



Devotions for Advent through Epiphany

Based on the Core Values of Christ United Methodist Church

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Merry Christmas from the Christ Church community! This Christmas season, we have selected our Core Values for meditation during Advent through Epiphany: Compassionate Love, Active Invitation, Nourishing Community, Abundant Generosity and Purposeful Service. We invite you to read and consider engaging with us in new ways – now and in the year ahead.

Many thanks go to our authors. Their willingness to share their lives and hearts enriches us all.

Scriptures are from the *World English Bible*,
unless otherwise noted.

2014
Christ United Methodist Church
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

November 30, 2014 – First Sunday of Advent

1 John 4:7-8 – “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

First John is a continuation of Apostle John’s Gospel. The Gospel of John is often referred as the Book on Love: God’s love for us, our love for God and our love for others. There is no better time of year to be reminded of unconditional love than Christmas.

The birth of Jesus is the best example of God’s love. God so loved the world that he came to be with us. Jesus is the incarnation of God. Jesus is often given the name Emmanuel or “God is with us.”

During Advent and Christmas we can speak of our faith most accurately when we say that Jesus is God incarnate. The birth and the life of Jesus points us to God. Jesus helps you and me get closer to God.

As we get closer to God, John reminds us that we get closer to each other. Jesus is the one who helps us love others. Maybe that is why wars take a break during Christmas. People try to be kinder and more giving at Christmas. We think Christmas goodwill is a human thing. But it really is a God thing, which says to me that Christmas goodwill and care can be year round, as long as we remember all good comes from God. Jesus keeps us on track. We can love others because we experience Jesus’ love.

It is so good that one of our Core Values here at Christ UMC is compassionate love. This Core Value means loving year-round just as we do during the Christmas season — “God so loved the world!”

Amen & Amen,
Pastor David Goehring

P.S. Remember, when you believe in the wonders of Christmas, you see through the eye of your hearts!

Monday, December 1, 2014

John 15:12 – This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.

If there is a central theme in God's relationship with man, it revolves around one word, and that word is love. All the other commandments are like spokes on a wheel, with love being at the center of it all.

With the instruction given by Jesus in John 15:12, love takes on an added dimension. Jesus wants us not just to love, but to love as he has loved us. And just how does Jesus love us? Almost more than we can imagine, more than seems humanly possible at first glance. It means that Jesus loves us more than he loves himself. He loves us so much that he surrendered his own life, enduring the agony of being nailed to a wooden cross, that we might have eternal life. It is the ultimate love.

Therefore, we should lead our lives in a similar manner, be willing to sacrifice our lives for others. Does that mean we need to die for others? Yes, at least be willing to die. But it also means so much more. It can mean living for others, loving in a way where you are giving — or sacrificing — your life for others. That can take countless, just infinite forms, whether that means praying for those in need of God's mercy and graciousness or becoming involved in someone's life as your brother's keeper. It can mean saving someone's life by introducing him to the Gospel of Christ or donating your time and money to a friend in need.

Loving one another as Jesus has loved us is something to aspire to in our quest to become the best we can possibly be. To have a fulfilling, life-altering love that can conquer our own selfishness — all the way to death if that is what is needed — is the standard that Jesus set when he was mocked and crucified.

Ultimate love will conquer our own selfishness. Especially at this time of year, what message could be more appropriate?

Bob Bevan

Tuesday, December 2, 2014

Matthew 5:43-45 – “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

This Christian message of loving our enemies was radical when it was first preached, and it’s counter-cultural still today! Fortunately, many of us have never faced an enemy on a battlefield or been persecuted in the traditional sense of the word, yet this message speaks to each of us. Even if you don’t consider anyone your “enemy,” per se, can you think of someone whom you have a hard time loving? As we discussed during our Core Values sermon series, loving someone is an *action*, not just a feeling, and we must *choose* to love others.

Lots of parents teach young children that “you don’t have to *like* your brother, but you do have to *love* him.” We can still live out that distinction ... some of our “neighbors” might seem disagreeable or unlikeable, but God wants us to *love* them, anyway! We should remember that God sent his Son to die for THEM, too. God CREATED each “enemy” in your life, and they are therefore worthy of God’s love ... and ours.

During Advent, as we rush hurriedly from place to place, we have countless opportunities to practice compassionate love. Loving others means wanting God’s presence to be strong in their lives. Perhaps to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) means that when you *look* at someone, you are praying for them. You may not know anything about them, and you may not say anything out loud, but you pray for God’s blessing on them. Imagine that — every person you encounter, you lift them up in prayer!

Thank you, God, for sending rain and sunlight and your son Jesus to each of us. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit to help us act in love to those for whom we do not feel it. Thank you that we can trust in your love and the Holy Spirit’s power in us!

Catherine Neal

Wednesday, December 3, 2014

Matthew 20:34 – Jesus, being moved with compassion, touched their eyes; and immediately their eyes received their sight, and they followed him.

This Bible verse always makes me smile with the heartwarming memory of teaching Wednesday Night Kids Club ten years ago to a group of 30 young children. This particular week we were teaching the kids about compassion for the sick. The children shared many stories about grandpa's heart surgery, broken limbs and sick pets going to the vet. We talked about how to pray for someone who needs healing and even the laying of hands as a way to transfer a blessing or prayer.

At the time, I had been suffering from a nasty inner ear infection causing vertigo and nausea and the kids could see I was not my usual peppy self. My co-teacher helped organize a prayer circle around me and asked the kids to pray for whoever needed healing, even Mrs. Hanlon with her sore ear.

With eyes closed we began to call out the names of people that needed our prayers of compassionate healing. The laying of hands was a new concept and several children were anxious to touch my shoulder and arms as we prayed. It was a delightful and faithful moment as the children were acting as Jesus did. Towards the end, a small boy placed his tiny index finger "into my ear" while he said, I don't want Mrs. Hanlon to be dizzy anymore. By the grace of God, I was feeling better within a few days.

Kim Hanlon

Thursday, December 4, 2014

Galatians 6:2 – “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Every summer our student ministry goes on a backpacking adventure called Wilderness Trail. This ministry has been around for 27 years and one of their mottos from the beginning has been, ‘bear one another’s burdens.’

It has graced the back of their shirts for dozens of years and is always talked about during our opening retreats. The motto seems simple enough when talking about burdens at base camp, but after miles and miles of carrying a pack that can weigh over 30 pounds, it becomes very heavy indeed!

While spending a week together in the woods we also share the burdens that weigh not only on our backs, but also in our hearts and minds. As Christians we are called to love one another with the love of Christ which means we are called to be moved outside of ourselves and into service of each other.

Simply put it means that another’s burdens become our own. Their heavy pack becomes our heavy pack. Their heavy heart becomes our heavy heart. Their needs become our needs. Their desires become our desires. Their passions become our passions.

Sadly this is not always as obvious as noticing a student with a heavy pack, but my hope is that all of us spend our days looking for ways to love each other. Looking for the burdens that others carry in their lives and allowing those burdens to become ours as well. It’s a sharing in community. It’s service with weight. It’s inviting someone to share with you. It’s generosity with your entire life.

This love is costly if we see the needs in the world. Good thing it’s the love of Christ we are giving and not our own. The abundance of God’s love will never run out. There will always be more than enough. All we need is already here.

Rush Beam, Youth Pastor

Friday, December 5, 2014

Matthew 14:14 – Jesus went out, and he saw a great multitude. He had compassion on them, and healed their sick.

I have worked in healthcare for over 30 years. I have cared for a countless number of individuals, some of which I remember as vividly as yesterday. I like to think that there is a great gift in being able to look at someone whom you have just met with genuine interest, to hold his or her hand with meaningful compassion, and listen to that particular individual who is in a place where they did not plan to be. To pray with that person before the journey to surgery begins.

Jesus did all of this and more on a regular basis while He walked amongst us. I have always been in awe and mesmerized by His willingness to love and to heal. As Christians, imagine what kind of difference we could make in the lives of so many by just reaching out with compassion and a healing heart, sharing the peace of Christ.

I am unable to heal as Christ did. But I pray that I can provide my patients with a sense of peace simply by being an extension of Jesus.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us your peace and your Holy Spirit which we can pass onto others. Help us to heal your children. Amen.

Julie Ann Lowery

Saturday, December 6, 2014

John 13: 34-35 (NRSV) "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The emphasis, as one reads the text, is on "loving one another" — this phrase is repeated three times. These are the words of Jesus who is giving us a "new" commandment. It sounds like an "old" commandment; so what does he mean? He means that the commandment to love one another seen in his glorification (death) derives from the incarnation (see Jn. 3:16). In other words those who belong to Jesus join in his amazing and fantastic love for God the father. Stated a little differently: Jesus calls on his disciples to join with him in the "new" love for the father, based on Jesus' death and resurrection. Let's make sure we understand the significance of this new love commandment which is directed toward the disciples and through them the church: in the gospel of John, Jesus knowing he is going to his death, charges them and other members of the inner circle, to love one another as they have loved him and the Father.

"Jesus, as the incarnate and exalted Son of man and Son of God, joins earth and heaven decisively together and makes it possible, even in this world, for every believer to share the life of eternity." (*The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 373.)

Walt Avery

December 7, 2014 – Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 14:12-14 – Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers, or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

It’s awfully easy to think of this passage as a beautiful metaphor. Inviting outcasts to our table sounds good, but imagine with me for a minute the scene: you’re in your kitchen preparing Thanksgiving dinner, busy with the pressure of entertaining, and there are not only your own usual mouths to feed, but about a dozen local people with nowhere else to go are sitting in your living room in folding chairs and tables, waiting to be fed. You may think to yourself, “why did I invite them?! They didn’t even bring anything to contribute!”

Let’s change our perspective now: you’re fresh out of college at a new job on an island in another country, you’re nowhere near your family, and your grandmother passed away only weeks before. Thanksgiving has rolled around, and you are feeling incredibly alone and isolated. A family from church has invited you to Thanksgiving dinner, and you are so grateful. When you arrive, you see that you’re not the only “outsider” at this meal ... there are at least a dozen extra bodies around the table(s)! You are surrounded by warmth and laughter, and you leave that evening with a full belly and an even fuller heart.

That was my story of being the outsider—I was the lonely 22-year-old, homesick and poor. I will never, ever forget the way that one invitation made me feel. May we each strive to extend warmly the invitation that Christ has laid out for us.

Mary Day Saou, Worship Arts Director

Monday, December 8, 2014

John 1:45-47 – Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, “We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him and said about him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in who is no deceit!”

Who am I in this story? That’s what challenged me as I read these verses.

Am I Philip, so excited with what I have found in Jesus that I can’t wait to share it with a good friend?

Am I Nathanael, letting my prejudices overshadow trusting the good news from a good friend? “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

Could I be Jesus, eager to meet a stranger and seeing only the good in him, even from afar?

I think I’m Nathanael, too quick to make assumptions about others before I even know them. And every time God calls me on it.

Seldom am I like Philip, eagerly and exuberantly sharing the good news of God’s love in Jesus. Maybe it’s the “T” in my personality profile – too introverted to let the Spirit do its work through me.

What I want to be, though, is like Jesus. I want to see each child, each woman, each man for who they are – a most beloved child of God and mine to love as God loves. So that’s my prayer: “Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart. Lord I want to be more holy in my heart....” Amen

Jean Elia

Tuesday, December 9, 2014

Isaiah 43:1, 5-7: The Lord says . . . “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’” and to the south, “Do not hold them back.” Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Invitation begins with relationship. When we consider “active invitation,” we usually consider ourselves as the inviters, rather than the invitees. However, in order to invite someone into an active relationship with God, we first must have a relationship with God. Who better to look to on the art of invitation, than the One who originally called and invited us into relationship with God?

In Isaiah 43, the Lord calls us *by name* and claims us as God’s own. Most everyone loves to hear their own name, can hear their name amongst crowd noise, and feels better to be counted, to be noticed, to be called by name, and to be claimed.

In October 2013, I visited Slobodskoy, Russia with our Mission 1:27 group. I felt a calling to go, although I am not the mission trip type; I’m not an extrovert, nor do I easily step outside of my comfort zone. While standing in the orphanage cafeteria the first day, looking at all the unfamiliar faces with all the loud and unfamiliar voices, the anxiety of past middle school experiences started to flutter around inside me.... I wondered where I was supposed to sit. Would I be welcomed? Would I be ignored? Was I crazy to come halfway across the world on this trip? Why, at my age, was I still worrying about fitting in? While standing there, summoning my nerve, and calming the tiny middle school girl inside of me, one sound stood out to me out of the chaos – the sound of my name. From across the room, one child was calling to me by name to come and sit beside her at the table. Thankful, I now had a place to begin, a place to belong, one face I could recognize, and I immediately felt more at ease. This experience reminded me how comforting it is to be called by name. I sat at that table, with that lovely group, nearly every meal for a week, in community with them. They likely didn’t know or

comprehend how much it meant to me to be called by name, nor did they understand the gravity of their invitation, calling me into deeper relationship with them, and in turn, into deeper relationship with God.

You don't have to trek to Russia to work on your active invitation skills. You can work on those skills in your own church, in your own home, in your own community. The first step is to step outside of yourself, outside of your comfort zone, to be *in* community with people – not standing on the outside – and to call them by name. The power of your simple invitation may be life changing.

Jenn Myers

Wednesday, December 10, 2014

Matthew 4:18-19 – Walking by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers: Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers for men.”

I did not want to invite her. There was no way she would say “yes.” I would feel uncomfortable. Who wants that?

But, I kept feeling this “nudge” to invite my work associate to attend worship at my church.

After wrestling with this feeling for a while, I grudgingly gave up the struggle and invited her.

Incredibly, she said “yes.” Without hesitation. I was taken off guard.

I met her in front of her high-rise building in the Near North neighborhood of Chicago and we walked together to the hospitality room where my small church gathered. She wept through that service and attended again – and again – and again. Two of us began studying the gospel of John with her. She drank it in like a traveler in the desert. That was in 1985.

Months later, Judy made a commitment to Christ. A few years later, she decided to attend seminary. This year she retired after years of service as Pastor of a Presbyterian church in Wisconsin.

Does that give you chills? You are not alone. It still has that impact on me.

We do not know which person’s heart and mind are ready to receive the word of God. Sometimes we think others are full of cynicism or doubt when they are rich with His unseen preparation. But, Jesus knows, just as he knew that Peter and Andrew would accept his invitation.

We are called to invite others into the family of God. We are not responsible for each response – that is in God’s hands.

Invite others. Sometimes you will not observe results. But, you may be amazed.

Cynthia Wheaton

Thursday, December 11, 2014

Luke 6:31 – As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to them.

Ah, the Golden Rule. I remember this as one of the first rules of my childhood, a more peaceful way of my parents telling me to quit hitting my sister. It would give pause to that six-year-old me, wondering if I really wanted to get hit in return.

It struck me recently (and when I say “struck” I mean “realized,” not “struck” like the retaliatory punches from an eight-year-old sister), as I read this verse again, that I was using a very narrow view of the text. Even with the words “people” and “them,” I always looked at this as a person-to-person rule, that I should give charity, compassion and love to one as I would want one to give in return.

However, this is far too narrow a view. Luke 6:31 is not a call to help a few, but to help the many. It’s a call for community building. Jesus does not want us to just treat those in our immediate vicinity as we would want to be treated; He wants us to engage this philosophy with our neighborhoods, our towns, our countries and our planet.

We need to find the fallen, the hurt, and the sick. We need to show them Christ’s love and invite them into the church, into our home of compassion and love. We need to welcome those people into our arms and the arms of the Lord. We need to extend that invitation of fellowship to all, not just to the few, to create a true loving community in Christ.

Because, if someday we ever need it, that invitation will be ready for us.

Charles Rempel

Friday, December 12, 2014

Acts 8:29-31, 35 – The Spirit said to Philip, “Go near, and join yourself to this chariot.” Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He said, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” He begged Philip to come up and sit with him. Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture, preached to him Jesus.

Philip is told by the Holy Spirit to approach the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch on his way home from Jerusalem. Philip approaches and says, "Do you know what's going on? Do you understand?" And the Ethiopian, in response, invites Philip to hop in and sit beside him.

In this story, we often focus on what Philip taught the Ethiopian — the good news of Jesus Christ — but I bet Philip also learned a thing or two that day.

The story continues with Philip and the Ethiopian continuing on their way, riding together, until the Ethiopian asks to be baptized. Perhaps along the way, Philip learned about this Ethiopian man's story or the work he does for the queen or about his family. Maybe Philip learned about the eunuch's hopes and fears and dreams.

In hopping in the chariot, Philip certainly learned that God will surprise us and take us places we never expected. And I bet he also learned just how wide the arms of Jesus are. Even this man from as far away as Ethiopia (considered the edge of the world at that time) has heard about God. Even this man through baptism becomes a part of what God is doing.

There's nowhere God won't go and no one is beyond God's reach.

In this season of Advent, I wonder where God might take us when we least expect it. I wonder how God might surprise us when we're nudged to the chariots around us. And when the world seems darker and darker by the day, may we remember that nothing and nowhere is beyond the reach of God. Hope is coming....

Brent Levy, Intern Pastor

Saturday, December 13, 2014

Matthew 4:19 –He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers for men.”

I sat in the pew of Christ United Methodist Church for the first time, stunned by the beauty of the sanctuary — its display of stained glass windows, lovely arches repeated in architectural details, the glistening, vaulted ceiling that made me feel as if I was in the safe, warm protection of an ark. Next to me was my friend Jo-Anne who had invited Brian and me to come to church with her that day. She was still happy from a wonderfully relaxing Saturday of fishing with Brian, who sat on her other side; I was still thirsty for a church community that I had not yet found.

The sun’s rays filtered through the central Chancel stained glass window of Christ on the cross. The morning light struck the dogwood blossoms and Christ’s figure in a warm and welcoming call to awaken and rejoice. The triune of rings in the window’s center intersected in the heart and body of Christ. It reminded me of the double wedding ring pattern on my handmade quilt at home. *Keep Christ in the center of life and marriage*, I thought. The contemporary band filled the sanctuary with guitar, piano, drums; we all stood and blended our voices in worship. And when the Gospel was read, all three of us looked at each other and smiled in surprise of its delivery today, realizing the sermon was highlighting Jo-Anne’s active invitation to us: “And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:18-19

I looked at Jo-Anne, laughed and hugged her. That weekend, she had become a fisher of people.

Dear God, thank you for those who offer invitation to others to gather in Jesus’s name. No matter where we are, give us the wisdom, spirit and courage to reach out to others where they may be, and to invite them to join us in following the path of Jesus.

Wendy Smith

December 14, 2014 – Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 25:35 – ...for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in.

Christmas Night was unbearable and frightening when I was a little girl. About 9:00 p.m., I'd be overcome with a great sadness and fear that I was embarrassed to express in words. I'd sit on the stairs to our family room, where my parent watched my brother enjoying his new Evil Knievel Action Figure, and I'd start to cry. Big, slow rolling, silent tears that only my Mom would notice.

"What in the world is wrong?" I remember her asking me.

"I'm afraid and sad," I said

"Sad? Is this because Grandma got you Yahtzee instead of Mystery Date?"

Well, that probably had something to do with it, but it went much deeper.

"I'm sad that it's all over, Mom. Christmas is over. There's nothing to look forward to now. I'm afraid we'll never have another day like this."

I still feel that way even today.

Advent is a time of expectation, hopefulness, and anticipation. At Christ Church and elsewhere throughout our community, people seem more generous, more joyful, and more caring. The homeless woman at the I-40 exit near New Hope Commons looks like the "real deal" this time, instead of someone too lazy to get a job who wants to scam my hard earned money. The elderly man with the rotting front porch looks less like someone detracting from my neighborhood's home values and more like someone who could use a few hours of carpentry help on a Saturday. And you and me, we look a little less self-centered and fearful and more focused on those in our community as we intentionally seek out opportunities to help "the least of these."

So, can I sustain the hope and generosity of Advent beyond December 25th? Can we do it, Christ Church? Yes, but only if we stop believing God's blessings have a limit. And only if we can give up fearing that the resources God has entrusted to us are scarce. And only if we stop being afraid. It's only when we trust that God truly cares for us that we can care for others in His name.

Deon Roach

Monday, December 15, 2014

Romans 12:15 – Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Mama, “Midget” and Sammie were best friends from childhood on. They went to school together, on dates and to the beach together. Even after they married, they lived within a mile or so of each other. Trinity Methodist in Kannapolis, NC was their church, and they all sat together in Sunday School. Arm-in-arm, they traveled all around the US, Canada and parts of Europe. As the years progressed, my mother somehow became the support system for the whole group.

Sammie was the first to experience tragedy. Her beautiful daughter Jo was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and died when her two children were pre-teens. Sammie never got over it, and often called my mother when she was especially depressed. Regardless of what Mama was doing, she went to Sammie’s house, and invariably made her laugh. Sammie never fails to tell me how much she misses her best friend.

Midget was next. She had two boys and three girls. Stan, the older of the boys, decided he wanted to be career military. On a training flight in Georgia, his helicopter crashed and Stan was killed. Mama was right by Midget’s side the minute she found out. Years later, Midget found her husband “Punk” lying in their garden bleeding. The first person she called was my mother. Mama was still reeling from my daddy’s death a few months previous, and her sister’s death a month after that, but that didn’t stop her from rushing to help her friend.

My mother was the most fun-loving person I’ve ever known, and brought laughter to everyone she ever knew. She rejoiced with her friends when things were good, and mourned with them when the times got tough. But regardless of the circumstances, she was there with a brave face and a hug, a smile and maybe even a clean joke. She was an entire community unto herself. Her faith sustained her, and God used her as His hands on earth.

Anita Galliher

Tuesday, December 16, 2014

Matthew 18:20 – For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the middle of them.

Christ is present at gatherings or events, but we are often unaware of that Presence.

Many years ago, the young women students of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, all ate in the same dining room for their meals. At the evening meal the sun slipped below the trees and made interesting shadows as it slanted through the windows near dusk. The women filed quietly into the room and stood behind their chairs before the meal began. At that time they all began to sing a cappella: "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow ... Praise God All creatures here below..." and then the lovely voices blending and ending with "Amen."

These were voices of kindred spirits — fellow students and friends — offering praise and thanksgiving. We all received a blessing in those few minutes of prayerful song. Christ was certainly present with us. It was a nourishing time in a busy and sometimes stressful day. Let us be attuned to those times when we can experience that Presence and be fed. Sometimes, it is in unexpected places or events. Advent is a time to *be still and know* that Christ is among us.

Sharon B. Hamner

Wednesday, December 17, 2014

Hebrews 10:24-25a – Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another.

This verse calls us to action. It invites us to move, to create an atmosphere where we can encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to love one another and to do good deeds. By gathering together on a continual basis, we are affirming and spreading that love to others in our community. When such love is present amongst us, miracles can happen. Healings can take place. Restoration becomes a possibility. I know this to be true because I have witnessed it in my own life.

Several years ago, I was coming out of one of the darkest periods of my life. It was a time of great hardship and turmoil. My faith in God was at an all-time low. Eventually, I knew that if I stayed in this bleak place, I would crumble. I wished to return to life, light, and peace. Upon my journey to wellness, it was important to me to return to Church — the body of Christ — to find a new Church family. I have found that very family here at Christ United Methodist Church.

In participating in different ministries, I quickly realized how long it had been since I experienced true, Christ-centered love. Being an introvert, I am not the most talkative person, but being here and sharing in love with one another has reminded me of how very important community is, being together and not isolating ourselves.

This Church has become a haven for me. It is a place where I feel spiritually fed, nourished, uplifted and encourages me to share that same love with others I come into contact with.

As my physical and mental health began to improve, so did my relationship with God. It did not happen overnight, but in experiencing Him through regular prayer, study, and fellowship here at Christ United Methodist Church, my soul has been restored. To God be the glory.

Ellen Wean

Thursday, December 18, 2014

Matthew 18:20 – For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the middle of them.

The sky was painted orange and pink as the sun set on a beautiful autumn day. The evening air felt cool and crisp as I stood in a huddle with three other moms next to the football field where our sons would soon do likewise with their teammates. I knew only one of the women well; the others had come to join us in prayer after two boys suffered broken bones in the previous two games. The four of us stood with bowed heads and arms around each other, quietly speaking to God, oblivious to the buzz of excitement in the stands nearby as the final minutes counted down in the game before ours. The rush to pack gear and kids and make the hour drive on time seemed far away. Now, the only focus was God and thanking Him for his abundant goodness, asking Him to keep all of the boys on the field safe that night.

As we stood together, we seemed to lean into each other without even realizing it, no longer strangers, but sisters in faith with a very strong common bond. That's what coming together in prayer does. It pulls us toward one another, gives us a place to lean in and feel supported and encouraged.

Most certainly we should pray on our own, too. But praying with others is different. There is strength that comes, not from numbers, but from coming together in Christ's name and feeling Him in the middle of our prayer huddles. There is spiritual nourishment that comes in the encouragement from our fellow followers who walk with us in those moments of prayer and beyond. There is hope and light and comfort in feeling others lift us up to the Lord.

As we pray with Jesus in the middle, our faith is nourished. And, like any team, we are much better, much stronger together than we are as individuals.

Tracy Gibson

Friday, December 19, 2014

Ecclesiastes 3:1,4 – There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.

Our neighbor Jane was born with cerebral palsy. She was a large-boned, red-haired girl who walked with an erratic gait. Her arms and legs flailed about as if she were intoxicated. Jane had a large mouth with a very toothy smile. But Jane was intelligent and well-loved. Her strong support system included her parents, neighbors and her church. She graduated from college and married a nice young man. They were blessed with a daughter named Susannah.

By the time Susannah was grown and engaged to be married, Jane was in the last stages of breast cancer. It was uncertain whether she would be able to attend her daughter's wedding, but attend she did. In spite of her pain, Jane was smiling from ear to ear as she was wheeled down the aisle. At the conclusion of the ceremony, as she was being helped to her wheelchair by her husband, Jane fell. The silence was deafening as she was gently lifted back into her chair. Again she bravely put the giant smile on her face and waved to her adoring crowd as she was wheeled out of the church. Later she teased Susannah that she got more applause than the bride. Everyone reveled in her spirit and joy.

Jane died a few weeks later. It was a time to weep, a time to mourn. But she brought joy to all who knew her and loved her, because she herself had been so loved and nourished. Let's dance to her memory, and to all those with whom God has blessed our lives.

Anita Galliher

Saturday, December 20, 2014

Romans 12:10-13 – In love of the brothers be tenderly affectionate to one another; in honor preferring one another; not lagging in diligence; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; enduring in troubles, continuing steadfastly in prayer; contributing to the needs of the saints; given to hospitality.

Joy Among the Roses

Despondent, among the field of pretty pink roses
Sits a withering black bud, not attracting any noses
In the middle of the great bloom
The bud sits in an everlasting gloom
His neighbors dance and sing
Celebrating Spring
Although amidst their exhilaration
They must take into consideration
Their poor withered comrade
Who can't help but be sad
They give him extra sunlight
Their smiles are extra bright
He may never make it
But he's sure giving a fight
Then one day in the late August heat
The odds are against him
He looks tired, sad, and beat
Then in a spectacular feat
He looks to everyone and to their surprise
There is joy and happiness in his eyes
The withered black shell falls away
The crowd of roses shouts, "Hooray!"
And that is all that they can say
For the beauty that lay before them
Was too majestic for words
An astounding white flower
Has come from the crumpled bud

And the roses almost cower
But in a friendly shower
Of love and affection
The flower looks at his friends and in a friendly tone
States one thing:
“Finally friends, I’m home.”

Ryan Heider
Grandson of Richard & Diane Lowe

December 21, 2014 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Corinthians 9:7 – “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

It was Katherine’s 8th birthday and the house was filled with laughter as her friends arrived to celebrate her birthday. Her best friend Martha hopped out of the car and ran up to the house carrying a brightly wrapped package covered in a rainbow of colorful sticky bows. Giggling and smiling ear to ear Martha ripped a bright pink bow off Katherine’s present and stuck it on the top of Katherine’s head as she handed Katherine her gift and shouted Happy Birthday! Then to the girls’ delight Martha ripped a blue bow off the package and stuck it right on Katherine’s nose. Katherine and her friends were rolling in laughter. There was no doubt that Martha was a cheerful giver.

Years later if you ask either girl what Martha gave Katherine neither could tell you what the gift inside the brightly decorated box was, but both can tell you exactly how cheerful Martha was as she gave Katherine the extra special birthday gift. What made the gift so special? How it was given – with a cheerful heart.

In Paul’s 2nd letter to the Christians at Corinth he not only encouraged them to give, but to give “what you have decided in your heart.” The Advent season is a wonderful time for each of us to prayerfully consider what we should give and how we should give. Maybe you will give by picking a name off the Angel tree and shopping for a special gift, singing in the Christmas Cantata, volunteering your time to read to a student at school, visiting a shut-in, etc. In each and every way we choose to give; we should give with a cheerful heart. God loves when we give of our time, talents and tithes with a cheerful heart.

Jane Reeb

Monday, December 22, 2014

1 Kings 17:13-15 – Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go and do as you have said. . . .For Yahweh, the God of Israel says, ‘The jar of meal will not run out, and the jar of oil will not fail, until the day that Yahweh sends rain on the earth.’” She went and did according to the saying of Elijah, and she, and he, and her house, ate many days.

The widow who feeds the prophet Elijah in this story was at the end of her rope! During a time of extreme hardship, she was down to her last meal. Her faithfulness and generosity in responding to Elijah’s request was rewarded far beyond her expectations. Elijah went on to do great miracles in the name of the God of Israel. However, just a couple of chapters later, Elijah’s own faith has been tested and he is frightened, exhausted and deeply depressed. God sends an angel to provide food and rest until Elijah recovers sufficiently to resume his ministry. (1 Kings 19) These stories are wonderful examples of God’s love and care for us.

For some people, the holidays are especially difficult, in the midst of illness, grief, depression or other difficult situations. In *Gospel Medicine*, Barbara Taylor Brown writes, “We are expected to represent God’s interests, being as generous with each other as God is with us.” May you be blessed with God’s love and grace this season, so that you may share His love and comfort with those around you.

Katherine Kubel

Tuesday, December 23, 2014

Acts 16:14-15 – One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Lydia comes down to us through the ages as a puzzle and an inspiration. The New International Version says she dealt in cloth, but perhaps “purple”—all that’s mentioned in the original Greek—was just a dye that she sold. Regardless, we recognize her as a woman who’s done well for herself. She has a home of her own and it’s roomy enough to accommodate the members of her household as well as Paul and his companions.

Lydia would appear to be a “God-fearer,” as they were called, a Gentile who in some fashion followed the religion of the Jews. So Paul’s presentation of the gospel resonated with things she already believed. The specific part of the message that prompted her conversion is anyone’s guess, but we know what her immediate response was—to share the abundance of her life with people she had known very briefly, to invite them in.

In Advent, we can focus on Lydia’s action quite literally. One expression of our Christian generosity is the simple act of inviting people into the place you live, providing food and drink, greeting them with an open spirit. Ah, but you say, it’s the holiday season—we’re always having friends over. Good! But you can follow Lydia even further—have you asked a friend whom you’ve known just a short time to come to your home? What might that convey to them about your core values? The early Christians’ practice of eating meals together was no small part of the spread of Paul’s message.

John Paul Middlesworth

Wednesday, December 24, 2014

Ruth 2:8, 11, 15-16 – Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.” ... “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and your mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.” ... Boaz instructed his young men, “Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”

The book of Ruth is a great little story about family devotion and selfless loyalty overcoming severe losses, all wrapped up in a love story with a happy ending. It's also about abundant generosity as shown by three main characters: Ruth, Naomi (her mother-in-law), and Boaz.

Naomi and Ruth, both widowed, each generously puts the other's welfare before her own. After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi urges Ruth to find security and happiness in another marriage while she is still young by staying in her own country when Naomi returns to Bethlehem. But Ruth refuses to leave Naomi, knowing the tenuous fate of an older widow with no male to provide for her. She willingly leaves her old life completely behind for Naomi's sake. Impressive in-law love!

Back in Bethlehem is Boaz, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, who owns the field in which Ruth has come to glean leftovers to feed Naomi and herself. Generosity to the poor was written into Israelite law, allowing them to glean after reapers had finished working. But Boaz goes far beyond what is required. He notices Ruth, a stranger working alone, and he learns her story. Not only does he encourage her gleaning, but he makes sure that her safety and dignity are protected. He invites her to join his workers for water and a meal, giving her enough food to take home for Naomi. He tells his men to let her glean ahead of the reapers and to deliberately leave extra for her, reducing his own profit.

Perhaps Boaz didn't consider his generosity especially abundant that first day, but it changed the fate of Naomi and Ruth, and ultimately, of himself.

Abundant Generosity

(Spoiler alert – Boaz and Ruth end up marrying and their great-grandson is King David, which is why his descendent Joseph travels to Bethlehem for the census just before Jesus is born.) It makes me wonder how many times I miss the chance to share — whether with time, attention, or money — when doing so might have made a drastic difference to someone.

Generosity is a habit that comes more easily and gets more enjoyable every time we practice it. Rarely do I feel I have been too generous; most often it is the opposite. I suspect God takes delight in our discovery that the more we give, the more we feel we have. May we all experience abundant generosity this Advent!

Christy Jones

December 25, 2014 – Christmas Day

Luke 1:26-31, 38 – Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man whose name was Joseph, of David's House. The virgin's name was Mary. Having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, you highly favored one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered what kind of salutation this might be. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold you will conceive in your womb, and give birth to a son, and will call his name 'Jesus.' He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. There will be no end to his Kingdom." Mary said, "Behold the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word."

Mary was young, but her life was all mapped out. She was to marry Joseph, bear his children and build a life with him and the family they would create. Then, an angel brought her incredible news. She was to give birth to the long-anticipated Savior.

What did Mary do? She changed her plans and said yes.

Matthew 1:19-21, 24a – Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man, and not willing to make her a public example, intended to put her away secretly. But when he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take to yourself Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She shall give birth to a son. You shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who shall save his people from their sins." Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Joseph had a plan. An unexpected (and seemingly inexplicable) pregnancy was not on the list. Then, an angel came to reassure him. Joseph had a choice. He changed his plans and said yes.

These two very-human beings said yes to God with abundant generosity. What is God asking you to do? Are you willing to say yes?

Cynthia Wheaton

Friday, December 26, 2014

Matthew 2:11 – They came into the house and saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Opening their treasures, they offered to him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Even though we usually place the traditional three Wise Men in our manger scenes, most likely their visit came two years after the birth of Jesus. We mark it on Epiphany, January 6th.

Nonetheless, God led these scholars of the stars to search out the young Child, Who was destined to be the King – not of this world, but of a heavenly Kingdom. Their precious gifts are a wonderful example of “Abundant Generosity,” a Core Value of Christ Church. They followed the bright star God provided and knew by the Spirit that *this* Child was special. We who live on this side of the Cross & Resurrection know that Jesus is indeed the One Who is worthy of all praise!

And why do we worship? First because God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Three in One – deserves it! He delights in our praises!

Secondly, as Vernon Grounds writes, *we need worship!* Because we’re made in God’s image, we can’t fulfill our purpose unless we are in right relationship with Him. Worship helps us to focus on the Lord; and as we draw near to Him, we become more connected, more alive, and more able to be channels of His love and grace to the world.

How will we respond? By rejoicing every Sunday in its opportunity to join with other believers to worship Christ the Lord and receiving Sabbath rest.

And what gifts do we bring? We may have little gold or precious spices to offer. However, since all we have has come from God, we can count it a privilege to bring our tithes, our offerings, and our very lives. The Lord is pleased with cheerful, grateful givers!

May we say with Christina Rossetti:

“What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.”

Sharon Guyer

Saturday, December 27, 2014

Romans 12:21 – Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Boom! Crunch! I felt the impact. Poof! The air bag deployed and retracted, and the white powder filled the front of my SUV that I had just smashed into a car stopped in front of me. My mind was on other things. I was also in a hurry to get home to my family after a long day at work and distracted by a cell phone. Thank God no one was hurt. I had insurance, and it was my first accident where I was at fault.

I am overwhelmed and humbled by the kindness of the people in the other two vehicles in the accident. Both of them said they were sorry for my car and glad I didn't have a baby with me in the car seat. The woman I hit actually gave me a hug as she left. I am grateful for the professionalism and mercy of the Durham policeman who arrived at the scene. He was a former Marine back from having served two tours in Afghanistan and glad to be on US soil helping at home.

There is so much to be worried and distracted by in the world right now. There is so much suffering. It is easy to want to turn inward and to only protect oneself and one's family. But, that's not the way we're going to save ourselves or this planet we call home.

It's just as easy to be hopeful and optimistic as it is to be angry or fearful. We can be generous with our kindness and our understanding. We can be generous with our time, talent and treasure. I find myself turning to God and praying for those who suffer. I pray for faith to trust that there is more good than evil in this world. Though there will be pain and suffering, God's love for us is abundant and God is with us.

Paula Alexander

Sunday, December 28, 2014

Matthew 5:16 – “Even so, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

This passage comes to us from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. What an amazing gift – to have a sermon from Jesus that was recorded and offered to guide us Christians for all time. It feels as if Jesus is speaking directly to me when I read his passage.

This passage gets at the heart of what we are called to do in terms of purposeful service, and gives us some insights into what that involves.

First of all, we are called to be purposeful – to be intentional. Our relationship with Jesus and with our Father requires us to respond. We don’t merely bask in the glow of God’s love and grace, but we return that love through actions.

Second, my sense is that *what* we do in our response — in our service — is not as important as *how* we serve. We are called to let our light shine. As Christians we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). And we should not hide our light under a bushel (Matthew 5:15). Instead, we must let that light radiate for all to see. If we radiate brightly enough, in *joyful* obedience, that radiance will be seen and noticed by others. And who knows what impact that might have! We can let our light shine in how we treat other people; in how we act as parents and spouses; in how we pass the peace in church or renovate a home in West Virginia. The settings and occasions for us to shine our light are limitless.

If we are purposeful and let our lights shine, others WILL notice. They may not acknowledge that they see, but they WILL see. And who knows what may change because of it. If God is at the heart of our purposefulness, and since God is there in the way that the others take note, God can use that act of purposeful, joyful radiance for good.

Finally, Jesus explains that our purposeful acts of letting our lights shine will *glorify* our Father in heaven. What does it mean for us to glorify our Father? If you want to understand glorification, just read Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer in John 17. As Jesus prepares for His act of love at the Cross, He repeatedly prays about how He is doing this to glorify his Father, and how

his Father has glorified Him. “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” (John 17:1). When Jesus explains to all of us at his Sermon on the Mount about letting our light radiate so that others can see, he is inviting us to share in the same relationship that He has with His – and our – Father in heaven. When we let our light shine – purposefully and intentionally – we get to participate in the same loving relationship that defines the relationship of the Father and the Son – we get to glorify our Father, we glorify our Savior Jesus, and we receive glorification in return.

Ken Reeb

Monday, December 29, 2014

Romans 12:6-8 (NRSV) – We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

This Romans passage lists some seemingly lofty gifts, but not when you break it down. Honestly, I thought prophets had to predict the future, but that's not the case! According to the United Methodist Church, the gift of prophecy is the ability to speak God's word to others regarding a specific situation, and/or to be open for God to speak God's word through you. Prophets offer scripture-based insight and perspective with the courage to "tell it like it ought to be."

Have you ever completed a "discovering your spiritual gifts" worksheet? It's quick, and it might surprise you! It may be over-simplified, but it can start you on a path of understanding how God is and/or *can* work within you. Spiritual gifts are not talents or skills, but "the grace of God at work within us, empowering us to match our deep passions with the world's deep need." (umc.org) Don't we all want to do that?

We probably all know the story that Moses didn't want to lead his people, because he didn't feel qualified. He didn't have the *skills* to do what God wanted him to do ... and yet he did it. God worked within Moses, and God wants to work within each of us. I've never hungered to teach, but I hunger to have children learn about God's love and Christ as our Savior. Although I have no specific teaching skills (that wasn't part of my Electrical Engineering degree!), God's graciously given me courage and ability to teach some of his children. For that grace, I am SO grateful. He's given you a gift or two, as well, and your Christmas gift back to God might be recognizing your gifts, thanking the Lord for them, and maybe even figuring out how to use them! ☺

If you're interested, check out the quick (~ 5 minute) assessment:
<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/spiritual-gifts-online-assessment>

May each of us be blessed with the desire, ability, and endurance to use the gifts God has given us!

Catherine Neal

Tuesday, December 30, 2014

Luke 10:37 – “[Who] seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?” He said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (This is the end of the story about the Good Samaritan.)

Shortly after my youngest daughter was born, a couple from the preschool my oldest attended offered to bring us dinner. At the time I thought it was an odd offer. We were not close and I was perfectly able to cook for myself. Not thinking much about it, I agreed. A date was set and they showed up with dinner. They stayed a few minutes and left. As we sat down to eat that night, I realized how much I actually appreciated the meal.

A good friend of mine keeps in close contact with a few gentlemen in Haiti. At one point one of the gentlemen had an infection on his leg that wasn't getting better. The doctors were planning on amputating. My friend gathered some money for him and sent him to a private doctor. A few shots and some antibiotics later and he was fine and thriving.

On the middle school youth trip, we were playing basketball with some boys at a boys day camp in Raleigh. One of the students ended up sitting down and listening to a younger boy tell him all his problems and what his life was like. The little boy just needed someone to listen to him and felt comfortable talking to our student.

As with the Good Samaritan, the persons above who served their neighbor did so with intent and from a place of love. They each filled a need without being asked. Purposeful service can take many roles: listening to someone tell their story, building a ramp on a mission trip, sending money to help someone keep a leg. We can all serve as Jesus calls us to do by filling the needs our neighbors, locally to around the world. And as long as we serve from a place of love, we will be living out what Jesus calls us to do in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Tracy Livers

Wednesday, December 31, 2014

1 Peter 4:10-11 – As each as received a gift, employ it in serving one another, as good managers of the grace of God in his various forms.

God has given all of us talents and placement in our world that we should use generously to help all that we contact. The opportunity to help arises frequently and Christ has challenged us to make the best of our gifts. He is not interested in the kind of car one drives but watches for how many people we help get where they need to go. God won't admire your clothes but smiles when you help clothe others. He wants us to extend the hand of friendship to all who need it, and not just our good friends.

One could go on with many more examples. All of us have been blessed with talents and gifts to be teachers, friends, helpers, scientists, leaders or supporters. Managing an organization, project or family requires that we help the people that we come in contact with in addition to performing our operational duties.

You will not be asked how you enjoyed your success or your gifts, but God will want to know how many of your talents and possessions that you shared with others for their benefit.

Charles Hamner

Thursday, January 1, 2015

Matthew 19:14-15 – “Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto ME, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In July 1963, I was an American soldier stationed in Qui Nhon, Vietnam. Near our headquarters there was a Catholic Orphanage caring for about 100 abandoned children. The nuns had very limited supplies of food, clothing, medical and first aid supplies, and soap for bathing. They were not able to care for the children at even a minimal acceptable level.

Our soldiers recognized these shortcomings and volunteered to do what they could to help. We sent letters home to our families and hometown newspapers and asked them to send “care” packages. We also went to visit the children and helped to bathe them and care for them. A number of the children had sores all over their bodies and on their heads because bathing was limited by the lack of soap.

One day, we received a call from the senior nun telling us that one of the newer children had died and she wanted a ride to the cemetery to bury the baby. The next day, I drove my jeep to the orphanage. When the nun came out of the building she was carrying a small box -- about the size of a large shoe box — made out of rough lumber. We climbed into the jeep and she guided me to the cemetery. When we got there, the gate was locked. After looking around, we found the grave-digger leaning against a tree asleep. She awakened him. He pointed toward a clear space between the tombstones, took the heavy spade and dug a rather shallow grave. We put the box in the grave and he pulled the dirt in to cover it. The nun turned to me and asked me if I would say a prayer. I asked her the baby’s name and she said that she did not know because the infant had been left at the door without identification. I said a prayer asking the LORD to take this baby girl into his Kingdom and to give her HIS blessings.

I have always been saddened by this burial for a baby that had no earthly name and was prayed over by a soldier from a foreign country. When I think about this story, it always brings tears to my eyes.

These American soldiers used the gifts they had received to unselfishly care for these Vietnamese children.

Purposeful Service

When Pastor David first heard me tell this story, he reminded me that “our Father in Heaven had a name for that Vietnamese Baby even if we earthly beings did not.”

Jim Anderson

Friday, January 2, 2015

*Acts 13:47 (NRSV) For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,
I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

God's love, made manifest by the life of His son on earth, was and is intended for everyone, "to the ends of the earth." His love includes those who are rich and poor, male and female, those of every race, every culture, the entire family and the orphan. He includes those living anywhere on earth. God expects us to share the limitless love with which he graces us to be shared also without limitation. His love is needed by all, especially those who live in dark and loveless places or conditions.

People often ask "Why does Mission 1:27 go all the way to Russia to care for orphans?" or "Why does Beyond Our Borders go all the way to Brazil to care for the poor?" The poor and the orphan are everywhere, including here in Chapel Hill; why go so far away to care for them? We go because we are called to show *these* poor and *these* orphans that they are loved by God through His people, regardless of where they live.

During Epiphany, let us pray that the people that live in the dark and loveless places will have the light of God's love revealed to them in Jesus Christ, even to the ends of the earth.

Doug Kubel

Saturday, January 3, 2015

Ephesians 2:10 – For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them.

Sometimes it's difficult to understand. God created us to do good works long before we arrived at a given point in time. What good works are we to do? Are we up to the task?

Though an imperfect people, God loved us so much that he gave us His son, Jesus Christ, who came to save us so that we would have eternal life with Him. Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God, and it is by His example, as He lived out His life on earth that teaches us how we are to live out our purpose as we glorify God. We do that through giving and serving one another.

As Christians, we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. What are some of the things Jesus did while living amongst us? He prayed, healed others, encouraged those around Him, and He sacrificed. Jesus sacrificed His time and finally His life for our sake, to save us from our sins so that we may join Him in paradise. Why? Because He loves us.

We have available many ways we can serve one another. It might be as simple as a smile. Possibly a friend needs your moral support while keeping a doctor's appointment. Help with repairs, getting from one place to another, listening with concern, offering prayer, the possibilities are endless.

The challenge is not to allow our own selfishness to get in the way of doing God's work. We may not wish to step out of our comfort zones or to be inconvenienced. We might even make excuses saying, "It's not my problem". Where would we be if that was the attitude of Jesus Christ?

Purposeful service comes out of Christian love and being a Christian, we must follow Jesus' lead and learn how to die to self and our selfish ambitions. Come, let us take up our cross and follow Christ. It is God's will for our lives.

Ellen Wean

Epiphany Sunday, January 4, 2015

Esther 4:14 – For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Who knows if you haven’t come to the kingdom for such a time as this? ”

This may be one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament because it communicates the need for people of faith to prayerfully discern choices and at times to act in ways which are not comfortable to us.

Esther, who was Jewish, had become the Queen of Persia. During her reign, a plan was devised by one of the King's men to utterly destroy the people of Israel by massacring them and despoiling their property. Not aware of Esther's heritage, the King agreed to this plan. Mordecai, Esther's cousin who raised her, implored her to intercede before the King on behalf of her people. The Jews, who learned of this terrible plan, fasted and prayed for deliverance.

Esther was in a unique position to aid her people from destruction. However, she had to discern if her action to intervene was absolutely necessary, as it would put her at great risk. To aid her people she had to initiate a meeting with the King, which was forbidden. The Queen was to be summoned by the King and not the other way around. As she struggled with her fear, Mordecai told her, "For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. *Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*" (Esther 4:14)

We need to be courageous as we listen to God's calling in our lives. The God of Israel may be calling us to bring relief and deliverance to someone in need or to some situation which we can impact for good. Sometimes, like Esther, we may be asked to act in ways that are uncomfortable or risky to our position in life. But like Esther, perhaps God has placed us exactly where we are for such a time as this.

Where do you hear the prophetic voice of Mordecai calling you to action and commitment? While God will fulfill God's purpose, even if we say no, God is giving us the opportunity to be bold in our faithfulness, and in the midst of obedience, we will find true blessing.

Purposeful Service

Lord, please help us to wait and watch for where you are calling us to be a part of your magnificent deliverance of your world and of your people. Please then give us the courage to act in faith for your sake. We love you & praise you. Amen.

Suzanne Hultman, Associate Pastor

Monday, January 5, 2015

Luke 10:30-37 – Jesus answered, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, ‘Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.’ Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?”

He said, “He who showed mercy on him.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Tuesday, January 6, 2014

Matthew 25:1-12 – “Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. Those who were foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Behold! The bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘What if there isn’t enough for us and you? You go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ While they went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Most certainly I tell you, I don’t know you.’”

I love that Christ Church’s core values match up so well with the core values of the Gospel. In the birth narrative in Matthew, Joseph is a skilled tradesman, a carpenter in Nazareth. Mary, a young woman, is promised in marriage to him. When Mary becomes pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, Joseph wants to put her away quietly. Then an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and proclaims this special child is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph then marries Mary and takes her to Bethlehem to be registered. This is where our Savior was born. Jesus was born a long way from home in the most modest of circumstances. His parents were weary. When he was born they put him in what was probably a carved out rock that was used to feed the animals. Jesus in his birth will always connect us to the poor.

The early church had a special outreach to widows and orphans (John 1:27). The early church was also known for hospitality to the stranger and visitor. When we think of purposeful service during this Advent season, we must think of the poor, those who are without the resources for everyday life, and the destitute. There is a movement in Christian circles called “Whose Birthday Is It Anyway?” I challenge you to try it. It is really simple: give the church as much as you spend on family and friends at Christmas.

Mike Slaughter, who is pastor of one of our largest United Methodist Churches, loves this idea. He says it sparks some great conversations. What do we really value? Do more things make us happy? What if Advent meant a time of saving lives of the most marginal people around the world on behalf of a loving Savior? If this idea appeals to you or challenges you, pray about it.

I dream of a day when purposeful service means **every person** is committed to a major life saving ministry. Then Advent would take on a different meaning for us all.

Rev. David Harvin

