



HOSPITALITY. HOPE AND HEALING

A Lenten Devotional

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, United Methodist pastor, now Bishop, Robert Schnase authored a book called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. The first practice Schnase listed was **Radical Hospitality**. United Methodists across the globe have been upping their hospitality game ever since.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:7.

“The God of the Christian Scriptures is a God of hospitality, a God who extends hospitality to his people and who requires that his people embody hospitality to others. God’s hospitality to us is the basis of our hospitality to one another. God’s relationship to his people is fundamentally an act of hospitality to strangers, as God makes space for ‘the other,’ for his people, by inviting humanity into relationship with him. This experience of God’s hospitality is at the very heart of the church’s identity. We are God’s guests and friends. It is because of God’s extension of hospitality and friendship to us that the church can offer hospitality to one another **and** to those seemingly outside the reach of our faith communities. Just as God extends welcome and hospitality toward his people, so also God’s people extend

hospitality to one another, and as we imitate God, we offer hospitality—particularly to ‘the other,’ the one who is not like us, the one outside. This does not mean that there are not challenges, limitations, and boundaries to our showing hospitality. There most certainly are. But it does mean that hospitality to strangers is an inextricable component of the identity of church and its vocation.” (*Saved by Hospitality and Faith*, by Joshua W. Jipp, p. 2.)

I created this hospitality devotional as a seminary project, seeking to tie together my limited understanding of hospitality with the immense, boundary-less hospitality of God.

The scripture lessons and commentaries will show the deep, rich meaning of hospitality, and the mutuality that lies at the heart of hospitality. According to the gospel stories there is necessarily a love of stranger, and a love of providing hospitality which is present in most interactions. When most fully present, hospitality is not only an initial welcome of neighbor, but it extends to being present to the holiness inherent in each child of God.

Biblical hospitality is different from entertaining or trying to entertain. When we are hospitable, our main focus is on a person. We seek to connect with a person, and to meet their

needs. Hospitality moves beyond food and shelter into conversation and encounters of the soul.

As we become intentionally hospitable, we never know when we might be talking with an angel, “welcoming angels unaware,” and so we expect to encounter the Holy.

Radical hospitality welcomes the “other” as they are. It doesn’t seek to change, clean up, embellish, or alter the one who is present. In true hospitality, there is no need for new clothes or new appearances of any kind. The essence of Christ is seen in the other and is unconditionally accepted.

Hospitality involves ministries of hope and healing, as well as welcoming and acceptance. As we are accepted for who we are, without reservation or judgment, our personhood and dignity are restored. Giving to another without expectation of reciprocity or return frees both parties to explore a deeper relationship. Receiving the stranger openly, we provide hope and healing along with provision and grace.

Jesus’ ministry is full of healing stories, and of giving hope to the hopeless. Jesus accepts us as we are, warts and all. These stories seek to show God’s acceptance of what we think unacceptable, as for each of us, it is only by God’s grace and generosity that we gain eternal life and purpose

of life. It is by sharing these gifts and graces that we receive, especially with those who are in need, that we become fully human, fully alive, fully redeemed. “Do unto others as I have done unto you.” Jesus didn’t judge and exclude, but rather opened his arms wide, inviting clean and unclean alike into new life.

The purpose of this devotional is to challenge us, individually and corporately, to form a renewed vision of what a life of grace and mercy means to us today, especially as we continue to work closely together and envision a more united future together in ministry. We have lifted up hospitality as a core value, and will continue to implement systems of awareness, care, and community going forward.

Lent is a period of self-examination and repentance. We look at our lives, the good, the bad, and the ugly. We look at our communities and social systems and ministries in the same way.

What in your life needs to change this year, personally, professionally, socially? To live obediently, what must I be willing to sacrifice or change? These are deep questions without simple answers. Yet these are questions that lead us to life and hope beyond where we are now.

The devotional begins on Ash Wednesday and continues until Easter, covering a 40-day period spanning 8 weeks. There are no readings on Sundays, as each Sunday can be thought of as a “little Easter” as we recall the resurrection and the hope that is always ours with the gift of renewed life in Christ. You may choose to spend Sunday revisiting a scripture text that touched you particularly during the previous week.

As you begin, read the scripture passage. Let it soak in a bit. Notice what words, phrases or images stand out. Take a minute or more. Then read the narration below.

Expect to encounter the Holy Spirit as you set aside this time for God’s Scripture. It has been said that the Bible is the only book that reads me—I have experienced that countless times. Allow the text to sneak into your heart, knowing it won’t always be comforting, and, sometimes it will be more challenging than we’d like. Allow the Word, God’s Holy Spirit, to speak into your life as it can for no one else, as God knows each of us in ways the world does not.

Let us begin...with a prayer:

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the gift of life. You invite us to be a part of creating your kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. You invite us to use our hearts,

minds, hands, feet, imagination, resources, alliances, and more, to help others to know that your love is boundless, full of grace and abounding in mercy—and that you desire that all would come to know what we know. Move in and through each one who shares in this devotional time. Stir up in us visions and dreams that will bring life to our congregation and our community. Set our hearts aflame with your love and our passion and conviction that nothing can separate us or anyone else from your love in Jesus Christ. Draw us closer to one another, closer to you, and calm our fears. Give us courage to release ourselves into this season, offering all that we are, and all that we have, for your purposes, as we make the journey to Gethsemane, Jerusalem, the cross, and the empty tomb. We are yours, God, and we are grateful. Use us, we pray...Amen.

IN THE BEGINNING

Perhaps the greatest act of hospitality ever performed occurred at the creation when God made the world in which we live. Who are we, that God would prepare a place such as this for us? That we, mere humanity, would be appointed to have dominion and care, over all of the fish, the birds, and all living things upon the earth. God breathed into all of the living things on the earth, including humans, and called them good. Think of the beauty that surrounds us. Think of the responsibility we have to preserve the beauty. It is fitting, then, that we not only care for the resources we have been given, but that we begin to share them unselfishly as well. God has “delegated” to humans the responsibility to offer hospitality to all other life forms on the planet, including all of humanity, especially to those who are different from us.

As we begin this season of Lent, may we think about ways in which we have abused the hospitality of God, making note of times when we have been overly wasteful of limited resources, vowing to make differences in our lifestyle, committing perhaps to recycling, or committing to recognizing the sameness between ourselves and those

who seem different from us. Being hospitable is the holy and just thing to do; we are to treat others with grace, just as we have been treated. What is the most amazing hospitality part of God's creation to you? What gift from God is most surprising?

THE LEAST OF THESE

In this passage which refers to the judgment of the Gentiles and the end times, Jesus reminds us of what it is to be truly righteous in God's eyes. We must care for those who are hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, sick, and imprisoned. We must treat all people with dignity, and do what we can to see that their basic needs are met. As we serve one another, especially those who have less, treating them with dignity, we see one another through the eyes of Christ. This is the way God expects us to treat one another, regardless of station or standing in life. All people on earth are children of God, and all have the right of having their basic needs met, of having equality of opportunity. In this Lenten season, how can I commit to serving others in a real way, that I am not serving myself first? I know that as I serve, I will be filled beyond my own comprehension. May our lives "get in the way" of opportunities to serve our fellow human and help us to forge new realities of community. In what ministries of serving are you most challenged, dealing with sick? Hungry? Foreign? Imprisoned? Or another group with whom God calls us into relationship?

ENTERTAINING ANGELS UNAWARE

In the culture of the desert, hospitality is a serious obligation. The stranger depends on the graciousness of others for survival, in need of food, shelter, and water while traveling through the wilderness. In this story, Abraham and Sarah provide hospitality to three strangers, making food, offering shelter, and the initial gesture of hospitality and service, a foot washing. It is the privilege of the host to provide such creature comforts. It is the knowledge of the host that strangers often bring blessings, though are not obligated to do so. The strangers in this story tell Sarah, who is quite advanced in years, that she will bear a son. Sarah laughs when she hears this, but the strangers have brought a promise from the Lord, a promise that will be fulfilled and will lead to a new nation, the nation of Israel. How do we receive strangers, whether they come to our home or we see them elsewhere? Do we expect to be blessed by them? Do we treat each encounter with another as if just by chance, the Holy may touch us?

THE GIFT OF HOSPITALITY

“Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the community are to meet the guest with all the courtesy of love. First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace...Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.” –Rule of St. Benedict 53:1,3–4; 15

The Rule of St. Benedict was written in the 6th century by Benedictine monks. It has been a guide to the spiritual life for common people ever since. The rule is grounded in learning to look at the world with the interior eyes of the Spirit.

Benedictine spirituality seeks to fill up the empty places, and to heal the brokenness of life, and to call for hospitality in times which were barbaric, times when tending to neighbor could be life-threatening. Benedictines see all of life as holy ground, regardless of who is standing on it. Becoming intentional about being hospitable, we become less frightened of what is different in the “other.” We

become less vulnerable, because we are not controlled by our fears. We are able to become more fully ourselves.

When encountering the “other,” whether familiar or not, act as if you are encountering Christ. Notice how this changes your interactions, and consequently, how this changes you. Imagine a scenario in your life when you come upon one who frightens you for whatever reason. How will you respond? How will you seek Christ in the encounter?

SABBATH REST

03/01/20

A BABY BOY

The story of Elisha and the woman sounds a bit like Abraham and Sarah's story, at least in the outcome. The Shunammite woman is advanced in age, but is promised a son by her visitor. In the same way Sarah laughed at the lunacy of such a proposition, so the woman here feels Elisha is surely joking. Hospitality is provided for Elisha without expectation or cost. There need be no payment. Gehazi shares with Elisha a true desire of the woman that has not been fulfilled. She desires a son. Our guests may not be able to provide children to us in our old age, and that may be fine for us. Think of the family lines and generations present in your congregation. In the day this story was written, children were seen as gifts from God, signs of God's favor. Being childless was a tragedy. Are there tragedies we may respond to when we provide genuine hospitality to others? Could strangers be bearing gifts for us that will change us, perhaps so that we are less inclined to look to ourselves for fulfillment, but perhaps look to the stranger, or to God? Surely any time we are able to take our eyes off of ourselves and concentrate on others, God looks favorably upon us.

GUEST BECOMES HOST

The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus seems unlikely, even for the Son of God. Jesus calls to a hated tax collector who is literally “up a tree,” trying to find Jesus. Jesus invites himself to be Zacchaeus’ guest, if only Zacchaeus will come out of the tree. Jesus gives Zacchaeus all of his attention, and relates to him unconditionally, even though Zacchaeus is a known tax collector, despised by the locals. Upon receiving such extravagant care and unconditional acceptance, Zacchaeus promises to “downsize,” and pay back all whom he has defrauded. Jesus offers grace, first. He doesn’t judge Zacchaeus; yet his extension of unconditional love changes Zacchaeus, immediately. Zacchaeus has gone up a tree, because that is the only place where he can seem to see Jesus. It may be a place for him to be safe from the crowd, too. Jesus isn’t overlooking you, but rather is preparing a place for you, maybe in your own home. As Jesus singles you out, noticing you among the crowd, how do you respond? Zacchaeus demonstrated inward change by outward action. Has your faith resulted in inward change? In action? What changes might you need to make?

MY GUEST LIST

If we stop inviting those we know and regularly associate with to dinner, must we always dine alone? True hospitality is extending the gift of oneself, unconditionally, without any thought of being paid back. Confession time. How often do we really extend any offer, of anything—time, space, object, or place—completely without any expectation of some sort of acknowledgement or reciprocity? Do you see Luke’s point here? Whether it’s an invitation into your home, your confidence, for coffee, or into any area of your life, assuming a position of biblical hospitality entails giving without conditions. I imagine when we leave one another’s homes following a shared meal, we speak something like, “Next time we’ll have you over.” What if we didn’t? Can we extend our table so that it includes those who might not be able to return the grace as we have given it to them? Can we open ourselves up to the possibility of such relationships anyway? We should take the greatest care in receiving the poor, as it is especially in them that Christ is received.

SOCIETAL HOSPITALITY

Do we have a responsibility for hospitality beyond our immediate circumstances? If we hearken back to Genesis 1 and the creation account, we established that all of life is a gift, because the world we live in is a gift from God to us. We are the caretakers. Does anything in our society alienate others, or keep any from having their basic human needs and rights fulfilled? Surely there are different neighborhoods to live in. What is our responsibility to those who have less than we? What if we declared a fast for Lent, of something we can do without. 38 million people (11 million children) in this country will be hungry tonight, 820 million in the world. 27% of households in Marietta struggle with hunger, and 42% of children. Do I have more than I need? If so, can I declare a fast, so I might know what it is like to feel hungry, and then donate what I might have spent on food to a food pantry? In addition to providing hospitable homes and churches, we are also responsible for providing a hospitable society. Are there systems I can seek to change, causes I can advocate, in order to make a difference? How can I make an impact today?

SHARING PROVISION

In order to genuinely provide for one another, we must do so without grumbling, either about the loss to ourselves or the potential unworthiness of the recipient. God wants us to give with glad and generous hearts, sharing always from our abundance. Whether sharing a blessing in our own home, or sharing with another what was ours, we need to be intentional and genuine in our generosity. Otherwise, even if we're giving a large gift, our unwilling heart turns the large gift into a small one. Test your own gift spirit as you give. God doesn't want us to give to anyone out of a sense of compulsion or obligation, but rather, God wants us to give because we are grateful and joyful for the gift of life. Ask yourself, when I am giving especially an unexpected gift to another, perhaps even having been startled at the request, do I mirror the joy of God?

Some of my own deep soul searching has happened when I have given "loans," especially when the loans are not repaid. I have had to root out my reasons for giving, my motivations, and frankly, my "need" of what was shared.

It has been a difficult journey. I have had to give up control, whether offering a legitimate (in my mind) gift, or a loan. God is still teaching me in this realm—may I remain teachable.

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

Jesus asks Bartimaeus this question, after Bartimaeus has hailed the son of David, no doubt despite efforts to quiet him by disciples and other companions of Jesus. The crowd surrounding Jesus had forgotten their deep-rooted cultural value of hospitality, a value that Jesus embodied and incarnated wherever he went. Bartimaeus had been a member of the community who had been kicked to the proverbial curb, because of his blindness, which reckoned him “unclean,” and no doubt a sinner due to that affliction. But Jesus sees and hears something else. Jesus is no doubt cut to the heart by Bartimaeus’s cries. Jesus is conscious and aware of his surroundings, and especially of those who are left at the margins too often to fend for themselves. The rules dictated that Bartimaeus was unclean. But the posture of hospitality, the way our actions are to reflect a hospitable attitude in our heart, is more important than any rules, especially rules that diminish sacred personhood of another. An internalized ethic of hospitality will override rules that force “untouchables” to the margins, so that we walk with that “other,” rather than force them out. Jesus invites Bartimaeus into the center of the street, the focus of

attention, the antithesis to where his culture had assigned him. How am I challenged in my treatment of those I consider “other” by this story and understanding of Bartimaeus?

SABBATH REST

03/08/20

A TAXING BANQUET

The word representing “filled with awe” in verse 26 is a paradox. Jesus, the peasant preacher, has just healed a paralytic in front of the Pharisees. This is not what they expected. Wonder at the unexpected sometimes opens our souls up so that we see God. In the next verses, the paradox continues, as this holy healer dines with sinners. The Pharisees and the other onlookers are perplexed. Jesus shares table with those a holy man should avoid. Jesus replies, “Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick; I have come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” You see, the righteous have all they need, especially as they declare themselves by word, action or deed as “righteous.” They have figured out how to heal themselves, and to declare themselves “clean.” We know that this is untrue; we also know that until we truly allow Jesus into our lives we are like the righteous in this parable. We must be hospitable to Jesus, expecting to receive a blessing from this guest in our hearts and our lives. We must be willing to make spaces for the Spirit, and also for the stranger, so that we all may be made well. How does my feeling of my own righteousness get in the way of my dining with those who are sin-sick and without hope in Jesus Christ? Am I able to fully receive the sinner who is me?

LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME

What would it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a child? What is Jesus talking about in this passage? Innocence? Purity? Is there childlike faith in you waiting to be embraced? Have you “over-rationalized” the Gospel? Are you able to be awestruck with wonder and joy? Are you able to laugh well, even at yourself? It is not surprising to us that the disciples would try to prevent the children from coming, as we in our maturity know that Jesus must have “important” things to attend to. After all, he is the Savior of the world. Jesus is most known to those who welcome him genuinely, and children are often the best at doing that. Watch a child in an unfamiliar environment. Most times, quickly, the child knows no stranger. Try to name what keeps you from receiving God’s love unconditionally, and then pray about what to do with that obstacle. Name it, and give it to God, ready to turn it over again each time it surfaces.

BEARING BURDENS

Jesus welcomes all who are carrying burdens, whatever the burden may be. Parcels of guilt, shame, fear, exhaustion, loneliness, Jesus wants us to give that yoke to him. Jesus promises presence and companionship for the journey, and whatever the load is, it is always lighter when it is shared. Jesus seeks to teach us a better way, so that we may then learn to bear the burdens of others, just as he has borne ours. When we walk together, we are able to find rest. As we take on Jesus' yoke in exchange for the one we have been carrying alone, we accept commissioning into ministry, in some form. Jesus frees us from our own burdens so that we may serve others as we have been served, in whatever ministry of presence to which we are called. What burdens are you carrying that you ought to turn over to Jesus so that you might be more spiritually productive and purposeful in your life? Where are you being called to serve?

LOAVES AND FISHES

This story is familiar. Some of the characteristics around it may be forgotten. The disciples have just returned from a day of exercising their own powers of healing and exorcising demons, having been equipped, empowered and sent by Jesus. They are exhausted, and ready for some rest. A crowd gathers around. It is nearly night, and they want the crowd to leave so they can...go to bed! They ask Jesus if they can ask the crowd to leave, and he tells the disciples not to rest but to feed them. Feed them?! With what? We don't have anywhere near enough! And the cost would be more than we could bear. The disciples had been given powers, and used them, until they got near Jesus. Then they forgot about their own abilities and resources, and solely depended upon him. Do you think God would ask you to do something that you and God together couldn't handle? What resources am I hoarding for myself, because I am tired or fearful? If I give myself to Jesus, what might I also share from my life?

AUTHENTICITY

Have you ever been around someone who doesn't seem genuine? Even seems blatantly fake? How does that make you feel? Can you trust their words, especially if they're kind? Paul is painting a picture of how we should act as true Christians. We are specifically called to extend hospitality to the stranger, and through the other loving actions described in the passage, we may touch even the stranger inside of ourselves. Paul gives us basic rules for conduct in life and in relationship in this passage. The passage begins with love and ends with hospitality. Maybe Paul's got something there. Ask yourself whether you have been genuine in your dealings with others lately. If not, why not? Does God's way of honoring others sound too difficult for your competitive nature? Why not try to outdo one another in showing honor?

HEALING HOSPITALITY

This passage seems to present the antithesis of hospitality. Jesus has rid this man of demons, and now the man wants to follow Jesus home. Jesus refuses to let him, but instead insists he go home and share with his friends all that God has done for him. At the same time, the people who witnessed the healing are begging Jesus to get out of town. They have seen the power of change Jesus can bring. Their economic stability has just been shaken. Life as they know it has been changed by the presence of Jesus. They are understandably frightened. Many will witness the miracles of Jesus. Some will delight in them, and some will fear them. Some will lose their livelihood because of Jesus' faithfulness. Receiving Jesus further into our lives can have all kinds of consequences: spiritual, emotional, social, physical, economic.... What do you stand to lose if you allow Jesus further into any of these areas of your life?

SABBATH REST

03/15/20

EXTRAVAGANCE

This woman offers extravagant acceptance of Jesus, in a place where she herself is not welcome. The imagery is powerful. She has become absolutely vulnerable, but the possible cost is nothing to her. She is paying tribute to the one who has given her new life, treated her with dignity and perhaps even restored her self-respect. She probably has never experienced such love and is grateful beyond measure. She has been forgiven much. She will risk herself in a different manner than she previously has, to show her gratitude to the One who helped her to see herself as a child of God. What have you done today to let God know how grateful you are for the gift of new life? Is there a person to whom you have not been adequately grateful? Is there a person near who needs to be reminded of God's love for them? Do you appreciate the wideness of God's mercy? Are you grateful for God's forgiveness?

TRAVELIN' MAN

Paul was a traveling man. Together with Silas, he covered a lot of ground in Macedonia and nearby regions. He traveled, trusting that God would provide for his needs. His concern was faithfulness. Paul had experienced a dramatic conversion, so he had no doubts about God's power. Lydia overheard Paul praying. She was eager for a chance at new life. She wanted baptism for herself and her husband. In her gratitude, she opened up her home to Paul and Silas and provided for their material needs while they were in her region. Who has provided for me with gifts of grace that I have not been thankful to? Am I willing for the Lord to open my heart, like Lydia's heart was opened while Paul was praying, so that I might live more fully into my baptism?

RECEIVING AND GIVING

Hospitality is an action. Guests and hosts will always make judgments on how well they have been treated. Go ahead...confess. We all want to be like the best host/hostess we know. Look out Joanna and Chip. We all have much to learn when it comes to receiving. When someone serves us, we can feel vulnerable, or out of control.

But Jesus wants to serve us. In fact, Jesus demands to serve Peter, and we can easily put ourselves in Peter's place. Jesus knows what we can and can't do for ourselves, yet Jesus wants to serve us to show us how to serve others. Foot washing was customary in the days of Jesus. Today foot washing serves as a reminder of the ethic of servant leadership we are called to practice as we model our lives after Jesus. Short of foot washing, what actions may I perform that demonstrate my service to others? Do my actions model servant leadership? Jesus knows all of the sins we've ever committed and yet he still loves us. How do I respond to that kind of love? How are you able to receive lavish love from others?

MINDFULNESS

Hospitality is mutual. In a world of extreme rushing and detachment, the impact of our concern for each other cannot be overlooked. Practice the ministry of presence when you are with friends and loved ones...and strangers. Open up your own heart and soul, so that you can be fully present. Consciously turn off the other noise, of cell phones, background noise, distractions, and work. Practice the ministry of presence...with your spouse, your friends, your children, even the clerk at the store. Look people in the eye and look beyond their faces. Hang on their words. See into their soul, seeking to connect with their divine nature. The blessings that bubble forth from this kind of generosity of spirit are many. Turn off the noise. Let your love out. Are there visitors in your church with whom you could share a meal? Do you know lonely people who would enjoy an evening of conversation? Is there any way your home could meet the needs of traveling missionaries? Hospitality, at its base, simply means making other people feel comfortable and at home.

RE-SETTLEMENT

Jeremiah's nation was in exile. They were unhappy, yet their needs were provided. God provides for us, even in the midst of circumstances that are not exactly what we would like. Even when we are in exile, like those in Babylon in these verses, we can find fullness of life, even in seeking the welfare of the people who subdue us. Brighter days are ahead. When we seek God, with all of our heart, even in exile, we can find full life. In what ways are parts of me in exile, entrapped by "foreigners" to my beliefs, my values, and my ethics? The "city" God has sent us into has changed much over the last 5 or 6 decades. It doesn't look like "home" anymore. And yet, here we are. We must not grow weary, but instead pray for this changed area, this different looking, different feeling homeland. We need to pray for it, and ask God to show us ways that we can make it feel more like our "glory days." God will give us a new beginning and a new purpose—turning us into new people. Do not lose hope. Remember that God has overcome the world!

SING PRAISE!

God has prepared this place for us, the universe and the heavens. We are guests in God's realm. God has already delivered on so many promises. We are called to be co-creators with God, as we take care of what has been entrusted to us. We have free will to make decisions that impact the present and the future. God has promised justice and peace and mercy. God presides over all that happens, and we collaborate in God's spiritual creation. Have I given thanks for the great joy that is ours in Christ Jesus? How have I helped or hindered the bringing about of God's kingdom on earth today? Have I lived caring for the stranger, seeking to free the captives I encountered?

SABBATH REST

03/22/20

MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

What is more hospitable than allowing one who has been in a broken relationship to be restored to community? Paul is asking Onesimus to allow Philemon to be restored to the community, at a greater status than when he left. Paul is asking that his former superior as “brother” receive Onesimus because we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. When we feel we have been wronged or taken advantage of, are we able to let go of hurt and anger so that relationship may be restored? Why or why not? What holds us back from offering genuine hospitality in such circumstances? To whom do I need to reconcile? How can I do this...soon? What barriers are in my home, neighborhood, and church? What separates me from fellow believers—race? Status? Wealth? Education? Personality? As with Philemon, God calls us to seek unity, breaking down those walls and embracing our brothers and sisters in Christ.

SHARING TABLE

Luke's gospel is filled with images of sharing table and providing hospitality. This image is particularly relevant as it is the Passover meal.

"Where do you want us to prepare for it?" the disciples ask. At Passover, a meal of remembrance, Jesus institutes a new sacramental meal. In this meal, we remember the price of our own salvation. Jesus is so hospitable he gives up his life for the guests at his table. But this is not all good news, for one is at the table with an ingenuine heart, set to betray Jesus. Jesus even includes the one who will betray him in the celebration and thanksgiving he offers to all who are present. When taking communion, approaching the table of grace, do you come with a clean heart? If not, with whom must you reconcile? What must you confess?

STEWARDS OF GRACE

It is impossible to be hospitable without love. Hospitality without love for the other is hollow and not genuine. As God gives each of us grace beyond measure, we are called to be stewards of God's grace, administering it generously as we live our lives. Everything that we do should be a reflection of the love we have experienced that was made real in Jesus Christ. God equips and enables us to do more than we can imagine on our own, and to provide and serve more generously than we believe we can. Am I restraining God's ability to work through me with my own self-consciousness or inability to truly accept the grace God offers? Am I freely receiving the grace I've been given, so that I may freely give? How is God praised when we use our abilities?

WHO IS MY SAMARITAN?

We can all spout parables, even the greatest commandment, but when we get out of the spotlight, back into our comfort zones, or even our zones of complacency, can we name our Samaritan? In this parable, the Samaritan is the person least likely to act correctly. Could our Samaritan be the people on welfare who never seem to get off? Or the man on the corner with the sign, "Will work for food"? Or the AIDS victim dying in Africa, or a few blocks away? Who is it that I will cross the street to avoid? These are questions we don't like to ask, nor openly admit answers to. Yet we each carry some prejudice and preference, named openly or not. What prejudices am I willing to confess, confront and offer to God so that I may be healed and may offer more universal hospitality? Crossing over to avoid or even to alienate is much easier sometimes than living up to Jesus' difficult command to love.

READY FOR WORSHIP

Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? God has prepared not only this world for us, but also the next. God prepares a place for us, but God does expect us to live right while we're here. What is "right" living? Soaking in the words of the Bible, writing God's word on our heart so that it resonates with each breath and so that it lives through our actions. John Wesley asked, "How is it with your soul?" God wants to affect each of our souls, touching us and testing us, opening us to examination, so that we might live more holy lives. How is it with my soul? What is binding me, keeping me from full life?

LAWS OF THE LAND

No man is an island. We are our brother's keeper. We are responsible for the aliens and strangers among us. These laws sound like some of Jesus's words. Jesus was a Jew, so that makes sense. Jesus often quotes from the Torah. The difference is that the Pharisees often used the Torah to **exclude** people from community. Jesus used the Torah to **include** people in community. Everything is open to interpretation. However, in order to interpret what God and Jesus said, one must be familiar with the character of God. Is it God's character to condemn, alienate and separate? God is a creator, a reconciler, and a restorer. Why would we believe those negative things? It is important to spend time in God's word, so that you may test your life and living, especially before judging others, like the Pharisees did. In what ways can you leave "the edges of your field" for those in need?

How do you feel when you encounter foreigners, especially those who don't speak your language? Are you impatient? Do you think or act as if they should go back where they came from? Are you tempted to take advantage of them?

God says to treat foreigners as you'd treat fellow countrymen and women, to love them as you love yourself. In reality, we are all foreigners in this world, because it is only a temporary home. View strangers, newcomers, and foreigners as opportunities to demonstrate God's love.

SABBATH DAY

03/29/20

GOD'S PRESENCE REVEALED

Before Jesus, God revealed Godself to us in various ways. Sometimes the Word was written. Sometimes spoken. Sometimes experienced. In this story, the men have been beaten down. Jesus is gone and Israel is not yet redeemed. Some say today that Jesus is gone and the world has not yet been redeemed...so how could he have been "Messiah"? But we who believe in Jesus Christ know the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We know today that Christ is revealed through others, in conversation and listening, in the spoken Word, in nature, in expressions of love between friends, in actions of hospitality, in Communion and Baptism, and in celebrating memories. Just as Christ was revealed in the breaking of bread, Christ is still revealed as we are broken open in his service. In what ways today will your life be broken open in service to God as you help to make the world a more hospitable place? Will we step outside the culture and put our faith in Jesus? Or will we foolishly continue to be baffled by his Good News?

DOOM AND GLOOM

The Israelites took advantage of the downcast and poor. Maybe taking advantage isn't exactly the way to put it, but they didn't take care of them. In fact, sometimes they exploited them, paying them low wages so those in power could make even more money. The Israelites spent money—lots of it—at the expense of the dignity of a segment of society that was getting larger in number and ever more unable to get out of economic crisis. Today we have many of the same issues as when Amos spoke. How friendly is our society to the needy? We often hear of how generous we are as a people. We are responsible for one another, regardless of who that “other” might be. When we make money at the expense of another, we are not operating in God's economy. God's economy welcomes and provides for all. We are operating instead out of greed and fear, mostly that we might not get “ours.” Think about ways you may contribute to economic and systemic oppression right here in the US. If we believe in biblical economics, should ten cents of every dollar, the government's and ours, go to contribute to the well-being of another? How would the world change if we worried less about what we have and more about how to give generously so that more may fully live?

AWARENESS

Repeatedly in the scripture we are reminded that we are to walk according to the commandments. We are reminded that not all will do this. How, then, will we know who to believe and who not to? We are to love all of the creation God has given us, including even our enemies, right? Remember that we are to “walk in love” in all of our actions, but we must also know enough of Jesus’ teaching to know when something being taught in Jesus’ name is false. John’s first letter, in 1 John 4:8, the text so much as says that God is love. We must be able to test the spirits, as false teachers and false prophets will always be around. Am I testing the spirits against God’s word and God’s ways, even God’s love, so that I may live by God’s commands? Or am I testing by other spirits?

LOVING INTO WHOLENESS

Jesus' compassion was ceaseless. In the first century, those who were sick, maimed, crippled and otherwise imperfect in any way were kept on the edges of society, not allowed to participate in daily life. But Jesus didn't exclude anyone. He went to those society had forgotten and restored them to health and wholeness of life. Who do you know that needs Christ's healing touch? Jesus felt no one should be left out, hungry or without basic dignity. Jesus welcomed and healed the hurting, changing them into whole people now unencumbered by the afflictions that had kept them apart from community. Jesus accepted those society had forgotten. Who do we recognize as being on the edges of our community? Do we extend the same love to them that Jesus did? Can we?

SCARCITY AND PLENTY

The widow didn't know Elijah was a prophet from God. She was downcast, awaiting death for her son and herself. The drought in the land was so severe that she was down to her last ration of food. A stranger appeared asking not only for water, but also for food. Surely there is enough to share. She didn't have to listen to him. She could have tuned him out and maintained her concern for herself and her son. But her heart was too big for that. There was room for a stranger, for Elijah. When we give to others beyond our comfort level, we move our giving to a new plane. Many times such a leap of faith will bring in return much more than we can dream or imagine. A moment ago this woman was on the brink of death, of sure and certain starvation. Convinced to share what she had, she received blessing, abundance, and healing. Few of us have experienced hunger, but we have experienced fear of loss. Rather than clinging to what we think we can't do without, what if we loosen our grip and reach out anyway. When has God helped you unexpectedly? Do we trust God's faithfulness, even in times of scarcity, so much that we might even risk greater scarcity at times? Who knows in what form of person blessing may come. Are you prepared to receive?

ENTERTAINING ANGELS

When I think of entertaining angels, I usually think of not being aware that someone is an angel until they are gone, out of sight. Kind of like not knowing it was Jesus on the Emmaus Road, until he'd almost passed by the house, but he stopped for the breaking of bread. Lot recognized the angels at his door. He offered them shelter, clean feet, and food. First they declined. Then they accepted the generous offer. Lot knows he's living in a depraved community—he's new in town and hasn't been accepted, either. He offers the angels a place of safety. To whom do we offer such community? Must our guest be a recognized angel for us to show such kindness?

SABBATH DAY

04/05/20

Palm/Passion Sunday

FOR APPEARANCES' SAKE

“Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?” This may come as a shock, but people in the church don’t always agree. The debate in this passage concerns what rules one who is outside the church must conform to in order to be accepted “in.” What is it that really sets us free? Is it our clothes, our worship style, our impression of “sanctuary,” our steeple, or even what acts of service we perform around the church? We are only set free by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ! If we live in love, accepting others as Christ accepts us — and that includes us accepting ourselves warts and all — we gain access to the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. Because of cultural conditioning, oftentimes barriers are perceived by those outside the church. What barriers, seen or unseen, do we erect today as a church or community that exclude some from our fellowships? How do we expect others to conform or adapt to the way “we” do church? What does our expectation say about our understanding of hospitality? Of God’s grace? When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for faith we set up are God’s, not people’s.

SACRAMENTAL COMMUNITY

What an indictment! “Your meetings do more harm than good.” In this passage, Paul calls out the gathered community on a number of issues: having factions and divisions among them, receiving the communion supper in an unworthy manner, not practicing daily self-examination to correct areas of misconduct, eating without waiting for the others, and gluttonous conduct at the common table. The Corinthians are taking the Eucharistic meal too lightly. Has communion become routine for you? Are you able to imagine Jesus breaking the bread and offering his life to you? Do you come to the table of grace with a truly contrite heart, grateful for the abundant blessings you have received? Do you reconcile differences with one another before coming, or do you pretend that all is well in your relationships, eating the reconciling loaf and drinking the cup without a second thought? As you remember Christ, remember that we are called to live in purity in love, and that means living reconciled lives of love for one another. Before you take communion next time, examine your heart. It is a table of grace, of gift with no price. We receive the grace to strengthen us on our way, for our journey, to empower us to heal and to be healed...in Jesus’ name.

NO CONDEMNATION

The earliest manuscripts and many other early ancient witnesses to the Bible do not have this passage included. Perhaps that is because of the extreme unconventionality of the account. This story resonates with compassion and love that defy accusation and condemnation. Jesus has returned to the temple. A woman caught in the act of adultery is brought to him and the crowd wants to stone her. Stoning is the normal punishment for such an act. Rather than speak quickly, Jesus crouches to the ground. People must wonder what he's doing. Can't he see her guilt? They caught her red-handed. Shame? No doubt, fear? Jesus pauses and writes something in the dirt, seemingly not completely aware of all that is happening. He rises and suggests that one of her accusers who is without sin begin by throwing the first stone. He again bends to the ground and writes. Meanwhile, the accusers depart, leaving only he and the woman. He rises and asks where the accusers have gone. Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her either, and then he tells her to go, not to return to her former ways.

Here Jesus creates space, allowing the reasoning of the woman's accusers. They are no longer able to hold her in contempt. He has removed their case against her by pointing out their transgressions. Before we declare someone else guilty or in violation of moral code, we need to examine ourselves and the systems under which we operate. Perhaps we stand in no position to accuse anyone. What sins in me am I tempted to overlook as I point out the sins of another? What in me have I become blind to? When others are caught in sin, am I quick to pass judgment? Jesus invites us to examine the dark places in our lives. Stand in the light, opening yourself fully to the Light of the world.

A NEW COMMUNITY

This passage is the first reference of the Christian church, the believers who dwelt together. They shared and broke bread together, drinking the common cup and eating the common loaf. None were in need, and all possessions were held in common. How similar is this to life in the church today? How do we receive new people into fellowship? Do we keep them at a distance until they earn their keep? Or do we immediately welcome them unconditionally, generously offering to share what we have, receiving them just as they are, without expectation? Do we treat members differently than visitors? At what point do we treat people as if they really belong? A healthy Christian community attracts people to Christ. The Jerusalem church's zeal for worship and brotherly love was contagious. Is our love contagious? If love was a virus, would people want to catch our strain? What are you doing to make our church the kind of place that will attract followers to Christ?

NEW LIFE THROUGH FAITH

Jesus invites us into the house of God, into the family of God, offering unconditional love to us if only we will believe in him. Jesus doesn't make us clean up, straighten up, or change before we approach the throne of grace, because Jesus knows the power of God's love. Jesus knows that as we are touched by grace we will be changed. Jesus offers us a new and living way, a way of hope and reconciliation. Jesus knows we will never be worthy of the grace of God on our own, but by accepting the gift of faith, we can be changed and renewed and even recreated in God's own image. We can't grow alone though, so we must grow together in community, urging one another on to good deeds and good conduct, consistently meeting together and encouraging one another.

The God we worship is a 3-in-1 God: God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. 3-in-1, with all parts interdependent upon the other. Just as God doesn't act alone, we are not to act alone. We are created to be part of community. We have natural communities in our families, but we also have community as part of the church, the body of Christ. God sent the Holy

Spirit to enable us to live godly lives. The Spirit is a real presence—not magical, but certainly mysterious. We will never completely comprehend the marvels of God. God reaches out to us through the Spirit continuously. It is up to us and our communities to pay attention, to discern and be faithful. What is God’s Spirit calling our congregations to be today? Our local collection of churches? What gifts do we have for being the body of Christ?

THE ROOT OF HOSPITALITY

We are waiting for the sighting of the empty tomb on Easter morning. We know what happens after the cross, but we can't wait. Let's go back, just for a moment. The life of Jesus exemplifies gifts of hospitality, healing and acceptance. Story after story is told in the gospels in which dignity and personhood are restored. Jesus receives the outcasts of society freely. People receive blessings and fullness of life, beyond their wildest imagination.

In this passage Jesus displays absolute surrender to God. This is not to say that God "made" Jesus go to the cross. Jesus, being fully human and fully divine, had free will. Furthermore, he had power over life and death, even his own. Jesus didn't have to do it. Jesus didn't have to die then. He chose to, for the sake of humankind. Jesus had spent plenty of time with people like us and he'd seen our desire to save ourselves. He knew our inability to save ourselves. Jesus surrendered all of his will to God. What part of your life are you still clinging to, unwilling to let God change? What does it take to say "as you will"?

Lent is a period of self-examination and repentance. We look at our lives: the good, the bad and the ugly. We look at our communities and our social systems in the same critical way. What needs to change for you this year: personally? Professionally? Socially? To live obediently to God, what must I be willing to sacrifice? There are seldom simple answers.

What is God calling us into? One of our first priorities is to be radically hospitable to all who enter our places of worship. With God's help we will see a new way into the new thing that God is seeking to bring forth within and among us.

LIVING BY GOSPEL HOSPITALITY STANDARDS

At special invitation or with a surprise knock, company arrives and with them comes the promise of soiled floors, extra laundry, dirty dishes, altered schedules, personal expense, and inconvenience. From sharing a meal to providing a bed, hospitality costs...time, energy, money. But how we treat others reflects our true values. What is really important to us? Do we see people as objects or inconveniences, or as unique creations of a loving God? And which is more important to God, a person or the carpet? Perhaps the most important way to demonstrate God's values and Christ's love to others is to invite and welcome guests into our homes.

For Gaius, hospitality was a habit, and his reputation for friendship and generosity, especially to traveling teachers and missionaries, had spread. To affirm and thank Gaius for his gifts of hospitality, John wrote him this note. John encourages Gaius to practice hospitality, continue to walk in the truth, and do what is right.

As you read 3 John, with which named person do you identify? Are you a Gaius, generously giving to others? A

Demetrius, loving the truth? Or a Diotrephes, looking out for yourself and your “things”? Determine to reflect Christ’s values in your relationships, opening your home as you are able, and touching others with Christ’s love.

RESURRECTION LIFE

I have a particular fondness for Mark's account of the empty tomb. Most scholars say that Mark was the first gospel written. The earliest examples of Mark end here, at verse 8. The rest of the verses were added later. I appreciate this ending, because it leaves room for us to take over. It's unfinished, and not neat and tidy. And near as I can figure, God's kingdom has not yet come to earth, as it is in heaven, and so there is still much we can do. This open ending compels me to look for the presence of Christ in the world—Fred Roger's mother told him, when he was a child and afraid of things in the world, of bad things that happened, to "look for the helpers." Look for people who are doing good...even in the words of Micah—for people who are doing justice, acting kind, and walking humbly with God. "We are called to restore a world divided to the peace of Christ as One."

AT THE FONT WE START OUR JOURNEY

2114, The Faith We Sing. Jeffery Rowthorn. 1991

At the font we start our journey, in the Easter faith
baptized; doubts and fears no longer blind us, by the light of
Christ surprised. Alleluia! Alleluia! Hope held out and
realized.

At the pulpit we are fashioned by the Easter tale retold into
witnesses and prophets by the power of Christ made bold.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Faith proclaimed, yet still untold.

At the altar we are nourished with the Easter gift of bread;
in our breaking it to pieces see the love of Christ outspread.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Life embraced, yet freely shed.

At the door we are commissioned, now the Easter victory's
won, to restore a world divided to the peace of Christ as
one. Alleluia! Alleluia! Easter's work must still be done.

