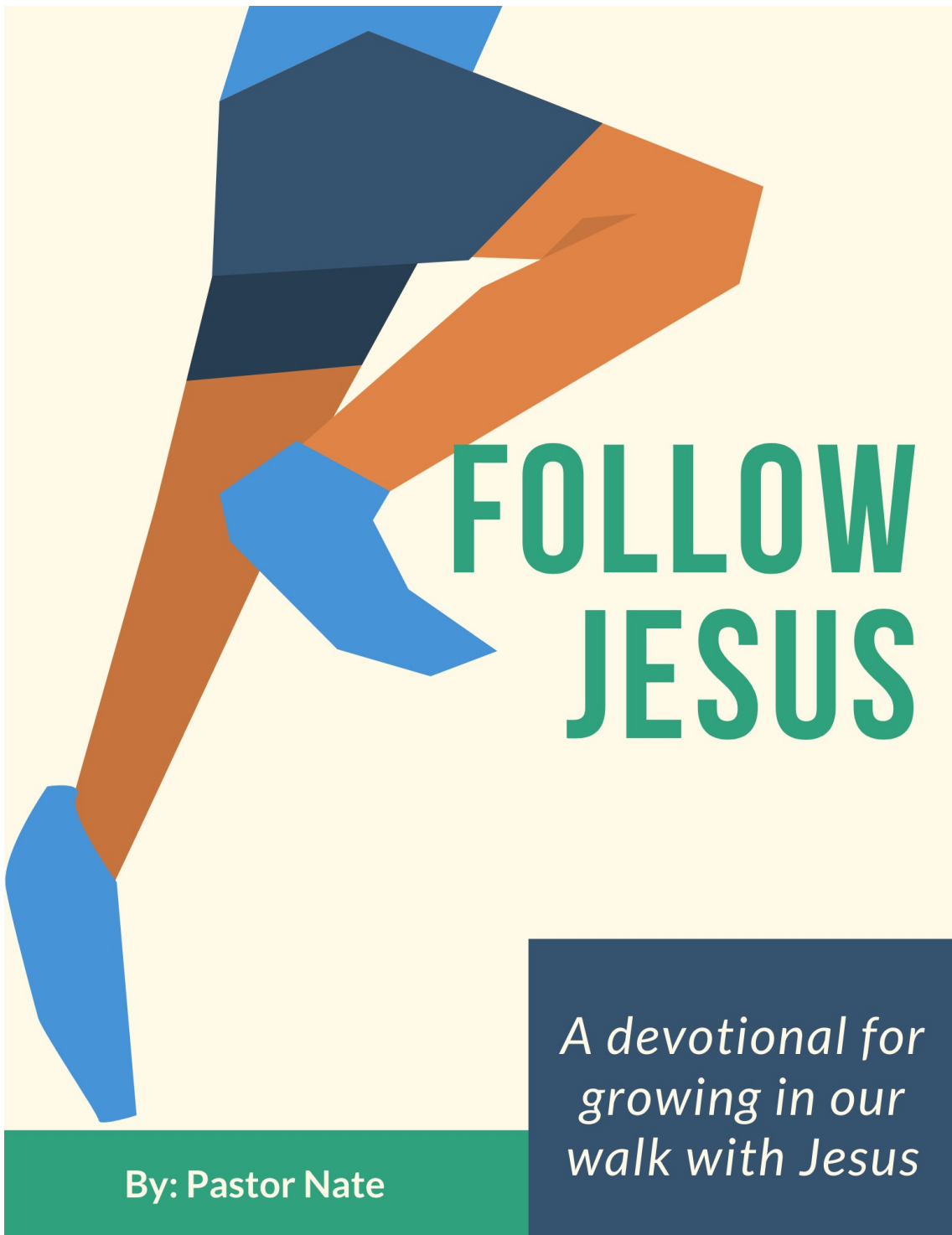




FOLLOW JESUS

*A devotional for
growing in our
walk with Jesus*

By: Pastor Nate

INTRODUCTION



The Summer months of the Church Year are reserved for something called “Ordinary Time”. It’s a season set us aside specifically for growing in our faith.

From Advent through Easter the church focuses on hearing the stories of Jesus and learning about his ministry, his life, and his death. But during Ordinary Time our focus is intended to shift to consider how we will now follow Jesus’s example in our own life.

This devotional booklet contains a collection of short reflections that I have written over the years. While the themes and scripture passages of each reflection are different, each one is intended to provide you with another way of following Jesus and growing as his disciple.

I have structured the book so that there is a devotional for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each week, but you are free to read this at whatever pace is best for you.

I pray that these reflections and this season of Ordinary Time allows you the chance to grow in your walk with Jesus.

Peace and Grace,
Pastor Nate



Monday—“Spending Time With the Teacher”

Through my own personal quest to follow Jesus day in and day out, as well as my quest to lead others into a day by day relationship with Jesus, I find myself constantly coming back to the topic of discipleship. The calling from Jesus at the end of Matthew’s Gospel continues to ring in my ears: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”* (Matthew 28:19)

Clearly, it was part of Jesus’ plan to have us become disciples and to lead others into this walk. But then the question becomes how?

I will always remember this one line about discipleship that I heard at a training conference years back: **“Being a disciple means you are spending time with the teacher.”**

I think it’s as simple as that. Spend time each and every day with The Teacher; time in prayer, time in study, time in worship and praise.

Walking with Jesus the teacher is not reserved for a few hours a week but is a journey that we are challenged to bring into every aspect of our lives. To me, “spending time with the teacher” is a personal act of consciousness; being aware of Christ’s presence in our daily interactions and showing the world through words and actions that Jesus is our teacher.



Wednesday—"Who Do You Say That I am?"

There's a point in the scriptures when Jesus asks his disciples a very direct and provocative question. Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?"

It's a question that we've likely been asked before by a preacher or confirmation teacher, but it is nonetheless a helpful question to reengage periodically because the answer to this question doesn't just reveal something about who Jesus is, but who we are as well.

Father Richard Rohr puts it beautifully: "Your image of God creates you." Such a statement makes one wonder if the current climate of fear and hatred in our world is a product of Sunday school classes and Sunday morning sermons about an angry and vengeful god.

I wonder, though, if the stories of Jesus the miracle worker, Jesus the teacher, and Jesus the transfigured and other stories of Jesus might alter our image of Jesus ever so slightly, and in so doing, change how we understand ourselves and our place in God's grand story.

Take time today and consider this question for you personally. Who do you say Jesus is? And how does your answer to this question change the way you live each day?



Friday—"Excess and Need"

Several years back I remember reading the following post on social media:

*"for kids whose stomachs hurt because they ate too much candy,
and for those whose bellies hurt because they have no food at all, we
pray."*

I'm not always quite sure what to do when I get a cold splash of reality like this. We know that our world exists in the tension of these type of circumstances. We know that some of us have so much that we don't know how to enjoy it all without getting a stomach ache, while others lack the basic needs for survival but we don't often know what to do with these situations. How are we to live in a world where there is so much excess and yet so much need?

I'll be honest, I don't have a good answer to all these questions. I'm sure that next Halloween will come and go and some children will gorge themselves on candy while others go to bed hungry. But in a world where this stark contrast is possible I find the following words of Jesus not only helpful, but convicting:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

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

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

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

- Matthew 5:3-7

Christ calls some of the most unlikely groups of people blessed not because He thinks their hunger or pain is a blessing but because, by His love, he has declared them blessed. And in so doing, Christ challenges us to understand blessings not in terms of what we have or don't have, but to understand blessing in terms of Christ's love for us. A love that is powerful enough to overcome the dichotomies within our world.

In our world of stark contrasts, we are called to see the excess and the needs with Christ's eyes and to bring that love of Christ to the many places of hardship in our world. May we learn to see the world with Christ's eyes. Amen.



Monday—"Your Own Personal Apocalypse"

With everything that's going on in the world I have been hearing a lot more whispers lately about this being the end of the world. I would like to start by responding to all of these theorists by quoting a much loved Bible passage of mine:

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." – Matthew 24:36.

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that even He doesn't know when the end will come. I doubt that this information from Matthew's gospel will actually stop people from trying to predict the end of the world because this is just how humans seem to be wired. We like to have the secret insider information. We like to be in on the joke, we like to claim to know the truth about big important matters. We like to be helpful, and informed, and secure, and in control and impressive. I think this is a big reason why so many people are quick to predict that the End Times are nigh.

If you ask me, I think it's this human mindset that needs to end. The need to be in control, the need to be unique, the need to feel special lives within us all. It's not inherently bad, but these types of tendencies can quickly spiral out of control. This way of thinking leads to greed and the oppression of others and all sorts of self-centered behavior.

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it." - Romans 12:2

The truth about the word "Apocalypse" is that it doesn't always mean "the end of the world". The word apocalypse simply means the ending of one chapter and the beginning of another. I think we all would do well to end the chapter of self-centeredness that too often pervades our world. Our calling is to focus on God and always keep God at the center of our life. So have your own personal Apocalypse today! Follow Jesus and His ways. Let God be at the center of your life and in control. It's a better a way to live and it can change the world for the better.



Wednesday—"Prove It"

Growing up, I played a lot of basketball in my driveway. My friends would come over and we would play 2 on 2 or 1 on 1 or, my favorite game of all - 21.

If you're unfamiliar, 21 is a game played with as many people as you want, but it's every person for themselves. The winner is the first to get to 21 points, but there are a variety of ways to do that and even ways for your opponents to reduce your score. The other fun thing about 21 is that there are so many variations of the rules. In my driveway, we had a specific rule that really was just a way to try and keep the game going. The rule was called "Prove it". If you were able to reach 21 points the game did NOT immediately end, instead you had to "Prove it"; you had to prove that you were worthy of the victory by backing up beyond the 3 point line and making one final jump shot. If the shot went in, you won that game, but if you missed, your score was reduced to 13 and play continued.

I think this "Prove it" mentality is all too common in our world today. Everyone seems to be working hard to justify their place at the table, their importance, their intelligence, their skill. Social media is this never ending flood of people shouting "look at me!" trying to prove to all their followers that they matter.

It's honestly heartbreaking when you really stop to think about it. So many people are walking around thinking that they aren't good enough, that they need to prove their worth in one way or another.

There's a passage in the Gospels where, right after being baptized, Jesus goes to the wilderness and is tempted by the devil. Each time the devil tempts Jesus he says "if you really are the Son of God..." the devil is asking Jesus to "Prove it" and every time Jesus resists because proving our worth is not the way of God.

We are all children of God, and nothing can take that away from us. The voices of evil tell us to "Prove it" but the voice of Jesus simply says, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you."



Friday—“Ch-ch-changes”

A few years back, Facebook, that enormous social media website, went through some aesthetic changes. Different icons and menus were shuffled around, graphics were updated, items were deleted or changed, and everyone was upset about it.

At that time Facebook had around 250 million users and about 249 million of the users were outraged by these adjustments. Within hours people were expressing their dissatisfaction with the changes and they were calling for “everything to go back to the way it used to be.”

What is it about change that is so difficult for us to grasp? Why do we get so upset when Facebook changes its layout, or when they change the time of our favorite TV show, or when they change the menu at the restaurant?

“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.” – Romans 12:2 taken from The Message paraphrase.

In this portion of his letter to the Romans, Paul is inviting members of the church in Rome to understand their faith as something that calls them to a different way of life than that of the Roman culture. Paul invites them to fix their thoughts on God and to be transformed by that relationship.

The reality is that we all need to change. None of us are completely perfect, finished individuals. We all have work to do and areas to grow. And that’s what God desires from us more than anything else: God wants nothing more than to be invited into our lives so that we might be changed from the inside out.



Monday—"Fundamentals"

One of my favorite times of the year is the weeks leading up to the NBA draft. I love all the speculating and trades and the endless discussion of different players skills and abilities.

Inevitably, somewhere in these discussions you'll also hear talk about a player's fundamentals. By this I mean how well the player has refined the core aspects of their game. How clean is their jump shot? How crisp is their passing? Do they dribble well? Do they know how to play defense? Do they have proper footwork in the post?

Discussions of fundamentals when talking about college basketball players is a joy for me. However, I bet if I used the word “fundamentals” in church or “fundamentalism” it would call to mind something completely different for most of you. When it comes to matters of faith, Fundamentalism is often associated with a particular branch of Christianity that emphasizes condemnation and judgement above all else.

But here’s the thing, I think we could all benefit from attending to the fundamentals of our faith a little bit more. Let me use a passage from Acts to explain:

“And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” - Acts 2:44-47

I think, in a way, this passage describes for us true Christian fundamentalism. The fundamentals of our practice of faith are described plainly for us in this short passage. The earliest Christians committed themselves to the apostle’s teachings, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. For the early Christian Church and the original disciples, the fundamentals are what kept their communities strong in the face of persecution. The fundamentals helped to constantly remind them and re-center them in the promises of God.

So I invite you this week to focus on the fundamentals. Study the apostles’ teachings that are recorded in the scriptures. Take time to fellowship and be in community with other Christians. Take part in a worship service where Holy Communion is celebrated. Find a moment each day to pause and pray. And then, take note of the ways that these fundamental practices keep you grounded and aware of the promises of God.



Wednesday—"Control"

My friend told me a story the other day about the worst experience he ever had participating in a Secret Santa gift exchange. Just like with all Secret Santa gift exchanges, each person in my friend's class put their name on a piece of paper and tossed it into a hat. Then, one by one, they drew names to find out whom they would secretly be buying gifts for.

Apparently, in order to help people out, all the participants were asked to also write on the piece of paper a few items that they might like to receive, or some of their interests, this way the Secret Santas had information to help them in their shopping.

When my friend drew a piece of paper from the hat he was shocked to discover that the only suggestion the individual offered, the only thing written on the piece of paper, besides the boy's name, was "gift cards".

Now don't get me wrong – gift cards can be a wonderful present – but something about putting "gift cards" down as the only thing on your Christmas list strikes me as the epitome of needing to be in control. I do not believe for a second that this person's only interest is gift cards – they put down "gift cards" because they wanted to be in control, because they didn't trust their Secret Santa to actually buy them anything worthwhile.

We see this longing for control in our lives of faith as well. We want to prove that God exists. We want the church to cater to our preferences in music and style of worship. We want God to be an active presence in our lives...but only when it is convenient for us.

I think if we are really honest with ourselves we have to admit that, at times, we aren't really that interested in knowing God or grow closer to God. Rather, what we really want is to be a god ourselves – we want to be in control.

"The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'" - John 1:43

Here is the hard truth: living a life of Christian faith ultimately means relinquishing our need for control. Jesus calls us to leave our normal lives behind and discover a new way of life in him. When we try and control everything, when we try and play the role that only God can fill, we will always fail.

But when we let go of our need for that all-encompassing control and we simply follow Jesus and let God be God that's when we discover peace and hope and life abundant.

May we be released from our need for control and learn to follow Jesus into a new way of life. Amen.



Friday—"Illusions"

I was reading this book the other night and in it they described God's love with this line, "God's love overcomes all of our sin, our despair, and our illusions." It's a pretty standard line, something that we've likely heard dozens of times before, except for that final portion, "... and our illusions".

When I first read it I automatically thought of magic tricks, because I LOVE magic tricks but I'm guessing that's not what the author meant.

No, I think that what God is more concerned with is overcoming the types of illusions that we ourselves concoct. Illusions like:

"If I just get enough stuff I'll be happy"

"I can handle this by myself"

"No one really cares about me"

"I'm better than those people"

"I can't make a difference"

"God has abandoned me."

And the list goes on... Part of the reason for all these illusions is simply because of the type of environment we live in. The world we live in bombards us with thousands of messages a day, and quite often this is where the illusions come from. If we see that McDonald's ad with everyone smiling and laughing enough times we begin to believe that a Big Mac is the very thing that will make us happy.

"For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace." - Romans 6:14

I'd like to make a small change to those words from Romans, try this out: "For your illusions shall no longer be your master because you are not controlled by the world's illusions, but by grace".

God promises to overcome all of the illusions that we believe; God promises to guide us into a better way of life. When we put our trust in God and define our lives by what God says (and not by what the world says) we discover a new way of life. A life free from the disappointment, despair, and pain brought on by believing illusions.



Monday—"Thankfulness, misplaced"

When I was 4 years old I lived on a dead end street with all retired families. However, there was a boy, let's call him Joey, who would come to visit his grandparents from time to time. He was about five years older than me, but since I was the only boy on the street, he was more than willing to play when he came to visit. Needless to say, I looked up to Joey and did nearly anything he asked me to do without thinking twice about it.

One day, Joey was sitting on his porch while his grandma was picking weeds in her garden. I walked over and said hello. Joey said to me, "my grandma is being really nice to me today, we should go get her something to say thanks."

As usual, I followed along without question. We walked down the street until Joey noticed a house with an Easter egg display in their front lawn. He told me that we should take several of those eggs and give them to his grandmother. Once again, I followed along without questioning. Shortly after we had walked away from that house, our hands filled with eggs, a woman from down the street, who had witnessed the entire event, began yelling at us. Joey and I started to run, but the women eventually caught us and then informed my mother and Joey's grandmother, of our thievery.

Here's why I'm sharing this story with you today: I think there are a lot of times where we as humans want to show God our thanks but we don't always find the best ways to do this. Often times we try and show our thanks for God by going out and trying to convert all our friends, or by calling out the evil that we see in other people's lives. Sometimes in our efforts to try and "win people for Jesus" we end up doing more harm to the Christian movement than good.

I think the strangest thing about Joey, me, and the Easter eggs, is that Joey thought stealing eggs for his grandmother was a good way to show his appreciation (and I followed along!). Wouldn't his grandmother have figured out very quickly that these were stolen eggs? Wouldn't it have made more sense for Joey to just help his grandmother in the garden?

"He has showed you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." - Micah 6:8

We can make our faith so complicated, when really it's quite simple. Joey and I wanted to show his grandmother that we were thankful. This is a good thing. In the same way, we want to show God that we are thankful. But we don't need to over think this! What God desires more than anything else is for us to act with mercy and justice and humility. Living our life like that is the best way to tell God, "Thanks".

May we learn to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Amen.



Wednesday—The Bible, more than a Decoration”

The other day, I was at my desk and I noticed my Bible, perched on top of a pile of books – collecting dust. Seeing this, I said to myself, “Wow, I’ve been really busy lately.” Then I said to myself, “When’s the last time I just read my Bible? Not in preparation for a sermon or Bible Study, but when’s the last time I just read the Bible and allowed the words of scripture to speak to me?” And then I said to myself, “I should stop talking to myself, people are going to think I’m crazy.”

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”
- Psalms 119:105

All of this reminded me of when I worked at a summer camp. Every day after breakfast the campers would go back to their cabins to clean, in hopes of winning The Cleanest Cabin Award, which was handed out at dinner each night. Most of the time my campers wouldn't try that hard to win the award. However, every now and then I would have a group of campers that would really want to win that Clean Cabin Award. And so, they would make their beds and put away their dirty socks, and sweep the floors, and put their duffel bags neatly under their bunks.

And then, the campers would put the cherry on top of their entire cleaning effort. After all, this was a Church Camp that I was working at, and so the campers would dig out their Bibles from the bottom of their duffel bags and they would place them on their pillows, for all the world to see. Apparently, to 10 year old campers, cleanliness and godliness went hand in hand.

I'm pretty sure that this was the only time the kids touched their Bibles all year, with the exception being those moments when a Pastor, Sunday School teacher, or me (their camp counselor) asked them to crack the book open.

I find it rather sad, that we, myself included, so often neglect the Bible and use it as a paper weight, or decoration. The reality is that the Bible is a living document where God speaks to us, and from which real wisdom flows.

I believe that taking time to slow down and allow scripture to speak to us is a daily practice that can change us for the better. Taking time to allow the ancient stories, prayers, and writings of scripture to wash over us puts us more closely in touch with God. Many times in my life, I have found comfort, and inspiration, and wisdom in the Scriptures that seemed as if it was written specifically for me. To use the Bible as nothing more than a decoration is a missed opportunity. In our world where we are overrun with competing messages, putting ourselves in touch with The Message is vital.

May the Word of God guide, challenge, and renew us this day and always. Amen.



Friday—"Jesus Didn't Really Mean that, Right?"

I heard a story the other day about a 7 year old boy, let's call him Alex, who was eating a bag of chips when his friend joined him at the lunch table. Alex had grown up in a home that always taught him to share, to be generous, and to not be selfish. With this in mind, Alex knew that the right thing to do was to offer some of his chips to his friend who had just sat down with him. One problem: Alex really wanted to eat all of his chips. They were his favorite – sour cream and onion potato chips – but Alex knew that the right thing to do was to offer some chips to his friend. So, Alex held out the chips and said to his friend, "You don't want any of these chips, right? That's what I thought."

One time, when Jesus was talking to a rich man who was wondering how to inherit eternal life. This is what he told the man:

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” - Mark 10:21

I bet that many people have heard these words before and I bet that when these words get brought up in churches and Bible Studies and in blog posts most people hear these instructions and then try and find a way around Jesus' directions.

I'm guessing that most of us hear these words from Jesus and we treat it like Alex with his bag of chips. “Jesus doesn't really want me to sell everything, right?” This seems to be how we always react when Jesus starts to talk about money. We know exactly what Christ is asking of us, but we find ways to only half-follow the expectations.

Jesus asks us to completely let go of our attachment to money, to give it all away in order to help others. When we hear this, most of us will be filled with anxiety because we can't even imagine giving away even a little bit more money. And yet, doesn't this reaction illustrate just how much trust we put in money? Jesus asks us to let go of this attachment and we're immediately terrified because we find security in our money.

And that's why Jesus asks us to let go of it; because we think that our security is based on having money. But Jesus knows that this type of relationship with money will always disappoint us. Jesus wants us to find security and to put our faith in him over and above everything else.

So let's stop making excuses, let's stop trying to find ways around Jesus' words and instead let's simply embrace the new way of life Jesus is inviting us into; a new way of life where our faith, security and well-being rests not in money, but in Jesus.

May we learn to let go and trust Christ more. Amen.

Monday—“Yokes and Life Jackets”

Several years back I served as the Summer Staff Chaplain for Lake Chautauqua Lutheran Center. During that summer I used Matthew 11:28-30 as a theme verse for my work with the staff. Here’s what that passage says:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

- Matthew 11:28-30

Here’s what we need to know, when Jesus talks about a yoke here he’s not talking about a physical yoke like this:



Jesus was talking about his teachings. Jesus is a Rabbi and in His day a Rabbi’s yoke referred to the teachings of the Rabbi. Each Rabbi had a unique way of interpreting the Scriptures and so the followers of different Rabbis would subscribe to different “yokes”.

A friend of mine compared the yoke in this passage to a life jacket. I really like this analogy. If you’ve ever spent time on a lake (and this friend is from Minnesota, so we can assume that she has spent time on 10,000 different lakes) you know that you always have to put on your life jacket. Even if you are an expert swimmer, or even if you’re just sitting in the boat with no intention of going in the water, you wear a life jacket. And if you’ve ever worn a life jacket, you know how awkward and cumbersome they are. But despite all these inconveniences, you wear a life jacket because it can save your life.

It's much the same with the yoke of Jesus. We follow Jesus and listen to his teachings because it saves our life. At times Jesus' yoke might seem awkward, or out of place. At times following Jesus certainly won't be the popular or easy choice. But the truth is that following Jesus is the way we were meant to live, it is the yoke that saves us from ourselves and guides us away from our own dumb decisions. And also, have you ever noticed that some life jackets look like a lot like that yoke image I posted above?



It's interesting that in this passage Jesus says that his yoke is easy. Personally, I don't think the message of Jesus is always easy. For example (and there are many examples), Jesus tells his followers to sell everything they own and follow him. Not easy.

But when Jesus says that His yoke is easy and burden light He is inviting us to understand His ways as blessings. He is inviting us to find rest in His teachings; to discover that His way of life is the best way to live, it's the way we were created to live.

So, yeah, the teachings of Jesus are kinda like a life jacket. Maybe they seem a little awkward and cumbersome at first, but you get used to it. And not only that, but these teachings they can save your life. May we find rest and blessing in The Way of Jesus Christ. Amen.



Wednesday—"In the Hands of the Silversmith"

I came across this verse the other day from the little-referenced-book of Malachi. In Chapter three it says:

“God will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” (Malachi 3:3)

We hear a lot of different things about God and about God’s nature. The Bible is filled with hundreds of different analogies and metaphors that try and describe God, but God as a silversmith? What’s that about? Now, if you’re anything like me, silversmithing isn’t a profession that you’re particularly familiar with. That’s probably part of what makes this verse so strange. But as I was scrounging around for information about silversmiths, I came across this brief story. It’s about a woman who read Malachi 3:3 and then went to interview her local silversmith.

“As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined.

The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?”

He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that’s easy – when I see my image in it.””

The metaphor of God as a silversmith from Malachi reminds us that at times life can be difficult – it can feel like we’ve been thrown into the hottest part of the fire, left to burn away. But just as a silversmith never takes their eyes off the silver, God never abandons us; God is always watching over us - even in the midst of our struggles.

And ultimately we are refined and matured by the trials we face. Just as silver reflects the image of the silversmith, when we grow in our faith and trust we come to reflect the image of God.

We are silver in the hands of a loving Creator – a silversmith who refines and removes our rough spots so that we might shine beautifully and brightly in a world that is often filled with ugly realities.

Though trials may come, may we know that God’s eyes never leave us. And may we continue to grow in the ways that we reflect the image of God to the world. Amen.

Friday—"A New Way of Life"

Why do you think Jesus came to earth?

I ask people this question and here are the usual responses I often get:

- To seek and save the Lost
- To reveal God to us
- To defeat demonic spirits of this world
- To die for our sins

These are good answers, and in certain ways they are correct, but none of them are the reason that Jesus himself gives in the Scriptures. You might have missed it, because it's just at the tail end of a verse right in the middle of John's Gospel, but Jesus says very clearly: "I came that you might have life and life abundantly." (John 10:10b)

And in Luke 4:43, Jesus says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."

In other words, Jesus came to usher in a new Kingdom, he came to reveal to us a different way of living in this world.

All of this got me to thinking, and I do my best thinking when I express my ideas through pictures. So, here are two pictures to consider:

1



2



As I consider the way I currently live, and the way that many of us currently live, I think of picture #1. We have this tendency to want to grasp on tightly to everything in our lives. We desperately try to hold on to our possessions and our rights and our ideas and we get angry or defensive when something or someone threatens any of this. And when we try to cling tightly to any of these things, there are almost always huge systemic problems as a result.

The economic collapse that took place in this country ten years ago was the result of a few powerful people clinging tightly to their blessings. And the splits that have taken place throughout the history of Christianity are the result of people clinging tightly to their understanding of Christian Truth. Notice how the sand in picture #1 is falling out the bottom of the hand. If you've ever tried to hold a handful of sand like this you know that clinging tightly to it will always result in loss. In the same way, when we try and cling tightly to the blessings God has given us, something falls away; something is lost.

I think that Jesus wants to lead us into a way of life that looks more like picture #2. I'm convinced that Jesus' desires for us to see our possessions, ideas, and rights, as blessings from God, rather than as the things that define our life. We are called to hold these blessings lightly, with open palms, and to have faith in the promise that we are defined by God's love for us. It's clear that this is the life Jesus modeled. He loosely held all of His blessings, He gave generously when there was need, and He willingly gave up His very life, for God's purpose and our sake. He gave up His life so that we might know God's love and discover a new way of life through Him.

May we learn to follow Jesus into a new way of life – a life where we hold our blessings loosely and give freely to others. Amen.



Monday—"What I Learned From Space Jam"

One of my favorite movies as a kid was Space Jam. And for good reason! It had aliens, Looney tunes, Wayne Knight, Bill Murray, and of course, Michael Jordan. If you're unfamiliar with Space Jam - go rent it! (Waiting for you to find a movie rental place that's still open...) Okay, now watch it! (Waiting for you to watch the movie.)

All finished? Good.

My guess is, you didn't actually take the time to rent and watch Space Jam, or maybe you did and you've already forgotten what it was about. I'm not going to give a full review, but here's what you need to know for the sake of this devotional:

The Monstars are playing the Looney Tunes in a very important basketball game. Michael Jordan is playing on the Looney Tune team, but at halftime the Looney Tunes are losing badly to the Monstars.

The Looney Tunes are feeling defeated and hopeless, they can't possibly beat the Monstars. That's when this happens... Michael Jordan (with the help of Bugs Bunny) convinces the Looney Tunes that his "Secret Stuff" will give them a needed boost.

What the Looney Tunes don't realize is that they are just drinking water, they really think it is "Secret Stuff" with magical powers that will help them win the important basketball game.

Have you ever wished that you had some form of "Secret Stuff"? Some type of magical potion that can give you the needed energy, strength, talent, or wisdom to work through a seemingly impossible situation? I know I have. But the thing is, the world doesn't really work like that. Rarely, if ever, is there a magic bullet for difficult situations.

In Space Jam, even though the "Secret Stuff" is just water, it actually works. The Looney Tunes battle back and win the basketball game against the Monstars.

The reason the Secret Stuff works isn't because it's actually magical, but because it caused the Looney Tunes to change their perspective. Until that moment everything seemed hopeless for The Tune Squad. But the Secret Stuff gave them a different perspective, it allowed them to adjust their mindset and approach the game with new confidence.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." John 18:36

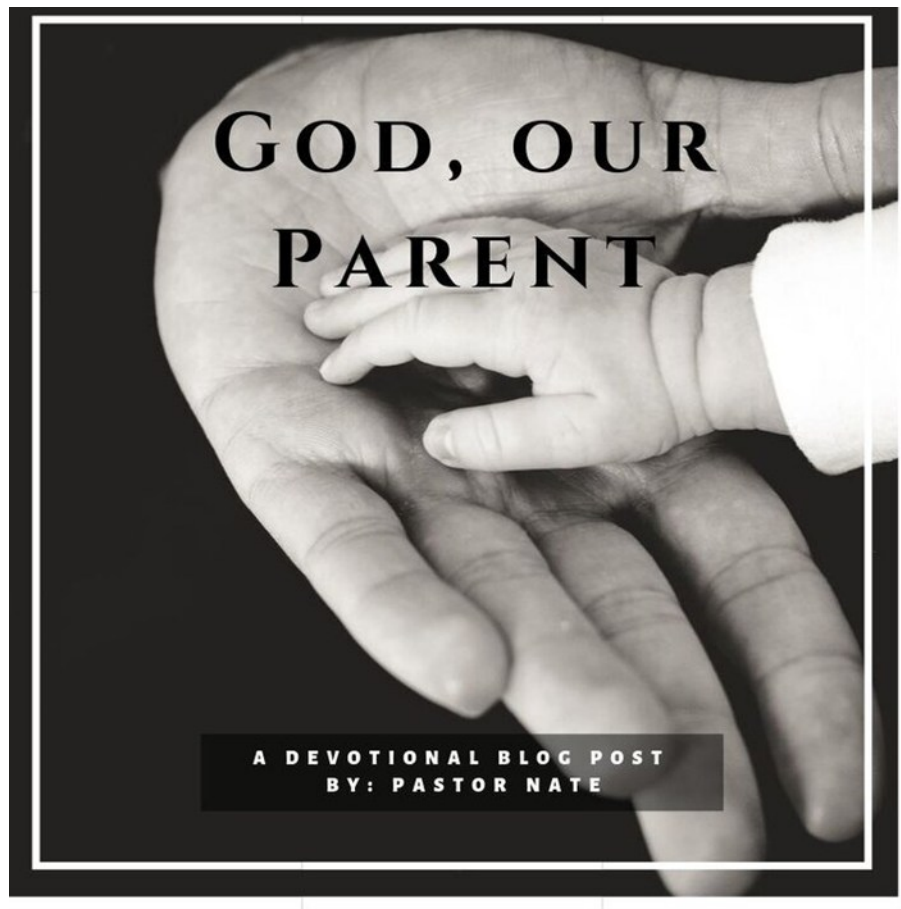
Throughout Jesus' ministry he talks about the Kingdom of God. Through his actions and words and miracles, Jesus reveals to the world a different type of Kingdom – a different perspective for understanding and looking at life, the shift of perspective that Jesus is constantly inviting us to make. We don't have to sit around waiting for a magic bullet to save us. Maybe all we need is to shift our perspective and approach life with a different mindset – in ways that Jesus would:

Instead of repaying violence with violence, Jesus invites us to choose peace.

Instead of repaying hate with hate, Jesus invites us to choose love.

Instead of repaying greed with greed, Jesus invites us to choose generosity.

Jesus invites us to change our perspective and to discover new life by following him.



Wednesday—"God, Our Parent"

When I think about my parents, one of the things I remember is all the curfews and rules they established. They were always telling my sisters and me how to behave in public and giving us rules to obey and responsibilities around the house.

And a long, long time ago, God talked to a guy named Moses and gave him a similar list of rules called the Ten Commandments. Now Christians will often think about these Ten Commandments as a list of ten rules that must be followed if we are going to make God happy. It's similar to the ways that we all probably understood the rules our parents established when we were younger; "I've got to do my chores, otherwise Dad is going to be mad."

But as we grow older we begin to see that our parents didn't just establish rules randomly — the rules they set were meant to teach us responsibility and honesty and work ethic. The rules our parents established were helping to guide us towards maturity. A parent doesn't make rules just because they can; they set rules so that we will mature; so that we will be safe; so that we can have a better life.

I think that's what The Ten Commandments are about. The Commandments weren't just made up as some sort of test by God to see if we would really listen and obey. The Commandments are a gift from God, they were given so that we might live our life in the best ways possible — the way God intended for us to live.

Now that I am a father, I understand why my parents established all those rules for me growing up. They loved me and wanted to keep me safe, and they wanted to see me grow up into a mature adult who could take care of himself. And in the same way, God has given us the Ten Commandments, because God loves us and wants to provide us with guidelines that will help us live a more full and complete life.

“You will be blessed if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today.” Deuteronomy 11:27

God does not give us a reward when we follow the Commandments, rather, the Commandments themselves are the reward. The Commandments are a blessing from God that guide us into living our lives in the way God intended.

When we make God our first priority (First Commandment), and we honor and respect God's name (Second Commandment), and we take time to rest (Third Commandment), and we Honor our parents (Fourth Commandment), and we refrain from murdering, committing adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting (Commandments 5-10), our lives are simply better.

May we discover the wisdom of God's Commandments, and allow God to move us into fuller, more complete lives. Amen.



Friday – “So Much Better than Day-Old Bread”

In the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John there is this crowd of people who follow Jesus to Capernaum. When they find him Jesus talks with them about the work that God is calling them to do and their response is:

“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Here's the thing you need to know about this group though. They are hinting at something else here with their statement. They actually aren't that interested in Jesus performing a sign so that they can be reassured and commit their lives to the Mission of God. No. They are actually just trying to coax Jesus into giving them a free meal.

Earlier in John chapter 6, Jesus miraculously feeds 5,000 people and this group that followed him to Capernaum, the ones asking about manna in the wilderness? They were part of that 5,000! They are following Jesus around because they want more miraculous bread and they aren't being at all subtle about your hopes and intentions.

Sometimes in our walk of faith, we start thinking like this group of people. We start longing for the day-old bread that God once provided. We look to the past and talk about how great it once was and we try and find ways to get back to it. In not-so-subtle ways we'll ask God to return us to the "miraculous" days of yore.

Here's the problem with this type of thinking – it focuses on the substance of the miracle and not the one who brought the miracle about.

When that group ask Jesus for some more bread, Jesus responded by saying "I am the bread of life." Jesus was trying to remind the group that the meal they had miraculously experienced wasn't the point, it was His love and his presence in the world that truly matter.

When we think about the "glory days" of our church or the "mountain top" moments of our faith, they are important, but only because of what they reveal to us about God. The loving, ever-present God who authored those glory days and mountain top moments should be our focus.

If our attention is only on the miraculous moments of the past then we are forgetting Jesus. We are looking for day-old bread when The Bread of Life is still with us and guiding us into a new moment.



Monday— “Jesus’ Radical Love”

I was talking with some friends the other day about this passage:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man,
there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ
Jesus. - Galatians 3:28

It’s a great passage, and through that conversation with friends, I’ve had some new insights about what it is saying to us.

You see, in the first century, when Paul was writing this, the debate about Jew vs Greek was HUGE. Let me repeat that, the debate about Jew vs Greek was HUGE. Following everything that Christ had done people were wondering what it meant to be Jewish, they were questioning where the lines had to be drawn. Did people have to be Jewish to be Christian? Did people still have to follow the customs of the Jewish culture to be a follower of Christ?

That is what Paul is trying to approach with this question. He's writing to his friends in Galatia and he's telling them that this fight needs to be ended — all are welcome. The world doesn't have to be like this anymore. God has leveled the playing field. Paul is telling these people just how revolutionary the love of Jesus really is.

Jesus, through not only his words, but by his actions also sought to turn the entire system around. Jesus lived in a world that segregated based on religion and sex and country of origin.

By befriending tax collectors and fisherman, and by loving the poor and the untouchables Jesus turned the entire culture upside-down. His radical love opened the eyes of many. It is that love that Paul had heard about and then experienced himself. That is why he wrote those words to the Galatians...

“Don't you get it? Don't you see that all this fighting is silly in light of what Jesus did? It's not about being a Jew or a Greek, it's about being a child of God; a beautiful, wonderful, perfect child of God.” (my version of Galatians 3:28)

The revolutionary love of Christ lives on. Even today it is still truly present. And so, Paul's words are still relevant.

There is so much today that has not yet been touched by Christ's love. It is our call to respond to the revolutionary love that Christ has shown us and to pass that love onto the world. It is our task to carry on the words of Paul and to show people that because of Christ, our arguments can cease. The world doesn't have to be like this anymore.

I pray that the radical love of Christ can work within us and can foster change in this world.



Wednesday—"Jesus Saves"

God, come back!
Smile your blessing smile.
That will be our salvation.
—Psalm 80 (The Message)

Salvation is something that we are taught growing up, something that tells us that when we die God will save us from eternal damnation and we will live in heaven for ever eating candy and smelling flowers. I have no idea if that's true or not, nor will I ever have an idea — at least not until I die and I actually partake in a candy feast with roses by my side.

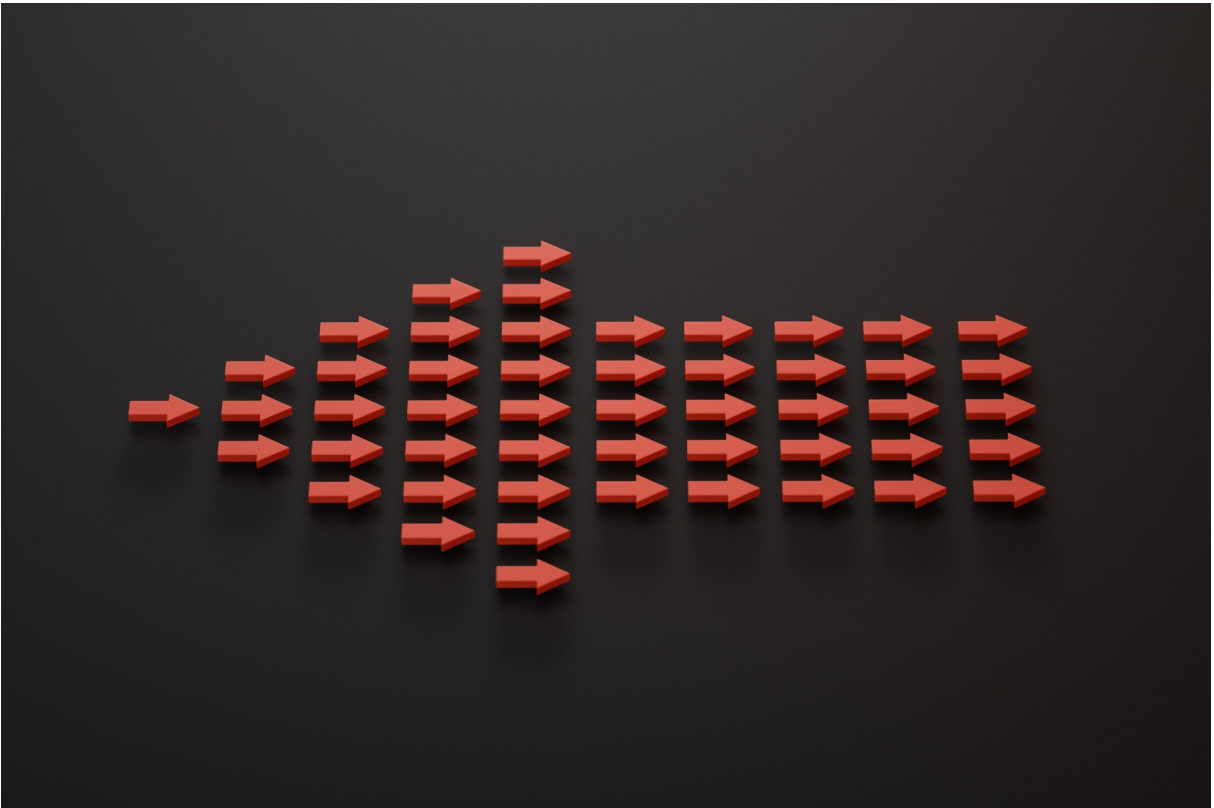
But instead of putting salvation off and to the side for the next 60 years (God-willing) we all need to look and see where salvation exists today, how the message of Jesus is affecting us today.

It's not just about reading the Gospel, or even believing the Gospel, it's about living the Gospel. With his life Jesus showed what perfect human existence looks like, submitting to God's will, seeking out the lost and lonely, preaching kindness not hate, humbly following what God has planned for him.

Just living like this, truly bringing our lives into God's presence, will allow for salvation here and now. We will be saved from ourselves. Every day we try to serve some earthly God, whether it be popularity, social media, our job, a spouse or significant other, or even our own natural urges to care only for ourselves, these are the moments of are stumbling.

The message of the Gospel, when we believe it, own it, and live it, when we truly seek to dwell in God's presence, that message can be our salvation. The words and life that a man from Nazareth led 2000 years ago can today affect change in our lives. His life can be our salvation today. His way of living can take us away from all those self-destructive habits. His way can save us from the behaviors that hurt us. His way can save us from all the terror and trouble that we experience in this world today.

The life and example of Jesus can save us, when we die, but also today. Lord, help us to live in your presence so that you can save us from those behaviors that destroy us. Amen.



Monday— “Misdirection”

I love magic tricks. As a kid I loved the wonder of them and how the seemingly miraculous could happen right before my eyes. As I’ve gotten older I’ve loved learning the clever secrets that make the illusions possible.

Most of any magic trick is just misdirection. The person performing the trick tries to pull your attention elsewhere while they make the “magic” happen without you realizing it. The misdirection is what fools you. I think it’s the same with our life of faith as well. Some slight, or some struggle, or some annoyance comes along and we start to think that it’s the end of the world. We get so caught up in resenting the person who slighted us, or complaining about the struggle facing us, or avoiding the task that annoys us and we think that our resentment or complaints or avoidance will some how make things better but it never does. We’re just misdirected and caught up in focusing on the entirely wrong things.

Our faith tells us that we are called to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Or the way I like to say it, is that we are called to know that God loves us and to show that love to others. Anything else is just misdirection. It’s the forces of evil pulling us away from what actually matters.

Look at your life today. Have you been misdirected? Are you holding a grudge or caught up in some drama that doesn’t have anything to do with loving God or loving your neighbor? These are the things that God invites us to let go of. There’s so much in this world that can grab for our attention, but a lot of it is just misdirection. Certainly, we sometimes have to deal with the minor annoyances of our life, but we don’t have to be consumed by them.

Following Jesus is invitation to let go of all the misdirection and distractions that so often overwhelm us and to instead simply know love and show love.



Wednesday—"The Counter-Intuitive Ways of God"

My kids have been in swim lessons and I have loved watching them trying to wrap their mind around this strange skill. Do you remember when you first learned to swim? It is such a scary process at first. You know that you can't breathe underwater so you logically conclude you must find any way possible to keep your head above water. During your first attempts you try thrashing around wildly, moving every limb and appendage with as much force as you can muster. It's as if you're fighting the water, struggling against it in hopes of keeping afloat. Your ferocious efforts cause you to swallow water, which causes you to freak out even more and struggle even harder and eventually your swim instructor has to come over and save you from yourself. But eventually, you learn that this violent, assaulting approach does not work, in fact it seems to make you sink faster. Your swim instructor begins to convince you to relax a little bit, and sooner or later, you are amazed to discover that if just do nothing, you can float quite peacefully on the water.

It's all completely counter-intuitive. It doesn't make logical sense that you should just let go and be still and give yourself over to the water, but that's actually crucial for mastering the skill.

It's funny because our life of faith also has some counter-intuitive elements. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he invites the people to not think with a Greek mindset or with a Jewish mindset but instead to embrace a new type of wisdom that God has revealed through Jesus Christ:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

– 1 Corinthians 1:22-24

Paul's words remind us that the Wisdom of God is different than our worldly wisdom. Although it might seem counter-intuitive to worship a crucified Savior, our faith tells us that God is deeply present in suffering; that God uses weakness for God's purposes; that crucifixion is actually the beginning of Resurrection Life.

Certainly, there is still room in our faith for reason, intellect, and knowledge but there are also times when we, as people of faith, are invited to let go of our need for logical explanations and to instead embrace the counter-intuitive ways of God. We are invited to have faith that God really can use our despair to bring hope and take something like death and author new life.



Friday—"Remember God"

Growing up in Confirmation Class I was always taught that sinfulness means "missing the mark". I remember weird Bible studies at Church Camp where we would go to the archery range and talk about trying to hit the bullseyes (or at least the target) and there would be some sort of strange connection to God's desire for us to live a perfect "bullseye" life. We were told that when we missed the mark - that was sin.

But much later in life, I learned that there is another way to talk about sinfulness. Apparently a much more Biblical way to understand our sin is as forgetfulness.

For example, when the Israelites had been in Jerusalem for a little while, all of their success started to distract them from all the things God had done. They became so focused on getting more land and more power and more shiny new things that they began to forget about God. And this forgetfulness caused the Israelites to lose their connection with God. I really like talking about sin as forgetfulness because I believe that God is loving, and gracious, and therefore sin as forgetfulness just seems like so much less pressure than having to always "hit the bullseye".

But I also think it's important to speak of sin as forgetfulness because it gives us a much better path forward.

When we speak of sin as "missing the mark" the only solution is to just do better. But when we speak about sin as forgetfulness then the path forward is to remember. And isn't that what our faith is built on in the first place?

When we gather for worship, when we read our Bible, when we pause to say a prayer or read a devotional, we are deliberately remembering that God is a part of our life and our world. When we remember who God is and who God has called us to be, there is healing and power and grace in that moment.



Monday —“The Promise of Failure”

Growing up I always got yelled at on Sunday morning for taking my shoes off in the pew. My “church shoes” weren’t that comfortable so as soon as my family arrived in our assigned pew, I’d take them off and go through the entire church service in stocking feet. My mother was appalled. There seemed to be this unwritten rule that church was a place where you had to look absolutely 100% put together.

Maybe it’s because church is a thought of as a holy place, or maybe it’s because we think God watches us more closely at church, but more so than a lot of places, church seems to be the place where people are very concerned with how they come across.

It's so sad though, because in our efforts to look really put together I think we often miss the point. Because in my mind, church should be the place where everyone is loved, church should be the place where everyone is accepted and supported, not a place where we gossip and put each other down and whisper behind each other's backs and do whatever we can to hide all our faults.

In fact, as I read the scriptures I hear a message about the importance of failure. Jesus once observed how everyone was jockeying for the best seat at the table and he said "take the lowest seat at the banquet". This simple instruction was actually flying in the face of the entire social structure of Jesus' day. And I think those words are just as important today as they were 2000 years ago.

What would happen if willingly took the lowest seat at the table? What if we embraced humility and even failure and learned to see failure as a sign of promise and a source of wisdom rather than something to cover up and avoid? What if, rather than trying to hide our faults, rather than trying to always look put together, what if we just were honestly and openly ourselves. Wouldn't that change.... everything?

This is what Jesus wants for us. This is what Jesus invites us to do; he invites us to completely disregard the social systems we have that tells us "failure is not an option" and instead Jesus invites us to see the ways that failure can make us unique, and the ways that failure can bring about all sorts of new possibilities.

After all, Jesus failed; at first glance it seems as if the cross is the greatest failure of all. Jesus was the Messiah, he was supposed to come and overthrow the Roman empire and take back the Promised Land for the Israelites. But instead, the Romans captured and publicly executed him on the cross.

I'm sure at first, most people saw the cross as Jesus' ultimate failure. But as Christians we know that there is promise in failure; as Christians we believe God that takes failure and turns into new life.

Wednesday— “Out, Not Up”



One of the first stories in the Bible is about a group of people that try to build a temple that will reach up to God. It's called the Tower of Babel and it doesn't end well for the people. It's funny because I feel like we are still doing this.

Humanity seems to be stuck with this hubris and sense that they are able to work hard enough, to be creative enough, to achieve so much that we will reach God.

And so we go to all these efforts of trying to prove our worth; trying to impress other people with our accomplishments; trying to be as bright and shiny and successful as possible. It's a story as old as humanity itself.

But what if, rather than spending all that energy on building ourselves up, what if instead we used that energy to reach out? We waste so much time trying to prove our worth and value and in doing we miss God's promise to us: that we are loved and valued exactly as we are.

Not only do we miss this essential message from our Creator but we also miss the essential purpose that God had give to each of us — to reach out. To reveal to others their own inherent value. The story of the Tower of Babel is about a group of people who destroyed their community by trying to build up.

But towards the end of the Bible there's another story about Pentecost when the Holy Spirit sent the disciples out and their actions built a diverse, global community of Christ.

We are called to go out rather than build ourselves up. And when we do the world will be healed and the community of Christ will grow.

Friday—“Theology of the Cross



Sometimes people will ask me, what’s the Lutheran Church about? It’s often hard to distinguish between one Christian denomination and the other and that’s because there are a lot of theological similarities with only a few subtle differences.

But still, I feel like I have to have an answer to this question. So, when I am asked for a unique understanding of Lutheran views I’ll mention The Theology of the Cross.

The truth is, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, and probably other Christian denominations would all be fine with the Theology of the Cross, but I think Lutherans really get to claim it because it stems from writings of Martin Luther.

The general idea is this — we know what God is like most clearly through what Jesus did on the Cross. In other words, when we are suffering, when we confront death in all its ugliness, when we feel lonely or forsaken, that is actually the moment when God is near. On the cross Jesus revealed that God’s power is shown through sacrifice and weakness.

Some Christian denominations will say that Jesus’ death was his way of suffering for us. But a Lutheran would put a little twist on this and say that Jesus suffers *with* us. It’s a powerful reframing and I think a deeply comforting thought; that our moments of fear and pain and struggle are in fact the places where God has promised to show up.



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