

# the Messenger

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September/October 2025

## CONTENTS

From Your Pastor.....	3
Worship and Wonder.....	4
Upcoming Lunch Discussions, RSVP now!.....	5
Matthew 25 Lending Library Book Highlight.....	5
Adult Sunday School Class List and Descriptions.....	6-7
Children and Youth Sunday School Class List and Descriptions.....	7
Welcoming All—People and Wildlife—With Plants.....	8
Funky First Fridays.....	8
Recently at Riverside: Rally Day and Pastor Brian's 5 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary.....	9
Recently at Riverside.....	10
October/November Birthday List.....	11

*Happy 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Pastor Brian!*



Page 9

*Pastor Brian's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*  
FROM THE COVER







# From Your Pastor

*Brian Lays*

Dear Riversiders,

One of the greatest things about church fellowship is its intergenerational quality. The pews on Sunday morning contain the wiggles of four year olds, the canes of the elderly, and every generation of people in between. Together, we sing the same hymns and hear the same scriptures. We eat of the same loaf, take the same cup, and ultimately worship the same God. It's a beautiful thing!



Within this broad fellowship of the church, however, there is also a deep desire to build community with those who share in the joys and challenges of each life stage. Young adults like to gather with other young adults who share the experience of working to establish oneself in a world that can often feel lonely. New parents like to gather with other exhausted parents and share insights about the transition to parenthood. Empty nesters look for meaningful activities to do together as they adjust to a new phase of life with more time. And older adults look for ways to gather for meals or card games to stay connected in the midst of so many quiet days.

As we've studied the feedback that emerged from the Be the Church campaign, it became obvious that Riversiders really like to spend time together! While intergenerational, church-wide events for everyone have always been (and will surely remain) a foundational aspect of life at Riverside, we have focused on creating more opportunities for certain demographics of folks to gather and get to know one another more deeply.

Toward this end, we've moved our staff position for congregational life from part-time to full-time, and welcomed Jaimie Smith into the role. The Session also approved the formation of a new committee, the Congregational Life Committee, which represents a merger of the previous connections and community life committees. Congregational Life now oversees three specific subcommittees: young adults, older adults, and connections (a committee that "connects" with visitors and works to bring them into the fold as new members). This new governance structure allows for us to continue to focus on our broad, all-church events at the committee level, while also focusing on developing more program offerings for particular demographics (young adults, older adults).

This fall, we've debuted a Third Thursday Lunch Bunch for older adults, which gathers at a local restaurant for a slow-paced meal together. A group has also formed that gets together to play cards—good friends bringing out their competitive sides! Meanwhile, young adult events now consistently appear on our calendars. We've gone to a Jumbo Shrimp game, the Cummer Museum, and have gathered for "Flow & Fizz" (yoga and a drink in Five Points).

Further plans for new small group opportunities are in the works as well, and there's much more to come! So don't miss out—join us as often as you can to deepen your fellowship with our faith community. From generation to generation, these friendships come to mean more than we can put into words.

Yours in Christ,  
Pastor Brian



# Worship and Wonder

Pastor Lauren Scott

A child's eyes widen with delight as they are handed a generous piece of bread at the Communion table, reminding us that God's feast is abundant and for all.

An older member leans over a coloring page, whispering that it has been years since they picked up a crayon—yet in this simple act, prayer is offered in a new way.

A toddler splashes in the waters of the baptismal font and echoes sacred words: "You are loved by God. You are forgiven by God. Thanks be to God."

These glimpses capture the heart of Worship and Wonder—a monthly intergenerational service where faith is experienced in tangible ways. On the first Sunday of each month at 8:30 a.m., people of all ages gather to worship, learn, reflect, and wonder together. While the service follows a familiar Presbyterian order of worship, it also opens space for hands-on experiences through interactive faith stations, storytelling, and creative practices.

This year, our guiding theme is "God is..." Each month, we will explore a different word that helps us name and celebrate who God is in our lives and in the world.

Last year, our congregation was blessed to receive a \$1,000 grant from Columbia Theological Seminary's Worship of Wonder program. Those funds helped us launch our monthly Worship and Wonder service—creating a space where people of all ages can gather, grow, and experience God's presence in new and meaningful ways. The energy and enthusiasm surrounding these services has been incredible! Because of that, we were invited to apply for a second grant—this time for \$5,000. With the help of Nancy Schneider and Breanna Sooter, we applied for this second grant and I am grateful to share that we have been awarded this grant as well! This financial gift will allow us to deepen and expand Worship and Wonder, providing more opportunities for interactive worship, creative faith stations, and intergenerational connection.

It is during Worship and Wonder that curiosity is encouraged, connections are deepened, and Communion is shared. Whether you are young, old, or somewhere in between, you are invited to come and see how God meets us in both the ordinary and the unexpected. We hope you'll join us!



**1st SUNDAY OF THE MONTH, 8:30 AM**





# Upcoming Lunch Discussions

## Be the Church Followup

You're invited to attend a series of roundtable discussions around four key topics gleaned from the recent Be the Church visitation initiative. These additional conversations will help church leaders gain clarity on specific ways future programs and activities might be altered or enhanced to increase engagement. Each will be held on Sundays, after worship, with a light lunch provided. Please RSVP to help the organizers with meal planning.

### Learning Opportunities for All Ages

September 28, 11:45 am - 1:15 pm,  
Thompson Parlor / Mark and Stuart Harbison

### Communication Best Practices

October 26, 11:45 am - 1:15 pm,  
Thompson Parlor / Leigh and Carter Rosenbloom

We look forward to continuing the conversations started earlier this year about RPC's core values of Belonging, Connecting, and Transforming!

RSVP for September 28 lunch: [www.evite.me/sept28lunch](http://www.evite.me/sept28lunch)

RSVP for October 26 lunch: [www.evite.me/oct26lunch](http://www.evite.me/oct26lunch)



September RSVP



October RSVP

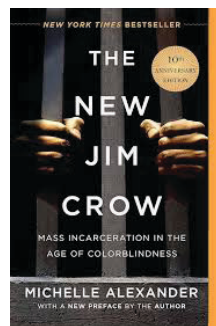


# Matthew 25 Lending Library

... focusing on matters of justice and equality

RPC is a Matthew 25 (M25) congregation of the PC(USA). In Matthew 25, Jesus makes clear that what we do and how we treat others matters to God. Matthew 25 provides the foundation and framework for the missions of RPC. The three focus areas of the Matthew 25 initiative include: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating poverty. Responding with wisdom and discernment, we educate ourselves and work together to make our community more compassionate, more inclusive, and more just.

We have an amazing resource that informs and challenges us in our work: the Matthew 25 Lending Library. It is located in Bittinger Hall, inviting us all to sit, browse the collection, and check out a book! Our Lending Library was established because of the generous donation of Carl and Barbara Zacheis of a very comprehensive collection of books focusing on historical issues of race and inequality and our responses to racism today. Read Carl's reviews of the books below.



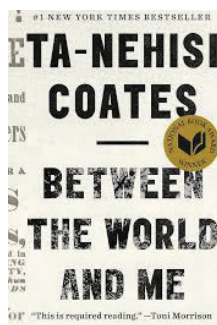
### *The New Jim Crow*

Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness

by Michelle Alexander

This book describes how our legal system has found a way to re-establish Jim Crow on those disadvantaged by race, financial resources, and social status. The volume of incarceration is higher in the U.S. than any

other country in the world. Sentencing Guidelines and the War on Drugs established by Congress seem to have allowed circumventing Constitutional guarantees. The results are so devastating I could not bring myself to finish the book.



### *Between the World and Me*

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

(Letter to His Son)

"This is your country, this is your world, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it."

This is a very personal essay. Best I can do is to excise a comment from the fly leaf: Beautifully woven from personal

narrative, reimagined history, and fresh, emotionally charged reportage. Not to be missed if you know any teenagers.

Check out a book from the Matthew 25 Lending Library TODAY! If you'd like more information about the work of the Matthew 25 and the Community Outreach Committee, please contact [dana.riley@rpcjax.org](mailto:dana.riley@rpcjax.org).





# Adult Sunday School Classes

Sundays, 9:30–10:15 am

## Exploring the Book of Acts

Teachers: Ed Pratt-Dannals and Rev. Dr. John Ragsdale

Education Building Room 302/303

The first Christians experienced the risen Christ in profound and mystical ways that formed them into a radically new kind of community. Join two of Riverside's talented teachers for an in-depth, ongoing study of the earliest record of their lives in the Book of Acts. Together, we'll explore the stories of the early church, the power of the Holy Spirit, and what these ancient words mean for us today. Whether you're brand new or a longtime member, you'll find a warm welcome and thoughtful conversation.

*After working in banking and finance for fifteen years, John responded to a call to ministry. John attended Columbia Theological Seminary for his master's and earned his doctorate from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. He served as the pastor of churches in Orange Park, Gainesville, Jacksonville, and Green Cove Springs, Florida, as the Executive Director of the Montgomery Presbyterian Center, and as Mission Coordinator for Leadership of the Presbytery of St. Augustine, retiring from full-time ministry in 2013. John and his wife, Sally, have two sons and live in Jacksonville, Florida, and Cashiers, NC.*

*Ed Pratt-Dannals has been a member of RPC for about 35 years and has taught a Bible-based adult Sunday school for the majority of those years. For his career, he was a public school teacher, principal, and ultimately superintendent here in Duval County. He has been married to his wife, Jo, for 49 years and has 2 adult children and 5 grandchildren who live in North Carolina.*

## Underwood Bible Class

Teacher: Clay Boone

Education Building Room 305

Looking for a place to grow in faith, connect with others, and dive deeper into Scripture? This welcoming adult Bible study meets year-round and explores the International Sunday School lessons in a friendly, conversational setting.

## Parents of Young Children: Faith and Family

Education Building Room 306

This ongoing class is designed especially for parents navigating the joys and challenges of raising children. We'll begin our class this fall by joining the church-wide study, Exploring the Gospels with Pastor Brian: A Beginner's Journey, for September 14, 21, and 28. This shared time will deepen our understanding of Jesus' life and teachings and give us a foundation for conversations about faith at home.

### ***More Than Words: 10 Values for the Modern Family***

Starting October 5, this group will begin a parenting segment entitled More Than Words: 10 Values for the Modern Family based on the book by Erin Wathen. We'll reflect on how to move beyond surface "family values" and cultivate a wholehearted, faith-filled lifestyle rooted in love. Each session will include Scripture, honest conversation, and practical ideas for living out these values in our homes and communities.

## Exploring the Gospels with Pastor Brian: A Beginner's Journey

September 14, 21, and 28 at 9:30 am in the Thompson Parlor

Teacher: Rev. Dr. Brian Lays

Whether you're brand new to the Bible or just want a fresh look at the life and teachings of Jesus, this 3-week class is for you. Together, we'll explore the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - learning who wrote them, why they were written, and what makes each one unique. You'll discover the central stories of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, and how these accounts continue to shape our faith today.

## Learn more



[www.rpcjax.org/adults#SundaySchool](http://www.rpcjax.org/adults#SundaySchool)



# Adult Sunday School Classes

Sundays, 9:30–10:15 am

## Living Your Strengths: Discovering Your God-Given Gifts

October 26, November 2, 9, 16, and 23 in Thompson Parlor

God has uniquely created each of us with strengths meant to bless the church and the world. This 5-week small group experience will help you discover and deepen your understanding of your God-given talents using Living Your Strengths (Church Edition), a resource based on the Gallup CliftonStrengths assessment.

Together, we will:

- Explore what Scripture says about gifts and calling.
- Identify and celebrate our personal strengths.
- Learn how different strengths work together in the body of Christ.
- Discern how to use our strengths in church, family, work, and community life.
- Create a personal statement of call rooted in our strengths.

Participants will take the CliftonStrengths assessment and use their results as a guide for conversation, reflection, and prayer. Each week will include Scripture, discussion, and practical activities that connect faith with everyday life.

## Advent, Scripture, and the Visual Arts

November 30, December 7, 14, and 21 in the Thompson Parlor

Teacher: Claudia Calhoun

Join us this Advent season for a four-week journey to the birth of Christ through scripture and the visual arts. We will reflect on the rich passages of Advent and deepen our understanding of their meaning by engaging with various images of paintings, sculpture and photography. Together, we will discover how scripture and visual images can open our hearts in new ways as we prepare for the coming of Christ.

*Claudia Calhoun's background is in teaching and practicing art, nonprofit consulting, and community volunteering. She received a Master's degree in Christian Education in 2017 from Union Presbyterian Seminary. There she began to connect how art can play a role in illuminating scripture and shaping how we see the world around us. Claudia and her husband, Jack, became members of Riverside after moving to Jacksonville from Lively, VA in 2020.*

# Children and Youth Sunday School Classes

## Preschool

Williams Building Room 104

Teachers: Jen Edwards, Palmer Edwards,  
Jen Saenz

## K, 1st, and 2nd Grade

Education Building Room 301

Teachers: Nancy Warner, Bookie Zeigler

## 3rd, 4th, and 5th Grade

Education Building Room 304

Teachers: Paul Heeg, Bess Goff

*All children's Sunday School classes use Dwell curriculum. DWELL invites children to live into God's story and to live out of God's story every day as they respond to God's call.*

## Middle School

Education Building Room 307

Teachers: Thomas Cotchaleovitch, Beni Tasel, Neil  
Schoenberger, Lauren Scott

*Middle School uses "God is..." curriculum which connects to our Worship and Wonder services.*

## High School

Education Building Room 310

Teachers: Mark Rosenberg, John and Deana Green,  
Lauren Scott

*High School Sunday School uses PC(USA) Coffeehouse and Rob Bell "Nooma" Videos for their curriculum.*



# Welcoming All-People and Wildlife– With Native Plants

Lisa Williams

At our church, we strive to welcome ALL people. Yet, our sense of welcome stretches even further, extending to the wondrous diversity of wildlife that shares our neighborhood.

Recently, Kathy Stark and Lisa Williams transformed a section of the small parking lot behind the sanctuary into a new mission: feeding our wildlife with native flowers and grasses. These native plants are not only beautiful, but they serve as a generous banquet for the pollinators and birds who call our grounds home. And when the flowers fade, the story continues—the spent blooms turn into seeds, providing vital nourishment for songbirds through the fall and winter. Unlike nonnative ornamentals such as crepe myrtles, which offer little for our local wildlife, native plants are woven into the fabric of our ecosystems. They sustain the web of life that God has so wonderfully created. By choosing natives, we are acting as good stewards, nurturing both the land and the creatures in our care.

We invite you to visit the garden —see what is blooming now and return as the seasons change to discover the seeds and other food that our garden continues to offer. Then, consider planting with natives in your own yards to extend the hospitality even farther.



## Funky First Fridays

*in Five Points!*

September 5th marked the first inaugural Funky Friday in Five Points! As you can see, children (and some adults) enjoyed getting their faces painted, as well as receiving a tailor-made balloon animal of their choice. On our corner, just outside of Hawkers, were martial arts dragon performances, special music inside of Waffle Cone and HolySmoke Barbeque, and fun vibes throughout our Five Points neighborhood. The Promotions and Events committee, an initiative of the Five Points Association, worked hard and had fun planning and implementing this fabulous event. Mark your calendar for our next Five Points Funky Friday extravaganza on October 3, 4:00–8:00 pm.





# Recently at Riverside

September 7, 2025: Rally Day and a celebration of Pastor Brian's 5th Anniversary as Senior Pastor and Head of Staff at Riverside



September 7—We began with breakfast in Bittinger Hall and then explored all of the different spaces uses on Sunday mornings for Sunday School Classes, Worship, Worship and Wonder, Grow in Grace (children's church), and the Handbell Choir room. Five years ago, on August 1, 2020, Pastor Brian Lays began his call at Riverside. The co-chairs of the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) who called Brian to Riverside, Mary Coxe and Leigh Rosenbloom, made a special announcement at the beginning of the service and invited the congregation to enjoy cake after worship to celebrate. All of the communion servers that day were members of the PNC.



# Recently at Riverside



Top two photos: Blessing of the Backpacks on August 10, 2025. All students and educators were invited to the steps for a blessing and given a backpack tag that says "Be Kind." Below: Friends in Five Points! On the third Sunday of the month we invite you to each lunch in Five Points after worship. If you would like lunch companions, look for the person holding a yellow sign near the cookies and lemonade table in the courtyard.



Above: New Bible Studies for Women kicked off on September 8, 2025! Nancy Schneider (pictured above) teaches the 10:45 am group and Emily Heeg teaches the 1:00 pm group. All are welcome.

Below: Lunch Bunch met at Blue Orchid in July. All 65+ Riversiders are invited to meet for lunch on the third Thursday of the month at 11:30 am with our pastor(s)! Check the bulletin or weekly email for upcoming locations!





**October Birthdays**

1  
Mandy Alvarez

2  
Rachel Gaillard  
Delta Kraus  
Fin Williams

3  
Adam Celio  
Kelly Jenkins  
Bruce Smathers  
Diane Tuttle  
Vicky Watkins

4  
Chris Eyrick  
Will Harbison  
John Pence  
Alexa Worsham

6  
Agnes Fredericks  
Tom Lobello  
Partner Rosenbloom

7  
Margaret Burke  
Olivia Davis  
Bill Howey  
Laura Lambert  
Cliff Spohr  
Andy Swiercek

8  
Vic Hasselblad  
Christy Lane

9  
Rob Overly  
Lucy Wallace

10  
Jeanette Hoffman  
Tom Miller

11  
Gena Boone  
Salley Todd

12  
Jude McDonald

14  
Michele Cook  
Jan Duncan  
Frances Humes  
Kathy Newton

16  
Harper Allen  
Bill Burns

17  
Catherine Hunt

18  
Emily Coll  
Penny Cunningham

19  
Walt Brinkman  
Richard Campbell  
Zipf Pedrick  
Judy Wingate

20  
Susan Black  
Camp Charnley  
Lilly Hall  
Robert McDougall  
Jasper Riley

21  
Kae Harding  
Michael Harding  
Laura Silva  
Susan Suggs

22  
Trey Alvarez  
Mark Zeigler

23  
Will Walker

24  
Logan Lays  
Isy Milne  
Piper Spohr

25  
Mary Kress Littlepage  
Anne Meyer  
Diane Milne  
Dougie Milne  
Suzanne Perritt

Bill Proctor  
Nancy Splane

26  
John Grisnik  
Honey Moore

27  
Darren Dorsey  
Wendy Mueller

28  
Mike Erdelyi

29  
Evalyn Alderman  
Wycke Hampton  
Michael Lane  
Beth Mixson

30  
Samer Garas  
Ann Gittings  
Philip Price  
Mark Rattigan  
Ryan Walker  
Chris Wrenn

31  
Gowie Cassell

**November Birthdays**

1  
Daniel Bergey  
Lillybelle Thoburn

2  
Sofina Parker

4  
Ann Cranford  
Ashley Diebenow  
Brenda Johnson  
Don Queen

5  
Bo Farrar  
Henry Wallace

6  
Henry Andrews  
Peter Cotchaleovitch  
Courtland Cummings

Barry Hall  
James Lays  
Julie McLaurine  
Kelly O'Brien  
Holly Rosenbloom

7  
Kerianne Celio  
Louis Gittings  
Pat Gurley  
James Rosenbloom  
Merry Tasel

8  
Tim Akin  
Phebe Ball

10  
Lynne Matson  
Marilyn Wood

11  
John Stiefel  
Karen Sullivan  
Dan VanTrice  
Dan Warner

12  
Bradley Celio  
Blanche Coffman  
Rusty Newton

14  
Adelaide Duncan

15  
Ryck Archambault  
Jennifer Ward

16  
David Breedlove  
Matt Hoff  
Kate Overly  
Chad Rice

18  
Kimberly Allen  
Lachlan Alvarez  
David Drew  
Quentin Lockwood

19  
Jim Gleaton  
Jaimie Smith

20  
David Boyd  
Sena Corbett  
Mary Caroline Gillam  
Bob Gittings  
Tyler Goff  
Sadie Hunt  
Bill Leuthold

21  
Erich Diebenow  
Steve Diebenow  
Missy Riley  
Cooper Verlander

22  
James C Jackson  
Tom Johnson  
Jane Miller

23  
Andy Baker  
Hayden Phillips  
Charlotte Verlander

24  
Val Lyman

25  
Allison Blanks  
Eveline Dyal  
John Humes

26  
Clementine Kuntz  
Ethan Lobello  
Abel Mehlenbacher  
Bennett Mehlenbacher  
Elizabeth Meux

27  
Peter King

28  
Michael Brumback  
Neff Jenkins

30  
Evelyn Brown  
Bob Gay  
Stuart Harbison  
Max Hoff  
Emily Stevenson

If we are missing your birthday,  
please call the Church Office  
(904) 355-4585 or  
email [communication@rpcjax.org](mailto:communication@rpcjax.org)



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# Worship & Wonder

Join us for a special worship service at 8:30 am

Connections deepened | Curiosity encouraged | Communion shared

**OCTOBER 5**  
**NOVEMBER 2**  
**DECEMBER 7**



**SHIVER  
AT THE  
RIVER**



**SAVE THE DATE!**  
**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 24**



Volunteer Signups coming soon for:  
GAMES, TRUNK OR TREAT, KITCHEN HELP, AND MORE!

*We will be collecting new and gently used  
children's books to give away. More info soon.*