isn't it? Our reaction to the question is also a curious one. I get a magazine from the university I attended and the donor's giving levels are listed all the time. I go to charity events or charity headquarters and the giving levels of their patrons are always listed.

On the church side, we always trumpet our large offerings for special causes. However, any hint that someone's giving level is quickly hushed. I'm not 100% sure why. I have some guesses and one centers on Matthew 6:3 and passages like it, "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing". Jesus was clear that giving to the Lord is not a matter of prideful arrogance. Yet there are other passages where Jesus speaks clearly about giving as an act of worship. He even points out how much a woman gave, to the cent, in Luke 21:1-4. Then we read passages like today and we are taken aback. Not only was everyone expected to give 100% to the service of the Lord, but look what happens when they don't! How do we interpret that in our lives today? Let me offer an interpretation that won't let you off the hook but will lessen the blow a bit. In the earliest part of the formation of the movement of Jesus Christ, it was necessary for all people to present 100% to keep the momentum and make possible the ministry. Over time that expectation relaxed to the tithe. The tithe means 10% off the top of your income. It's the first ten, sometimes called the first fruits. It's the beginning of your giving.

The understanding remains and that is that 100% belongs to God. It never was yours and as a follower of Christ it is a part of your faith confession. It's all God's. You get to decide what to do with 90% of it but the first 10% comes off the top. Is this a tough teaching for you today? Well don't fret; since the days of Ananias and Sapphira nobody that I know of has dropped dead at offering time. But be clear, this is an issue of the heart and your heart is not completely surrendered to Christ until your budget is brought under His leadership as well.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 55-57

MAY 13

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES... AND ALL THE OTHERS

Acts 6

Though we commonly abbreviate the title of this book to a single word, “Acts”, the title of it is “The Acts of the Apostles.” It is an account of the activities of the first eleven chosen by Jesus plus the one addition by a role of the dice, Mattias (see chapter 1). At least that’s the first eight chapters. In Chapter 7 we will be introduced to another apostle, Saul, who is called Paul. Chapter 9 will pick up his exploits and the other twelve will fade away from mention.

This chapter, though, is as much about all the other followers as it is about the twelve. There seems to have developed an issue among the followers. You might imagine that whenever money is involved there will be differences on how it is to be properly spent. It seems that people have divided up into factions. There were the Greek (Hellenistic) Jews and the Hebrew Jews on opposite sides about what is the proper proportioning of food to widows (and by implication, their families.) The details of the argument are not shared but it was bad enough that the twelve felt that it was a distraction.

As the twelve verbalize their concern, there is an unfortunate phrase that makes them sound condescending. “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.” “Waiting on tables” can also be translated as “keeping accounts.” Why almost every translation chooses to use “tables” rather than “accounts” I don’t know, but it is true that the Apostles were clear about what their task of ministry was and what it wasn’t. Someone has been given the task to preach the Word and now someone else has to step into the role of leadership in this other important task of the fledgling church.

I see three important details here that I think are worth noting. First, what I’ve already mentioned. There is a division of responsibility. The preachers don’t do the accounting, run the food pantry, and all the other tasks. Everyone will eventually have a role to play in the church. Saul/Paul will teach on that in the books that follow Acts. Each of us has a task assigned to us and we are called upon to serve.

Second, the leader of this group has an important qualification. Stephen is “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” Leaders must be chosen among the most faithful, Spirit-filled people in the church. A business

MAY 13

leader may be a good leader outside of the church, but their connection to Christ is a more important attribute for church leadership.

Finally, the leadership of ministries other than the preachers, are discerned and lifted up by the people as a whole. The twelve assigned the task to be done but it is the people who chose Stephen to lead and the other six to serve. Imagine a church where the members take a young Stephen aside, point out his leadership gifts, and offer him a role in using them. Imagine a church where the membership points to six other people to say, "You have the gifts necessary to assist Stephen in making this ministry successful." If you've made a commitment to a local church, like Living Word, it is your role to serve and to lift up the leadership gifts of those around you.

MAY 14

ST. STEPHEN PROTO-MARTYR

Acts 7

St. Stephen Proto-martyr. That's the name given by the Roman Catholic Church for the man who is the subject of this chapter. The Proto-martyr (first disciple to die for proclaiming Christ) probably didn't enter into this meeting with any grand ideas of what the outcome would be. After all, he had just been given a job of caring for the distribution of food for all of the followers. I'm sure he had a daily agenda that didn't include sitting down with Sanhedrin to argue the details of faith. Yet here he is, and boldly so. Stephen was a man of faith and filled with the Spirit of God. As he begins his defense of his faith he shares the historical faith of the people to whom he's speaking. He begins with Abraham, then Jacob, then Joseph and the patriarchs. This is the same list that they would begin with. Then he moves to Moses, the most venerated personality in their faith history. By all accounts Stephen has done a masterful job of professing the same faith as the Sanhedrin and those who had dragged him into this council. He then takes it another step by speaking of the prophets and the way they had been treated for generations. That stings, but they would all agree that it is an unfortunate part of their people's history.

It's the last part that gets Stephen crosswise with his accusers. He proclaims that all of this leads up to, and is predicted by the prophets, the coming of the Righteous One whom they put to death. That was the last straw. They drag him out and stone him to death. Even in his extreme suffering from the bludgeoning he is sustaining, he asks Christ to forgive them for their act.

Do you know your faith story that well? Could you proclaim it boldly before an opposing crowd? Could you suffer their anger and pray for their forgiveness? I hope I could, but I would need more of the Holy Spirit than I dare say I possess; at least for that forgiveness part. More prayer and devotion is needed on my part. What about yours?

MAY 15

A PURPOSEFUL SCATTERING

Acts 8

Such an ominous beginning to a chapter. This zealous young man, Saul, becomes the leader of the first organized persecution of the people of The Way (the early term for followers of Christ.) Yet this chapter might just as easily be called the Acts of Philip, as he is the primary character. Let's note a couple of important things going on here:

1) Though Philip is at the center of the stories here, The Holy Spirit is the prime mover. All that happens from verse 4 on is the activity of the presence of God, His Spirit, moving in and through the lives of the believers. Are you open to the prompting of the Spirit?

2) When the people are scattered the report is that they preached Christ wherever they were scattered. The persecution didn't hold them back. Instead, it is in the scattering that the Word of Christ goes beyond Jerusalem and spreads first to Samaria. Remember what it said in Acts 1:8? "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It's not that the Holy Spirit of God caused the persecution that led to the scattering. Yet, Christ had full knowledge of human nature and could foresee a scattering taking place. God always uses the worst moments for the best possible outcomes when we allow His Spirit to work through us.

3) In case you weren't sure, Simon found out for you. You can't buy the Holy Spirit, only submit to His perfect will for your life.

4) Evangelism is a one-on-one conversation where two people gather around the Word of God and seek to discern the Good News within. To whom are you listening? With whom are you speaking?

The next reading will reintroduce Saul, who will be renamed Paul, and from there most of the story centers on Him. It is safe to say, though, that there are hundreds more stories like that of Philip. Though he didn't change the world, he changed the part of it with which he had contact. Isn't that the very task to which we are all called? Isn't that the task toward which The Holy Spirit moves us?

MAY 16

THE REFORMED

Acts 9

I remember years ago when my father quit smoking. It was New Year's Eve 1975/76. He quit cold turkey. He was smoking in excess of 4 packs per day, a chain smoker, and he just up and quit. Within days Dad became a "reformed smoker." You know the type, if anyone lights up they are all over that person about what a heinous habit it is. Only five years later he had his first heart bypass surgery of three total. He also had other procedures like stents and an ablation. Each time, he had lung trouble following the procedure. Twenty years of smoking had done its damage to heart and lungs. There was no fixing that. However, he never went back to smoking and was always critical of my sisters when they did. He didn't want them to suffer the same fate.

When I read the account of Saul, I read him as a reformed persecutor. In his young life he was zealous for the wrong reasons. He did damage to his relationships with the Jewish people in and around Jerusalem and for many it was irreparable. So he couldn't return there as a preacher, but instead was sent to faraway places to preach the Good News as one who had been reformed. His witness to them is strong.

I knew a girl in my youth group who was a mean and nasty little thing. I can't be kinder in my description. One week we went on a mission trip and she met women who had been beaten by even meaner husbands. She was reformed nearly immediately and became a strong voice for Christ in our youth group for the remainder of her senior year and a leader of the faith in college.

What about you? What reform happened in your life because of Christ? Are you a reformed liar, glass half full, cheater, or... what? Your voice will speak loud to the people around you. Most of us don't get the blessing of hearing the actual voice of Christ telling us to change our ways, but each of us has a before and after story. What is your story? It could speak loudly to the people around you if you'll allow the Holy Spirit to use you to save the lives of others.

(Side note: In verse 2 we have the term "The Way," referring to followers of Christ. In verse 31 we finally have the word "church." Though the word "church" is used in prior chapters, this is where the shift takes place. The term "The Way" fades from use. The disciples are moving from a loose band of believers to an organized force. They are reforming their ways to become an organized voice for Christ.)

MAY 17

LEAVE ROOM FOR GOD TO TALK BACK

Acts 10

Prayer is powerful, and yet misunderstood. I can't, in one devotion, open up for you the fullness of prayer. This passage gives us some deep insight into prayer that is worth exploring. Peter and Cornelius are both in a time of prayer when God speaks to them. Peter possesses something God wants him to give away. Cornelius needs what Peter possesses. In the case of Peter, his own prejudice is in the way. Peter assumes that the message he possesses is available only to the Jews. In spite of many of the things Jesus said, Peter holds that message only for those who are ethnic Jews.

In Peter's time of prayer, God shows him all kinds of animals that had been forbidden in scripture for consumption. They are considered to be "unclean." Peter is hardheaded and refuses the command by God to kill and eat. Three times God says to Peter to kill and eat. The number three is all it takes to get through to Peter that this isn't a dream but an actual vision of God. Remember, Peter denied Jesus three times and Jesus told Peter three times to "feed my sheep." Peter finally gets it, at least where food is concerned.

Cornelius is a Centurion, a Roman military leader, who has found the God of Israel and has become a faithful follower. In his time of prayer there is no convincing necessary. He's a soldier, he follows orders. The order is to send men to bring Peter back to hear what he has to say. He does so immediately and when Peter hears the men call out he realizes that God didn't only mean that food was no longer unclean but that even the Gentiles were considered clean as well.

The prayer lesson here is that these two men heard from God. Often when we pray we bring to God our laundry list. Do this, heal them, attend to the concerns of these people, thanks for everything, Amen. Yet Peter and Cornelius both made room for God to talk back. I'll admit that it is difficult for me to sit quietly for any length of time. God comes to us in our quiet time, especially if we take time to go to God with our regular and faithful prayer.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 58-60

MAY 20

CELEBRATE

Acts 11

As I'm writing this Major League Baseball spring training has begun. During spring training teams play each other, but winning is not the goal. The teams have three basic tasks: to get their pitchers tuned up, to get their regular players back in the playing mindset, and to figure out which other players will get to make the team, get cut, or sent down to the minors. Even though I know that the wins and losses don't count, I still count them. I celebrated each win. I'm a big fan of the team.

Celebrating wins is fun. Win a game. CELEBRATE. Get a raise. CELEBRATE. Win the lottery. CELEBRATE. A group of people we don't like at all comes to Christ...um...celebrate? It's exactly what happened in this passage. Peter has shared Christ with the Gentiles. The Hebrew word for them is Goyim. Literally, it means "people of other nations." However, in practice it meant "scum of the earth." By their scriptures (the Old or Hebrew Testament) they were unclean and unfit for Temple worship or even having dinner with. Intermarriage didn't make an unclean person clean. Quite the opposite, the clean Jew became unclean. So when Peter has a meal with them and they enter into the family of faith through accepting Christ as their Savior, the more traditional Jews who have converted to Christianity are not quite in the mood for celebration. When they hear Peter out, they go silent for a moment. Quiet reflection allows them the time to see that God is doing a new thing in their presence. After a moment they break out into celebratory praise of God for His grace and mercy.

Over the 20 years of my ministry I've baptized babies and adults, I've presided over the reception of new members in the church and welcomed more than a dozen confirmation classes, all to the polite applause of the congregation. What would happen if we took seriously what God was doing in the lives of these people and had a standing ovation? Not standing for them, but a thunderous applause for the mighty act of God that has turned their hearts toward their eternal home. Now that's something worth celebrating.

MAY 21

GOD CHEATS

Acts 12

Sometimes I think God cheats. We humans have to live by a certain set of rules. Gravity, momentum and other laws of nature must be obeyed or we bear the weight of that punishment. Eighty years, give or take, is all we get and then we all experience the sting of death. You cut me, I bleed; you slap me, I sting. There are just some rules we have to follow. When it comes to the rules God has established for us, apparently God doesn't feel bound by the same set of rules.

See, when it comes to God getting His way, He's willing to cheat. Put a giant up against a small boy, small boy wins. (1 Samuel 17) Get swallowed by a giant fish because you didn't go where God wanted you to go, you don't drown, you get spit out on the beach in the direction where God wanted you to go. (Book of Jonah) Wrestle with God and He knows just the right spot on your hip to throw it out of place so you cannot prevail. (Genesis 32) Nail His Son to a cross and bury Him in the grave... resurrection. God cheats.

Now the primary messenger who has the responsibility of leading the fledgling church to spread the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is imprisoned and facing certain death. Sleeping between two soldiers, bound by chains, sentries keeping watch just outside, and four squads of soldiers nearby guarding against a jail break. No big deal for God. Send an angel and allow Peter to walk right out uncontested. God cheats.

You might remember back in Acts 5 when the famous teacher of the law of the Jews, Gamaliel, spoke these prophetic words. ... "Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." When it comes to the message of what God has done in Jesus Christ, God will go to great lengths to assure His will is done. Why not, turn your life over to Christ (again) today? God is seeking after you and will cheat to get you to receive His grace.

MAY 22

SALVATION HISTORY

Acts 13

Paul's speech is one of Salvation History. The term means the moments when The Lord has entered into human history to change the course of humanity in order to point them back toward His Glory and His Grace. In a Jewish place of worship (synagogue) Paul, Barnabas and John thought that their salvation history was not complete through the Old Testament. There was more to be done. In Jesus Christ, God acted once again, providing salvation. Not of the same type. This was not deliverance from a physical slavery or oppressive governance. This salvation was a new movement in human history that tells us that in spite of our physical existence our souls are loved and cherished by the Creator of the universe. It's a new moment in history in which God has acted in a profoundly different and decisive way.

What's your own salvation history? How has God acted in time to point you toward His Glory and His Grace? If you came to faith at this church your salvation history has something to do with the people you see on Sunday. So in your history is all of their stories as well. Your Sunday School teachers, the usher who handed you a bulletin, the custodian who cleaned up during the week, the member of the band or choir who hit the right note, they all have something to do with your salvation history. Trace the history of this church and you go back to its founding in the mid 1900s when faithful people saw a need for a Methodist presence in the Ellisville area. Go back before then to the founding of Methodism in America and its first Bishops Coke and Asbury, further back to John Wesley, his mother, Susannah, and father, Samuel, and his father, Samuel. Your salvation history has deep roots, and though the details of that history have gotten lost, they can be traced all the way back to people like Paul, Barnabas and John who dared to be led by the Holy Spirit to speak Christ into the lives of others.

In 100 years you will be but a memory. You have the opportunity today, though, to enter into this stream of salvation history and be mentioned in the line of those who brought someone, or many, to Christ due to your words and your deeds. Pray today that the Holy Spirit will lead you to enter into salvation history and give you the boldness to follow.

MAY 23

ADVANCE

Acts 14

Leonard Sweet is one of the eminent Methodist theologians of today. He is retired from the seminary where he taught and was president, he now holds retreats for pastors and theologian wannabe's. However, he never calls these events "retreats." He prefers the word "advance" because, he says, that Christians don't retreat; they constantly move forward. They advance upon evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever form it presents itself.

I would agree with him but I'm not sure Paul and Barnabas are terribly good examples for those who want to advance. In this chapter I read verse 6 "...But they found out about it and fled..." and verse 20 "The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe." It seems that they often "got while the gettin' was good." I suppose getting stoned (in the "throwing rocks" sort of way) would cause me to decide there might be a better town to approach with the Gospel.

Now you would think that once you had been mistreated you would stay away. There were plenty of towns where Christ had not been preached. Go find those and preach there. You would also think that when Paul and Barnabas left, the fire in the souls of those who had accepted Christ would burn out. Neither appears to be the case. Verse 21 tells us that they later returned to the very cities that had persecuted them, their mission; to see to the faith of those who had believed from the beginning.

I guess they advance after all. They do so in a wise way. Present the Gospel in a fiery and intriguing way. Stir up the fire in the hearts of the first converts. When the heat gets too hot, leave for a term but return to teach and encourage those who have come to believe.

For me that means to be bold in my faith in the public arena. If things get heated, it does no good to prolong the fight. Allow things to cool down for a while. When people have come to faith because of what you've said or done, stick with them. Encourage them. As we'll find out from Paul in later books, allow their newfound faith to encourage and build up yours.

MAY 24

WHAT ARE YOUR RULES?

Acts 15

I met a man who had to have a circumcision for medical reasons. Even with modern procedures, anesthesia, and medications, his recovery time was not brief. I can only imagine the look on the faces of the gentile men who had recently come to Christ when they were told that the next logical step for them was circumcision. You did catch where that idea came from, right? Verse 5, “But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised...”

Let’s clear something up. To be a Pharisee was not in itself a bad thing. It meant that you were seeking to be an upright follower of all of God’s commands. You knew the biblical commandments and intended to follow them to the letter of the law. In the eyes of the followers of God’s Old Testament commands, these were the truly respectable good guys. Something went wrong along the way. Somehow they came to believe it was in following the law that they were righteous. It never occurred to them that God’s commands were intended to help them understand God’s love and commitment to them. In following the law they had ignored the very people God loved and made the focus of their love the legalism that made them special. It was a misguided exercise of faith. Legalism is still an issue for all of us today. What are the “rules” of faith that you use to judge others? The way they dress for Sunday worship? The place they worship? The fact that they attend infrequently? They let their kids play ball on Sunday? What rules have you established that draw away from the grace and love of Jesus Christ?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 61-63

MAY 27

WHERE THE SPIRIT LEADS

Acts 16

If you ever find yourself as an actor in the middle of a spooky movie and the guy next to you says, “I got a bad feeling about this,” drop what you’re doing and run! If you are in that movie and you hear a noise behind a door, don’t you have that gut feeling you shouldn’t open it? You’ve probably watched enough scary movies that you know what’s coming when it comes. It still jolts you when it happens. “Don’t look under the bed!” we shout at the screen because we just know for sure that the evil that lurks in the house makes its bed under yours. Whether it is a movie as old as “Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein” or as current as the “Saw” or “It” series, we generally have that gut feeling when things are about to happen. Something tells us that things are not quite right.

What about in real life? Have you ever gotten that feeling that tells you, “Don’t go there!” or, “Don’t do that?” I suspect this is what was happening when Paul thought that going to Asia to preach (verse 6) or entering Bithynia (verse 7) was a good idea. We’re told that the Spirit prevented them. It doesn’t say that the Spirit threw up a giant wall of fire or sent a brigade of soldiers to keep them out. It was something else. Something much less tangible that was testifying to their souls that this was not the proper time or that they were not the right people to preach.

But how did they know? It’s like those scary movies. Watch enough of them and you can predict what’s going to happen when. If you’ve watched “Halloween” and the 10 sequels, you pretty much know what’s going to happen before it does. You’re in touch with the author’s writing style. Even though it still makes you jump, you know when Michael Myers is going to jump out in the hockey mask, wielding the large butcher’s knife. You’re so familiar with the style or genre of movie that you can see it coming.

Paul was familiar with the work of the Spirit of God. He prayed constantly and had devoted himself to preaching the Word. He had suffered for the work of the Lord and, over time, had become in touch with the way the Spirit was moving. So when he set his mind to go to Asia and his soul said, “No,” he knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord testifying to his own spirit that this was not the time or place for his ministry.

It takes time and effort to get in touch with the Spirit. It takes Bible study, prayer, worship, Sunday school, serving and perhaps a little suffering on behalf of Christ to know where the Spirit is leading you. Be patient, but be persistent as well.

MAY 28

EVER CHANGING

Acts 17

Day after day, Paul is opposed by well-meaning people who aren't comfortable with the spread of Christ in the world. However, even those well-meaning people have a limit to how far they'll go. At that point they get angry. You would think they would figure out that they are working against the Spirit of God. Instead, they are in league with the devil seeking to thwart the work God is doing through the faithful.

In Jesus Christ, God did a decidedly new thing. The prophets of old had predicted it. A great many of the Jews were expecting it. Yet when God acts in a new way, the old ways seem so much more palatable. Why change, why rock the boat, why move in new directions? Most especially, why isn't it a military savior conquering Rome? Why is it a poor carpenter talking about the Kingdom of Heaven being within us?

Two things I can take away from this. God rarely moves in the ways we want. God moves in the way that is best for us. God's love is perfect. His grace is always present. We cannot go anywhere that God is not with us. God's grace is the constant. We may not always appreciate the new ways He moves in our lives, but they are always movements that benefit humanity in the end... if we'll let God be God.

The other thing I gather from this is that the devil will always lead us to oppose God's way. We'll be deceived into thinking our way is better, our direction for life is so much more faithful, and what we do is based upon long standing and proven methods, which doesn't leave God with room to move.

It's not only fair, but also important to note that not every new thing/theology/method is of God. Careful and prayerful consideration is always necessary. With the world changing as fast as it is, with culture and the world wide web moving at the speed of bits per second, not every change is a good thing. However, it's fair to say of God, "If the world is changing at the speed of light, God is changing His approach at a pace one step ahead."

MAY 29

TRIPTIK

Acts 18

As a child my family would often take road trips to places to vacation. With seven of us, airfare was not affordable. So we would load up in the station wagon, luggage on the rack on top, my little brother and I facing out the back window and off we would go. In the days before Garmin and Google Maps we had Triptiks. My parents were members of AAA and they would have the agent print off this flip book of maps. Each page outlined the highway, stops along the way, and services available on your journey. Places of interest could be found on some pages and that kept we five children busy for at least a few minutes on the trip.

I was reminded of those Triptiks as I read about Paul's journeys and his many stops along the way. How often did he get lost? Did he ever have a time when he was concerned that he needed to stop for food or other supplies? How did he know where to go and which off ramp would take him to his next destination? And did he have anyone on the trip with him who would eventually cry out, "How much longer?" or, "Are we there yet?"

One person calculated that Paul spent 281 days of actual travel between towns. He traveled approximately 10,280 miles. When you add in the time spent in each town, which was weeks and months and possibly even years, his total ministry was roughly 30 years. We are reading about it as if it was just a busy month on the job. The Book of The Acts of the Apostles leaves a lot of activity out in order to express the places of Paul's influence. Those places were many.

When I have traveled, the motivation has always been to find something I can take away. A photo, an experience, a token, each of these memories have been my take away. I've grown up with a consumer mentality that wants something for my time and money spent. Paul is quite the opposite. His time and money spent are all about leaving something behind. Each town he leaves there are a few believers who continue his work in their town. He offers them Christ. Those who accept are the token and experience of Paul's journey. It's not what he takes away, it's what he leaves that makes these journeys so meaningful.

As you go through the trips and days of your life, how are you offering Christ as a memory of your life's journey?

MAY 30

BURN IT

Acts 19

At the youth church camp I led for 14 years we ended each night with a trip to a campfire area where we had a devotion to close out our day. I know from years of camping myself that there's nothing like a fire to capture the imagination and attention of youth (and adults.) I've always tried to play off that fascination in my devotions. I've had them pick up a stick on the walk over to the campfire that they get to add to the fire. The growing flame is a metaphor for bringing the light of Christ into the world together as opposed to the small amount of light my one lone stick added. One year I gave them a cool little wooden box and I asked them to place in it a prayer of praise and then we burned the box. The prayer of praise going up to God. (That was an unpopular one because many of them wanted the box as a keepsake.) One year we used cedar logs in the fire. The distinct fragrance of that wood burning was a metaphor for the incense that was often used in Old Testament times to take prayer up to the Lord. (Psalm 141:2, May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.)

Without fail, each year I have them pray over a stick or some other item to burn that will represent their sins. I ask them to offer those sins up to God in prayer and allow the burning of the stick to represent God taking away their sins. As the stick disappears into ash, so the guilt of their sin disappears as well.

In verse 19 we're told that many of the sorcerers in the region of Ephesus were bringing their scrolls and burning them. The scrolls were the very valuable tools of their trade. They were books that told of their wisdom and their tricks to perform. No doubt there were chemical formulas for potions and incantations for spells. In coming to faith in Christ they realized that there were things they simply couldn't continue to do. In their case, their sins were their livelihood and burning that up symbolizes a huge commitment to make a change in faith.

Later in this chapter the silversmith, Demetrius, raises a concern that the followers of Jesus Christ are no longer spending their money on silver (and other) idols, and the craftsmen are losing income. It's an interesting dialectic between the two groups. One gives up livelihood for salvation while the other can't find Christ because faith would mean giving up livelihood.

Most of us don't have career changing decisions to make when we come to Christ. However, we all have those parts of our life that need to be burned up in a fire, never to be returned to again. What do you need to set on fire to allow your faith to grow?

MAY 31

CAUTION AGAINST BEING LED ASTRAY

Acts 20

In Paul's farewell to the Ephesians, he warns heavily about those who would come along behind him and lead them astray. He even warns that it may be people from their own ranks that will do so. Paul has been clear to them that what he has preached has been for their salvation. He has done so with a purity of intentions and leaves them with no sense of guilt should they stray from his teachings.

Four hundred years before Paul, Alexander the Great led the expansion of the Hellenistic (Greek) influence and control through the region that is controlled by Paul in his day. One of the markers of the Hellenists was a great hunger for knowledge and understanding. They would invade a territory but they wouldn't seek to destroy their culture and religion. Instead they would learn all they could about their newly conquered people and even adopt or adapt their religion to assist or nuance their own. This can be seen also in the teachings of Jesus. Though much of his influence is from the Jewish scriptures, his philosophy of life and some of the things he says and does echoes the religions of the mystics from the Far East. I believe this is because the best parts of every religion reflect the grace of God. Therefore, it makes sense that the good and helpful parts of faith from those other religions would show up in the teachings of Christ. (I'm saying they got it from God; Jesus is God's Son: Jesus got it from God as well.)

The issue has always been that the local philosophers and religions from other places have influenced the faith; and some to the point of drawing away from Christ. I see it even more today than ever before. We live in a culture of consumerism. We're all raised to buy and consume. Gluttony and greed are no longer the sins they once were because they are so closely aligned with our cultural norm. Therefore, we approach our Lord with the question, "What's in this for me?" We can't help ourselves, we've been raised by advertisers who tell us to "Grab all the Gusto" and to "Be all that You Can Be." We have placed ourselves at the center and moved God into the place of serving our needs and wants.

Paul warns the Ephesians of these dangerous ideas that will lead them away. He warns us today as well. The center of our faith is the life, death and resurrection of the Living Christ. It is not our own pleasure, satisfaction, and soul salvation. Those are selfish motives. Worship the Lord as the center of your life and the other things may become your blessing. If not, Worship the Lord.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 64-66

JUNE 3

THE FAITH JOURNEY

Acts 21

The author of Luke and Acts writes these stories as a series of journeys. Jesus' journey from His baptism until "He set His face to go to Jerusalem" is the first journey. Then comes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Following the resurrection there are various stories of the Apostles until Paul enters in at chapter 7. Paul is an antagonist of Jesus' followers. He goes by the name of Saul in the early part of his story. His journey as the antagonist ends on a journey to Damascus in Acts 9.

At this point Paul is thrown from his horse and Jesus asks the question of him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" That's a vital question because Jesus doesn't ask, "Why are you persecuting my people?" Jesus takes this personally; remember what Jesus says in Matthew, "Whatever you have done to the least of these who are my children, you have done to me." Paul has a conversion of his soul, becomes a champion for Christ and embarks on three missionary journeys. Two of Paul's three journeys end in Jerusalem.

Paul's third journey comes with much anxiety on the part of his followers. They don't want him to face the persecution they fear in Jerusalem. But Paul, like Christ before him, has a steely resolve to face what life has in store for him in the town where prophets die at the hands of the very people they were sent to deliver (Luke 13:34). When Paul arrives in Jerusalem he does face that prophesied opposition and now he embarks on the journey that will lead him to Rome.

There's poetry to the upcoming journey as well. In Old Testament times and up to the time of Christ, Jerusalem was the faith center of God's people. In time and until the 1500's Rome will become the center. Just as Paul is on this journey, the faith center of God's evangelistic work is on a journey.

It wasn't until Martin Luther, John Calvin and others in the 1500's started the protestant revolution that the center of faith moved from a town to the heart and soul of every believer. Your body has become the center of faith (1 Corinthians 6:19) and that center journeys outward from you and into the heart of those with whom you have contact. You have become the journey of faith just as you are on a journey of faith. Make every step on the journey count for Christ.

JUNE 4

AN INSIDER

Acts 22

When Paul is arrested and accused he asks for permission to speak. While there was much in Roman rule that we would find oppressive today, they were not without laws. Giving an accused man the opportunity to make a defense was one of their laws. So Paul addresses the unruly crowd. "I'm one of you," he explains. He offers them his full credentials; he studied under Gamaliel, the great teacher of the day, a zealot for the ways of the God of the Jews, a persecutor of people of the Way of Jesus Christ. Paul is an insider and he lets them know he's no different than they.

No different, except on one point. After aligning himself with them, Paul will share his testimony of how it was that Christ entered his life and changed his heart to become just as zealous for The Way. I would imagine there were some in the crowd, perhaps some who studied with Paul under Gamaliel or who knew him as a zealous Pharisee who were beginning to question their own faith. "If Saul can be converted enough to change his name and his ways, perhaps I should listen to what he has to say about The Way of Jesus Christ."

We don't know of any conversions at that time because mob mentality brought the IQ of all in the crowd down to the level of a pack of dogs. They began growling and howling for Paul's death. If there's anything the Romans hate it's an angry mob so they remove Paul from the midst of the crowd and prepare to "interrogate" him. Their methods were no less animalistic than the mob. "Flog first, ask questions later" was their *modus operandi*. Once again, Paul comes to his own defense saying, "Wait a minute, I'm one of you. I'm a Roman, an insider, and you can't treat me this way."

In the chapters to come we will find Paul as an insider in various Roman courts. Each time Paul will share his faith as he makes his own criminal defense. As you read the following chapters you'll find that he doesn't do a very good job of his defense, but he doesn't fail to share Christ quite clearly.

You're an insider with the same opportunity. In your family, at work, where you hang out; you are an insider. You may not have to make a criminal defense with some of those people, but there are those you've hurt or offended in some way. We all do. You have the opportunity to not only say, "You're right to be upset, I did what you said and I'm sorry." You can also say, "Now let me share with you the story of the Savior who turned me around and taught me to say I'm sorry and to seek a new way for you and me."

JUNE 5

DIVIDE AND CONQUER (OR LOSE)

Acts 23

I went to a hockey game and a church board meeting broke out. This spin on an old joke seems to fit this scripture. Paul has been accused of the crime of heresy (speaking falsely about God.) He is brought before a group of men who are the leaders of the church. As I alluded to in the prior devotion, Paul is an insider. He's not only a Roman, he's a Pharisee from a long line of Pharisees and here he is in a crowd of Pharisees and Sadducees (another sect of Judaism) in the midst of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council).

Have you ever been in a meeting on serious matters when an argument breaks out that really isn't about the point of the meeting? Paul, as an insider, seems to know just which buttons to press. He could have proclaimed Jesus as the messiah. He could have called Christ the Son of God. He could have lifted up any number of Jesus' teachings, miracles, or His reinterpretation of their practice of baptism and the institution of The Lord's Supper as a replacement for their Passover meal. Any one of these, which Paul was guilty of, could have gotten the two sides to agree against Paul. Paul was a crafty veteran of their ranks, though. Agreement wasn't what he was going for.

Paul raises the issue of the resurrection. He knows this is a divisive issue between the two groups. Divide and conquer is his strategy and it works perfectly. They argue the finer points of "resurrection" and seemingly forget the main reason they were there.

Too often we are sidelined by arguments about the finer points of religion. If you want to know about the difference between the Methodists, of which I am one, and any other Christian expression, I can flesh them out for you. I can tell you why we Methodists and the Baptists talk about baptism differently. I can share why our view of Mary, the mother of Jesus, differs from the Catholics. And don't get me started about my Calvinist friends; we'll be here all night. Those are the finer points that divide us. What unites us, though, is a passion for Christ.

Churches and church people are the same as they were in the time of Paul. Too often, we are divided over the finer points. Let's hope we can unite over the more important points. I'll pray for that, will you join me?

JUNE 6

IS THERE EVIDENCE?

Acts 24

“I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy” is the line from a song made popular by many singers. It seems Paul is saying next to the same thing. “I’m guilty of being a follower of The Way of Jesus Christ. I’m guilty of spreading the Word about the resurrection and the new life. I’m guilty of preaching this Way to others. Oh yeah, and I’m guilty of giving to the poor and making an offering at the very church where my accusers preside. Beyond that, I’m not guilty of anything they say, except to say I lost my cool in one of their meetings. Of that, I’m guilty as charged.”

As Christianity grows throughout the Roman Empire, and before it becomes the religion of Rome, many Christians will be put to death for the same crime, the crime of worshipping a God other than one being claimed by those in charge. However, the word will also spread about the way they cared for one another, for the poor and for the misfortunate. They are guilty of living and believing in the Way of Jesus Christ.

From when I was a young man in youth group, I remember a popular phrase. I don’t know if it was a new concept or if it had been around for 1,000 years, but it was new to me then and I’ve heard it a lot since. The phrase was this question, “If you were dragged into court for the crime of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It’s a phrase that comes to mind often in my practice of the faith. There are many times that you could easily say, “Based upon the evidence of today, NO, Dave’s not guilty.” I pray those days are rare. I pray they are rare for you as well. Following Christ is so much more difficult in a world that says, “Follow your own way and don’t impose your way on me.”

My encouragement to you is to be found guilty. Look for ways to give evidence of your trust in Christ’s saving grace. Search out opportunities to prove to others that the Lord of your life is Jesus of Nazareth.

JUNE 7

STANDING UP TO THE TRIAL

Acts 25

With all due respect to political leaders and legal experts, there's a good reason to keep religion, law and politics in separate conversations. The people of Israel had a long history of mixing religion and politics, as well as law. Their law was the Bible and the current acceptable interpretations of it. Their politicians were first judges, who were the wise people in each region, as well as military leaders, making matters even more confusing. When David is anointed King by the religious leader of the day, their religion mixes with their politics as well.

By the time of Paul you have religious rulers from the temple, monarchical political leaders like King Agrippa, and Roman prefects Felix and Festus who had responsibility for exercising Rome's military influence in the territory. Each one, in increasing layers of bureaucracy, claimed the right to decide the fate of Paul. You can see what a mess it was. The temple leaders were pining for the good old days when they were allowed to stone someone to death and, then, get on with their day. The King was pining for the day when he could proclaim "off with his head" and have it done. Then there is the Roman prefect wondering why the people of Israel can't just get along with each other and hate Rome like they do everywhere else. At least then they could understand who the enemy is and who is the friend.

Things never seem to get simpler. When religion, politics and law collide, things get even more complicated. Paul makes it simple for them, though. As a Roman citizen he claims his right to be heard by Caesar. That's about like me saying I want an audience with the president because someone doesn't like my preaching. That's not likely to happen (the part about the president, I mean.) In Paul's day that was apparently a right that the prefect could grant. Festus saw it as a more expedient way to handle this problem and prepares to pack up Paul for the journey.

There's a lot I could make of this. To pick any one direction would take another week's worth of readings. "Law and religion don't mix." "Settle church disputes within the church." "Take your faith to the heads of the government." These are only a few of the thoughts I could expand upon. Let's stay simple, though. Paul stands as an example of one who will not let his life situation govern his faith commitment. How many of us would sit in jail two years waiting for justice? Would most of us just recant, head home, and quietly try to pick up the pieces of our faith? Paul is a hero of the faith in this sense. Imagine your life living up to such trials and if they come you will be more equipped to face them.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 67-69

JUNE 10

WRITE YOUR ELEVATOR SPEECH

Acts 26

When I was in sales I learned that there are several different ways to pitch your product. The circumstance decided the method. You needed to have, and be able to explain, all the benefits and possibilities of the product. That full knowledge would allow you to do the “infomercial” pitch. That’s the 15-20 minute presentation, or longer, when you had an interested audience who was willing to give you the time to share the full story. On the shorter end was the “slogan.” This is the short phrase designed to catch a person’s attention. It is the billboard or what was put on the side of the truck or on the business card and came with contact information should the person be willing to pursue the conversation further.

There are a few other lengths of presentation like the longer “seminar” which is more about industry standards and how your product meets them. The “elevator speech” is the most commonly used. While riding in an elevator you generally have about 2-3 minutes to pitch your product. You have to demonstrate three main points in this speech. First, your knowledge of the product. People have to know you know what you’re talking about. Second, your passion for the product. People want to have a sense that you’re committed to the product. Finally, you have to demonstrate that you are open to speaking more in the future.

Speaking about “selling” Jesus is probably a hard concept for people to hear, but in a sense that is what Paul is doing. In a very short span of time he is seeking to get Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice to buy into The Way of Jesus Christ. He shares first that he is a man of knowledge. He’s a Pharisee, from the strictest sect of the religious Jews. He clearly has the passion for what he is doing, you can read it in his speech. In the way he concludes his speech it is evident that he is willing to continue to share his faith at a later time and for however long they want to converse.

It’s helpful for all Christians to have an elevator speech. That 2-3 minutes can change another person’s life for the better, why wouldn’t we want to be able to share that? The one thing that separates a Christian’s speech from a sales pitch is the conversion. Conversion is a must. It is the before and after part of the speech. Before Christ, this was my life. After, it was so much better/different/relieved. You can even substitute knowledge for conversion. It’s fair for all of us to say, “I don’t understand how God works or why God chose me, but I was a mess before Christ and now my life is making sense.” Why not take a moment on the nearest blank page to begin to write your elevator speech of faith.

JUNE 11

GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD

Acts 27

In Genesis 50:20 there is a great line that came to me as I read this chapter. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” In that story, an adult Joseph meets his brothers who had sold him into slavery when he was a young boy. Joseph, through faithfulness and the work of God, became powerful and influential in Egypt. When a famine had come to Israel, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt seeking food. When they realized it was their brother who ruled in Egypt they were terrified. Joseph, filled with the Spirit of God, offers grace instead of harm. By all rights he could have wiped out what remained of his family, but he chose to see God’s hand moving in his life and spoke those grace-filled words to his brothers. As I read today’s chapter I can’t help but think of all that has happened to Paul over the last couple of chapters and wonder if he was thinking the same thing about the many people who had meant him harm. The members of the Sanhedrin, crowds in various places, Roman rulers and military leaders, all had made his life difficult. We can look back on history and we can surely say, “You meant all this to be the demise of Christianity as it’s champion is put to death, but God meant it for good in the end.” Paul doesn’t have the good fortune of our hindsight, but he seems to be able to see what God has done in the past and trust that God will work good in the future. Paul is along for the ride and will make the best of it, even if the ride runs aground from time to time.

Having that kind of trust is necessary when times are bad. You have to be willing to look at your life circumstances and utter a prayer that says “Lord, all I can see is the bad that has come from these people. I know that in all of life’s circumstances you are working for the good of those who love you. So I’ll love you in the good times and the bad. I’ll lift up my hands in worship in spite of what is happening in my life. I choose to trust that there is a greater good that you are working. I ask that one day I get to see and live in that good. But if I don’t, I will praise you anyway because You are God and I know that Your will is done no matter the evil others intend.”

JUNE 12

A NEW COVENANT

Acts 28

Which mind is harder to change, the one who has never heard of such things or the one who has heard only part? Paul, by the actions of God, runs aground on the Island of Malta. There he is able to share his faith with a group of Gentiles (natives of that island) and they receive him openly. In Rome, Paul has an audience with the Jews of the community. He brings to them the Good News that in Jesus Christ, the Messiah upon whom they have their hope, has come. Most of them, though thankfully not all, reject this claim.

It still goes back to their expectations. The people of Malta had no pre-conceived expectations of the job of the Messiah. So when they hear the Good News of Christ's soul saving offer they are wide open to the message Paul brings. The Jews had developed such a love for their Nation of Israel that they had assumed that the Savior (Messiah, Savior and Christ all mean the same thing) would be a nationalistic hero, once again restoring Israel to self-rule and installing a legitimate King. When Jesus doesn't meet that expectation, but meets Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament Messiah, they reject that possibility. This "new covenant" that God had promised in Jeremiah 31:31-33 is fulfilled in the hearts of those who accept Christ. They thought the new covenant would be a piece of land that God would rule and they would be the favored inhabitants. God did what was promised but it wasn't what was expected. They couldn't accept God's act of love.

As children we are taught certain habits, notions about other people, ideas that become our world view. When we encounter something that doesn't fit the world that we've been raised to accept we have difficulty changing our minds and our hearts. All of the "-isms" in the world are predicated on this notion. Racism, sexism, ageism, denominationalism, which leads me to Methodism (which I favor, but do I favor it too much?). These "isms" tend to tell us that one group of people or way of thinking, is inherently bad because we were raised to believe that it ran contrary to God's grace. Just as the Jews rejected Jesus because they had been taught another way, so we reject people because of the way we've been taught. What beliefs from your upbringing do you need to leave in the past so that God can establish a new covenant in your heart?

JUNE 13

FAITH NEEDS ENCOURAGEMENT

Romans 1

In the past I have served as the chair of the District Committee on Ordained Ministry. Among our responsibilities is the task of interviewing Licensed United Methodist Pastors annually. Due to their designation in our denomination this team is tasked with assuring they are fit for ministry and bearing fruit. It is a task we take very seriously.

Each year, as I approached this task I recognized, that it is two full days out of the church office. The business of my one church was put on hold for the business of the United Methodist Church's reach in Southeast Missouri. I don't approach such meetings with excitement because I don't like taking time away from my task to lead the church to which I'm assigned. Two teams, 24 interviews, in two days isn't my version of productivity. However, I could always rally myself to get into the car and drive to those interviews because I knew something about them from experience at this and two other districts. I knew I would come out of them on a spiritual high.

Many of the licensed pastors are dual career or serving churches in their retirement. They serve one, two or three churches each and every Sunday. They serve churches in remote areas and small towns, worshipping an average of 15-30 per church. These are not the high steeple, glamorous church appointments. Yet these pastors are so deep in their faith and trust in Christ and the calling they have received that they ooze faith throughout the interviews. By the end of the two days I found myself refreshed and encouraged in my ministry. It's a transaction of sorts; we provide the oversight responsibility to assure they are fit for ministry. They provide us with the faith that sometimes drains out during the year. I think the team wins out in the end.

In this first chapter of Romans, Paul speaks of that transaction that comes when people of faith gather "For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Paul knows that there is a mutuality of faith encouragement that comes whether you are the leader or the person under leadership.

Each Wednesday morning, I meet with a group of men from Living Word Church to encourage their faith and have mine encouraged as well. Once per month I meet with other pastors for the same purpose. It is vital to your faith that you do the same. Let me know if you need help finding a faith group.

JUNE 14

KINDNESS THAT LEADS TO REPENTANCE

Romans 2

Jesus' last teachings on earth were spoken somewhere around 33 A.D. Here is Paul (the author of Romans), 22 years later, fighting the same fight. Won't they ever learn? The fight is legalism. "The Law" is what the Jews were referring to when they were speaking of the many rules they had gleaned from the Old Testament books (most of which are found in the first five books of the Bible.) The Law is what set them apart from the rest of the world; the Gentiles. They were chosen by God to receive these laws to follow in order to be God's chosen people. If you found these words of Paul confusing, you're in good company, many in his day had a difficult time grasping what he was saying.

The Jews found Paul difficult to comprehend because his teachings were too far removed from what they had learned their whole life. "How could the Gentiles be excused from the Law," they might ask, "since God had set up the Law to be followed. The Gentiles had difficulty because they were confused by the Jewish religious system of laws. They may have seen it far too complicated as well as far too exclusive to bother with. In their mind, they need only carve a new God out of a stone or piece of wood and they were good to go.

Paul hints at his interpretation of The Law in verse 4 and it is significant to the way he teaches throughout all of his letters we will be reading. "Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" Paul understands all that God does for us is a movement of His kindness. This includes The Law. In Paul's understanding, The Law was given by God as a way for people to experience God. It's God's kindness, or grace, that leads to The Law. However, the Lord also sees that the people had allowed The Law to become twisted, confusing, and cause of a separatist attitude that was never intended. God didn't mean for The Law to exclude people, but rather as a way for all people to approach His throne.

In Jesus Christ, God offers new access to His grace. This new kindness on God's part is not intended as a separatist movement, it is intended to once again open up access to all persons who seek God with a sincere heart. Our repentance is made possible by God's kindness. The movement on our part towards repentance gives us access to God.

At the risk of sounding like a street preacher, "REPENT, and allow the kindness and grace of God to lead you to His throne."

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 70-72

JUNE 17

BE A GOOD BOY

Romans 3

There was a member of a church who greeted me at the end of each service with, “Now be a good boy.” She’s sweet, and while I know she says that to every man she sees at worship, she said it to me like she wishes it for my life. “Be a good boy” is not a bad thing at all. It’s what we hope from our children. It’s what we would like to receive from others, goodness. Socially speaking, being good is a really good idea. Theologically speaking, this chapter seems to absolutely trash the idea, until the end. The letter to the Romans represents Paul’s last known letter to survive antiquity. It is also the crown jewel of his theology. Most of his other letters, while deeply theological, were dealing with discipline of the church community and advice on how to lead the Christian life. This letter is very light on church issues and very heavy on theology. Without trying to give you a long explication of theology in this or future chapters, let me summarize what Paul has found to be important.

First, we are all sinners. Sin is the willful, or even unintentional, breaking of God’s commandments. It’s not just the letter of the law, either. Sin is when we seek that loophole in the law. In looking for a way to skirt the law, we’re breaking the spirit of the commandment God has offered. Jesus tells us that if we have looked upon a woman/man with lust in our hearts it is no different than had we committed the act. Paul wants us to be clear, you can’t “be a good boy” enough to be free from the consequence of sin.

Second, because of what God has done, we can be freed from the guilt of our sin. God took the steps to put Christ forward as our “substitutionary atonement.” That’s an often discussed theological term. Atonement means the paying back to God for what we have taken from Him, namely the righteousness and respect He deserves as our God. Our sin robs God of the thanks for our lives. It damages the relationship God desires to have with us. It belittles God as the genie who answers our prayers at our demands and is under our control. When have you ever treated a friend that way and remained friends? Magnify that to a human/divine relationship and you see we owe God an atonement, a pay back, and act of seeking forgiveness. In Old Testament times that was a sacrificed dove, bushel of wheat, barrel of olive oil, or a lamb. Because we can’t possibly offer enough, God substitutes His own Son for our offering and wipes the slate clean.

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JUNE 17

Third, the transaction is not complete when Christ says on the cross, “It is finished.” The transaction requires acceptance on our part. God says to us, this is my final offer, take it or leave it. Acceptance on our part means having the faith (trust) that what I’ve written above, what Paul writes in this chapter, is God’s final answer on sin.

Finally, is that all? By no means. Faith in the atonement by Christ is not a one-time moment and then it’s back to business as usual. Verse 31 makes it clear, now that we’ve been set right with God, we must do right by God. Following the law, the commandments set forth by God are now the requirement of a continued relationship. So accept on faith what you have been atoned for and “be a good boy.”

JUNE 18

WHICH... WHAT... WAIT... CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT AGAIN?

Romans 4

There has been a long-standing theological battle between this chapter and the second chapter of the book of James, summed up in James 2:26 "... so faith without works is dead." I see no conflict so let me explain. In this chapter of Romans, Paul is arguing the value of the Hebrew Law for salvation. The Law can be found principally in the first five books of the Hebrew (Old) Testament. They had also found several more in the other books of their Bible and tacked on a few of their own. It was believed that in keeping the letter of the Law (or laws) that a person was saved. It was a lot of work to keep the Law and therefore could be called "works righteousness," meaning you are made right before God by what you do. Paul would have agreed with works righteousness prior to encountering Christ. In fact, Paul was among the strictest followers of works righteousness as he was a Pharisee. In Christ Jesus, Paul has found that God has changed the rules, or stated them in a more clear and concise manner. Paul has come to realize that God is not seeking a group of robotic, fanatic rule followers. God is seeking your faith and trust. What makes you righteous in the eyes of God is not what you do and how you act. It is your loving trust and thanks to God for His many blessings that God desires. What does loving trust, thanks and faith look like? God answers that question by giving The Law. One who loves, trusts and has faith in God will live their life looking like a Pharisee. Be clear though, it is NOT The Law that saves, (makes righteous) it's a movement of the heart.

Enter James (which we won't be reading until November). James states that claiming to be a follower (righteous, saved, etc.) is not enough. The evidence for your salvation is in the fruit you bear. Quite specifically "faith, without works, is dead." I see no argument between the two, as many scholars have argued. The proof of your own salvation (the matter of your heart seeking and trusting God) is the outward work of your life. Dana Carvey's "Church Lady" sketch from Saturday Night Live (YouTube it for those who are not getting the reference) is the perfect example for us. She clearly is self-righteous, judgmental, and mean spirited. However, she's probably in church every moment the door is unlocked. She probably has a key for when it's locked and even controls who else gets a key and which cabinets they can access. Is she saved by the grace of God? Well, that's a heart thing and I can't see it. However, I'd be concerned

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JUNE 18

if I were her because her outward life seems to be all about works righteousness and not about a work that flows from a heart made right by the activity of Christ's work on the cross.

The order of things is this: (1) God forgives and makes us righteous through Christ's death and resurrection. (2) We trust (have faith) that this is all that is needed. (3) We accept it for ourselves and get credited as righteous. (4) We live our lives in response to God's gracious work through Christ by bearing good fruit (works) that others may come to know God's grace. In this order, your salvation is assured. Get things out of order and you find yourself working for something that was already earned for you.

JUNE 19

BLESSED ASSURANCE

Romans 5

One of the doctrines of the Christian faith, and especially of the Wesleyan movement (of which Methodism is one), is the doctrine of Assurance. Essentially, assurance means that you can have absolute trust that Christ's death and resurrection are all that is necessary for your salvation. Your acceptance of that offer of salvation secures it for you. Charles Wesley, first, and then John his brother, had experiences that caused them to emphasize this doctrine.

John's account was that on one occasion he went to a Bible study, quite reluctantly. The study topic itself was quite innocuous; Martin Luther's introduction to the book of Psalms. Yet in his act of faithfulness, in spite of his own desire, something changed. On his way home he states, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Methodists from time to time have been called "The People of the Warmed Heart." That's not a bad moniker to have.

This is what Paul is teaching us in Chapter 5, without the emotionalism of the Wesley's. He's stating in academic language that God has taken the steps to offer you salvation. "Justification" is the word he uses which means that we have been set right with God, but clearly not by anything we've done, only by the actions of God. Because of that we can have peace with God.

"Peace" is an interesting word here. Paul would have been familiar with the Hebrew word "Shalom," which we commonly translate as "peace." It means something more than having a serenity of the heart. It means having the assurance of God's presence and favor for you. It is the emotional connection with God that John Wesley shares when he speaks of the warmed heart. Wesley entered seminary at the age of 17. He was ordained at the age of 22. However, it won't be until 13 years later that Wesley has his experience of Assurance. He only gets to that point in his faith life because he has diligently searched for, and served, Christ for all these years. He will later report that he believes some people get it at the time of their first profession of Christ as Savior, but it certainly wasn't the case for him.

Surely a warm heart that burns for Christ because of what He has done for you is a worthy goal to strive for.

JUNE 20

FAIR WAGES

Romans 6

“How much do you make a year?” In most circles, asking that question would be considered rude. That tends to be one of those conversations that is considered taboo in polite conversation. Not so much for United Methodist Pastors. Our compensation package is a matter of church vote every year. Everyone has access to our compensation package, it’s considered public information. (Note; if you ever look at mine remember that no taxes are taken out. I’m self-employed for the purposes of taxes, I pay the employment tax AND the social security. I also pay employment taxes on the fair rental value of the parsonage.)

I offer that disclaimer about my income and taxes to make a point, not necessarily because I’m defensive. The final verse in this chapter actually mixes metaphors, yet in doing so it summarizes the point of the chapter. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Our income is based upon the value our employer puts on the effort we give. Some incomes are upside down and unfair. The least paid person is often of greatest value. Surgeons make a lot of money but if the tools are not clean, the dressings are not sterile, and the O.R. is not spotless then the patient is in grave danger (pun intended.) The lowest paid people on the hospital staff are probably the ones responsible for making successful surgery possible. The same can be said of the school teacher vs. the administrator, or the factory line worker vs. the CEO. From whatever way you look at it, our income and the value we offer for what we get paid are rarely equal, at least in our own eyes.

When it comes to sin, Paul is telling us that we get what we’ve earned. The hard work we put into lust, greed, gluttony, pride, anger and envy earn us a wage. It’s an income that seems far greater than what we’ve done to earn it, though. How is it that something as simple as compiling a wad of cash earns us such an income as death? Paul’s not one to white wash the issue. When it comes to the value of our sin, we get what we deserve. We’ve earned it, go ahead and cash it in. It’s all yours. However, like a bad Monte Hall impression, you can trade it in for what’s behind that stone. You know, the stone that was rolled away. That’s the stone that gives us life rather than the death we’ve earned. It’s your choice, life or death, sin or righteousness. You decide which you prefer.

JUNE 21

AN UNSTEADY DIET

Romans 7

Who hasn't been on a diet at one time or another? Or, who isn't constantly on a diet? Technically speaking, your "diet" is whatever you consume. So if you're on a diet of fruit loops, Big Macs and Pizza, that's a diet. Albeit, not a healthy one, but a diet all the same. I use this as a metaphor for what Paul is saying in verses 15-20. It sounds like how we feel when we go on a diet and find ourselves cheating. We even hide our cheating from other people as if it doesn't count if no one sees it. And then we hate ourselves for having cheated. To make matters worse, when we go to the scale there is no doubt at all that the cheating counts, at least as far as calories go.

I loathe being on a diet, the kind with restrictions. I find myself cheating on it whenever I try to keep it healthy. I love chips. I'm not a huge fan of sweets but a plain old sugar cookie once in a while is heaven to me. However, my diet is a life and death issue now. I don't want to sound over dramatic, but I was diagnosed as diabetic several years ago. From now on, chips and cookies not only pack on the pounds but they literally add up in my blood sugar, creating a potentially dangerous situation. I know I could go on eating whatever I want because I can just treat it with medications. However, it seems that the more I pour the carbs into my belly the more damage I do to my pancreas (the organ that is affected in this process), and you can't live without your pancreas. Nevertheless, if there are chips in the house, I'll eat a few once in a while. Girl Scout cookies are the bane of my existence. I know it hurts me to eat these and I don't know why I do, and I hate myself for doing it knowing the harm that comes to me when I do.

This is the same as with sin. This is what Paul is referring to in these verses. The temptations to sin are sometimes far greater than our willingness to walk away. The desire within us seems to trump the grace God offers. Not because God's grace is too weak, but because we have become so conditioned to caving to temptation that we sin without seeking the strength God offers.

To break a habit of sin is not unlike being faithful to a diet. It requires diligence in your Bible study, prayer, accountability to others and worship. It's about changing a destructive habit for a healthy one. In the case of your diet, you can seek the help of others. In the case of faith you can seek others AND seek the help of the Lord. "Greater is the One who is inside of you, than he who is living in the world." (1 John 4:4, paraphrased.)

JUNE 24

QUOTABLE QUOTES

Romans 8

If you're looking for a bunch of Christian quotes to impress your friends, you need go no further than Chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. This single chapter contains more bumper sticker theology than most. (That's the theology that fits easily on a bumper sticker and can be read quickly at the next stop light.)

Assurance of Salvation: 1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...

Having the Mind of Christ: 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

How God confirms His grace in our souls: 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

God helps us pray when we have no words: 26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

God is at work, even when the evidence is to the opposite: 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

God is on our side: 31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

God's love for us through Christ is persistent: 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

And in case you didn't catch what was said in verse 35: 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I'm not sure any comment I could make on this chapter would add to your understanding. Instead, just take a moment to glorify God and sit in the presence of Christ.

JUNE 25

MYSTERY

Romans 9

There are some things in life that I just don't understand. I don't understand why the nutritional information on the box of popcorn gives the calorie count for "un-popped" as well as "popped." Who's going to look at those kernels and be tempted by that tasty, crunchy, un-popped snack? It's one of those great mysteries of life. There are other things like why is the joke always funnier when the boss tells it, or why is it that the people who say the least always seem like they know the most? Life is filled with unsolved mysteries.

When theologians agree on a topic for which no one has an answer (and that rarely happens because they tend to be a bunch of know-it-alls) they have a deep theological term for it, "Mystery." In our communion liturgy, when the full liturgy is read, there comes a point when the pastor says "Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith" and the response of the congregation is "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." We call that a mystery, not because we don't understand the concept but because we don't understand the motivating factors behind it. Why would the God who created the universe, the billions upon billions of stars, the limitless expanse of it all, care enough about one small corner of the infinity He has created? Why would the One who spoke and the world leapt into existence speak once again by choosing to enter into the form of the creature, suffer a miserably painful death, and then, rather than offer wrath for the mistreatment, God offers grace and eternal life to all as He resurrects our Savior to new life. Why does God do that? Why bother? Why should we receive grace when we failed, and still fail, to worship righteously and make a sincere offering of wealth and service? Why? It's a mystery.

In this chapter Paul goes to great detail about the mystery of God's chosen people of Israel. It remains a mystery as to why these people are a chosen race. I can offer a great deal of answers to that question but none would suffice; clues but no clean answers. It's one of those mysteries that we humans must live with.

It takes a great deal of faith to live with mystery. It takes trust that even though we don't understand (then insert a line from the previous chapter). 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

JUNE 26

PRAY FOR OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Romans 10

Do any of you have a sister or a brother who just can't seem to get life right? You know the one, no matter what mom or dad said, they would do the opposite. "Get out of bed," and you could hear the snoring. "Do your homework," and you could hear the yelling when the grade card came through. Years later, you're all adults and that sibling still seems to be at odds with the world. If they were a child today they might be diagnosed Oppositional Defiance Disorder. That's the newest fad diagnosis used to push more pharmaceuticals. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't think some should be diagnosed and treated. I just see far too many children being medicated when the real diagnosis might be "future independent leader" or "budding philosopher" or "she has all the potential to be an incredible musician." Sometimes free thinking children are drugged into compliance when what they need is freedom to be themselves.

Some, however, seem absolutely self-directed toward self-destruction. We all wait around for them to hit that proverbial "rock bottom" out of which those who have been hurt the most must muster the energy and compassion to pull them out and get them the help they've always needed. I have no idea why some people seem to take the path of the disobedient and the obstinate. When they do the rest of the family longs for their return to the fold. We pray, "Lord, show them the way. My love for them is so deep yet that doesn't seem to be enough. Please lovingly make Your way known to them."

It seems to me that this is what Paul is saying about his brothers and sisters in Israel. "Lord, they can't seem to see the obvious error of their way. I've tried so hard to share with them that Christ is the fulfillment of the scriptures but they are a disobedient and obstinate people. Please lovingly make Your way known to them." That sounds like a prayer you might want to lift up for a wandering brother or sister today.

JUNE 27

IF LIFE WERE A MUSICAL

Romans 11

I'm sure you've seen a musical before: Sound of Music, Man from LaMancha, Jesus Christ Superstar or GodSpell, to name a few. One of the characteristics of these is that songs are generally sung in response to what is going on. There is action and activity, maybe a small amount of dialogue, and in response one or more characters break into song. It may be someone has made people angry and the mob in West Side Story breaks into the "Jet Song." Or maybe two people meet and fall immediately in love and can only tell the story in song like Danny and Sandra Dee in "Summer Nights" from Grease. Or, the idea of being wealthy beyond his dreams sparks the song "If I Were A Rich Man" out of the mouth of Tevya in Fiddler on The Roof.

There is something about the heart that causes us to break into song. I do that all the time. If something comes up in common conversation and a song pops into my head, I just might sing it aloud. I used to drive my children nuts (still do) with songs from my childhood and the years of my youth. I'm sure life circumstances sometimes reminds you of music.

Back in Paul's time they had no radio to listen to, but there was still music. From time to time the Bible makes note of people who have broken into song. In Exodus 15, following God's deliverance from the Dead Sea crossing, Moses' sister breaks into "The Song of Miriam," and Moses follows suit by singing back to her the chorus. The Song of Solomon is an entire book written in response to falling in love. In Luke 1, Mary visits her cousin, who may have been the first person to actually celebrate her pregnancy, and Mary breaks into a song that is meant to praise (magnify) the Lord. It has become known today as the "Magnificat."

At the end of this chapter of Romans, Paul breaks into song. He has just written about the rejection of Jesus by Israel, his ministry to the Gentiles, and the possibility that through their conversion God may be able to save Israel as well. Paul loves Israel. They are his people. The possibility that God may work an amazing act of grace, by using the Gentiles, to save the Jews moves Paul's heart so deeply that he can do no more greater work at this point than to break into a song of Praise for God. This is a "doxology" (Doxa= glorify, Logos=Words – Words that Glorify).

As you go through your week and into the weekend, consider salvation and the possibility that God can use you to be salvation to others who, until now, were considered quite lost. Glorify God for such an act of awesome grace.

JUNE 28

JOB DESCRIPTION

Romans 12

Since I took my first job as a food service assistant in a nursing home, I haven't had too many jobs without a job description. That sheet of paper would list the tasks and responsibilities, as well as the supervisor to whom I reported. At the bottom of each job description is that line, "And other duties as assigned." That's the catchall phrase to help make sure it's known that there may be things we forgot, but you still get to do them. I often joke that it's now the phrase at the top of my job description.

When it comes to working at the church, I generally provide a job description for each position. I don't begin with duties and responsibilities; I first offer a narrative of the idea of working at a church. Here are a couple of the lines from a recent job description: "The "spirit" of being a staff member at a church is that you give yourself fully to the mission of the church. There will be times that odd hours and extra hours are required. (Vacation Bible School for instance.) The assumption of your presence during such events, even when not directly in charge, is necessary. This form of "leadership by example" encourages volunteers and builds the church community." And, "Our Church succeeds in our calling through a cooperative effort of church leadership, pastors, staff and the congregation. Paid staff members have as their part in this cooperative, the responsibility to assure that the congregation is actively recruited, trained, and resourced to do the ministry to which God has called them. In other words, your primary ministry will be working with adults who work in ministry." As you can see I think there is a "spirit" of working with the church that cannot be divided from the job.

In Romans 12, Paul also shares that sense of spirit. In this case Paul isn't referring to paid church staff, he is speaking to all followers of Christ who are, by their calling from God, "staffing" the church to accomplish its mission. In verses 4-8, he lists several jobs within the church and offers very little description. The remainder of the chapter is focused upon the spirit of being actively involved in living out your faith in the church. Look at the flow; it begins with sacrificially giving yourself to your ministry, then the naming of the job, then the attitude of the job, which Paul names as "Love."

In what ways does this inspire you to approach your "job" at church, whether paid or unpaid staff, differently?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 76-78

JULY 1

OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Romans 13

If there is any commandment in the whole of the Bible that sees more disregard than those found in this chapter, I'm open to hear which one. Obey the government, pay the tax. I don't know if there has ever been a time in my life where I have had less respect for the governing authorities. The IRS recently cut their customer service budget by 76%. This in a time when the tax code is far more confusing than ever. Add to it the suggestion that these authorities are in their place because God has put them there and I begin to lose my religion. That's just in the USA. What do we do with those authoritarian dictatorships around the world? Are we to respect them as well? Paul really confounds me in this chapter and I'm sorely tempted to just ignore it and move on to better things. Can we highlight this chapter, hit Ctrl-X on our Bibles and just move on?

Let me offer this suggestion, and I'm only speaking about this country and our current governing rules and laws. We are responsible to the authorities in this country for the terms they serve because we spent time in discernment (electioneering), cast our votes, and put them into that authority through majority rule. It matters not if your candidate was elected, you participated in the process, or should have if you're of voting age. They deserve the respect and honor as ones who received the majority vote. As we see ourselves as one nation...under God, they also deserve the respect of the hope we place in God, that somehow our nation is guided by adherence to His will.

There is one more aspect of this that should be attended. Lincoln suggests, and most would agree, that we are to have a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." This being the case, it is our responsibility to ensure that our leaders are as faithful to us as we are to them. As a people of faith we offer respect to our leaders. As our leaders we demand and expect their faithful adherence to govern "for the people." It is a give and take, done out of respect and honor.

Finally, we have as a tenet in our governance the separation of church and state. This means that the state will not interfere with the church. It does not mean that you shouldn't take your faith into the polling booth; you should. It also means that those whom we elect are expected to act upon their own faith beliefs in office; they should. So dig deep into the faith of the candidates. If they are to be those installed into their position by God, you might want to check which god they serve.

JULY 2

A HAND UP

Romans 14

Pardon me while I get on my theological soapbox. One of my pet peeves (I'll admit to having far too many and praying for fewer) is that most modern day Christians believe that everyone in the church is at the same place in their faith. Perhaps "believe" is the wrong word. Let's say they operate as such. I blame it on the over-emphasis on salvation. Many think that the goal of the Christian faith is salvation and, therefore, once you've professed faith in Christ you're done. All you have to do is go to church, occasionally, and wait to die. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Christ didn't die to save you from Hell. Christ died to restore your relationship with God. This relationship is intended to be one that grows and thrives over time, like any relationship you are in. Salvation is a first step in a long and deepening relationship with God.

What was happening among the Roman church was an argument that had to do with dietary issues of those who had recently converted to Christianity. Vegetarian diets were popular in that day and new converts to Christianity didn't understand why some Christians were eating meat. It really was an issue of a lack of recognition that some people are farther along in their relationship with God. Those who were more mature were judging those less so, and vice versa. Instead of recognizing the faith progress of all Christians, the assumption was that all are saved and, therefore, all should be in the same place in their faith journey. Paul doesn't see it that way and gets on both of them for spending time judging the faith quality of each other.

The appropriate approach is Paul's. He begins by shutting down the judgmental behavior and then encourages the more mature to be responsible in the way they live and act around the less mature. The more mature believer has the responsibility to lead by example and not put a stumbling block in front of a younger believer. Watch what you eat, stay away from wine; if these things cause another to stumble, be mature enough to refrain. Christianity is not a private affair of the heart. The journey toward a deeper relationship with the Lord includes an ever deepening relationship with the people around you. It is a personal journey, not private, lived out in a public way. As you grow in your faith, be aware of the faith of those around you and set an example that leads them rather than causing them to stumble.

JULY 3

GRACE AND TRUTH

Romans 15

Discipline is a word we don't like so much. Discipleship is one we are probably more open to, but not very clear on. Encouragement is something we always enjoy. Discipline and encouragement are both part of Paul's plan for discipleship. Paul takes seriously his task of bringing new people to Christ (vs. 20). He seems to thrive in it. He also sees the great need to model expected behavior and to create an environment where Christians encourage one another (vs. 14). Yet once in a while he feels it necessary to challenge behavior that has been reported to him with correcting words of discipline (vs. 15).

Paul seems to be one who stands on both grace and truth. Throughout this chapter he stresses the need for grace. He urges us to "bear with the failings of the weak," and to "accept one another." That spirit of grace permeates much of Paul's writings. I believe it is due to his deep concern that everything we do draws others to Christ and nothing pushes them away. The Gospel of Grace is his strong theme throughout all of the books of the Bible that bear his name.

Paul never shies away from "speaking the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15) That's the discipline part we aren't comfortable with. Speaking to someone in a way that teaches them right from the wrong they have committed is tough work. If you have any amount of shyness, you'll hesitate to do so. It's fair to say that the ones we are seeking to correct are not always open to the idea. In a world that over-values individual rights, the idea that anyone might have bearing to correct your behavior is offensive to some.

How about you? Who are you willing to have correct your behavior? In 1 Peter 5:5, it tells us to submit to those who are farther along in our faith than we are ourselves. Perhaps that's the only way to accept correction, through the mutuality that comes when one decides to be subject to another, rather than when it is either forced or unexpected. As you consider that question the answer is probably in the question, "From whom do you enjoy the most encouragement?" I know I accept criticism easier from a person who has encouraged and appreciated me prior to the discipline. Seek that person out and ask them to hold you accountable to some portion of your faith life. See if you can accept discipline from your encourager.

JULY 4

WOMEN LEADING THE CHURCH?!?

Romans 16

There are still denominations and faith expressions today who don't feel women should be in leadership in the church. They point to certain writings of Paul and say, "See, he forbids it." They choose scripture like 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet," to reinforce their strong stance. Yet, they choose to ignore the fact that Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon," which would suggest a position of authority in the church.

Each of Paul's "books" of the Bible are actually letters. They are written in a specific format that was the order of the day. The conclusion of each letter was to be written with formal greetings to people who would be privy to the letter, and in this case, all Christians in Rome. Paul was choosy about who he would greet and this letter has some very telling information. He says to greet "Priscilla and Aquila." That doesn't seem so odd until you realize they are husband and wife and he lists the wife first. Even in addressing a letter today, after 2000 years of cultural evolution, we still address the husband first. Paul speaks volumes about his respect for women and their place in ministry with that simple choice of wording. Paul mentions those two as well as Mary, Junias, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (which mean dainty and delicate), Persis, Rufus' mother (un-named), Julia and Nereus' sister (also un-named). All of these women are spoken of as workers in Christ. Today that sounds common to offer such a greeting, but in Paul's day that was unheard of. It was even more scandalous as it was a Jewish man, Paul, greeting women of non-Jewish heritage. All of this points to the full inclusion of women in ministry.

Though the concern expressed in other scriptures still stands; what do we do when we find such a seeming conflict? We err on the side of grace. We discern a person's calling to ministry based upon merit and not gender. We ask ourselves if a particular scripture was based upon a moment in time and not based upon an eternal truth. We pray and seek guidance. What we don't do is degrade a person's value or seek to squelch the work of the Holy Spirit in their life.

JULY 5

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

1 Corinthians 1

On one occasion I had the opportunity to be in the office of the Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Missouri. No, I wasn't in trouble, quite the opposite. I was bringing a couple from my church to meet the Bishop. They had a mutual interest in a ministry that the couple wanted to fund for the Bishop. I was quite warmly received. There was a fancy document hung in Bishop Ann Scherer's office that traced her ordination back through the years. Her name was at the bottom. Atop hers was the Bishop who had ordained her as a pastor, then the Bishop who had ordained him, and so on up to John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. I wish I had asked for a copy of that document so I could know my ordination ancestry as well. What difference does that make? None. It doesn't win me any influence or any amount of extra jewels in my crown in heaven. It simply ties me to the founder of the Methodist movement, and so I'm interested.

In my ministry, I've had the opportunity to baptize quite a few children and adults. Sometimes I forget which children I baptize, though a few are memorable. However, I remember almost every adult/youth I've baptized. Those are special moments to me when an adult makes the decision for Christ themselves. I believe in child baptism, I just appreciate the depth of meaning when an adult says yes to God's grace of their own accord. It's the same feeling I get at confirmation when a youth makes that decision as well.

I remember my own baptism. Though I was four, I have the memory that it wasn't so much a special occasion but one that made me cry as the pastor splashed me in church. I don't remember his name but I could dig out my certificate and find it. Then I could hand a document to everyone I baptize that says, "You were baptized by Pastor Dave, who was baptized by Pastor X, who was baptized by Pastor Y, etc." What would that matter? Actually, as I think of it, it would matter only in the harm it would bring. As a pastor, I stand in the place of God and welcome the baptized person into God's own family. I am not God, we can all agree on that. I simply perform the function of the sacrament that is the mystical moment of adoption. To insert my name, and those who came before me, would be pretentious and shameful. I have no part in the adoption except as a functionary. It matters not who I am, or who baptized me. All that matters is the grace of God through Jesus Christ and the meaning of the sacred moment of baptism. Forget me, remember your baptism and be thankful.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 79-81

