



Devotional Prayer Guide

This guide has been provided by the Prayer/Spiritual Development Ministry Team. It is our hope that these devotionals will promote unity, healing, and grace within our church family and community. We trust that these devotionals will give you personal insight into what you can do to enable Fernwood to identify and live out its mission. Each day's guide begins with a designated scripture passage, devotional thought, followed by a prayer, and a section for you to record your personal reflections.

We hope that you will read, pray, meditate, and reflect during the next 42 days as you prepare for Lent.

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January 18–February 28, 2016

Following Devotions by E.A. Cox

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| Day 01 | Wednesday | January 18 | Acts 1 |
| Day 02 | Thursday | January 19 | Acts 2 |
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| Day 04 | Saturday | January 21 | Acts 5 |
| Day 05 | Sunday | January 22 | Acts 6–7 |
| Day 06 | Monday | January 23 | Acts 8 |
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Following Devotions by Sara Gardner

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| Day 11 | Saturday | January 28 | Acts 16–17 |
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Following Devotions by Gerald Keown

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|--------|----------|------------|---------------------|
| Day 16 | Thursday | February 2 | 1 Corinthians 1–2 |
| Day 17 | Friday | February 3 | 1 Corinthians 3–4 |
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| Day 21 | Tuesday | February 7 | 1 Corinthians 15–16 |

Following Devotions by Margaret League

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|--------|-----------|-------------|----------------------|
| Day 22 | Wednesday | February 8 | 2 Corinthians 1–3 |
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Following Devotions by Karen League

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|--------|----------|-------------|---------------------|
| Day 25 | Saturday | February 11 | 2 Corinthians 8-9 |
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| Day 27 | Monday | February 13 | 2 Corinthians 12-13 |

Following Devotions by Robert Hendrix

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|--------|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Day 28 | Tuesday | February 14 | Galatians 1-2 |
| Day 29 | Wednesday | February 15 | Galatians 3-4 |
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Following Devotions by John Anthony

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| Day 38 | Friday | February 24 | Colossians 1-2 |
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Following Devotions by Kathy Hensley

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|--------|---------|-------------|---------------------|
| Day 40 | Sunday | February 26 | 1 Thessalonians 1-3 |
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There is a lot of anticipation and anxiety and nervousness in this passage. In the first part, verses 1–11, the passage discusses Jesus being taken up to heaven and his second coming. The anticipation of receiving the Holy Spirit, a gift from Jesus himself, was probably intense. There was probably a lot of excitement in this new gift. But that excitement was coupled with some nervousness: When would they receive this gift? How would they receive it? Would it turn their lives upside down much the way Jesus himself had? What would the gift require of them?

In the second part of the passage, verses 12–26, the disciples take on the task of choosing someone to replace Judas. Here the anticipation is of a new person coming into their group, a group that is tight-knit and has been through a lot together. Choosing someone to join them also brings with it a lot of nervousness, both on the part of the disciples and on the part of Matthias, the new member: Would a new person negatively impact the group dynamic? Is Matthias as dedicated to Jesus as they have been?

Anticipation and anxiety often come hand in hand. In our lives we are constantly approaching new situations and change and those things bring with them lots of different emotions. Hopefully the anticipation and excitement will outweigh the nervousness, and we can walk through our lives excited about the next step and what it will bring, knowing that Christ is with us in everything.

Prayer: *Dear heavenly Father, as we stand at the beginning of a period in our lives, many of us are filled with anticipation and nervousness. Anticipation for all of the new and exciting things this year will hold. And nervousness for those exact same things. Help us to open our eyes so that we may be able to see past these emotions and recognize that you are with us each and every step of the way. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday, January 19

Acts 2

Imagine watching and experiencing Pentecost. Think about what you would think and feel if all of a sudden everyone around you started speaking in a different language. And imagine if they all had tongues of fire above their heads. Your first instinct might be to shake yourself or pinch yourself or maybe even ask the person next to you if he is seeing the same thing you are. And what if what you saw was real and was happening right in front of you?

Sometimes we do not realize that God is working right in front of our eyes until after the experience is over. But once we realize how God has moved among us, we are changed. And oftentimes, we come together to share that experience with our fellow believers, much like they did in verses 42–47.

Think about a time in your life when you experienced God working around you. Spend a few minutes dwelling in that experience.

Prayer: *Father, thank you for working in our lives. Thank you for allowing us to rejoice with one another as we share all of the many things you have done for us. Please open our eyes so that we may see you working in and around us on a daily basis. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, January 20

Acts 3–4

This passage tells the story of Peter and John healing a crippled beggar, being thrown in jail for their actions, and appearing before the Sanhedrin. There are a number of points in this story where it appears that Peter and John are done: going to jail, appearing before the Sanhedrin, when the Sanhedrin have a private meeting about them. And yet, through all of this, Peter and John continue to speak the truth. And they speak it with boldness and courage. It seems that neither Peter nor John show fear at any point during this series of events. They know who they represent and they do not doubt that He is with them each and every step of the way.

It is easy to read this passage and forget that Peter and John were human, that they had fears and doubts, just like you and I. It is easy to think that because Peter and John knew Jesus personally that they had some sort of advantage that you and I do not. However, the truth is that the Jesus that Peter and John knew is the same Jesus you and I know. Even though we have fears and doubts, Jesus can help us to overcome them and speak the truth in spite of them, just like he did with Peter and John.

Spend a few minutes meditating on how awesome it is that the same God who was with Peter and John is with us today.

Prayer: *Jesus, as we go through the steps of our days, remind us that you are with us. Remind us that you will give us boldness and courage to speak out against injustices and against hatred. Help us to speak out with strength and in love. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, January 21

Acts 5

“We must obey God rather than human beings!” This short phrase packs a big punch. At first it seems relatively easy to follow because, obviously, we are called to obey God. But in meditating on it further, one can see how difficult it can be to obey God rather than human beings. God tells His followers to do things very differently than the world. For example, we are called to love our enemies. We are called to help those in need. We are called to love God above any and everything else. We are called to mourn with those who mourn. We are called to be different from the world.

Obeing God is not easy. It requires a lot of thought, discipline, and action. Take a few minutes and think about the steps you can take in your life immediately to obey God and follow Him as you go about your day.

Prayer: *God, obeying you is not always easy. Please open our eyes to the ways we need to obey you in our own lives. Give us the strength and perseverance to obey you even though the world tells us to do something different. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Sunday, January 22

Acts 6–7

Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin is a powerful one. It traces the history of the Israelites from the calling of Abraham until the death of Jesus. Stories recounting the history of God's people appear often in the Old Testament, and, like here, they serve as reminders of what God's people have been through and of God's faithfulness to His people. Stories like this are refreshing and inspiring. A few short paragraphs remind us of who God is and of how much He loves His people. They demonstrate the character of God. And sometimes all of us need to be reminded of that character.

Take some time today and write out the story of God's history in your life. A written account can be revisited in a time when you need some encouragement yourself or when you need to encourage someone else.

Prayer: *Faithful Father, how quick we are to forget who you are and all that you have done in our lives. How quick we are to rely on ourselves in times of trouble or fear. How quick we are to forget that we are yours. Help us to remember who You are and who we are to You today, and every day. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Monday, January 23

Acts 8

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, verses 26–40, Philip’s day starts out with a voice from the Lord, and it only gets stranger from there. Philip does a number of things that were out of the norm for him: runs alongside a chariot, strikes up a conversation with a stranger, gets into the chariot of said stranger, baptizes said stranger in a river. The events of this story call Philip to step out of his comfort zone time after time after time. And at the end, Philip sees the beautiful result of stepping out of his comfort zone: a new brother in Christ.

Comfort zones are exactly that: comfortable. They are places, both physically and emotionally, where we feel safe and secure. Leaving them is something that we do not do easily. And yet, leaving them is often exactly what God calls us to do.

Think about how you can step outside of your comfort zone this week. Some possibilities: talk to someone you might not normally, make amends, learn the history of a group of people that is different from you, sit somewhere different in church, make a new friend.

Prayer: *Father, you challenge us to step out of our comfort zones. You desire that we follow you out of the safe places into our lives to take a risk for you. Remind us that you will be with us each step of the way. Open our eyes to see how challenging ourselves changes us to be more like you. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, January 24

Acts 9

The conversion of Paul is a powerful story. It reminds us that God can take even the worst people and change them and use them to glorify Him. It reminds us that our past does not determine who we can become in the future.

And while these are important lessons, think about those who were around Paul near the time of his conversion. Ananias is described as a disciple in verse 10, so presumably he did his best to follow God in his personal life while encouraging those around him to do the same. Imagine God calling you to go and visit a man who was known for killing Christians. And at first Ananias protested, and rightly so. However, God told him, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument and I have chosen him to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (verses 15–16). Ananias had to trust that God was telling him the truth, probably a big request based on what Paul had done.

The issue to trust is also seen just after Paul’s conversion once he arrived in Jerusalem (verse 26). The believers were afraid of him and hesitant to allow him to join them. These feelings are completely understandable. However, Barnabas vouched for Paul and the new man he had become in Christ. Once that had happened the disciples allowed him in and accepted him as one of their own.

Trust is hard for many of us. Sometimes we need to listen as God and other believers tell us it is okay to trust people that we find difficult to trust. And that trust does not happen overnight, it is a process, and often a rewarding one. In the case of Paul, for example, he led many people to belief in Jesus.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, help us to trust you as you lead us to trust those around us. Help us to take small steps of faith and trust daily. Remind us that you can do powerful things in and through others. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Wednesday, January 25

Acts 10–12

Peter's vision and response to it (chapter 10) is often cited as a turning point in the book of Acts. God uses a vision to show Peter that God has made all things clean. This realization is something that most of us take for granted. For many of us, we have grown up being taught and understanding that God loves all people, no matter where we live, what we look like, or anything else. And Peter's understanding of this truth is beautiful. He says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right" (verses 34–35).

It is this truth that led Peter to go to Cornelius, and others to share Christ with the Gentiles. It is this truth that leads us out into the world to share Christ with those who are different from us.

Think about a person or group of people that is different from you in some way. Do your best to look at them through God's eyes, and to see them the way He does.

Prayer: *Jesus, thank you for making all things clean, including us. Thank you for allowing every person the opportunity to both hear and share the gospel. Help us to see others as you see them. Open our eyes to the people around us who need to hear your good news, and encourage us to share that news with them this week. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday, January 26

Acts 13–14

Throughout these chapters Paul and his friends travel from one place to another sharing the gospel. And as more and more people believe, others become jealous and angry. And Paul and his friends had to talk people down and even escape from some dangerous situations. Yet, they continued forward. They did not let the opposition stop them from the mission they knew they were called to.

Although they faced a number of challenges, Paul and his friends were encouraged by the things they saw God doing through them. They saw people believe in each place they went. They also had each other to remind them to push through, and to support and encourage one another.

Sometimes in our own lives the opposition feels overwhelming. It can be hard to push through and continue to do what we have been called do. And yet, the callings that have been placed on our lives are important. It is our responsibility to carry them out, in spite of the opposition. Thankfully, like Paul, we have friends in our lives who can encourage us and who we can encourage as we follow God's calling.

Think about a friend (or two or three) you can encourage this week. Write an email or a letter. Pick up the phone and make a call. It is important to know that we are not alone.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for putting friends in our lives who can encourage us to keep going in spite of the challenges and opposition. Please help us to be that encouragement in the lives of the brothers and sisters around us. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, January 27

Acts 15

Disagreements are a part of life. The important thing to remember as we have disagreements with others (whether they are family members, friends, co-workers, or fellow believers) is how we work towards a solution.

The disagreement in this chapter of Acts is about circumcision, and whether the new Gentile believers should be required to be circumcised. It is not a stretch to imagine that this debate probably got very heated and intense. And here the leaders listened to both sides of the story and then met together to make a decision. They came to a decision, and shared it with the group at large. And, although it probably took some time, it seems like everyone came to a place of acceptance.

Even though the events of this chapter happened many, many years ago, they provide an excellent example for us to follow as we encounter disagreements in our own lives.

If you are in the midst of a disagreement, think about how the approach taken in this chapter can be applied to your situation.

Prayer: God, help us to trust those in leadership positions as they navigate us through times of peace and through times of disagreement. Help us to accept their leadership even though their decisions may be ones with which we do not agree. Help us to trust that You are in total and complete control of each and every situation. Amen.

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, January 28

Acts 16–17

As I read Acts 16 and 17, I was drawn to the familiarity of Acts 16:16–40 (Paul and Silas in prison). I kept rereading verses 25–26 from the NIV.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

I am not a singer; I don't sing in the church choir; I was never in chorus in high school. However I do sing during congregational hymns, I sing along with the radio when I'm alone in the car, I sang and rocked my children, and I sing to my grandchildren.

I was amazed when I googled the benefits of singing. Everything from strengthening the immune system, lowering stress, boosting your confidence, and about a dozen more health benefits popped up.

Maybe Paul and Silas knew something about singing. You see it was only after praying and singing that the earthquake caused the doors to open and the chains to come loose.

Do you ever feel like you're chained? Sometimes I do. Maybe not physically chained like Paul and Silas but emotionally chained. Well, maybe we should take a lesson from Paul and Silas and sing. It may make us feel better and help us break through some chains. A time of singing and praying could bring great benefit to each of us.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us lift our voices to you in song and praise and glorify your name. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Sunday, January 29

Acts 18–20

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Acts 20:24 (NIV)

As I read this verse, it stands out to me that Paul doesn’t say if only I can win the race. No it reads if only I may finish the race. I remember watching the Olympics this past summer when one of the US runners encouraged a runner from New Zealand after they had both fallen. Both runners hung back finishing in last place. But they finished.

I watched this happen often in Special Olympics. The special Olympians would encourage each other and just glow when they finished the race.

As members of Christ’s church we are encouraged to finish the race and testify to the gospel of grace. Sometimes events in our life’s race may seem to be too much to handle. However we make it to the finish line because of those who are encouraging us all along the way. There may be other times where we are watching those in our midst struggling in their own race. That’s when we step up to encourage them with kind words, prayers, cards, a meal, a smile, or a hug.

Where are you today? Are you in a race? Are you standing by encouraging someone? Hopefully wherever we are in our journey we are testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us stay strong to finish the races we face each day, and help us encourage those who run with us. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Monday, January 30

Acts 21–23

This text includes the story of the uproar in Jerusalem when Paul is arrested and then shares his conversion experience. Prior to presenting his defense we read these words from the Message.

Standing on the barracks steps, Paul turned and held his arms up. A hush fell over the crowd as Paul began to speak. He spoke in Hebrew. My dear brothers and fathers, **listen** carefully to what I have to say before you jump to conclusions about me. Acts 21:40–Acts 22:1

I am guilty of jumping to conclusions and not always **listening**. I hear part of the story and just think that I have the rest of the story figured out. Sometimes I'm right, but often I didn't hear enough and I'm terribly wrong. **Listening** can strengthen our relationships in our homes, at our jobs, with our friends, and yes in our church family. Things are just not always the way they appear. We need to **listen** to the whole story. Unfortunately sometimes we don't want to hear the whole story. Some folks thrive on sharing rumors or half-truths. We must be careful not to jump to conclusions that might be false.

The people in the crowd in Jerusalem had **listened** to Paul's story when he began speaking in Hebrew, but when he began to mention that the Lord was sending him to the Gentiles the tone changed and the crowd was now cursing him and ready to kill. It was only when a centurion **listened** and learned that Paul was a Roman citizen that he gained an audience before the Sanhedrin and eventually before Felix, the Governor.

Are you **listening**? Are you hearing the whole story? Take time to really **listen**.

Prayer: *Forgive me when I jump to conclusions with people in my life. Help me love those in my life enough to really **listen**. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, January 31

Acts 24–26

In this text Luke records for the third time Paul's conversion experience. His testimony is not much like what we might hear on Christian radio and television today. Most of the testimonies we hear are about someone's troubled life, how they found Jesus, and then how they've overcome their problems. Paul's story is about a happy, determined persecutor of Christians, who doesn't find Jesus but is found by Jesus. The end of his testimony is not how wonderful his life is. No it's about suffering. Paul's problems really started when he met Jesus, but he remained faithful.

Maybe there is a lesson for us about being faithful in all of our circumstances. Mother Teresa said, "God does not require that we be successful only that we be faithful."

If we look back at our own lives and at the life of our church, we have been witnesses to happy times, sad times, peaceful times, times of discord, times when we're contented, and times when we're dissatisfied. Yet in all of these times God has been faithful to us showing us his grace. Have we remained faithful to God, to each other, and to our church? Paul's life was a testimony of faith. Hopefully we can share a story of sacrifice, faith, and God's love and grace.

Prayer: *Help me remain faithful in the good times and the bad times. Thank you for your love and grace. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Wednesday, February 1

Acts 27–28

Paul has finally made it to Rome. What a difficult journey it has been! Paul has had to face many challenges and frustrations as he traveled to Rome. I would have been so discouraged; I know I would have just given up. But not Paul, he persevered. He has finally arrived in Rome.

As Acts ends we read

³⁰ For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ— with all boldness and without hindrance!

Because of Paul's perseverance he was able to preach unhindered for two years while he was under house arrest. During this time the authorities did not interfere with his mission.

Do we have a mission? Are we hindered here at Fernwood from fulfilling our mission? What is stopping us?

Prayer: *God give us the courage to persevere through the challenges we face. Help us as we seek to proclaim the Good News unhindered in our community. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday February 2, 2017

1 Corinthians 1-2

As with virtually all of the letters attributed to the apostle Paul in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians was written in response to a particular set of needs/concerns which had been communicated to him in some fashion. In the normal structure of letters of the time, Paul begins by identifying himself, as well as naming a companion who would apparently be known by the letter's recipients. He also notes those for whom the letter is intended, in both particular and general terms. The primary recipients are those who are the "saints" in Corinth, but he includes all who claim the name of Christ. As a part of the introductory section of the letter, Paul begins by emphasizing the positive, not a bad idea even in the 21st century!

The meat of the matter surfaces beginning in verse 10. Paul calls attention to the disruption which has occurred in the fellowship of the Corinthian Christian community and challenges the actions responsible for it. Certain persons in the community appear to claim special status because of their identification with one or another "baptizer" who may have been responsible for their conversion. Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and Paul are all included among those to whom one or another claims allegiance and some status thereby. Paul even refers to some who identify with Christ, perhaps seeing that as an even higher status in the community. He protests that such is not ever appropriate for those in the Christian community. What sets Christians apart is their awareness of what Christ has done by means of the cross. The new life claimed by Christians has its foundation in something the external world cannot comprehend, in fact, something perceived to be foolish by those outside. But, it is through that folly that the power of God has been infused into the Corinthian community, making those who were before of no significance now the bearers of life in Christ, through whom comes all wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. In other words, the apostle encourages those to whom he writes to recognize what truly matters and turn away from the things that don't. Focusing on what matters reinforces the unity which God intends in Christ and protects against the division which is too often a result of our instinctive human tendency to be "better than."

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul continues to urge a correction in behavior by reminding his readers of what he first announced among them as the essence of the gospel, Christ, and him crucified. Paul acknowledges his own limitations. Some have suggested that he may have had a speech impediment, or, at least, was not the greatest orator. Yet, through Paul, God did a great work in the Corinthian community. It is the power of God which brings about the unexpected. One of those unexpected "gifts" is the discernment of the wisdom of God, possible only through God's Spirit. Later in the letter, Paul will have much more to say about the Spirit and the Spirit's gifts, but here he is focused on encouraging his readers to remember what sets them apart from who and what they once were. The distinctive qualities of the Christian community are all gifts from God, not reasons for human arrogance or divisive behaviors.

The specific factors which lead to division in contemporary churches may differ from those to which Paul makes reference in 1 Corinthians, but his call to remember what matters continues to be

relevant. It is crucial that the body of Christ emphasize that who we are and what we accomplish are due to the power of God, and not from any of our own initiatives.

Prayer: *O God, give us the grace to focus our attention on what truly matters. Forgive us when we become obsessed with the trivial, when we forget that our truest identity is found in community. Help us to love as you have loved, and extend that love at every opportunity. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, February 3

1 Corinthians 3–4

These chapters of 1 Corinthians continue to engage the disruptive elements within the community at Corinth. Paul offers a rebuke to those who seem to demonstrate an arrogant spirit. He speaks of them as “people of the flesh” who are still “infants” in their walk of faith. They began as immature believers, being “fed” milk, since they were not ready for the solid food of the faith. The rebuke is that such remains true. They are still showing their immaturity by their wrangling with one another. Paul goes on to attribute all that is worthwhile to the working of God, the master builder. Paul, and others, have participated in the “building” of the faith in Corinth, but the foundation is Jesus Christ and the worth of the building is not due to the workers who have played certain roles. The only boasting which is proper is the boast that they belong to Christ, and not to any of the various persons who have influenced their journey. He reminds his readers that what they consider wisdom is not the wisdom of God, for the wisdom of God appears to be foolishness. Rather than become wise, they should become God’s “fools” so that they can gain true wisdom.

In chapter four, Paul rather sarcastically refers to the quarreling Corinthians as “kings,” a reference to their high regard for themselves. He contrasts their sense of themselves with his own humble role in life. He also reminds them that he, Paul, is their father in the faith and, though they may not heed his advice, he warns them that he **will** come and, when he does, their arrogance will be met with God’s power. In words not unlike those of a disciplining parent, Paul offers them a choice. Shall I come “with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”

Conflict in the church can sometimes develop in ways that those involved fail to see. There can be a certain blindness to how we appear to those outside the boundaries of our conflict world. Paul’s words of rebuke are probably worthy of our attention as warnings against these attitudes in our own context. Too often our disputes are about things that are not as important as we make them out to be. In the midst of such conflict, we forget that we are like petulant children. We need to “grow up” into Christ and attend to what we are called to be and do.

Prayer: O God, give us the wisdom to know that what binds us together as the Body of Christ is more important than that which divides us. Through your spirit, enable us to imitate the humility of the One who endured everything on our behalf. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, February 4

1 Corinthians 5–8

Beginning with 1 Corinthians 5, Paul plunges wholesale into what he deems the significant problems that have arisen within the Corinthian congregation. Of particular concern is an arrogant attitude which chooses to ignore behaviors which have a devastating effect on the reputation of the Christian community.

Paul has been made aware by oral report of a scandalous situation in the church. One of the members is engaged sexually with his own stepmother. This kind of behavior would not have been acceptable even within the larger Roman society. There were laws which forbade such relationships as both adulterous and incestuous. However, for some reason, the behavior was being tolerated by the Corinthian congregation. The likelihood is that the man involved occupied a higher status within society, bringing a certain amount of prestige to the congregation. That might explain the reluctance on the part of the community to challenge his behavior.

Later in the letter we learn that there are some in the congregation who have an inflated sense of their own spiritual superiority. That offers yet another possible reason for their inaction. They see themselves as so spiritually superior that the normal boundaries no longer apply to them.

Paul's approach is very direct. You must dismiss this man so as to preserve the integrity of the community. Not to do so threatens the very gospel which called them into being.

In the ensuing text of the letter, Paul identifies other behavioral issues which likewise have imperiled the reputation of the entire community. There is disagreement among members severe enough to lead to legal action by members against other members. Paul finds this to be totally unacceptable. Rather than offering a portrait of Christian unity, the Corinthian church is modeling the kind of chaos that would be eyebrow-lifting for the broader Corinthian public.

Paul goes on to address the involvement of some church members with prostitutes. Again, this may represent the arrogance of those who adopt gnostic assumptions that the physical self and its actions were irrelevant; only the spiritual self truly mattered. Paul clearly rejected that understanding and identified their behavior as joining the body of Christ to prostitutes. The three behavioral issues addressed are symbolic of a community which has lost its way. Paul not only condemns the behaviors, but warns that he will himself come to hold those who are guilty of such actions to account.

In 1 Corinthians 7–8, Paul continues to wade into the highly-charged arena of sexuality. Whether the context is ancient or modern, most ministers tend to see this as paramount to carrying a lighted match into a powder magazine! Paul does not hesitate to engage sexual issues. Most of us would find his ideas a bit rigid. After all, as Paul himself admits, he is not married, thus speaks as an "outsider" in these matters. He nonetheless considers his own choice of singleness to be the

preferred way to live. No doubt, this attitude was related to his understanding that the kingdom age would soon dawn, making these normal human relationship issues moot.

My own reading of scripture in a larger sense would suggest a more positive view of sexuality as one of God's good gifts, when properly exercised, though it always has the potential for harm if treated casually. Paul does offer sound advice regarding the importance of a healthy sex life within marriage. He advises mutuality in the way the sexual relationship of married couples was to be approached. Despite his singleness, he clearly is aware of the powerful role our sexuality plays in all of life, and he seeks to guide the Corinthian Christians toward a healthy focus.

We perhaps would part company with Paul as he advises the unmarried to stay that way. To say that it is "better to marry than to be aflame with passion" implies a much lower view of marriage than I am willing to accept. It is difficult to know how much the particular circumstances of the Corinthian culture influenced Paul's rather harsh attitudes, but such may have had an impact.

My suspicion is that we also part company with Paul in his rigid stance toward divorce. In part, that is due to the cultural differences between our western culture and that with which Paul was familiar. Divorce in the 1st century world was almost entirely a male prerogative. Only a very few highly placed women in Roman society could initiate divorce. Women who were divorced were often forced into poverty or worse. It is not too dramatic to suggest that it sometimes meant a virtual death sentence to a woman who was left with no male advocate or means of support. Our cultural context offers examples for which divorce is the most "righteous" choice, for a variety of different reasons. While the marriage bond should be recognized as sacred, it is not always a bond which can be preserved for life.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul takes on his final concern in this sequence of the letter, the eating of food previously offered to idols. Corinth was a major trading center of the ancient world and within its boundaries were many "pagan" temples, erected to the various Greek and Roman gods. The worship of those gods often involved sacrifices of meat, typically of high quality. That meat would not necessarily be consumed, but could be sold in the market after the religious rites were observed. Here again, the attitude of spiritual superiority emerged, as some within the Christian community thought nothing of purchasing this meat for their own use. Paul reminds them that, even though they consider the idols to be "nothing," that did not apply to all who were members of the Christian community. Some believers would not be so "mature" and could be greatly harmed by seeing their Christian brothers and sisters eating that which they associated with idol worship. Paul emphasized the importance of how the behavior of one can have an effect on another. The "meat-eaters" were correct in considering the idols to be nothing, but that wasn't the end of the issue. What of those for whom the lines were more blurred? Concern for them should outweigh my "right" to do what I believe, or even know, to be acceptable.

These four chapters in 1 Corinthians surface a variety of issues which continue to raise relevant questions for contemporary believers. What we know as matters of faith, or what we believe, does

not allow us the option to engage in behaviors which destroy the integrity of the faith community we claim to represent as the Body of Christ. We have a greater responsibility to live out the faith we claim to embody. Words of testimony, even elaborately developed theological understandings, can never take the place of the lived-out faith we are called to practice.

Prayer: *O God, when we become too comfortable in the way we “play” at being Christian, convict us. When we become convinced that we are somehow “better” than others who are struggling to live the life of faith, convict us. Remind us of the sacrificial love which first called us to Yourself, and give us the strength to live a life that honors your love. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul uses himself as an example of selfless devotion to the gospel. Perhaps he is offering an alternative to the arrogant assumption of spiritual superiority evidenced in the issues raised in the previous chapters. In any case, Paul reveals something of his personal struggle, and the reason he is willing to persevere in that struggle. He declares that those who serve God are deserving of material resources. He uses the example of the priests who are allowed to use the meat of the sacrifice as part of their diet, appropriate recompense for their sacred service. Likewise, Paul, as a servant of the gospel, is due similar consideration. However, he insists that he has never availed himself of that option, nor does he intend to do so. He is intent on proclaiming a gospel that is free, and, in his case, unfettered by any possibility that he is acting out of self-interest. Paul's whole purpose in life is to relate to all persons as they are, where they are, using every resource at his command, so that the power of the gospel may have opportunity to transform lives.

1 Corinthians 10 begins with a summation of Israel's salvation history, with attention to the ways in which the Jewish ancestors strayed from the faithful path. Paul describes the consequences which befell those ancestors who turned away from God. The traditions passed down to the Corinthian Christians are warnings not to be imitators of the Jewish ancestors, rather to learn the lessons clearly evident from their sinful actions and the disastrous results which followed. Paul acknowledges that the life of faith will include its moments of "testing," but no believer will be tested beyond his/her ability to endure that testing. He then returns to an earlier topic, food offered to idols. In the Corinthian setting, such may in fact produce "testing." Paul insists that the danger lies in blending the sacred "food" of the Lord's table with the food offered to idols. The cup and the bread of the Lord's table are more than food and are not to be blended with the pagan practices so common in the local culture. One cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of "demons" (v. 21).

Continuing with his warning about food from idols, Paul reiterates that there is nothing innately perverse about the meat itself, but just because I know it is nothing special does not allow me complete freedom to consume it. Even so, Paul offers specific direction. If you are offered meat as a guest, eat what is before you without questions. If, however, you are informed that it was earlier used as a pagan sacrifice, under no circumstances are you to eat it. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the church of God" (vv. 31–32).

1 Corinthians 11 moves into the realm of worship, concluding with the familiar instructions regarding the observance of the Lord's Supper. The early verses of chapter 11 confront us with a number of difficult questions that lack clear answers. Paul makes a big deal about head coverings for those who are engaged in worship practice. Women are to have their heads covered, while men are not. The latter is a departure from Jewish custom, for Jewish men always cover their heads when they pray. This is likely a reflection of Roman customs and assumptions which are associated with them. The women referred to are "wives" (an alternative translation for the Greek word used here). In Roman society, wives are always to have their heads covered in public so as not to be confused

with "virgins," widows, or, more problematic, prostitutes.¹ Head covering for women is still expected in some circles of Christian practice, but not at all typical of American Protestant Christians. Even more problematic for some is the seeming reference to household hierarchy to which Paul refers in the early verses of this chapter. Paul refers to the creation account of Genesis 2 to describe woman as created from man. Of course, he is ignoring the account in Genesis 1, when humankind is created in the image of God, male and female. I would argue that the only true image of God is only to be found in both genders. Neither alone reflects the full image of God. Scott Nash, in his commentary, is quick to point out that the language Paul uses here does not necessarily denote inferiority on the part of women. Quite the contrary, verses 11 and 12 emphasize the mutuality of men and women.² There is, however, the challenge in understanding what is meant by the woman's actions that are "because of the angels."

No one has the clear and certain explanation for what Paul intends by that phrase, and this devotional does not allow the space to explore it further. In any case, these instructions are about how to engage in worship in a proper manner (and may not refer to any but those who are exercising worship leadership). The concern, as has been surfaced previously, is that the integrity of the community be maintained by proper practice.

The last section of chapter 11 gives instructions for the observance of the Lord's Supper. Preceding the specific instructions, Paul describes some of the abuses reported about the observance in Corinth. The fellowship meal (which would have included the Supper as we know it) had become a means of separation rather than unity. Those with means arrived early and ate lavish meals (and drank more than they should have), while the poorest members arrived late and often had nothing at all to eat. For Paul, this made a mockery of the time around the table. He concludes this chapter by giving specific instructions about how Jesus intended the Supper to be observed, in remembrance of Him. Paul warns against trivializing the Supper, eating the bread and drinking the cup "in an unworthy manner" (v.27). He even suggests that some have experienced the punishment of God for doing so. He encourages the Corinthian Christians to return to the original purpose of the Supper, the remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice and the importance of the unity of the faith community.

We would do well to note the elements in this section of 1 Corinthians that continue to be relevant for us. I suspect we may be guilty of trivializing the supper in a very different way than the Corinthians. We trivialize it by failing to give it the significance it deserves, but, in our anti-Catholic mentality, incorporate it as a kind of add-on so as not to give it the role of sacrament. I suspect we are robbing ourselves of the tremendous meaning available in this central act of worship in so doing.

¹ Robert Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 324.

² Nash, 332.

As with the concerns about right living elaborated in the previous section of 1 Corinthians, the instructions offered by Paul in these chapters are not without value. We likely don't eat meat offered to idols, but we may be guilty of an attitude of spiritual superiority that takes other expression. When we lose sight of the value of community, we have somehow lost our way as the Body of Christ.

Prayer: *O God, every time we eat the bread and drink from the cup, may we be reminded of why we do it and what it calls for us to do. May we be ever conscious of our neighbor's needs and seek to be the extension of your love to meet those needs. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

These chapters represent the most familiar content within 1 Corinthians. Paul offers his perspective on the importance of the many spiritual gifts which God grants to different members of the Christian community. Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to illustrate the value of a variety of gifts within the community. No one gift is given precedence over others. As with the members of the human body, all are essential for the body to function at its best. Within 1 Corinthians 12, Paul lists many of the spiritual gifts that enhance life within the Body of Christ. We discover as we continue reading that there is a reason for the apostle's emphasis on the importance of all gifts, without emphasizing one, or a select few, to have greater value. The "tongues of angels" have apparently become a source of division within the Corinthian congregation. Ecstatic speech, glossolalia, was seen by some as a superior spiritual gift. Thus, those who practiced it lauded it over those who did not.

It is the attempt by Paul to address this divisive issue that leads to the much-loved text of chapter 13. If there is one spiritual gift that is indeed more important than any other, it is the gift of love. Without it, no gift has value. With it, even the most insignificant gift is of great value.

The unity of the faith community can be endangered by any number of factors, but the temptation to elevate oneself, or one's group, above the larger community is often cause for division and conflict. As Paul expands his treatment of "tongues" in chapter 14, it becomes clear that this was a primary concern he wished to address.

I come from a segment of Baptist life which did not practice (and likely had little understanding of) speaking in tongues. Pentecostal Christians often perceive tongues speaking to be a valuable spiritual gift. Perhaps to our surprise, so did Paul. He never dismissed tongues speaking as without value. To the contrary, he indicated that he spoke in tongues more than anyone, but in the privacy of his prayer life, not in public worship. His concern is the tendency for the exercise of this gift to create a chaotic atmosphere that, rather than contributing to the sacredness of worship, instead caused it to disintegrate into bedlam. Note that Paul did not prohibit the practice in worship, rather he offered guidelines as to how it should be done. The overall goal of worship is to glorify God, and do so in such a manner as to enable the entire gathered body of believers to participate fully. The primary motivation for pursuing this unified understanding of worship is that love outweighs everything else in guiding our practice within community. If our actions are not from that motivation, they are of questionable value.

The problem with tongues speaking, as far as Paul was concerned, was that it was unintelligible for most of those who witnessed it. For that reason, the apostle argued that prophecy (proclamation of the gospel) was more valuable than tongues speaking. As the chapter comes to an end, Paul insists that he is not forbidding the practice of speaking in tongues, but that, along with all other expression of worship, it should "be done decently and in order" (v. 40).

The lessons of these chapters speak powerfully to the 21st century church. As was true of the Corinthian Christians, we struggle with issues that divide congregations. All too often, those issues are trivial, but rise to the level of destroying the fellowship of believers. Paul's emphasis on the superior gift of love is a word we not only need to hear, but put into practice. The metaphor of the body continues to be relevant. We need to remind ourselves that every contribution, every "gift," is vital to our overall function as the Body of Christ. Therefore, we need to affirm all those who contribute as part of the Body. None is without value.

I would like to think that the Corinthian chaos is rarely replicated in modern contexts. However, we are all aware that our own versions of chaos, while they may differ in some ways from what Paul encountered at Corinth, still have the same potential for harm to the community. May we find a way to make love the centerpiece of all we are and all we do so as to overcome chaos in so doing.

Prayer: *O God, give us the clarity of vision to recognize the varied gifts within our faith community. Give us the grace to accept those gifts when we are their recipient. Give us the will to acknowledge our own gifts and use them to further the goals of your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, February 7

1 Corinthians 15–16

The first letter to the Corinthians closes with an extended focus on the resurrection and a rather typical closing note which mentions a number of key persons as well as instructions concerning a collection of funds which Paul intended to send, or take, to Jerusalem for the saints there who apparently were experiencing financial hardship.

1 Corinthians 15 may be the most thorough discussion of resurrection in the New Testament. Paul begins by reminding the Corinthian Christians of the centrality of the resurrection for their overall faith in Christ. Apart from it, he argues, your faith is in vain. He offers a summary of the gospel, "that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3–4), then appeared to Cephas (Peter), the twelve, hundreds of other followers, and, last of all, to Paul himself, the least worthy of all apostles.

He then seems to confront some in Corinth who have denied the reality of the resurrection. If this tenet of the faith is not true, Paul declares, then our faith is futile. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19). However, Paul insists that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have died.

It may be that some have asked Paul about the nature of the resurrected body, for he offers an extensive discussion of the contrast between the physical body and the spiritual body, emphasizing that the spiritual body overcomes all of the limitations and weakness of the physical body. The source of Paul's ideas is not clear. It may be his own understanding gleaned from who knows what source. In any case, he firmly defends belief in the resurrection, not only of Jesus, but of all those who believe. As you read the verses with which chapter 15 concludes, you will recognize words that are often read at funerals. They are words which encapsulate the hope of the Christian perhaps better than any others could.

Because of this steadfast hope, Paul encourages those who hear his letter to remain steadfast, for they do not labor in vain.

The concluding chapter in 1 Corinthians begins by reminding the Corinthians of the need to be collecting financial resources to aid the Christians in Jerusalem. All of the churches in Galatia are participating in this "offering" which Paul, or those whom he selects, will take to the "saints" in Jerusalem.

He offers some of his own travel plans, along with referencing others who will possibly be visiting Corinth. He is writing from Ephesus, in Asia Minor (eastern Turkey today), and eventually plans to travel through Macedonia (northern Greece), before, he hopes, spending extended time in Corinth. He ends his letter with both challenge and encouragement for the Corinthian Christians.

As one reads and reflects upon the wealth of ideas which surface in 1 Corinthians, it is difficult to distill one or two that stand out. Rather, it may be that the best summation is to remember how much of Paul's counsel has to do with restoring the unity of a body of believers who have been splintered by a variety of factors. Paul reminds them, and us, of the core beliefs which first called us to follow Christ, and encourages them, and us, to give priority to what truly matters, leaving behind those things that hinder us from fulfilling the purpose to which we have been called.

Prayer: *O God, we give profound thanks for the hope of resurrection. May we live as persons who reflect that hope in the way we relate to others. May we be willing to remain "steadfast" in our labor for you. Most of all, may we strive for the unity of believers which can make resurrection hope transparent to the world around us. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Wednesday, February 8

2 Corinthians 1-3

It is fascinating to me that I can read today a letter that was written nearly two thousand years ago and find it very relevant for me. Yet, here we have Paul's letter to the young struggling church at Corinth. They were struggling to keep their lives in harmony with the truth of Christ that Paul had taught them. I struggle too sometimes, don't you? How can struggle, conflict and trouble make you stronger?

These new Christians were told that they were "letters" of recommendations to Paul and to others. God's Holy Spirit had written these letters on their hearts for all to read. Think about it! God has put His stamp of approval on all who put their faith in Jesus. Let us be obedient to the teachings of Christ so that the message can be read "loud and clear" by a world that is hungry to know the love of God and to find redemption in Him.

God's Holy Spirit is still writing on our hearts. What is the message that He has and is writing on your heart? Fill in the blank.-----

Prayer: *Father, we pray that our lives will be a clear "letter of recommendation" of your love, your mercy, your forgiveness, and your grace for all mankind. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday, February 9

2 Corinthians 4–6:13

Paul shared with the Corinthian church what it had meant physically and spiritually to be God’s message of salvation through Christ. He said that his body had been the container of this “treasure”. As he moved from place to place to share this treasure he was assailed by trouble and conflict and in constant danger. He was beaten, put in jail, confronted by angry mobs, exhausted suffered sleepless nights, went hungry, etc. He was crushed, but not broken–perplexed, but didn’t quit–knocked down, but got up to go again–hunted down, but **never abandoned by God!!**

In spite of all this he could say, “Though our bodies are dying, decaying, and wasting away, our inner strength (where that “treasure” is) is being renewed and is growing every day”. I’m thinking that we should make ourselves available for that renewing by worshipping, praying, loving, forgiving, giving, and _____. (You fill in the blank.)

Prayer: *Father, thank you for the earthly body that you have given us; it has served us well even as it is decaying, dying, and wasting away. We look forward to that heavenly body and to living with you forever. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, February 10

2 Corinthians 6:14-7

Paul has already told the Christians at Corinth that when they put their confidence, faith, and trust in Jesus they are a new person inside—they have **new life** in Christ. God has taken away their sins and in turn filled them with the righteousness of Jesus. And surely the same holds true for all believers! Think about it! I am now fit for God to dwell in me.

Now Paul says, “You are God’s temple, the home of the living God.” God has said of you, “I will live in them and walk among them. I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Think about it! How am I careful to keep my “temple” fit for God’s presence?

- Take good care of my physical body
- Guard my thoughts (think of things lovely, pure, and of good report)
- Deny self to make room for God’s self
- _____(Add you own idea.)

Prayer: *We live and move and have our being in you, O God. And what a sobering thought that you live and move and have your being in our lives, lives that have been cleansed by the blood of your Son, Jesus!*

All praise, and honor, and glory to you most Holy Name! Amen.

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, February 11

2 Corinthians 8-9

Paul in this section of the letter uses this opportunity to teach about grace while at the same time asking the church to prepare to give a financial gift. He was sending Titus to collect their donation. In essence he was killing two birds with one stone. He didn't want them to be unprepared for this visit. Also he told about the Macedonian churches who gave out of their poverty and beyond their ability because of the grace God had given them in this area. The result was not only money but also overflowing joy.

You see God is more concerned with our heart attitude than with the resulting action. He takes pleasure in a cheerful giver. We have a tendency to only look on the outside; God looks on the inside. Not only that, but He gives us the grace needed to correct a bad attitude.

I am defining grace as God's empowerment in us to handle whatever situation we find ourselves. Of course that is undeserved favor, but it is so much more. Whatever we do, God is there with us to help if we will let Him. He is always willing. We however are not always inclined to accept His grace.

Prayer: *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift of grace. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Sunday, February 12

2 Corinthians 10-11

Paul defends his ministry in this section. He advises against comparing one person to another. Although the church looked at him as timid in person and bold in his letters, he holds to the contention that he was only concerned that the church be held blameless in its relationship to God. Other so called "super apostles" had slipped into their midst teaching and preaching falsehoods. Paul's fight against their teachings was not in the flesh but in spirit and mind. He admonished them to take any thought captive that was not in obedience to the true Word of God.

These false apostles were boastful of themselves, but Paul only boasted in God and His empowerment to do His will. Paul could have easily relied upon his own qualifications and background to show up these self aggrandizing super apostles. But Paul chose to only boast in the Lord who was made strong in Paul's weakness.

Prayer: *Father, show yourself strong in our weaknesses. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Monday, February 13

2 Corinthians 12-13

In the summation of the letter Paul ties his previous points together. He mentions a thorn in the flesh that he had asked God to remove three times. He calls the thorn a messenger from Satan to keep him from being prideful of the visions he had. God's answer is found in verse 2 Corinthians 12:9. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Go back to 2 Corinthians 9:8. God is able to give us all the grace we need in abundance for every occasion.

I recently heard someone say that God's grace was like manna. We only get what we need for today, not yesterday or tomorrow. We should be aware that we can only live in the present. We can't change the past and can only plan for the future. But only God know our future.

Paul goes on to express his love for the church saying he did not want their possessions but them. He did not want to come and find them quarrelling and angry. His prayer is for their perfection, but if need be he was ready to deal with any impurity or sin among them

Prayer: *Lord, give us the courage and wisdom to aim for perfection, listen to your word, be of one mind, and live in peace. May your grace and love be with us. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, February 14

Galatians 1-2

Where do we find the direction for our lives? This can be a challenging problem that Paul attempts to resolve in his letter to the Galatians. Paul had been one of the chief persecutors of early Christians. His conversion is one of the amazing miracles within the early church. Of course, there were those who were skeptical of his conversion after which he had visited Jerusalem and met with James. Many were overjoyed and praised God because Paul had become an enabler of the gospel. There were some who were unsure as they had observed false brothers infiltrating the early believers often creating confusion. How do we know how to judge true belief?

Paul was concerned that the Galatians were deserting the gospel. They appeared to be more interested in obtaining Paul's approval than God's. We are challenged with similar issues. We have our traditions and customs, and they tend to become our gospels. We must always find our way back to God through understanding the human dynamic that we can observe in the life of Christ.

Within this scripture is the familiar story of Peter going to Antioch. As long as Peter was the only elder of the Jerusalem church in Antioch, he would eat and associate with the gentile Christians. His attitude and behavior changed once the other church elders came to Antioch. Paul could not believe the hypocrisy of Peter's actions. Paul became so incensed that he challenged Peter in front of all the elders. Do we struggle with our faith in secular situations or can we remain consistent in all avenues of life?

What sermons we are preaching through our actions? We know God by understanding His incarnate self through Christ. Paul had learned the Law and he originally felt justified through the Law. Once he was confronted by Christ on the road to Damascus, he realized that justification comes through the spirit of Christ, and not the Law. Righteousness is only gained through Christ. Through righteousness comes grace, and grace enables us to live as free men and women of faith.

Prayer: *Lord, we pray for your presence in all situations. May we not falter in our faith as we live our lives. We thank you for the grace that you give to us so freely requiring very little from us in return. May we emulate you in our interactions with others showing them grace. In all things, may we live out our vision as a church by being Christ to each other and to our community. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

How did you receive the spirit? This is a question that Paul asked the early Christians in Galatia. Faith leads to righteousness, and consequently, the righteous live by faith. Sin, however, creeps in and imprisons us all. Even when the people were under the Law, they lived imprisoned to it as well. But faith through the spirit breaks the chains of imprisonment. The spirit lives in us and calls out to God, “Abba, Father”. The spirit makes the connection for us.

Similarly, Paul also said that we may become slaves to sin. Through the spirit, we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters. We are now heirs. The Galatians were struggling with weak and miserable principles. Paul suggested that the Galatians look to him as an example. They could recognize in him someone who had undergone change. They could observe that the spirit worked in Paul’s life and that he lived by faith.

Although Paul is perplexed by the Galatians, he continues to provide them direction in their lives. He emphasizes that we are all one in Christ. There is no slave or free, but all are free from sin through grace. Paul even makes a curious comparison related to Abraham’s sons’ mothers. One was a slave and one was not. Paul compared these to the Law and the Promise. The Law made slaves of those who followed it. There was no humanity in the actions of those following the Law, only strict adherence to its instructions. The promise that God loved us enough to send his son to free us from this strict adherence fills us with the spirit of Christ. We receive the spirit as a free gift. We just need to be open and accept this new life.

Prayer: *Father Spirit, breathe us in and breathe us out. May your exhalations fill us with your Spirit. May we imbibe the fresh air of faith. May we brush away the winds of influence of this world and purge the impurities of sin from our airways. May we dance in your spirit as we spin around and dart side to side as a leaf in a windstorm. May we be so filled with your spirit that those things that divide us as a congregation can escape as the new breaths of your spirit replace them. We can only be made whole through your Spirit. Make it so. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday, February 16

Galatians 5–6

Paul lays out the confrontation between the sinful nature and the Spirit. Again, he emphasizes the freedom that we have in Christ and that we are no longer burdened by the yoke of slavery. He cautioned us not to use our freedom to indulge in the sinful nature, but to live in the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to produce the good fruit. Specifically, the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Not only do we produce good fruit, but by belonging to Christ we destroy the sinful nature.

Paul also cautioned us not to think too highly of ourselves. This could provoke envy among us. We also should be cautious of strongly rebuking someone who perhaps has given into the sinful nature. We should take a gentle approach in our restoration of others. We should carry each other's burdens and test our actions to be in alignment with the Spirit. We should never weary of doing good.

Life in the Spirit, producing those good fruits, is the means to a new life. We are recreated in the Spirit. Any past associations pass away, and we can walk in the newness of life. We love because God first loved us. And we love our neighbor as ourselves because the Spirit produces that good fruit within us. While we continue to reap what we sow, we reap eternal life because that is what the Spirit sows.

Prayer: *We praise you as our Lord and Savior. We honor you as our Creator recognizing that creation is not finite, but is ongoing. You give us the opportunity to have a new life. A life filled with the fruits of the Spirit. We thank you for that great gift, and pray that we can all live through the guidance of your Spirit. We pray for a unity of Spirit so that we can collectively produce those good fruits. We trust that we can do great things through your Spirit that prepares us for the challenges of each day and strengthens us for the journey together. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, February 17

Ephesians 1–3

Predestination has always been a troubling word to me. I believe that God gives us the opportunity and the freedom to choose our own paths. I still believe that he can guide us through that process, but to think all is predestined is foreign to me. In this passage, Paul uses that word to indicate that because of God's love, we are predestined to be adopted as His son or daughter. In this context, the word takes on the nature of choice. God has chosen us to be His children. That adds a different dimension to the concept of predestination for me.

Paul also alludes to the mystery that is God's will. To have the will of God for us to be made plain to us would be incredible. Through His will, we are chosen and predestined, but how do we live this? How do we even know this? If it was that obvious to us, we would probably still not be able to truly live within His will. We are saved by grace, but that is not for us, but for God. We are saved by faith, not by works, so that we cannot boast. We are derived from God's workmanship, not our own. We cannot truly function as a child of God unless we take it on faith that we live out His will for us whether we understand it or not.

Paul also reminds us that we are all in this together. We are no longer foreigners or aliens, but we are fellow citizens, members of the same household. It is so easy to forget that especially when we are so divided by things of earth. We see this division every day in the world, in our country, in our state, and even in our church. We need to remember that Christ is our cornerstone, and the church is Christ's bride. We need to approach God in freedom and confidence that things can be made right. We have to exhibit the faith, and allow our hearts to be enlightened so that we will know the hope that brings true understanding. Through humility and grace, we can find our way through the maze of division.

Prayer: *"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever Amen." Eph. 3: 14 – 20 (NIV)*

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, February 18

Ephesians 4–5

What is our calling? How do we understand how we are called and how we are to respond? Often we associate a calling with the ministry or other faith-based endeavor. God has blessed us all in special ways and understanding how those blessings play into the over-arching will of God leads us to our calling. Paul in Ephesians 4 says that we are to live a life worthy of our calling. As he did in Galatians, he also laid out some of the attributes of a worthy life. We need to be humble, gentle, patient, and bearing one another in love. These are juxtaposed to the ways of the world, thus we struggle with our calling.

Paul also reminds us that we need to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. I think sometimes we forget that it takes effort to maintain unity. Why is it so hard? The church should be a safe haven where we can come and find comfort and confidence in each other. It is a place where we can combine our resources and our spirits into one expression of love and grace to each other and to our community. Paul says that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all. How can we live out that type of unity in our world?

Paul says we are to mature. But are we not mature already? We must become mature through the body of Christ. We must each do our part to build up the body of Christ. Each of us must do our work and through our work, we build unity up through love. We can no longer allow petty differences to divide us. We must not allow anger to separate us. With God's help, we must strive to make ourselves new. We need to speak truthfully, we must be kind and compassionate, and we must build up each other. Only then can we respond to God who calls us to be Christ to each other.

Prayer: *Our Father, who has adopted us to be your children, we pray that we can jettison those things that divide us out of our lives. May we remember that we are family, and that we need each other to fulfill your will. Grant us the humility, the patience, and the gentleness required to respond to your calling. Finally, Lord, we pray for unity. Embrace us with your Spirit. Lead us to the newness of life. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Sunday, February 19

Ephesians 6

Paul first addresses relationships in Ephesians 6. He instructs children to obey their parents and to honor them. Likewise, he provides guidance to parents to train and instruct your children, but not to exasperate them. I believe this shows that there needs to be a balance between firmness and fairness in our relationships. While slavery seems foreign to us, we often see these relationships described also in scripture. Paul enlists the slaves to obey their masters, but he also tells the masters to treat their slaves as you would if they were serving the Lord. We serve God by serving each other. Slaves, children, parents, masters, all of us are under God, and we are to love Him and each other with all of our being.

Paul then creates the image for us to prepare for battle. He suggests that we stand firm and put on the full armor of God. We first put on the Belt of Truth and buckle it around our waste. Then we don the Breastplate of Righteousness. Our feet should be fitted with the Readiness that comes from the gospel of Peace. We carry the Shield of the Spirit, and we place the Helmet of Salvation on our heads. Finally, we wield the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. He has provided all of the armaments and protections that we need to battle the sin that surrounds us and to serve others when they are under attack.

We are now prepared except we also need to pray in the Spirit. We must stay alert to the perils in this world and to bring the peace and grace of God to the world. We do that by building relationships with each other and by always being prepared to meet the challenges of life head on.

Prayer: *We praise you Lord because we know that you do not send us out without preparation. You provide the means for us to build relationships. You enable us to serve you by serving others. You empower us to fight the sin of the world to bring wholeness to your people. Please forgive us when we feel overwhelmed and look for excuses not to do thy will. May we be your hands and feet to bring grace and peace to all your children. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Monday, February 20

Philippians 1

You can tell from this passage what a love Paul has for the church at Philippi. He probably remembers meeting Lydia by the river, and how this church grew from those early beginnings. He thanks God every time he thinks of the Philippians.

Paul encourages us to pray with joy. The distractions of the world often weigh us down. Joy can become hidden from us, but we can find joy through sharing in God's grace. Grace enables us to experience God's love. Paul reminds us that love abounds more and more through the knowledge that we experience within God's grace. It gives us a new insight. We then can discern what is best, what is pure, and what is blameless. We can then be filled with the fruit of righteousness.

Paul also recognizes that there are challenges in living out our calling. At times, he feels that he is in chains for Christ. He experiences the awesome responsibility of representing Christ to those who have not experienced Him first hand. He must not only preach the gospel, but he must live it also. He even questions his motives at times, but he realizes that preaching the gospel is a good thing regardless of the motives. Paul is torn between the desires to be with Christ in death versus being alive with Christ living in him. He is fighting the good fight, but always questions if he is doing all he can. In the end, whatever our motivations, we must conduct ourselves in a manner that is worthy of the gospel.

Prayer: *Oh joy, where are you? We are burdened by the strife and the animosity that surrounds us. We feel the call to love, but we become frustrated when we are met with obstacles. We fear that we do not know how to move the church forward into the 21st century. How do we resolve the discord in our lives?*

We do recognize that we cannot do this on our own. Only through the grace that comes from you can we even begin to feel the energy needed to push onward. May we resolve to push on believing that you are enabling your Spirit to permeate our being. May we find the joy that is the great gift that flows from your grace. Amen.

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, February 21

Philippians 2

Christ displayed the ultimate spirit of humility. Unfortunately, we often forsake humility for audacity. We get caught up in correctness, and somehow feel we have all the answers. We bow our backs and dig in our heels, because we know we are right. But what does that buy us? We need to imitate Christ and show true humility. By doing so, we become united with Christ and we fellowship with His Spirit. We need to be like minded with Christ displaying agape love and being one in spirit and purpose. Only by putting the interests of others ahead of our own will be able to experience unity in Christ.

Christ did not consider himself equal to God. He became a servant to others. He was even obedient to death, allowing himself to be sacrificed for us. He humbled himself, but God exalted him. His name is above all other names. At the name of Jesus, we humble ourselves, we kneel, and we confess the Lordship of Christ.

Through adorning a humble spirit, we allow God to work within us. He can bring about his good purpose in us as we surrender to His will. We are the children of God. What do we have to complain or argue about? God calls us to be glad and rejoice, and he challenges us to shine like the stars of the universe. We shine for god's glory, not our own.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to emulate the humility of Christ. Forgive us when we allow our arrogance to create friction and fracture within the body of Christ. We pray that we can shine like stars, but not for our glory, but to show the way for others to share in your glory. Help us to have the attitude of Christ showing tenderness and compassion to all. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

We are urged to forget what is behind us and strive for what is ahead of us. Paul entreats us to press toward the goal to win the prize. Having played sports for most of my young life, I understand pressing toward a goal. In sports, the goal is to win at all costs. Similarly to 1 Corinthians 9, Paul understood about giving his all to reach the prize. The key is that we need to understand for what prize we are reaching and that the costs are borne by us, not by others.

Everything is considered loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. That puts things into perspective. Knowing Christ is more than just having the knowledge of Him and His life. It must be personal and rooted deep within us. We must exhibit the righteousness that comes from God through faith. It must bring about change within us. We must truly repent, that is, change the direction of our lives. If it doesn't, then we do not truly know Christ.

Paul set himself up as a pattern for the Philippians to see as a way to know Christ. But through the gospels, we have Christ himself as a pattern for our lives. We can observe Him in his interactions with those who were challenged by life. We can ponder his great teachings in the Sermon on the Mount or reflect on his many parables. We see the life that Christ lived, and transforms us into a child of God. This will allow us to obtain citizenship in heaven. What else could we ask for?

Prayer: *Help us to keep our focus on the prize that is Christ. May we ever continue to seek the knowledge of Christ. There are many shiny prizes that can often distract us. Help us to keep our perspective. Help us to keep pushing forward. Enable us to stay on the path to grow into your love and mercy. We pray for transformation. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Thursday, February 23

Philippians 4

Why do we jump to conclusions? Why do we always expect the worst? What causes panic attacks and high anxiety? Not being a psychologist, I admit I not trained to understand such things. Of course I get nervous from time to time, and even can be a little compulsive, but thankfully, I have never experienced a full-blown panic attack. But I know people who have. I can be very troubling to them and they struggle to understand the causes. I also know people who have experienced PTSD. This can be very debilitating to their well-being. Life is complicated, and fear and anxiety are on the rise rather than the decline.

Paul reminds us that the peace of God transcends all understanding. This is a welcoming thought, but is it real enough to relieve our anxiety? He goes on to say that we should not be anxious, but how do we control that? We should pray and petition God in all things. With thanksgiving, we should present our requests to God in faith. It sounds simple. The God of peace will be with us providing contentment in every situation. Can we have that much faith that we believe God can meet all of these needs in all situations?

Rejoice in the Lord always. Exhibit gentleness in interpersonal encounters. Do whatever is true, noble, right, pure, and lovely. Seek those things that are excellent and praiseworthy. Think positive. Be content in every situation. Can we flip the switch and move beyond anxiety to thoughtfulness, insecurity to fulfillment, terror to confidence? Can we remember that the God of peace will be with us always? We have convinced ourselves that we can do everything that we put our minds to do. We can do it, but we need to remember that we can only do it because it is through God who gives us strength that we can. Thankfully, God will meet all of our needs. That is His promise.

Prayer: *Father, help us to trust you. We often feel that we can do things for ourselves, but then we feel inadequate when things do not go as planned. Steady us when we begin to waiver. Allow your Spirit to permeate our being to give us confidence that you are there, and that there is no challenge that we will face that together we cannot overcome. We thank you for your constancy and your peace. May your Spirit prepare for us for today, and may we rejoice that You are our constant, abiding hope. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Friday, February 24

Colossians 1–2

Although Paul did not establish the church at Colossae and had never been there, he still felt a responsibility to provide it with encouragement and correct teaching. (2:1–3, The New Jerusalem Bible). After learning of its formation from Epaphras (1:7), he immediately began to pray for their spiritual maturity. (1:9–12). In verse 12, he tells the Colossians that he thanked God for making them able “to share the lot of God's holy people and with them to inherit the light.”

Our “lot” and “inheritance” as part of God's people isn't always easy. We constantly struggle against the temptation to drift away (1:23), worldly philosophies (2:8), and empty rules (2:20–23). But we have the knowledge that God through Christ has “rescued us from the ruling force of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his Son that he loves.” (1:13–14).

Paul's mission to the churches of Laodicea was to “bind them together in love and to encourage their resolution.” (2:2). Even today, a close-knit, determined church will persevere through the challenges that come with being part of God's people to inherit God's kingdom.

Prayer: *Father, make us thankful for the inheritance we receive from you, including the struggles that come from being part of your kingdom. As a Church, help us to realize that the strength we receive through Jesus Christ will allow us to become the people you want us to be. And let us trust your Holy Spirit to provide us that strength. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Saturday, February 25

Colossians 3–4

You have stripped off your old behavior with your old self, and you have put on a new self which will progress toward true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of the Creator. (Col 3:9–10, The New Jerusalem Bible).

Two coats were before me an old and a new.
I asked my sweet master O what must I do.
The old coat was earthly so tattered and torn.
The other a new one had never been worn.
I tell you the best thing I ever did do.
I took off the old coat and put on the new.

Since you have been raised up with Christ, you must look for the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at God's right hand. Let your thoughts be on things above, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. (3:1–3).

The first man was earthly and made from the ground.
We bore all his image the whole world around.
The next was my Savior from heaven so fair.
He brought me this new coat you now see me wear.
I tell you the best thing I ever did do.
I took off the old coat and put on the new.

Over all these clothes, put on love, the perfect bond. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it for this that you were called together in one body. Always be thankful...With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and whatever you say or do, let it be in the name of the Lord Jesus, in thanksgiving to God the Father through him. (3:14–17).

Now this coat it suits me and keeps me so warm
It's good in the winter; it's good in the storm.
My Savior has dressed me in a garment so rare.
He brought me this new coat you now see me wear.
I tell you the best thing I ever did do.
I took off the old coat and put on the new.

Two Coats (Traditional song, arrangement by Patty Loveless and Emory Gordy Jr.).

Prayer: *Father, thank you for graciously offering us all a new coat through Jesus Christ. Give us the courage to put it on, killing our old selves and becoming the new creation you have called us to be. And bind us together as your people with the gifts of love and peace that come from your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Sunday, February 26

1 Thessalonians 1-3

“God has put his hand on you for something special.”

In 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3(MSG), Paul addresses the new Christians in Thessalonica, telling them that when he thanks God for them he calls to mind their work of faith, their labor of love, and their patience of hope in following Jesus. In verse 4, he says, “...God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special.”

Can the same be said for Fernwood? Has God put his hand on us for something special?

The fact is that Fernwood *is* special. We are the only fully CBF church in Spartanburg county; that is, we are not dually aligned. We are among very few Baptist churches with a female pastor. We are affirming of all cultures. We have embraced refugees from the Congo. We are certainly a church where many would find a loving home as nowhere else in the county.

With that uniqueness in mind, we need to recognize that, yes, perhaps God has put his hand on us in this particular time and place for something special. We can be God’s hands and feet as no other church can be. We may be the only church where many will find a welcome. Let’s recognize that. Let’s embrace our unique identity and claim that God loves us as God loved the church at Thessalonica.

Prayer: *Dear God, Help us to discern your will for our church. Amen.*

Personal Reflections:

Monday, February 27

1Thessalonians 4–6

“...the word has gotten around.” 1Thessalonians 1:8:b

When I taught school, our district superintendent told us to be aware of what we said about our schools in the grocery line or at a ballgame, being careful not to complain or criticize, but to be positive. He said the community would listen to what we said about our colleagues, our schools, and the students, and their perception of our district would come from us. At home, I even told my children not to complain about us or their siblings in public, but be supportive, because in this world each of us needed at least the support of his family. In other words, don't air our dirty laundry! Now I don't want you to think we have deep dark secrets! But every family has arguments and disagreements, especially when teenagers are involved! It's just normal. This is true not only of families and schools, but also of businesses, governments, and yes, churches too. Disagreements and arguments are normal, because we are humans. Addressing our own normal problems “in the family” allows an institution to later move forward without the cumbersome baggage of negative public opinion.

Paul tells the church at Thessalonica that, “Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit! – taking the trouble with the joy and the joy with the trouble. Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? *The word has gotten around.* Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore – you're the message!” (1Thes. 1:6b–7MSG).

What we say and discuss about our church “gets around.” And these days there are so many more ways for our words to get around, not just in person in the grocery line or at a ballgame, but also through social media and online interactions. Let's affirm that just as in Thessalonica, God loves our church! With that in mind, precisely what word do we want to get around about our church? Let's hope the word gets around that we are a loving, affirming, caring church. Let's be the message! Or, in the words of our vision statement, that we are indeed “Christ to each other and our community -- – doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.” May it be so.

Prayer: Dear God, Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Personal Reflections:

Tuesday, February 28

1 Thessalonians 1–3

Are you a list maker? According to one of many personality tests, I have an analytic personality as opposed to a global one. One of the qualities of an analytic personality is the need to make lists and follow them. I make to-do lists for each day. I never go the grocery store or mall without a list. You will find shopping lists, lists of bills to be paid, birthday lists, and Christmas lists in my house. My calendar is full of lists. And I look at my lists many, many times in the course of a day. I live by my lists. Much of the reason I do this is because the only way I'll remember what I need to do is to write it down! But more than that, I relish marking things I've done off my list. It gives me a sense of accomplishment and completion. Marking things off can even be cathartic! Some people I know even add to their lists completed tasks that weren't on their lists just to mark them off and feel better! Although you may not be as extreme as I am, I'll bet most of you are list makers of some sort also.

The last chapter of 1 Thessalonians, 5:11–28, contains a *list* of instructions from Paul. Just a few of those are

- Encourage one another.
- Be at peace among yourselves.
- Help the weak.
- Be patient with everyone.
- Do good to one another.
- Be joyful or cheerful.
- Pray all the time.
- Thank God no matter what happens.

This is just one of many lists to live by the New Testament offers us. Paul offers other lists of admonitions, notably in Galatians and Philippians. Problem is the things on this list are not as easy to accomplish as “make a doctor’s appointment, buy new light bulbs, or call Rita,” like some of the things on my lists that I can easily check off. These admonitions from Paul take lots of work, thought, and time. And they can’t be permanently checked off. They need to be listed every day. Which led me to think... Why don’t we start adding one admonition to our lists every day? After all, these lists are something we pay attention to each day, and what we give our attention to is what we care about most. If we add “be joyful” to our lists for a week and look at it many times a day, perhaps we will remember to be joyful at least once in a while. Hopefully this plan will help us insert what is really important into the lists of mundane tasks that fill up most of our days.

Prayer: *Dear God, Help us to prioritize our lists and never leave doing your work out of our days. Amen.*

Personal Reflections: