

Braman

Foundation of Charities



Central Bridge
United Methodist Church

The Sermons of Richard W. Braman Vol. 13

“

Love Thy Neighbor

Let us give thanks to God for the life and work of the Rev. Braman. Richard born in Aug. of 1929 wrote and delivered over 360 sermons in which this volume contains the beginning of his preaching and writing. Although, not born to a particularly spiritually or religious family he wrote in his memories of a calling to serve the Lord at an early age of 18. He married his wife Gladys in 1948. Mrs. Braman was saved at the age of 14. She began to pray for Richard and in 1955 Richard had a conversion experience in 1955 as the result of a Rev. Graham crusade. His first sermon called "A Conversion Experience" speaks volumes of his personal conversion.

Rev. Braman began a home Correspondence course through the United Methodist Church in 1956. He worked on his studies for several years until ordained in 1962. He continued to study the Correspondence course in addition to many Cokebury publications until his passing



The Rev. Braman was a writer of Evangelism. He felt strongly that all his sermons and writing should be directed by scripture or several scriptures. As you read his sermons this will become evident. His style was direct and to the point.

Richard believed that Jesus Christ was Gods only son and that who ever believed in Him shall have eternal life. In fact John 3:16 was his favorite Bible verse. He preached not only in the Fultonham United Church, but also in two churches in Ohio: South Harpersfield United Church and the United Methodist Church in Cork, Oh.

As you read these sermons may the Holy Spirit continue to guide your path and may the Grace of our Lord continue to bless your life and your families' lives. If you have never had the experience of realizing Jesus as your personal Savior just ask him to come in your heart and He will. Let us thank God for the life of the Rev. Richard Braman and give praise and thanksgiving.

In Christ,
The Braman Foundation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Stewardship of Mysteries Scripture: Psalms 103:1-18	Page 1
The Primary Color of the New Testament Scripture: John 15: 1-11	Page 5
Living the Thankful Life Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:7-18	Page 9
The Grace of Gratitude Scripture: Luke 17:11-19	Page 13
God Is Speaking Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11	Page 17
Unfailing Light Scripture: Psalm 119: 9-16	Page 22
A Positive Christmas Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12	Page 26
Christmas – Where? Who? Why? Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25; 2:1-2; Luke 2:1-20	Page 30
The Christmas Story Scripture: Luke 2:1-20	Page 35
Anticipating a Fresh Start Scripture: John 1:1-5, 9-14	Page 38
A Road to New Life Scripture: John 6:51-70	Page 42

The Practice and Power of Prayer	Page 45
Scripture: Daniel:1-22	
Necessity and Missions	Page 50
Scripture: Matthew 28:1-16	
Life in Four Dimensions	Page 54
Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-19	
The Undiscovered Self	Page 58
Scripture: Mark 8:27-38	
The Christian's Concern for Civil Rights	Page 63
Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22	
The Other End of Concord Bridge	Page 67
Scripture: Luke 10: 25-27	
Compassion for the World (World-wide Communion Sunday)	Page 72
Scripture: Luke 4:14-20	
Living Your Own Life	Page 75
Scripture: John 1:35-43; John 21: 9-21	

The Stewardship of Mysteries

Scripture: Psalms 103:1-18

The text is chosen from I Corinthians 4:1-2; “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”

Let us break our text down clause by clause. First, “Let a man so account of us.” What we do is done in the open. Others observe us, criticize and pass judgment, commend or condemn. Whatever they do, let them put us first in the category of followers and servants of Christ. Of course, that may bring us the more severe judgment. It will become more important that we prove worthy servants.

The way we live our lives as Christians is very important and indeed is important for the example we set. It’s difficult to convince a non-Christian he should become a Christian when the way we live our lives is non-Christian. Christ should be the central part of all of our lives not just church and Sunday school.

Second, “As of the ministers of Christ.” The New England Bible puts it “As Christ underlings.” That puts us in our place. We are not to make a little gods of ourselves. We are not to set ourselves up as complete authorities and every time someone else wants to do something, they have to come to us or go through us.

Third, “it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful” how often have we admonished one another, and we need to do it, concerning our stewardship of time, talent, money, life itself. Faithfulness, trustworthiness, in these is a prime requisite of a trustee. And we are all trustees of God. We certainly need to renew the church membership vows periodically because we all get lax and fail to remember that there is more required of us than just paying our pledges. There are many jobs to be done in the church and they will not be done unless we do them.

Another clause remains in our text: “Stewards of the mysteries of God.” I wonder what Paul meant by that. What does it mean to be trustee of a mystery? Is it to know something that you can use, but you won’t tell? Magicians treasure such mysteries. But then they are no longer mysteries to him. What is it to be steward of a mystery? Let Paul make his own list of the mysteries of God to which he was faithful. I shall make my own list, though I have not attained onto faithfulness. Let each of us make his own list. It would be interesting to compare notes. This morning, I would like to suggest four mysteries of God to which we stand in the relationship of trustees.

First, the mystery of good and bad. The question is often asked, why is there evil in the world? Another question shares the same mystery, why is there good in the world? Are these not the mysteries of God? And yet is not the discerning of good and bad one of the great responsibilities of Christian men and women? God has left it up to each of us to choose the good way or the evil way of living. It’s our choice to make. It’s up to each of us whom we choose as friends and what kind of lives we live. We choose the way we handle our business deals. We choose how we want to raise our children. In all cases in all life,

we need the help and guidance of God. Otherwise, we can be tempted, we can be fooled into going down the wrong path.

Solomon when he was to become king encountered God in a dream. He was burdened by the responsibilities of his kingship. Therefore, he prayed, as is recorded in I Kings 3:8, “Give, therefore, they steward an understanding heart to judge the people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this, thy so great a people?” It’s not this our prayer also for we need to discern between good and evil in every part of our lives.

Whether he is a king or the humblest man in the world, each man faces his own responsibility and he faces it under the mystery of the good and the bad. There is the mystery of the good and the bad in themselves, the mystery of his own conscious, the mystery of the influence of his deeds. It doesn’t make a difference whether he is a faithful trustee of his time and talents and wealth.

What can a person do? Accept the mystery. Be faithful to the mystery. He can pray as he did Solomon, “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart.” By the discernment of the mystery, one will then be able to live an act in a manner worthy of the mystery.

As Christian parents we have a tremendous responsibility to raise our children to the best of our abilities with God’s help. We at least need to teach them the difference between good and evil and why they should choose the good over the evil. How wonderful it is when a person uses his God-given talents for good instead of bad and of course this is what we should all be striving for.

We begin to live when we are confronted like Moses with the burning bush, the blazing mystery at the heat of things which can never be reduced to the ashes of the material world.

Secondly, we have the mystery of loving the unlovely. That is one of the great mysteries of God. How can God do it? Knowing the mystery of good and evil, how can God love the person that is evil, unprincipled, unlovely, active and hurting his fellow man?

This is the mystery of grace. It is the mystery of God causing rain to fall on the field of the unjust person as well as upon the field of the just person. How can God be interested in making a saint out of a despicable Jacob? The question comes right on down into one’s own life.

This is where God’s forgiveness comes into the picture. God will forgive us regardless of how bad or evil we have been as long as we recognize it and want to live a better life. He will help us and guide us. Truly God is interested in us as individuals and willing to help us turn into good Christian people.

Yet, beginning with Stephen the Martyr, Christians have been faithful to this mystery of loving the unlovely, the mystery of God’s grace. Some of them have been faithful. It is being faithful to the love of

God, though unable to measure, to more than the slightest degree, the length and breadth and height and depth of this mystery.

Certainly, all of us can take a lesson from Jesus of loving the unlovely. Why do we think we are better than someone else? We are all God's children and perhaps all a person needs is some encouragement, some kind words and some guidance. We all need a sense of belonging, of being cared for, a feeling of being needed and appreciated. All of us could certainly stand to show more of these kinds of feelings toward other people.

Thirdly, we have the mystery of bringing good out of evil. Surely this is God's mystery, also. He accomplishes this in many a condition and circumstances. Within this mystery is that of suffering and pain. Many a person through pain and suffering has become a true Christian and gone on to help others through their suffering. Suffering and pain usually bring us to our knees helping us to realize there is a power mightier than man.

God also makes good people out of bad people. There are many such example throughout the Bible. I am sure all of us know of examples right around us. Here indeed is the mystery of the cross of Christ.

Without understanding the cross we must be good stewards of the mystery. We lift up the cross and we witness to the resurrection. What faithfulness this requires, to be stewards of such great mysteries! What responsibility! What grace is required to do it! What a glorious privilege!

Ephesians 3:8-9, reads; "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all men see what is the plan of the Almighty hidden for ages and God who created all things." Indeed, this is what we are – "the fellowship of the mystery" – men and women who are called together because we want to know, and to adore, and to respond in love to the mystery that has been illuminated in the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fourthly, we have the mystery of being made in the image of God, and having that image restored in us. It is the mystery of Christ beginning a good work in us and perfecting it. It is the mystery of being born again and the mystery of spiritual growth.

Truly Jesus Christ can change a person. I know and believe this with my whole heart. Once we really accept Jesus Christ into our lives we will become changed persons, we will become reborn persons. Perhaps this is a mystery to us but not to God because he has the power to do the impossible. We therefore have no right to say a person is useless or to give up hope for God has this power and in most cases a person will become a changed person and definitely for the better. Many of these mysteries that happen in our lives are used by God to strengthen us spiritually and increase our faith.

Many, many things happen in our lives that we cannot possibly understand but in the long run they usually turn out for our good. Some good comes out of every situation if we can wait and be patient.

Faithfulness to these mysteries is the faithfulness of response. It is the stewardship of time and talent and wealth, all that we are and all that we have.

Today is stewardship Sunday. Unfortunately, we talk very little about stewardship, except when the yearly every member canvas comes around. Stewardship, I believe, is the giving of oneself to the Lord's work and is a combination of our time, our talents and our wealth. We do consider money to be the only stewardship necessary but how very wrong this is, for a church could have all kinds of money and be free from all debt, but could be spiritually dead. God's work requires people who are willing to give their time doing all kinds of various things. The things we do of course depend on what we do best and what we have talents to do. Every church needs people who are willing to take responsibility and be leaders. Some people have unusual talents that can be used for everyone's benefits. No one should be bashful about coming forward and volunteering their efforts and talents. I also firmly believe if a church is made up of devoted Christians who are spiritually minded the financial end of the church will come automatically. Spiritually minded persons know why money is necessary and they do not hesitate to give.

I feel that it is necessary to say a few words about our financial giving, for no Church can operate without funds. I firmly believe in pledging to the church because we have to know how much money we have coming in, in order to determine what plans can be carried out. Besides I believe systematic giving is much better than giving when you feel like it or when you come to church. Most of us do not hesitate to sign up for monthly payments for something we want to purchase on time but the church seems to be different.

Before we decide how much to give to our church let us consider the rising cost of everything and let us remember to keep things just as they are is going to cost more money. James said, "for where your treasure is, there will your heart also be" and I believe that. Our giving reveals our interest in God's work. This includes our total giving of true talents and money. Let your conscience be your guide.

The Primary Color of the New Testament

Scripture: John 15: 1-11

The text is chosen from John 15:11; “These things have I spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Here is the thrilling prologue of the New Testament taken from Luke 2:10; “fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Luke’s Gospel closes with a triumphant epilogue: “and they worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy; and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God!” Here is the tremendous theme of the New Testament in the words of Jesus: “I am come that my joy may be in you.”

First of all, joy is the primary color of the universe. The story of creation repeats the phrase after each day: “and God saw that it was good.” When the foundations of the earth were laid “the morning stars sang together, and all the sounds of God shouted for joy” – a poet puts these words upon the lips of God as taken from Job 38:7.

Jesus reiterated God’s joy in the universe when he said to Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The Greek word used here is not *oikoumēnē* – “the inhabited world,” but *kosmos* – “the universe as an ordered world.

It may seem strange to sing for joy in this present world marked by threats, war and crime and evil of every sort. But it is not strange at all when one considers the history of the Christian faith and how men have sung their way through tribulation since Paul and Silas brought the jailer running in consternation when he heard their songs. (Acts 16:25-27) It is not strange – it is rare. For the joy which dominated the early Christian era has too often given away to fear, despair, and anxiety. We must revive the lost art of joy. We must recover the missing dynamism.

Joy is primarily the harvest of three things. First, it is nurtured on warm, radiant fellowship. Very seldom if ever do you find a joyous person who is a loner. We most definitely need to be in companionship, fellowship, and company of other persons. The joy that results from a warm fellowship of people is very rewarding. And likewise, the joy from the fellowship of married couples is rewarding. Of course, the most rewarding fellowship is with our Lord. But through warm and joyous fellowship together many good and wonderful things can result.

Secondly, Joy is nourished by, and thrives on, creative, constructive work. In contrast, the person who is not busy, who has nothing to occupy his mind is not joyful. We have only to look at some of the people who retire today with absolutely nothing to occupy their time. They soon become crushed individuals who wither up and die. We need to be doing something and something that which we can feel the satisfaction of accomplishment. When we can find time within our busy schedule to include the work of the Lord we

shall obtain joy and happiness.

Thirdly, Joy thrives on a sustaining, triumphant faith. Again, the person who is always doubting things, who must have everything proven to his satisfaction is a miserable individual. To never be content to leave everything in the hands of the Lord, must be an odd, empty feeling of doubt. We have to have faith in something otherwise our lives become chaotic and meaningless. Indeed, we do become joyful when we have faith in the Lord and what he can do for us. Start practicing these three things; fellowship, creative work, faith and begin the to enjoy life the way God intended for you to enjoy it.

Jim Gates met with an accident which took his life at the age of 25. A memorial service was held, and after the service a group of men talked together about their friend.

One of them said, "I don't know whether he would have become a great man, but he was a great boy."

The only member of the group who had not known Jim throughout his boyhood said, "in what ways was he a great boy?" All were eager to answer. "He was a good sport, said one. When we kids got into a wrangle in a baseball game, we'd ask Jim to settle it. Many times, he would settle it to the disadvantage of his own side."

"Did you ever notice," said another, "that Jim would never fight? He was the strongest kid in town. How he could twist a fellow's arm, but he applied his twist only to break up a fight, never to start one."

A third pointed out that Jim's father died when he was 14 and that the boy took over the responsibility of his home, his mother, and a younger sister. "He became a real man at 14."

Just then, the minister who had conducted the service approached the group. They told him that they had decided that Jim Gates had been a great boy. "That's interesting," he said, "Once in Sunday school class, when the children were being taught about the disciples arguing about greatness, Jim Gates spoke up and said, "I think if a man wants to be great he'd better begin early."

Then another spoke up, "He used to amaze me when I was a kid; I would see him put a dollar bill on in the collection plate. My limit was a dime. Here was Jim supporting his mother and sister giving dollar bills. I noticed it several times."

The minister said, "He was the most giving person I ever knew."

"Well, we've all agreed"; was the final remark, "Jim Gates was a great boy."

He apparently enjoyed doing these things and found joy and happiness doing them. Truly we can say that joy is the primary color of the universe.

Secondly, joy is the primary color of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not accustomed to think this way, for we have a stereotypical Jesus as “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” It assuages us to think of him as a man of joy, or the New Testament as a joyous book. But let’s look a minute at the statistics the word “joy” occurs 57 times in the New Testament, the word “sorrow”, 8 times; the word “rejoice” 45 times; the word “Cross” 29 times; the word “resurrection” 44 times, and the word “crucify” 12 times.

We as Christians certainly can be joyful and rejoice for what the New Testament tells us. Jesus Christ hung on the cross for your sake and for my sake, so our sins could be forgiven. He paid the debt for us. Isn’t that enough to be joyful for? No, we still have more. Jesus Christ rose from the dead and assures us of everlasting and eternal life with God our Father. Our lives now have meaning and purpose. Certainly, we can jump for joy.

The New Testament for all its stress and strain, it’s fighting without, and fears within, is a jubilant book. No men have ever said harsher things in condemnation of an evil world than the Christian leaders throughout the centuries; but they are never disheartened for long. Their faith keeps them in high spirits. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria writes: “Holding festivals in our whole life, persuaded that God is on every side present, we cultivate our fields praising, we sail the seas singing” In the 30th century Francis of Assisi’s asserts: “The servants of God are like jugglers, intended to revive the hearts of men and lead them into the spiritual joy.” In the 16th century, Martin Luther declares, “It is Impossible for one who hopes in God not to rejoice, even if the world falls to wreck, he will be overwhelmed, undismayed under the ruins.”

At his first public appearance Jesus issued a proclamation of joy: good news to the poor, released to the captives, sight for the blind, liberty for the oppressed. Even in the upper room with the blackest clouds of human history beginning to blot out the sun, he prayed that his disciples might experience that joy which wasn’t him. Jesus left joy streaming behind him as he moved throughout life.

“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again, I say, rejoice.” The rejoicing of the Christian is not the fruit of any work of his own, nor is it the consequence of any suspicious occasion. His joy is in men’s chief circumstance, which is God, our creator, our judge, and our redeemer. Only those who rejoice in this one Great Occasion know how to rejoice with an eternal joy.

Thirdly, joy is the primary color of the Christian task. It is the primary motivation for worldwide ministry. Why do you suppose the early church grew so rapidly? Paul gives us the key. With him joy was dominant over sin and despair, what else but an experience of joy was he giving to the Corinthian Christians; II Corinthians 4:6 reads, “For it is the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Indeed, Christians are joyful people and it is this expression which is portrayed to others. Isn’t this really what Christ wanted us to do? To go into all the world and see brother good news of the gospel is our institutions. Once a person receives this message into their heart he will be filled with joy and overflowing.

Christianity isn't a dried up, prudent thing but being a Christian is full of energy, within enthusiasm, and vitality that is unsurpassed by any other feeling one can obtain in this world of ours.

Joy is the primary ingredient of Christian stewardship. Jesus said of the faithful steward: "...that has been faithful over a few things, I will make the ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of the Lord."

What can make us happier than sharing our God-given talents with others. Those who are talented in singing or playing the organ or piano and who share this with others obtain many, many, joyful moments. How sad and miserable are persons possessed with talents but hide them under a basket and share them with no one else. Indeed, God has given us these talents to be shared and enjoyed by others.

How joyful and satisfied we become when we take time out of our busy schedules and get it to the Lord. How much more relaxed we become, how fresh and renewed we become. Let us truly please God first in our schedule and make sure we do devote some of our time to him.

We most certainly obtain joy when we share our wealth with God for his work and purposes. We really never miss this money we gift to God and in fact the feeling we obtain from doing this cannot be described nor cannot be bought. Indeed, joy is the primary ingredient of the Christian stewardship.

Joy is a primary motivation for evangelism and mission. The most powerful motive for mission is to see Christ and every man and rejoice that it is so.

We know what a better world this world would be to live in if every human being on earth accepted Jesus into his life. We all hope and pray for peace to come to our world. As Christians we believe the only possible answer is the true acceptance of Jesus Christ by all persons. Then and only then will peace come to our world. What a missionary program this is! Impossible you say? Perhaps but also believe everything is possible with God and of course we shall always strive towards that goal.

Joy is the rarest virtue of our day and the most desperately needed at home and abroad. We humans have all kinds of problems. We are always in difficulty and trouble with something. Let us really and truly turn to God. Let us accept Jesus Christ into our lives. If you really want to find joy and happiness you can, by doing these things. Try it for yourself.

Living the Thankful Life

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:7-18

The text is chosen from I Thessalonians 5:18. First, from the KJV; “In everything give thanks.” Second, from the RSV, “Give thanks in all circumstances. Third, from J.B. Phillips; “Be thankful, whatever the circumstances may be.”

“Thanks for everything, with those words a young man said goodbye to his benefactor; it was months before he wrote a letter to his friend. “Thanks for everything, Dad”, said the youth as he left home. He now went his own way and one might guess that he had forgotten his father and mother.

How easily we forget what others have given us and especially what God has given us.

Living a thankful life is not expressing thanks only in general. “Thanks for everything” is not sufficient. There must be thanks in particular, to a particular person, for particular things. The thankful life takes nothing for granted.

“Thanks for everything” might seem like a good grace to be said at the breakfast table before the family meets the day. It may mean something, but just saying grace isn’t living the thankful life.

Our text does not say “thanks for everything”. It says “in everything give thanks.” Even that is too general. We are not criticizing Paul – the words come towards the end of the letter to his friends in the Thessalonica, and it follows the tendency of letters to summarize towards the end, “best wishes,” we write, or make a general statement, “many thanks.”

So just saying in general “thanks for everything” is not enough. We have to be specific and thank people for the things we are really thankful for.

Living a thankful life is being thankful whatever the circumstance may be. In fact, the thankful life does not depend upon circumstances. They must, however, be considered.

The grateful person is not necessarily the satisfied person who gets what he wants. He is the sensitive person, sensitive to everything in every person to which into whom he owes his existence. A grateful person is the person who is aware of his own indebtedness and other things and persons to whom he is indebted.

Many things happen in our lives and our first reaction to them is that surely God is not being just. Why did he let this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this? Actually, when we really think about the situation and circumstance, we realize that truly, perhaps, I helped create this situation and perhaps it was for my own good. We still realize that we do have many things to be thankful for and truly we should be dwelling on these things instead of feeling sorry for ourselves. I admit, it is difficult sometimes to be thankful but in such a circumstance, our faith in God is what helps us through and even gives us more faith.

In affluence or abundance remember. Remember the Lord your God. The thankful life is a meditative life. We have to take time to meditate and talk with God and really be thankful for what we have.

In these days many live in affluent circumstances. Whether affluence makes for good or ill may depend largely with what spirit it is received, what acknowledgments are given to those who make it possible, what ultimate things are given to the Giver of many good and perfect gifts. Affluence can provide the means for a higher standard of living and culture; on the other hand, affluence may corrupt, it may deteriorate life, degrade values, hurt persons.

Influence, in abundance, give thanks that's evil may be subverted. Many of the things we think we need actually will not be needed if we stop to remember what we do have. Many of us desire things because someone else has them. Let us be thankful in abundance for what we do have and for what God has given us.

In affluence remember. Remember the Lord your God. Remember our Lord's supreme sacrifice for our sake's. Remember and be thankful. Surely, we cannot save ourselves. Salvation only comes by the true acceptance of Jesus Christ. Truly, by remembering and thanksgiving we may be saved – not only ourselves, but our children, our homes, our nation, our civilization.

Greed, selfishness, lust are sins many of us are guilty of. I believe they basically come from the way we live our lives. We are always in a hurry, never really taking time to appreciate what we have and realizing where it comes from. We do not take time to appreciate our heritage or to realize the many sacrifices our forefathers also made for us. We do not take time to understand and know what real living is. We've become too busy satisfying our own desires and seeking the things we think we need and must have to be happy. Take time each day to meditate and talk with God and see what a difference it makes in your life.

This inscription appears on Plymouth Rock monument in Massachusetts. "This monument marks the first burying ground in Plymouth of the passengers of the "Mayflower". Here, under cover of darkness, the fast-dwindling company laid their dead, leveling the earth above them lest the Indians should learn how many were the graves. History records no nobler venture for faith and freedom than of this pilgrim band. In weariness and painfulness, in watching, often in hunger or cold, they lay the foundation of a state where in every man through countless ages should have liberty to worship God in his own way. May their example inspire thee to do their part in perpetuating and spreading the lofty ideals of our republic throughout the world."

Truly, a tribute to these people who came to America, to a new land, to find new freedom under all kinds of hardship and endured to the end, and still able to thank God for their many blessings. What an example for us to follow today.

Someone say that the hardest thanksgiving is that which we make in adversity.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 reads; "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the

olive fail, and the field yield no food; the flock be cut off from the fold and there being no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” His psalm is given not of utter desolation. I wonder how many of us could still sing praises unto our God even after everything we had had been wiped out and we had nothing? Very few, if any, I’m sure.

It is said that the hymn, “Now thank we all our God”, was written in the midst of an epidemic of plague. The first verse of this fine old hymn reads:

“Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
whose wondrous things have done, in whom his world rejoices;
who, from our mother’s arms, has blessed us on our way;
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”

Beautiful and inspiring words for such a bad circumstances but truly I believe we actually do turn more to God and appreciate more what has been done for us when we are down and out with our backs to the wall.

The thanksgiving celebrations of the pilgrims were held in dark days. They offered thanks in the midst of discouragement and by that “held steadfastly to the purpose to subdue the unknown continent.”

It is hard to give thanks when you are hungry, when life hurts, while enduring pain, when bereaved; but it is not my observation that Christians in adversity lose appreciation of the goodness of God. In fact, I truly believe when we are subjected to the circumstances and conditions, we really gain appreciation of the goodness of God and I believe we would not be able to endure if it were not for our faith in God.

In living the thankful life we have in the words of Paul, “give thanks whatever happens” – enjoy or sorrow, uncomfortable suffering, and gain or loss, in prosperity or adversity – give thanks, remembering that it is within the power of God to make all things work together for good and that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ.

John Austin, a 17th-century English Catholic, has left us a prayer which is strikingly appropriate for the pilgrims in today’s world:

“Fix though our steps, O Lord, that we stagger not at the uneven notions of the world, but go steadily on our way, neither censoring our journey by the weather we meet, nor turning aside for anything that may befall us, Amen.”

The difficulty in living the thankful life lies not in being thankful for an hour or a day, but being thankful for the whole year through.

Or, as the traditional prayer has it, “not with our lips but with our lives.” For thanksgiving is man’s total daily life response to God’s total, eternal grace.

A boy who was in a very distant place during World War II said that when he got home the first thing he would do was to go to the refrigerator and get a glass of cold water; a judge from Pakistan, when traveling in

the United States, was asked what was the most interesting site he saw in America. He answered, “a public drinking fountain.” Two native princes from Africa were entertained in England by the British government. Before they returned to their own country they were asked what they would like for a departing gift. They said that they would like a cold water faucet and a hot water faucet. They thought the faucets were things of magic and did not realize the system that was behind of them.

We take a glass of water for granted. We take the means for a warm and refreshing bath for granted. These are things that are just naturally there.

A man disabled his thumb with a hammer. He said it taught him a lesson he needed. He said, “it has taught me to appreciate the thumb. I never knew its value before. I found out by actual count the first day that there were 257 things I have been using my thumb for every day of my life without giving it a thought.” This is pretty natural for most of us, isn’t it?

GK Chesterton once expressed surprise over the many blessings in life we so easily grow blind to, and for which we do not say thanks. In his unusual way of saying things, he said we thank God for the presence in our stockings this Christmas but what we ought to thank God for is that we have legs to put onto into our stockings.

Thanksgiving Day is coming. Let us keep the Day by taking nothing for granted. Instead take everything with gratitude to God. Do this and you will have a wonderful day. In fact, let us not limit it just to one day but every day of the year. The man who habitually takes nothing for granted but in everything give thanks leads a wonderful life.

Psalm 119, verse 11 reads; “I have laid up my words in my heart.” Most people think of Thanksgiving as a day on the calendar. They view it as historical, objective, and secular. This concept misses its real meaning. Thanksgiving is the quality of the inner life. It is expressed in the thankful heart. It depends not up on the “muchness” of material possessions rather upon the inner-riches of the spirit.

As we sit at our tables with our families on this special day, let us take time to enumerate our blessings one by one and to realize that truly without the love and grace of God we would be nothing and we would have nothing worthwhile. If we can carry the meaning and thoughts that Thanksgiving stands for, into all areas of our lives and each and every day of the year, our lives will become meaningful and purposeful and our world would become a better place in which to live.

The Grace of Gratitude

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

The text is chosen from Luke 11, verses 15-16; “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”

Here we find our Lord commending the one leper out of 10 that was healed, who came back to say, “thank you.”

Why do you suppose our Lord approved of him? Why is gratitude a good thing?

What is gratitude? “No man can be grateful to himself, but lives and sings his gratitude to others and all to God. They tell me that gratitude is laughter in our heart, is blessing flowing out of our heart, is tenderness entrusting us to one another, is our living harmony with the music of God.”

But not everyone has believed that gratitude is a good thing. Aristotle a long time ago said that there is a sort of servility about being grateful, and the really high-souled man will be at pains to avoid any circumstances in which he has to say, “thank you” to anyone else. And more recently Nietzsche, the philosopher from whom Fascism drew much of its inspiration, would have said that the kind of sermon I am going to preach shows that Christianity is what he said it was - religion for slaves and weaklings. While there are few, if any of us, who would share these sentiments, I think there are quite a lot of people who find it hard to say “thank you”.

If you haven’t learned to say “thank you”, then you are impoverishing the world you live in and you’re impoverishing your own soul. This leper who came back to thank Jesus was, by that simple act, putting something gracious into the life end, at the same time, enriching the quality of his own soul. And I think that is why our Lord was pleased at what he did; and why he regretted that the other men had failed to do it.

First of all, consider what the exercise of this grace of gratitude contributes to the lives of others.

In the exercise of this grace there is power to soften and regenerate human nature.

Dr. Hans Liljé, who was a prisoner in a German concentration camp, has said that, the bitterness and hate prevailed throughout the dreadful place, he found that a simple “thank you” when given his meager rations, or even when his chains were fastened on him at night, seemed often to pull his guards up short and to bring to their faces expressions of shame. One night the guard who had chained him came back and said, “Why do you thank me for a thing like that?” “Well”, Liljé replied, “you have done your duty, haven’t you?” The guard, he said, went away shaking his head and murmuring to himself. Strange to think that if there was one point at which the sway of the demonic forces which ruled in that camp was broken, it was

at the point where someone exercised the grace of gratitude.

I am suggesting that when we get home this evening, we should think of someone to whom we owe a debt of thanks, and then find a way of expressing this gratitude. By so doing we shall be contributing grace to life, perhaps to a degree that would surprise us, if we knew all the effect that our “thank you” may have.

It is the poet Southey who, in one of his letters, recalls a story from Spain that gives us a good suggestion. He writes up a Spaniard who love to eat strawberries. He always put on magnifying spectacles when he ate them so that they might seem even bigger and more delicious.

That was surely better than magnifying unpleasant things. It is easy to fall into the habit of exaggerating our troubles.

There is a sure pair of glasses which would make our strawberries and all the other pleasant things of life seem more wonderful – it is the habit of giving thanks.

Some people have failed to acquire this good habit. They do not own or fail to use the glasses of thanksgiving. There was the man who called the minister on the telephone and complained because the snowy sidewalk in front of the church was on shoveled. “Was the caretaker unmindful of the safety and comfort of people who had to plug through the snow?”

The minister promised that that the walk would have his attention. Then the minister asked the complaining man, “Have you ever gone by the church in summer and seen the roses and gladiolas and bushes a flame with beauty?” “Yes, I have,” he said. Then, asked the minister, “Did you call the church and express your thanks for this sight?” A strained silence followed.

Paul teaches us to give thanks always for all things unto God. He is telling us to put on our Thanksgiving glasses.

The act of giving thanks helps to bring life back into balance by weighing the blessings against the misfortunes. Though no life is free of its disturbances, there are multitude of things and people and happenings for which one can be truly thankful. We need the reality to see life as it is and not as it may seem to be. That person who finds no opportunity for thankfulness is neither fair to himself nor to life in general when he begins to count his misfortunes. That person who has learned the art of thankfulness, learned life’s quiet satisfactions, and finds a balance that tends to discount anything that would destroy right relations with his Creator.

Secondly, let us consider what the exercise of this grace of gratitude affects in our own souls. The one leper who turned back – like all who have the grace to express their gratitude – was enriching his own soul by giving thanks. Perhaps I can best make plain what I mean by taking three ills of the spirit and showing how

the remedy for each lies in remembering such reasons as one has with thanksgiving.

One is self-pity.

Dr. Sangster tells us that before a service he learned that some old folks from a house for the blind nearby were attending. He wondered if they would like to choose a hymn. The steward went to find out. As he waited, Dr. Sangster, wondered what their choice would be. “Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling glow?” Or, “as darker, darker fell around the shadows of the night?” Something like that seemed appropriate to their unhappy lot. The steward came back. Yes, they would like a hymn. Which one? This one:

When all the high mercies, Oh my God,
My rising soul surveys,
transported with a view I’m lost
In wonder, love and praise,
Oh, how shall words with equal warmth
The gratitude declare,
That glows within my thankful heart?
But thou can’t read it there.”

The preacher went into the pulpit feeling that he was going to proclaim the gospel in the hearing of people who would know what he was talking about. People whose eyes were sightless and who might well have been sunk in the deeper gloom of self-pity, but who had learned to see how full life is of things for which to thank God.

Regardless of how bad off we think we are, there are always many, many things we can thank God for.

Closely allied to self-pity is the spiritual ill of anxious worry. Now recall what Paul said: “Be anxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be known unto God.” “With Thanksgiving!” A psychologist has said that this verse contains some of the soundest psychological advice that could ever be given to anxious people. Paul, he points out, does not simply give them the futile advice, “Don’t worry”; nor does he fall into the opposite error of sympathizing with them and thereby concentrating their attention the more up on the thing they were worried about. It is a psychological truth that contrary states of mind expel one another, and Paul’s advice is so good because, where thanksgiving arises in any human heart, anxiety tends automatically to be dispelled. “The remedy is one of displacement.”

And finally, even doubt is dispelled.

Rossetti says that the worst moment for the atheist is when he feels grateful and has no one to thank. And, Katherine Mansfield, the novelist, who had rejected Christianity, when she went to Switzerland marveled at the natural beauty surrounding her; she wrote to a friend, “if only one could make some small

grasshopper sound of praise, thanks to someone. But who?"

This is an aspect of human experience which we are inclined to overlook. We talk so much about the things which challenge and disturb faith. But one of those things about which a man wants to say, "For this I'm grateful. For this I thank God?" And men do want to say that; even men who have turned their faces from God find themselves wanting to say it at times.

George Matheson, we're told, at one point in his ministry was a prey to many doubts and was on the point of abandoning his work all together. But he found that the bond of Thanksgiving which bound him to God was so strong, when he thought on the Cross of Christ, that nothing could ever sever it. And he wrote his him; "Oh love that will not let me go."

When other ties are tense, strained, even broken, the bond of gratitude binds us to God. And especially if we turn our eyes to the Cross of Christ. For amid all the doubts, there is this sure thing some: the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

As we sit at our Thanksgiving tables tomorrow let us recall all the things we can thank God for and let us truly be grateful to him. If we take the time to do this perhaps one attitude and even our lives will be changed. I would like to close with a poem entitled, "Gratitude". -To find words:

Just one word-
To express sincerity
Of the inner spirit.
One envisioned word is
-Gratitude!
Its strength, depth, source,
Is testified by
Humility!
A resounding, reassuring word!
A rearming word
Of the spirit!
Gratitude is more than a word-
It is a prayer
Spoken from the heart,
through God!

God Is Speaking

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

The text is chosen from Isaiah 40:1; “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”

God is speaking: “Comfort, comfort my people,” is his word to the prophet. In this passage, God fills the center of the stage.

God is watching over his people. “My people”, he calls them. Israel might turn to other gods, depart from the principles of their faith, forget their covenant with God – but deep down, hidden in their hearts, a substratum in their minds was the knowledge and conviction that they were God’s people. Should it be any less so with us? Let us read 1Peter 2: verses 9 and 60; “but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

God says to the prophet: “Comfort, comfort my people.” The word “comfort” is a rich word meaning have compassion, pity, to console, in Hebrew. In English it carries the ideas of strength, confidence and hopefulness. God wants his people to be strong, but, confident and hopeful. This is where our faith really pays off. We have to have faith in God. We have to put things in his hands. We have to let him run and guide our lives.

So, Isaiah gave comfort to his fellow Jews who were exile in Babylon. They had suffered grievously for their sins. For some three score years they had been displaced persons. They never forgot Jerusalem but they could not sing the songs of Jerusalem in a strange land. They grew old in Babylon but they kindled hope in the hearts of their children that sometime they would return. Of course some were captured by Babylon, enticed by the lore of the pagan city, but these to whom Isaiah spoke were only captives in Babylon.

Now we shall apply the words of God through the prophet to ourselves. We, too, are God’s people. We, too, have been sinful and faithless. We have carried a burden of guilt upon our hearts. We, too, must return. Isaiah 30:15 reads, “For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in returning and rest ye shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.” Is not this good for us today? We need to return to our Lord. Babylon is all about us. Babylon with its idolatry and wickedness and gross sin envelop us. We have become captives in an environment of which we are not really a part. We are, deep down in, God’s people. Deep down in our hearts we do not like this Babylon, its false values, it’s blatancy, it’s low ideals, its fashions, its lust. Now let the prophet bring God’s word to us in this Advent season, that our hearts may be filled with joy.

What does Advent mean? It means the glory of the coming of the lord. It means the breaking in of the

divine into human history – It means a sense of something great impending from the side of heaven.

The world is blundering in a morass of sin and sorrow – but here and there some man, some group of men, some church stands listening and intent – for God is marching on. That is Advent.

Today we are standing in the gateway of the Advent season; and I wish that the authentic thrill of Advent could lay some deep spell upon our spirits.

We take so many, many things for granted today most certainly, for many, the coming again of the Christmas season means very little. In fact, many of us dread the shopping, the rush here in there, the preparation and then the big letdown when it is all passed. This time of year, and the season has become so commercialized that I'm sure many of us do not even know what we are celebrating. What a glorious thing to remember that we are celebrating the coming of our Lord, the breaking in of the divine into human history. Certainly, a most glorious event and indeed one we should celebrate. I'm afraid we have gotten far, far away from the original intent. This year let us take time to read this glorious story. Let us take time to go over it carefully with our children. Let us take time to absorb it in our own lives and you really know the true meaning and significance of the event.

God's first word of comfort is a word of grace. It is not a word of judgment and condemnation. It is not a harsh word; it is tender; it is spoken to the heart.

If only we understood grace. We are so conditioned to the transactions of the marketplace that we fail to understand the gracious heart of God, who gives comfort, who gives forgiveness, who gives us the Christ. He asked the responsible heart of acceptance, not the paying hands of recompense.

How difficult for us humans to believe God gives and expect nothing in return. We could not buy what God gives us if we all had the money in the world. It isn't for sale. God gives these things to us. How wonderful this is.

God's second word of comfort is a call to labor. "In the wilderness prepare the Way of the Lord."

It is a second word. It is only after God deals with men's hearts through his grace that he calls for the labor of their hands. Then they will put both their hearts and their hands to the work. How quickly hands grow tired and listless when our hearts are not in the work.

"Building straight in the desert a highway for our God" was a very vivid figure of speech to the exiles in Babylon, who would have deserts to cross on returning to Jerusalem.

That's not the call come to us in our day to build the highways of the Lord? We are his people, we are the people whom God has comforted with forgiveness and strength. Now we are called to build the King's

Highway.

As adults, as parents, as leaders, as teachers, as preachers what a glorious privilege what a glorious opportunity we have for leading our young people to that road that leads to God's high kingdom. Certainly, it's a tremendous responsibility but it's also a wonderful privilege and opportunity. Let us not miss it for we will never have the opportunity again.

Let us build a glad New World! By his grace, by his strength we can do it. There is no question in my mind we can do anything we want with God at our side, with God leading and guiding us. The impossible becomes possible and new doors of opportunity will open before our very eyes.

God's third word of comfort is a word of assurance. "The grass withers, the flowers fade; but the word of our God will stand forever." That's comfort! God's grace, God's power, it's not an ephemeral thing, beginning and ending in a day. Forever is the comforting word.

Indeed, God is all powerful and regardless of what some people say and think, he will always be all powerful. He truly does give his grace to us, not just today or tomorrow, but always. He fulfills no empty promises but ones that are eternal, forever.

God's call is to prepare a highway through the desert, but the highway will not rest upon treacherous sand, it goes down to the granite foundation of the word of God. Certain inequities are to be ended. Certain crookedness's are to be ended. Certain roughness's are to be ended.

God will do his part in building this highway. We have to do our part, too.

The prophet may have had in mind a road leading from the captivity of Babylon back to the homeland of Judea, but the real road that concerns him was the one that concerns us – the road for the Lord God into our hearts and lives. "Prepare ye the Way of the Lord."

It is important, is it not, that we help our young people prepare the road in their lives for God. The building for them will be easier and well on its way if we can help to guide them.

We do have the assurance of God. He will do his part if we are willing to do our part.

God's fourth word of comfort is a promise of his coming. To the exiles of his Isaiah's day it was the Messianic hope. To us it is a promise fulfilled in the Christ.

Yes, we are again preparing for the celebration of the birth of our Lord. As Christians we believe Jesus Christ came to save our world, to save you and I from our sins so that we may have eternal life. We believe this, at least we say we do. It is comforting for us to know he did come for our sakes.

I know, of course, that the Advent gospel has another side to it – I have heard the terrible, startling urgency that was in the voice of Jesus when he tried to shake men awake from their sleep; less they should be found with loins ungirt and lamps unlit when at midnight came to cry. But I know also this, that beneath all the drums and thunders of the Advent Symphony there is a deeper undertone, the music of the peace of God that passeth understanding. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

This is the comforting word of God to us at this Advent season; a word of grace, a call to labor, a proclamation of assurance, a promise of the Christ. These words are gathered up in the “Word”, in him who’s advent we herald.

The true comfort of Christ is a strong, bracing, reinforcing thing. It is like a wind to the boat that has been becalmed. It is like the gift of a job to a man who has been for years out of work. It is like the clasp of a friend’s hand in a time of need. This is certainly the root idea of the word. “Comfort” in the New Testament; and when Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “Comforter”, he is really giving a promise that God will stand by a man in the day of his need, embrace his heart and nerve his arm, and make him more than conquerors.

We are fast approaching the season of giving and receiving. We say we all like to receive something, but do we really know how to be good receivers. I think we should for certainly Christ gives us plenty and we should know how to receive it.

Christmas was coming and Ira Dunlap went down to just Jack’s bicycle shop and said to Jack, “I don’t know the boys in this town, but you do; and you know the boys who want a bicycle this Christmas whose parents can’t afford to buy them. Pick out 10 such boys and give them bicycles, but don’t tell who gave them. Send the bill to me.” Ira Dunlap was always doing things like that. He knew that what Jesus said was true, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Now let us think a few moments about receiving instead of giving. I don’t know how those boys received their bicycles, but I do know that there is a gracious way to receive as well as a gracious way to give.

It is well for us to know that we ourselves, no matter how much of anything we have, were and are receivers. Life itself is a gift to us. Our nurture, our education, our freedom, our pleasures, our ideals, are gifts. Ira Dunlap knew that he could give only because he had received. So, a good way to be a good receiver is to recognize the fact that we are receivers. There are people too proud to be good receivers, and there are people who accept a gift only on a business basis, they think they must “get even”, payback. When they receive the gift, they feel themselves in debt to the giver. This takes away the joy of the giver.

How can we be good receivers?

As has been said, by recognition of the fact that you are a receiver.

By giving thanks, when you know the giver. Not all people to give thanks. Jesus healed ten lepers but only one returned to thank him.

By loyalty. Gift of nurture, education, freedom, may come to us through our home, our school, our church, our country. We show our appreciation by giving them our loyalty.

By use. When Ira Dunlap saw a boy passing on his bicycle it would give him satisfaction. When a great benefactor gives a community a park or a public building, appreciation reaches him through the use of the park or building by the people. We give thanks to God for the bounties of the earth by partaking of a Thanksgiving dinner. We show gratitude to Christ who came to give us abounding lives by living in his name that kind of a life.

By giving. Truly we have received, we freely give. Our lives are opened at both ends, the receiving end and the giving end. Blessed is the man who knows both the secret of receiving and the secret of giving.

Truly God is speaking to us again this Advent season – “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” The Word is our comfort, this Word is our Joy, the Word is our strength, the Word is our proclamation to the world. “Get up, up upon a high mountain – herald the good tidings.”

Unfailing Light

Scripture: Psalm 119: 9-16

The text is chosen from Psalms 119:105; “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my way.”

Writing the Bible consumed many centuries and involve the labors of many individuals and groups. Survival of the Scriptures is one of the miracles of history. Viewed from a secular point of view, the Hebrew people were unimportant. Their nation was small and unimposing beside Babylon, Syria, or Egypt. They spent many years as slaves, wanderers in the wilderness, or as exiles from their holy land, and yet they are the source of our spiritual tradition and our heritage of freedom and hope.

Perhaps it would be interesting to discuss for a moment “how the Bible got its name.” The word “Bible” came from the town of Byblos on the coast of Lebanon where papyrus was produced for the writers of the ancient world. The papyrus scrolls acquired the name of “biblia” or book from association with the town from which they came, much as China or porcelain took its name from the country where it was first made. The extensive copying of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures tended to connect the word “biblia” with that particular collection of documents, and so gave the name “Bible” to the whole.

Commonly we may say that the Bible is “the Word of God”, and essentially we mean that the Bible makes clear, as Caroll Wise notes, “the processes and relationships in life which destroy – – or create personality.” It may explain the nature of the relationship between man and man, and man and God, which leads to the abundant life. The “word of God” is a lamp for our feet as we make our way through the darkness of contemporary life, and a light for our way, luring us beyond the shadows of the moment to the promise of “something evermore to be.”

If we make the Bible a daily companion, we discover that because it is God’s word it speaks to our conditions. Indeed, we can find a solution to any of our problems if we want to take the time to read the Bible. We discern as we read that others have shared our experience. Others have walked lonely roads of frustration and fear. Others have had the same experiences we are having. Our situation and circumstances are not unique. The saints and seers who composed the Scriptures were men like ourselves. Perhaps we think we are different; that we live in a different age; but our problems are different; our desires are different; but they are not.

We are all humans and the things we desire today are the same as the desires of the men in Jesus’s day.

This is what makes the Bible so vital. The prophets and the psalmists knew as you and I that life does not always move at an even keel. They were not always smiling or sure of themselves as if God were locked up in their living rooms to assist them into their easy chairs.

The Scriptures are faithful to human experience and, what is more, they are utterly honest.

Well, the Bible does not deny the reality of the suffering and hurt that leads us to cry, “why are thou so far from helping me?” Neither does it leave us lost in the limbo of realism with “no exit” on the horizon. What is more, while the Scriptures are honest about human sin, they do not leave us helpless victims of our predicament. On the contrary, the men who wrote the book of the ages keep pointing to God as the way out.

Indeed, the longer we live, the more experience we gain and eventually we come to realize more and more that truly the only answer to our problems, the only answer to the way we live our lives, the only answer for a world in a mess like it is today, is to turn to God. It’s peculiar how we go around the barn trying all kinds of things and ways to prevent God from helping us, but in the end, we realize God is the only answer, the only way we can go to make progress, and joy, and happiness.

The writers of Scripture however human they were, lived and wrote against a backdrop of faith in the sovereignty of God. They kept life in the orbit of eternity. So, if they painted sin in lurid colors, they never forgot that sin is sin and wrong is never right. If they described circumstances that made their lives difficult, they understood that in the providence of God something was to be learned from their hardship and their suffering. Notice, if you will, that no experience ever was meaningless, and if life seemed now and then to be “a vanity of vanities, a vain striving after the wind,” it was not so when viewed as part of the economy of God.

Our conviction is that if we have the courage to use the Scriptures today, to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking to us in our tongues about our own times we shall find them to be in truth, “God’s Word for a New Age.” Indeed, the Bible is a timeless book. I truly believe if we read the Bible with faith in God that his words will speak directly to us, today, in our time and directly related to our present problems in our present age.

It is important to notice that not only in the Scriptures but now God reveals himself only to prepared minds. When the Gospels report that Jesus came ‘in the fullness of time’ the clear implication is that he came only when minds were prepared for his coming.

The decisive importance of the prepared mind is clear in the world of science God never could have revealed the truth of relativity in the universe to a Babylonian mathematician. The revelation awaited the prepared mind of Albert Einstein. He came “in the fullness of time,” after the researchers and studies of multitudes had made his insight possible. God could not have revealed the law of gravity to an Egyptian astrologer with no concept of natural law. The revelation awaited the prepared mind of Sir Issac Newton. He, too, came ‘in the fullness of time.’ As he noted, “If I have seen farther than other men it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.”

Truly if we do not prepare ourselves for meeting God, if we do not believe and have faith, God will not reveal himself to us. Two people can read the same passage in the Bible; one will receive inspiration and

guidance and the other will have read just words with little or no meaning. We do have to be prepared to receive our Lord.

The Bible is not static and neither is its contemporary application. It is a living book whose insights and injunctions, put in the thought forms of yesterday, are meant to be interpreted in terms of the abiding values that remain despite changing customs and cultures. However much the world changes, the “Book of Ages” remains “a lamp to my feet and a light to my way.” It speaks eloquently to prepared minds in any age.

Any thinking man is bound to ask three questions – Who am I? What kind of a world is this in which I live? Who and what is the power behind the changing scene of things? If a man will turn to the Bible, he will find these basic questions answered – and answered above all in Jesus Christ. For truly, once we discover Christ in our lives we will understand and find answers to these questions.

The Scriptures speak not only to prepared minds, but also to minds that are seeking what is in the Scriptures. We should be expecting something from God’s word when we read it and we will obtain it. If you are looking for poetry you do not read a book on the theory of equalities. If you want to know something about astronomy you do not look for what you want to know in Emerson’s essays. Obviously, you seek what you wish where you are likely to find it. So, you want to know how to live your life, read the Bible and find out. Believe me, the answer is there. What is the use of seeking a scientific account of creation in the Scriptures? The Bible is not a scientific textbook. It never was intended to be anything of the sort. It is an invitation to spiritual pilgrimages following in the train of those who recorded the experience of their encounters with the living God. It suggests the character of the relationships between man and himself, man and his fellow men, and man and God that result in creative and vital personality capable of living in community. The Bible tells us exactly what our relationship to God should be and what our relationship to our fellowmen should be. Some of us definitely need to find out what our true relationship to each other should be today in order for us to live in peace and harmony.

The Scriptures deal essentially with the question, “Why are we here?” “How can we live creatively in our mysterious universe? And, “Who made the hydrogen atom?” As to the last question the Scriptures are quite content to say with reverent simplicity, “In the beginning God.” Science can tell us how the universe works, but it has no answer to the question, “Why”?

Really there are three great questions concerning the universe as quoted by Dr. Harlow Shapley, Harvard astronomer; “what, how, and why?” “The scientist,” he re-marked, “can do fairly well with the first question. He knows what the universe is made of and how it works. But when it comes to “why, why are we here?”, we’re stuck. All we can say is, “God only knows” – Science has found the basic hydrogen atom, but who made the hydrogen atom? Science comes up against unanswerable questions.

Over and over again in one way or another the word of God may explain that the universe is shot through

and through with moral purpose, and that we were meant to fulfill our moral and spiritual possibilities. We were made for fellowship with God, who loves us with an everlasting love. In love he created us, lifted us from the mud and muck of ancient swamps, to the dignity of human personality, capable of response to his love.

What is the strangest fact in the world? Kathleen Norris, a distinguished American writer, said, “Perhaps the strangest fact we have in the world today is Christmas.

“Millions of us,” she says, “take it for granted, just one of the recurring dates of the year. We never stop to think how queer Christmas is in this jazzing, speedy, flying, material, prosperous age.”

I wonder whether young people, normal and modern, interested in sports, music, art, wondering about yourselves, who you are and where you are going, ever stop to wonder about such a thing as Christmas. Here we all are, basically celebrating the birthday of an obscure young carpenter who lived almost 2000 years ago. As Kathleen Norris said, “This man wrote no book, struck no political blow for freedom, had no money, no influential friends, no power at all, and was executed for high treason like a common criminal. Everything he talked sounded crazy then, and sounds only a bit so now. The idea of telling an armed world that the real weapons are meekness, faith, and love.”

Just why is this new country where we live, that no one ever dreamed of until 1400 years after the death of Jesus, why do we decorate with holly and ribbons? Why do sober people go mad with love and generosity and spend hundreds of dollars for gifts? Why the Christmas trees, the Christmas plays in the churches, the songs in the air, the lights in the parks, the decorations in the streets, the celebrations in the home for Jesus’ birthday?

Why? Because, in spite of all of our selfishness and our stupidity, we know and we feel that he was right – “that love, service, humility, and forgiveness are the secret that we all are seeking, the magic formula without which these human hearts will never be satisfied. Where can we find this? In the Bible, in God’s Holy Word.

It was Phillip Brooks, inspiring prophet of his day, who declared, “To me, the gospel is just one great figure standing with outstretched arms.” The observation is not amiss. God is love, the only power in creation able to hold either personal or social life together. “Love or perish” in obedience to the love of God is more than a cliché. It is the ultimate either-or of the universe. Such is the essential Word of God, the lamp to our feet and the light to our way. Take time to read the Bible. Let God speak to you through his Word.

A Positive Christmas

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

The text is chosen from Matthew 2:10; “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

Our theme, “A positive Christmas” suggest there is or could be “a negative Christmas.” What’s wrong with Christmas? This is a question that we frequently hear. The answers take various forms – “too commercialized”; “Christmas is paganized”; “we have lost the Christ in Christmas.” To some extent all of us may agree with such criticisms, but whatever of fault there may be in the celebration of Christmas, its correction lies neither in criticism nor into coming to and becoming a part of the negative trend. The minus must be counted by the plus. Let us apply the principle of overcoming evil with good. In other words, if we take something out of or away from our modern-day Christmas, we need something worthwhile and good to replace it.

Perhaps our problem is not to put Christ back into Christmas. He was and has always been there. Our problem is to get Christ into the other 364 days of the year. Basically, isn’t this our problem with all of life. We all say we are Christians. We want to be associated with and be a part of Christ’s church. Some of us think we only need to act like Christians while we are at church and the rest of our lives we can live as we choose. This is why we have so many problems in life.

The story of the Wiseman will give us suggestions on how we may do this. Matthew writes concerning them: “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were coming into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented to him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

First of all, let us find joy in Christmas. Follow the Wiseman’s example, who “rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” Joy is a contagious thing; your joy will kindle another’s. How many hearts will feel joy because you are joyous? Let us create an atmosphere of joy and happiness no matter where we are. You will be surprised how this catches on and how many people begin to have the same feeling.

It was a star that stirred the traveler’s joy. It was a sign. The wisdom and joy of these Wiseman was not that they had seen a star (they could pick up a star on any clear night); their joy lay in the significance of this star. This star pointed to the birthplace of a King. A modern Christmas of lights is more than a thing in itself. Like the ancient star it is a sign. At Christmas time we find joy at the source. What a thrill it must be to stand at the source of a great river, such as the Mississippi, or the Nile. Those Wiseman of old stood at the source of joy. Preceding them were the shepherds to whom the angel said, “Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy.” Draw near to the babe – at Bethlehem’s gate there was a spring of water, but here in the stable was the real spring of Bethlehem, which issued the most joyous of all the religions of me and kind.

Finding joy we have the joy of ‘finding’. Some of us may have lost the Christ. Remember Jesus stories of the lost sheep, the last coin, and the lost boy – and note the joy that came with their finding. Here in the cradle at Bethlehem is to be found him who has been lost to many. Of course, it should be put to the other way, for are not we the ones who become lost?

Indeed, we are the lost sheep. We are the ones that have strayed from the flock. Some of us are lost and perhaps do not even know it. What a wonderful feeling it is when we are finally found, for God is always searching for us.

By his autobiographical account of how he became a Christian, C.S. Lewis reminds us in his book, entitled, “Surprised by Joy”, that joy can also be a means of bringing us to God. And even the man who comes to God through his sorrows must sing with joy when he arrives. Of course, if the pursuit of pleasure monopolizes a man’s life, it can cause him to forget God. But it is equally true that pain, dedication to one’s work, even service to others can also crowd God out of a life. Protestantism in particular should be able to re-interpret the importance of pleasure and take a more positive view of the joyous Christmas season.

In other words, we have to strike a happy medium or a good balance between work and play and helping others. Life cannot be pleasure all the time; nor can it be work all the time.

The failure to wrestle positively with a question of how pleasure fits into the life of the Christian is at all times a serious shortcoming. But, as we stand on the threshold of the age of automation and the prospect of more leisure for all, the failure to come to terms with pleasure may be catastrophic. As man spends less and less time in his work and more in relaxation and recreation, it will be tragic if the church finds itself unable to relate Christianity to pleasure as well as to work. The Christmas season offers the perfect opening for Christian interpretation of pleasure.

Find joy in Christmas – the joy of expectancy. By the intense awareness that the babe of Bethlehem is Emmanuel, God-with-us, we have the anticipation that he will triumph over evil in the world, even over sin and death.

At Christmas time there is much of fun and frivolity and pleasure. Let us not treat it negatively; rather let us add to it, from each of us, a portion of contagious joy.

Secondly, let us put worship into Christmas.

The Wiseman fell down and worshipped the child. They certainly gave us a good example to follow.

There seems to be something spontaneous about their act. They were in the mood to worship. Their joy became the means of bringing them to God. Even when a man comes to God in sorrow, he finds joy and

worship. The days of true Wiseman were quiet and slow moving, not so with us. We find it more necessary to cultivate the mood, but it will come at unexpected times, when you hear the bells ring out a Christmas carol, when you see a face radiant with the true Christmas spirit, when memory brings back a Christmas scene of long ago.

Perhaps you think it isn't important to be in the right mood to worship God but I believe it is important to prepare ourselves for worshiping God. Certainly, by continual talk, chatter, laughter we shall never be prepared to meet God. I am not saying we should not laugh and have fun and talk, all I'm saying is, there is a place and time for everything and if we really and truly want to find God he's here we have to want to and we have to prepare ourselves for the worship service. This is the reason for the hymns and the other rituals of our worship service.

Christmas is exactly the same. We must know what Christmas is, what it stands for and what the celebration of Christmas does for life. We have to understand it's meaning before we can learn to appreciate it.

St. Francis of Assisi is usually credited with being the "Father of the Christmas Carol" – from "his jovial singing", came a new idea about the holiday season. Now the use of the yule tide music has become almost universal and we shout the glad tidings to the world.

"Then let us sing amid our cheer, Old Christmas comes but once a year."

The Wiseman became deliberate. They opened their treasures. We, too, can make this a positive Christmas by deliberately worshiping in our homes, by grasping a quiet and meditative moment at work, by attending worship in the church.

I hope someday we can get away from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. We rush hither and yon, shopping, wrapping presents, decorating the tree, preparing food for the big feast. We sometimes forget what and why we are celebrating. We become too busy. We should take time out of our busyness to really think and meditate about the true meaning of Christmas and what a difference the birth of Christ has made in our lives. Let us take time for worship in our homes as well as church.

Thirdly, let us most definitely put love into Christmas.

"Love came down at Christmas time" is the line of a poem. Love came down to make us loving men and women. Inherent in us is the capacity to love; to love God, to love our neighbor, to love one another. I am not referring to a gushy, sentimental thing either, but a love that shows concern, a love that cares, a love that matters, that's the kind of love I'm talking about.

Let us move in our meditation out from the Bethlehem scene to Nazareth and Galilee and even onto Calvary that seeing the love of Christ we may find ourselves loving him in return. Above all love someone,

a child, a wife; a husband, a friend. Make love particular.

Love by giving. Love by giving self. The giving of things without the giving of self is bare and spurious; is a negative giving. This must be a positive Christmas. Anyone can give gifts, material things, but to really give of yourself requires much more energy and thought and this is real giving. This is how Christ gave. He gave up his whole self and something that will always be remembered and appreciated.

Christmas truly is a story of divine and human love, which has a magnet-like tug on our hearts. A compelling, compassionate, and all-encompassing love explains the attractiveness of the day. Without love, there could never have been a first Christmas. Apart from the love we bring and the love we offer and receive, Christmas would be as dreary as an all-day drizzle.

We in our modern world sometimes get far away from the original meaning of events and why we should be celebrating. We tend to twist things around to suit our purposes, to meet the changing situation. Sometimes when this happens, we get too far away from the real meaning and purpose of things. Let us this year bring Christmas back and help to reestablish the true meaning of the event in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

It is written of the Wisemen that they went back home by a different road. They walked a road they had never walked before. This may be our own experience. Put joy and worship and love into Christmas. Then you will do far more than you think to make this a positive Christmas in the world about you, and you will make it positive in the world of your inner being. You may find yourself walking a new and better road. Truly a road that will lead you to the foot of our Lord's cross.

Christmas – Where? Who? Why?

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25; 2:1-2; Luke 2:1-20

The text is chosen from Luke 2:10-11; “And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Where did the Christmas event take place? Does it make any difference where a man was born? The time - yes, the place? Perhaps a place is not as important as the time.

Of course, we all know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Ancient memories cluster about Bethlehem.

Travelers from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (about 6 miles) passed the traditional site of Rachel’s tomb. Here Jacob’s beloved Rachel died. He had served seven years for Rachel, “And they seemed into him but a few days, for the love he had for her.” Giving birth to a boy, with her last cry she named him, “Son of my sorrow.” The anguish of Jacob’s heart is felt as he speaks to Joseph from his sick bed. “And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me – – when yet there was a little way to come to Ephrath; and I buried her there – the same as Bethlehem.”

Rachel in childbirth and at Bethlehem pre-figures Mary, “a sword would pierce her own soul.”

Jeremiah (though following another tradition concerning the site of Rachel’s grave) uses the cry of Rachel to echo the sorrows of Israel. Matthew appropriates this in picturing the mourning of the mother’s of Bethlehem at Herod’s slaughter of their little children.

“Years of travail and tears herald the coming of him who would bring good tidings to the afflicted and bind up the downhearted.” The consolation of Israel and the world, was born at Bethlehem.

The story of Ruth centers in Bethlehem. It was here that Ruth found a new home and new happiness. It is with a sense of wonder that we see “tiny Bethlehem” nourish in its own village love-story, that knit and hope of the Messiah’s universal kingdom. If the men delighted in David’s lineage, the woman must’ve felt in Ruth’s place in the story at least an equal pleasure.

David is one of the great stories of the world, and Bethlehem also shares in it to the fullest. The fame of having been in the house of Israel’s greatest king never deserted Bethlehem.

One of the most eloquent incidences in the life of David is associated with the well of water by the town’s

gate as recorded in second Samuel 23:14–17.

An old prophecy points to Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus. Out of the golden age of prophecy, the last half of the eighth century BC, came in the words of Micah: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days. Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this shall be peace, when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads upon our soil.”

Little Bethlehem is to be honored in the coming of the anointed one. The gospel of John, 7:42 reads, “has not the scripture said that the Christ to send it from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”

The great event blesses Bethlehem.

We enter Bethlehem with Joseph and Mary.

We go to Bethlehem with the shepherds and “see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”

We join the Wiseman and follow a star which leads us to Bethlehem.

Secondly, Christmas – who? – All of us can name the persons involved in the Christmas story: Caesar Augustus, Herod, the innkeeper, shepherds, Wisemen, Joseph, Mary, Jesus. Caesar at Rome and Herod at Jerusalem throw the Bethlehem scene into vivid contrast. We have some sympathy with the innkeeper; maybe the inn was full that night and he had to turn away a lot of irascible descendants of the house of David.

The shepherds and Wisemen catch our Imagination. Rita Snowden writes concerning the shepherds: “They represent the ordinary, honest-to-goodness people in every situation. It was through them that God revealed his glorious purpose to Bethlehem; and one cannot think in these so often dark days in which we ourselves live, that he has ceased to do that.”

We follow the Wisemen in their two journeys, almost with excitement. The first journey: where did they come from? What made them leave their homelands? What happened on the way? All culminating in joy and worship and gifts from their treasures. The second journey: the departure from Bethlehem, the different road. What was life like after their arrival back home? Could life ever be the same again after their Bethlehem experience?

Our who? Now narrows to the Holy Family. Of this family we have very little more than three brief glimpses: the Nativity scene, the flight into Egypt, and the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years of age.

Yet we know that this was a Jewish family. Upon that basis we can assume a great deal. Richard M Steiner points out three assumptions which can be safely made.

First, that love was at the heart and center of this family's life. No individual could speak so often or so authoritatively about the powers of love as did Jesus, had he not witnessed its power as a child.

Second, Jesus is concept of God as the father of mankind could only have come into being by virtue of a love, and affection, and respect which he felt towards Joseph.

The third assumption is that Jesus saw in his family a unity of purpose which he was to translate into unity of purpose for mankind.

Our second "Who" is Joseph. That parent is blessed who can be idealized by his or her child. The individual may be somewhat less than the ideal, but it is a great thing to have a life and character that can be idealized. Such a man was Joseph. The Gospel according to Joseph is that God is our Father.

It is noted that Matthew characterizes Joseph as "just man", and that Jesus, following a Jewish custom, took up the trade of his father.

Mary comes becomes our next "Who". Mary like Joseph can be idealized. This idealization has in some quarters take an exaggerated form. Mary was not a goddess. Mary was a Jewish girl "steeped in the passion and prophecy of her people."

Pondering that which was happening in her life, she knew that she was a handmaiden of the Lord. By the idealization of Mary any mother might feel herself chosen of God to bring her child to a maturity of Christlike character and service.

Writing about Mary, Joseph Fort Newton said, "If we have ears to hear, the message of the Mother of Jesus will disinfect the fountains of life, exalt the home, and transfigure with spiritual beauty and sanctity what else is so easily debased or accepted as a crude physical fact."

Our fourth "Who" of Christmas is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

You recall that God had instructed Mary to name this newborn baby Jesus which means Emmanuel – "God with us". This means that Jesus is the Comforter. When we accept him into our lives, we will find joy and

happiness and peace. We will be comforted.

Actually, the birth of Jesus is God's breakthrough. The breakthrough is an event that continues through his life, his crucifixion, his resurrection, dispersing the clouds of our night, and putting to flight the shadows of death.

Jesus's birth is also wisdom from on high. In Jesus' wisdom, the Word of God has come to show us the path of knowledge and lead us in his way.

Thirdly, Christmas - Why? Why? is a probing, fundamental and ultimate question. One Why? leads to another Why? Why do we celebrate Christmas? Because Christ came to earth supposedly at Christmas time. Why did he come to earth? Because God sent him. Why did God send him? The question "Why", whenever asked, leads to a question about God's being in nature and will. Philip, the disciple, once said to Jesus, "Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied." Our whys can only be answered in God himself.

Why Christmas? Because God wants us to know him. Of course we could ask: why does God want us to know him? And follow with a half a dozen more interrogations, but somewhere we must stop and find an answer. This is our present answer to why Christmas? Because God wants us to know him.

Jesus was sent to reveal what God is like. We sometimes feel that if God only showed himself there is nothing that we couldn't face. Just one glimpse of God and the landscape of life with all its shadows would be changed. The fact is that God is ever seeking to reveal himself to men that they may know him. And so, he revealed himself in the man that was born at Bethlehem whose name is Jesus. He was full of grace and truth. He became a man so that he might manifest God to men. Jesus is God-with-us. In him we see God. From John 14:8, Jesus said, "He that have seen me have seen the Father." In him we know God. That is why we celebrate Christmas.

Why Christmas? Because God wants us to love him. How do you win another's love? By showing love. "One loving heart sets another's on fire." "We love because he first loved us." Jesus was a manifestation of the love of God; that is the reason why we celebrate his birth.

We have the reasons for his coming in his own words as I recorded and Luke 19:10; "The son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost." That is his loving concern.

Again, Jesus said, "I am come that they may have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." That men should have abundant and eternal life was his loving concern.

Why Christmas? Because God wants us to serve him. When we know God, we will love God and love and in loving God we will desire to serve him. In our service of God his own purposes will be fulfilled.

The world will be redeemed, and our own destiny will be found. Can we not hear God's call to service in the angel's song, "Peace on Earth, goodwill towards men?" Do we not find Christ's life and words a challenge to serve God? The service of God is our destiny and our joy. That is a reason, too, why we celebrate Christmas.

Christmas where? Yes, Jesus came as a lowly babe in Bethlehem. But we need not go to Bethlehem to worship him. He comes directly to our hearts.

Christmas – who? There was the Holy Family which includes Joseph and Mary but Jesus is the important one. Jesus is Savior. He is salvation, goodwill, peace. We greet his coming by the cherishing of the ancient prophecy of peace and the angelic message; "Peace on Earth, goodwill to men."

Christmas why? Because God wants us to know him, to love him, to serve him.

Consider these things, ponder them in your heart. Christmas isn't just for children. It's for you and me, for every one of us. Let Christ come into your heart and life. Accept him. This I truly believe is the where, the who, and the why of Christmas.

The Christmas Story

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

The text is chosen from John 3:16; “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son.”

Everyone likes a good story. A good story, of course, is entertaining; but it also becomes revealing. It gives us insight. It fits into words something we have thought or felt. Not the least of the reasons the Bible is so terrible is it has so many great stories. Stories a child we enjoy; stories the wisest may not fully fathom. It's best is the one we remember and celebrate at this season of the year. Tonight we shall think together about the Christmas Story as a story.

First of all, the Christmas Story has an author. Its byline reads, “God.” We read “God” between the lines of the lovely account about Wiseman and angels, about a star and a virgin mother. They are saying that Jesus was God's idea. They are saying that God is the author of this Story.

The most famous musical setting of the Christmas story, I suppose is Handel's oratorio “The Messiah.” You may remember that it begins with a brief prelude and then a solo, “Comfort me, Comfort me, my people, saith your God.” Christmas, you see, didn't begin in Bethlehem, nor with a star in the east, nor with shepherds keeping watch over the flocks by night. It didn't begin with an imperial decree that all the world should be taxed, nor even with Joseph and Mary. It began with a redemptive purpose in the heart of God. So, the great oratorio which finds its climax in a mighty chorus of hallelujahs, displays an equal genius at its opening when that single voice proclaims a divine purpose. God is definitely the author of the Story.

When God came into the world, he came out of the past, with roots in history, and he was born in a city that had a great memory. Jesus was a branch on a full-grown tree, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. In other words, there was a development that led finally to Jesus, through the prophets and the priest to the Master.

Secondly, every story has a plot. And the plot of the story is nothing less than the redemption of the world. The Author's theme is nothing less than the perfection, the bringing to completion, of his universe. Like every great story this one means a great deal more than it says on the surface.

The plot of the story is that mankind can be better than it is and that the institutions can be redeemed from destruction. In the regular meeting chamber of the Security Council of the United Nations there is a large mural on the theme, “War and Peace.” At the bottom, its colors are somber and the symbolism depicts discord, strife, hatred. As your eyes travel up the wall, however, you realize that the colors are becoming brighter and the symbolism less hostile and more cooperative. The very top of the picture runs into the ceiling and is unfinished - by which the artist is saying that piece is unfinished business, that the best is yet to be, that the dark and bloody past is prologue to a fair and friendlier future. That is a pictorial representation of the plot of the Christmas Story – the redemption of the world from all its sin and sorrow

and suffering.

How very hard we all seek everlasting peace. Look at the effort that is constantly being poured into the obtaining it and yet how very simple the answer is. The answer is right before us. Each of us needs to accept Jesus Christ in our lives, really except him I mean, and we will obtain the piece we are seeking. If only we had eyes to see and ears to hear we would see and hear the answer to everlasting peace.

Thirdly, the Christmas Story has a climax, a place where the plot is unraveled and where all the strands in the pattern are seen in their proper relationship, a denouncement. That point, in the story, is Calvary – the place of Jesus is crucifixion.

It is not enough to think of the Christmas story only in terms of the baby Jesus. To do this is sheer sentimentalism. You have to remember that he grew up and that he formed a group of disciples and that he was an offense to the social, political, economic and religious powers of his time; that he was crucified, dead, and buried, but he rose from the dead. The real climax of the Christmas Story is the Easter Story – the resurrection of our Lord from the dead, assuring us of everlasting and eternal life with our Father in heaven.

“He dwelt among us.” That too, It’s a part of the Story. He did not just appear for a moment, like a flash from across the frontiers of the world, and then vanished into darkness. He dwells among us, living our lives, sharing our troubles, entering into our sorrows (and our joys), bearing our burdens. He identified himself with humanity at every point. And truly he dwells among us now and will always.

Christianity itself is a story. Christianity is not just a religion of influences and values of principles. It is a religion of happenings, I’ve events, of plain historical occurrences. Indeed the faith is based on such. It belongs to the very marrow of the gospel to assert that God came at a certain hour in history and at a certain place on earth; that he lived and died among us, and afterwards rose from the dead.

Christmas is not just the star; it is also the cross and the empty tomb. Without the latter the former would never have been remembered. The central Christian belief is that Jesus’s death is the central clue to life end around it everything else we know can be gathered coherently. We do not know how history will end; but we can be sure that it will be congruent with the cross. The world may reject Jesus; but we can be sure that it is eventually judged by his stature. Pride and lust and falsehood may play the very devil with the power in human hands; but the last man to control power will be those who have clean hands in pure hearts and whose world is as good as their bond.

I do not know what the lead story was in the Jerusalem Gazette or the Bethlehem Bugle or the Nazareth Courier when Jesus was born, but it is safe to say that any mention of him would have been on the other side; not on the front page; but in some out-of-the-way corner. But that it was actually the big story is it tested by the fact that we - among millions, are gathered to commemorate and celebrate it.

The Christmas Story Is a love story; its author is love, its plot is love, its denouncement is love. In Jesus's birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection we have the full revelation of the love of God.

Abraham Lincoln once told of a little girl who received some beautiful alphabet blocks for Christmas. She liked them so much that she took them to bed with her on Christmas night, and played with them until she was very sleepy. Then she remembered that she hadn't said her evening prayers. So, she knelt by the side of her bed and prayed, "Oh Lord, I'm too sleepy to pray, but there are the letters, spell it out for yourself."

That is just what God did when he gave us Jesus. He spelled out his love for us all. With her blocks the little girl might have spelled out the word LOVE. Now, of course, God might have spelled out the word in all the languages of the world, but his way of doing it was much better - he sent us a loving person to show us what love is and that he loves us. The whole world can understand a loving man.

We spell out many things at Christmas time. For example, we all spell out "Merry Christmas." We spell out the words the angels sang when Jesus was born, "Peace on Earth, Goodwill Toward Men."

Now, I am going to make a suggestion that each of us in the silence of his or her own heart spell out to God our joy and thanks because God gave us his Son to be our Savior. Let's keep spelling them out all through this Christmas season. Then, too, we might spell out our joy and our thanks in loving deeds as readable as the letters on a little girl's blocks.

In 1944 there was a Christmas Eve service in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. The service had been forbidden but the prisoners went ahead and held it anyway. It was planned by the only chaplain, who happened to be a Roman Catholic. He asked a Jewish boy to sing a solo. And as Protestants, Jews, Roman Catholics, and those who would have had a hard time describing just what their religious faith was, joined in devotion, regards drew near. Although they were clearly reluctant to obey their orders and interfere, no one was sure just what would happen; you could feel the tension mounting moment by moment. Then, as a soloist sang "Silent Night, Holy Night", a guttural German voice joined in and soon everyone else was singing the hymn. So, the love of God includes all men, breaks down all barriers, and wipes away all tears. And this is the end of the story.

Anticipating a Fresh Start

Scripture: John 1:1-5, 9-14

Our text can be given in one word of three letters. Make each letter a capital. The word is found in II Corinthians 1:20. The word is YES.

The New English Bible reads: “With him it was, and is “Yes”. He (Christ) is the “Yes” pronounced upon God’s promises, every one of them. That is why, when we give glory to God, it is through Jesus Christ that we say, Amen!

On this last Sunday of an old year let us meditate in anticipation of a fresh start. There is a certain glory beginning again suggested by the calendar. We are thinking especially of our spiritual lives.

The examination questions had been written on the blackboard. A tenant student soon went up to his teacher’s desk and said, “Teacher, do you have an extra piece of paper that I could have? I messed this one up.

The teacher saw that it was full of blots and soiled by erasures, and gave him a new sheet. She smiled encouragingly at him and said, “You will do better next time.”

It is the boy who holds our attention in the incident, but we must think, too, of the kindly teacher. It was Jesus’ way of doing things – when people mess things up he would take their soiled sheets and give them a fresh start. I hear him say, “Here is a new year, my son, you will do better this time.” And indeed, we will with Christ at our sides, guiding and directing us.

The man who can begin again is, to say the least, not dead. He hasn’t come to a full stop. He isn’t a drop out.

Then, too, he hasn’t stepped into a “center of indifference.” The man who does that isn’t exactly dead; he is a dismal swamp personality.

The man who can take a fresh start hasn’t settled down into an everlasting “NO”. He doesn’t live in the “dim” world of denial. He is not a despairing man. The passing years are not used for the confirmation of his pessimism. If you have the merest clicker of optimistic light, thank God you have it; by following the gleam you can take a fresh start.

The man who can take a fresh star is not dumb. He is not like the man who, starting his car, let it run in neutral, all the time thinking he was going somewhere. He has sense enough to put life into gear.

Beginning again, it is possible for a person to discard undesirable encumbrances. Changing direction or

goals is a possibility. Pressing on, becoming steadfast, running the race, is often by a series of fresh starts.

We should always be looking forward. It is true we have to remember the past in order to try to correct our mistakes and to not forget good memories. As for our spiritual lives, looking back will do us no good. We have to start from where we are trying to overcome our faults and mistakes and fortunately Christ died so we could be forgiven and so we could have another chance, a fresh start.

Christ gospel is the gospel of the “yes” – he denies only our denials. Each of us must choose between these two: whether he will live in a dim world of denial, or dare to affirm the highest and give himself to it.

First of all, where can you make this fresh start? Begin with a “yes”.

We are not dismissing doubt, a question mark, as the road to discovery. As William James put it, “Smiles and the word ‘yes’, prove too tepid and relaxed a moral climate. Some austerity and worthy negativity, some roughness, danger, struggling, and effort, some No! “No” must be mixed in to produce the sense of character, texture, and power. Our “yes” must be strong enough to involve a “no”. Nevertheless, one cannot make a fair, fresh start upon the foundation of a wriggling question mark. A man must find somewhere to put his feet.

Start with the strongest affirmation possible. We are not thinking now of taking some fresh start to put over a paltry program for a year. Start with a ‘yes’ that interprets life, gives it glorious and eternal purpose, supplies it with power, makes it victorious, transforms its question marks into exclamation points.

Too many of us know that our spiritual lives are not what we would like them to be and so we declare that next year is going to be different. We say, “I am going to change my life and start living it the way God wants me to live it.” But then we are trapped right back into the same old rut, perhaps because we are lazy, perhaps because it will cost us some so-called good friends, perhaps we are too comfortable the way we are. If we really know and believe we should be living differently, then let us make a solid affirmation and stick to it regardless of what happens.

That’s what is wrong with many of us, we are “Lukewarm Christians”. We want to make sure we do not go overboard with concern to our religion.

Start also with an affirmation that is not an abstraction. Idealism, in which we may deeply believe, is sometimes a kindness to our advance. We may glow over the Golden Rule, but never do more than glow. We may prate about honesty and cheat our neighbors. We may set up absolute concepts of purity and love and truth and make the abstract a substitute for concrete life and deed.

The strongest affirmation has flesh and blood.

If things could be changed for the better by us talking about it, everything would be perfect in our world.

Many of us talk a good fight and tell others how they should live their lives but we turn around and leave our lives just the opposite.

Because we came to church on Sunday, we believe we have the right to go out and cheat our neighbor on Monday. Some give when they have notoriety and publicity. Indeed, we desperately need to practice what we preach and not just in church.

Thomas Carlyle passed through a bitter ordeal. Doubt darkened into disbelief. The unwise seem to say “No”. Instead of falling into despair, his pain begat defiance, and his soul stood up and made protect.

From the everlasting know he passed to a center of a difference in which so many men live today in respects to ultimate issues. It was a decimal., As Carlisle admits, life lost its luster. The Earth seemed a dog cage, the grave a hound’s ditch. Slowly, by ways no words can trace, he found his way to a better mood, a cleaner insight, and the universe which had been so unresponsive, answered with an everlasting “Yes!” He was in a new world, no longer dead nor demoniacal, but divine, and the earth was a dewy valley with a lark song over it. His heart overflowed with a tide of love and pity.

Secondly, how then can we make a fresh beat start beginning with this new year? Meet God’s yes with Man’s “Amen”. “Amen” is “So be It.” “Amen” is men’s strong affirmation. Amen is acceptance of God’s deed in Christ. Amen may be a leap of faith from one’s own selfish and petty plan to the acceptance of God’s mighty affirmation. To God’s mighty “yes” a man makes a mighty response and lives of life through Jesus Christ that gives glory to God.

You can most definitely make a fresh start right now. God will help you. Accept Jesus Christ into your life now and I guarantee your life will be different. Let Christ into your life. Give him a chance.

Some 1300 years ago a boy 10 years old named Steven entered the old monastery of Marsaba overhanging the brook of Kedron. He never left it. He became a wise teacher of souls and a healer of wounded hearts. He still sings to us in a tender, haunting hymn which, until 1862, lay locked up in the Latin tongue, but in that year was turned into limpid, pathetic English. Listen to that voice and learn how you may hear the divine “yes” singing amid the discards and denials of life: “Art thou weary? Arts out languid? Failing, following, keeping struggling?”

Is he sure to bless?

Saints, Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs, all answer yes.

What are we going to do? Put down a period in life? That is deadly. Step into a center of a difference? This is dismal. Just go round and round? That is dumb, stupid. Rubberstamp the divine “yes”? That requires no brains, no heart, no will. Base life on your own affirmations? Life becomes doll and drab. Say “Amen” to

God's "yes". Say it like thunder! In that there is power, poise, purpose, discipline, achievement, victory.

Paul points to the fact that Christians say Amen through Christ. One cannot say Amen to anything except the reality which is in the Christ. Amen is the formula of confirmation, the expression of ultimate servitude. We are participants of his resurrection; therefore, we can say the ultimate "yes", the Amen beyond our "yes" and our "no".

What is more, Paul continues, as recorded in I Corinthians 1: 21-22; "And if you and we belong to Christ, guaranteed as his and anointed, it is all God's doing; it is God also who has set his seal upon us, and as a pledge of what is to come, has given the spirit to dwell in our hearts."

I think too in order to make a fresh start we should consider this "the Sacrament of the Present Moment." The day in which we live is the day which matters.

Dr. Frank Boreham tells the story. He said he came to know this lady who silently worried herself a good deal about the future. Then one day she came upon some words in her Bible that pulled her up with a start: "This is the Day," she read, "which the Lord has made; we will be glad and rejoice in it." She paused, trying to puzzle out, as she read, which day was meant. Since no day was specifically marked out, she came very wisely to the conclusion that the day was living.

This was the day which the Lord had made!

This discovery was so much to her that she scratched it letter by letter onto the pane of her window, so that first thing every morning she could look out on the new day through her new assurance.

By faith let us, you and I, do the same this year. You truly can make a fresh start from where you are and let Christ help you get started and help you continue on the way.

A Road to New Life

Scripture: John 6:51-70

Our text is chosen from John 6:68; “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.”

In the life of Jesus, we find a moving incident, which comes very close to our situation today. In that first century people were unsatisfied with life; they too were looking for someone or something which could show them the road to a new life. Then came Jesus of Nazareth. At first, he seemed to have the answers. Then doubts began to arise. “Many – walked no more with him”, the account says significantly, poignantly. Then Jesus turned to those who knew him best, “Will you also go away?” Peter, as usual, had his answer, ready, strong, and confident, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou has the words of eternal life.”

“To whom shall we go?” What alternatives are open to us? Which road seem to lead to new life?

One way, with a mood of yearning for a new life upon us, is to ignore it, to plunge into a continual round of business and pleasure, and let the world go by, to try to silence the voices of our soul.

One trouble with taking the way of escapism is that it leaves the world just as it is. God has so made his world that he will do nothing for us until we are ready to let him do something through us. Moreover, we discover that we let the world alone, it will not let us alone.

Another difficulty is that we cannot always escape from ourselves. The time comes when somewhere we are alone with ourselves, and that yearning for a better life rises again unbidden within us. We know then we have missed the answer we need.

Another road in which we all at times trust, is that which we believe takes us to a new environment. In our society and the world, thinking we imagined that by some rearrangement of external conditions of life, a new world can be born. And when the way is difficult in our own affairs, we yearn for a change of circumstances – a different job, a new house, a better salary.

History is filled with the disappointments of men who trusted in a changed environment to give new life. Again, and again, even vast changes have been shown to be nothing more than the rearrangement of the scenery of society. Why cannot we see that it is the spirit that needs changing with the changing of the structures of society? To grapple with one without the other, in the end, to be as you were.

Thirdly, the way of the moralist seems to lead to new life. We move nearer to the answer of our need when we speak of moral recovery and an ethical revival. We become convinced that by calling upon ourselves and one another to advance, moral ideals, and standards, we shall be saved.

But men do not rise to higher moral standards, merely by being told that they ought to live better lives. Through the centuries, this way has been tried, and it has failed. The way of the moralist does not go deep enough. There is no re-created power in being told to be better, and there is no power on which to draw.

The plain truth is that none of us is good enough to tell others that better lives should be lived. We will listen to someone beyond us, Jesus Christ, but to no other.

Fourth, we have the Christian answer as the road that leads to new life. The place of renewal and recovery is where it has always been, where alone it is to be found – in the transforming power of God given to us through Jesus Christ.

CS Lewis said in his book entitled, “Surprised by Joy “, that on the night he gave into God and knelt and prayed, he was perhaps “the most dejected of reluctant converts in all of England.” He pictured himself as a prodigal who is brought in “kicking, struggling, resentful, and guarding his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape. This was not the end of the matter, for Lewis concluded: “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation.”

The best years of any life come only when one stops the pursuit of happiness as the end and aim of all existence and begins to recognize and enjoy the blessings at hand; when one learns that the true meaning of life is not in self-gratification or self-seeking, but in the glorious quest for God – to find him, to know him, and to grow into his image. This is maturity. This is discovery of the joy of living. Once it comes, all the years to follow are “best”.

There is only one force in all the world that can change the moral tone and atmosphere of a nation; only one power in the whole universe that can take away one of us as he is and make him what he ought to be – it is the power of true religion. There is only one set of answers sufficient to meet the needs of our minds and hearts, giving purpose to living, and goal at the end of the road – it is found in the Christian faith. Only one person in all history can take our highest yearnings and satisfy them – he is Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior.

Numerically the years before Christ can be counted either forward or backward. Yet the west counts them backward, thereby expressing the theological understanding that what happened before Christ is not only passed, but also finished and complete. And the count back begins with Christ, from the center, for he made the old and past. But the years after Christ are counted forward, as for the new they are always pulsating with eternity, they open out before an authentic, never-ending future. This theological understanding of Christ birth as a division of time so decisive as to be able to be the only point of departure for any meaningful count of the years is the significance of BC and AD. It is something to which every newspaper, check, business transaction, every piece of correspondence daily bears, silent witness.

The answer to the desires and groping after a fuller life – for society, for you – is in God, and committing ourselves to Jesus Christ, who disappoints no one. It is in letting our whole lives, go out toward him and trust and prayer and obedience. It comes through inviting the living Christ to live within us. The road to new life runs through the experience of becoming a committed, worshiping, serving Christian.

As we come to our Lord's table this day, let us remember what Christ has done for us, for indeed, the communion is a memorial to Christ. As we partake of the elements, let us quietly meditate upon our own individual lives. Let us recall the many sins we have committed in the past and let us truly repent of them and promise to live a better life. Indeed, we all do need a new and fresh start and Christ can help us do it. What better place and what better way to make this fresh new start than at our Lord's table for indeed we do find him here with us. May God guide and direct you through this year.

The Practice and Power of Prayer

Scripture: Daniel:1-22

Our text is from Matthew 6:6; “Jesus said, but when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

A singular luster and distinction clings to the name of Daniel. At no time do we find anything common place or conventional in what Daniel says or does. His faith and courage are so preeminent that he stands as an example to all men.

He maintained an unbroken and unconquerable spirit in the face of events that tried men’s souls.

He witnessed the destruction of his beloved homeland.

He survived the long and exhausting journey through the Arabian desert on route to captivity in Babylon.

The promise of honor, wealth, and power could not seduce him from his allegiance to the God of his fathers.

When his enemies plotted against him, he gazed unflinchingly into the face of death and would not play the coward.

First of all, the secret of Daniel strength lay in his practice of daily prayers. Nothing was permitted to interfere with his appointment with God. He constantly drew upon the source of all spiritual power.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful with us, if we would let nothing interfere with our appointment with God. This world would be a better place in which to live if each of us would put God first in our lives and if we took time each day for prayer and meditation.

A story was told years ago of Stonewall Jackson, that Cromwell of modern war, who combined the spirit of devotion with iron discipline and impetuous bravery. He was heard using Paul’s phrase, “continuing instant in prayer,” and was asked what he understood by it.

“I can give you my ideas of it,” he said, “by illustration, if you will allow it and will not think that I am setting myself up as a model for others.”

On assurance being given, he went on to say: “I have so fixed the habit of my mind that I never raise a glass of water to my life without asking God’s blessing. I never seal a letter without putting a word or prayer under the seal. I never take a letter from the post without sending my thought heavenward.”

“And don’t you sometimes forget to do this?”

“I think I scarcely can say that I do; the habit has become so fixed almost as breathing.”

I cannot think of a better habit. Many people feel that in order to talk with God they have to specifically stop with their doing, get on their knees and pray to God. This isn’t necessary because we can think of prayer while we are doing something else. I am not saying that you should think all your prayers while engaged in some other activity, but what better way to keep in contact then by thinking of him constantly.

A boy to whom Father Huntington was talking one day, said that he had no time to pray. As soon as the boy got up in the morning, he had to eat his breakfast and rush off to work. He worked hard all day, and when he got through, he said he was too tired, even to think. “Where do you live,” asked Father Huntington. The boy told him. It was in a tenement on the fourth floor. “Well,” said Father Huntington, “every morning you come down three flights upstairs. As you come down the first flight, say, “I praise God this day for all his mercies; and then think of the things you are thankful for. When you come down the second flight, say, “I pray God keep me this day from harm.” “When you come down the third flight say”, “I dedicate myself to God this day; and try to think of something you can do for his glory.”

It Is a good way to start each day, isn’t it? I know that I could not get through the day, if I didn’t start with God. People who say that they don’t have time to pray to God really do not know what they’re talking about and they use the time but as an excuse.

Secondly, one of the most notable elements in Daniel’s character was that he unfailingly put principal ahead of policy and expediency. The men and women of history, whom we are most delighted to honor are those who have been willing to maintain the truth against the whole world. The type of unyielding affirmation, which makes us all proud of our humanity is shown in Martin Luther’s words: “here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

I suppose that none of us will ever have to choose between our Christian beliefs and death because we do not live in the right place, but I can’t help wonder how many of us would have faith enough in our God to stand up against all odds, really stand up for what we believe? But in any circumstance, the power of prayer, sincere, honest down to earth prayer, is the only answer and perhaps the only thing we can do.

What is prayer? To pray is to seek communion with the very spirit of the holy God. To pray is not primarily to ask for things, but reverently to receive a presence. To pray is to open our innermost self to the royal entry of the eternal Lord. To pray is to expose one’s secret being to the purifying faces of God’s holy grace and love.

Indeed, prayer is the most powerful force in our world today and it is unfortunate that more of us do not know how to use it. Just think if more and more people were constantly in touch with God, what a great difference it would make in our world.

Thirdly, the resources of prayer, which kept Daniel steadfast are as meaningful and mighty in every other period of human history. We live in this atomic and hydrogen age, the studying power of the Christian faith and prayer. It has fallen to us to witness the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that we should see "men's heart feeling for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth."

Walk and talk and work and laugh with your friends. But behind-the-scenes, keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship. Keep it up throughout the day. Let inward prayer be your last art before you fall asleep and the first art when you awake. Constant inward prayer and worship I know and believe will help you through each day. It will give you strength encourage to face the many problems of life.

Fourthly, what did prayer do for Daniel? It reinforced his character. It inspired him with quietness and confidence. It gave him stability and poise in the face of mortal danger. It made him the strongest man in the kingdom of Babylon.

We desperately need the same qualities that only a life. A prayer can truly nurture within us. Many people are living on disciplined, unplanned, unregulated lives. They are always hurried, nervous, jittery, rushing from one activity to the next without plan or purpose in their lives, often living on the precipice of nervous collapse. They seem to have no place in their lives for a quietness, meditation and prayer.

Prayer brought Christ into communion with his Father. Prayer made God as real within him as hunger made real the world about him. Prayer led him to know that he belonged to God and that in God, he lived and moved and had his being. Life may have offered him questions about God: prayer assured him of God. Prayer was assurance of God's reality, of God's presence, of God's nearness, of his oneness with God.

I believe there are some general rules that will help us in our prayer life.

First of all, begin with God. If you can learn to forget yourself and saturate your minds with thoughts about God, prayer will be more meaningful.

Second, thank God for his blessings. This helps to develop a grateful heart. Indeed, we have much to thank God for.

Third, pray that God will forgive your sins. Ask him to forgive specific sins. Remember, we are all sinners in God sight.

Fourth, God's rules for prayer are the same for all. No person has any special privileges in prayer.

Fifth, God wants his children to have the best.

Sixth, the door to the Father's house is always ajar. You can go in and out of the Father's house through prayer at any hour of the day or night. Saturdays and Sundays included.

Seventh, God answers our prayers in one of three ways; (1) more often than we deserve, God says yes to our prayers. (2) God answers some prayers in this fashion, "I cannot say either yes or no. I will do my part and if you will do yours, the prayer will be answered in the affirmative. However, if you fail to do your part, the answer will be in the negative." (3) God says no to many of our prayers because he alone knows what really is for our good. I think these rules can be helpful to us in our prayer lives.

Often, we finish our prayers without any sense that we have drawn nearer to God. Our failure may result from the fact that we have not reckoned with the requirements which prayer makes on us. We know that God is faithful, but what is our part? These simple reaching principles can help us grow in our praying.

First, put your mind on God as well as yourself. A common phrase suggest that we need to look out for number one. But who is number one? We assume it is ourselves, but the fact is that God is number one, your brother is number two, and you are number three in the Christian scheme of things. When prayer is mature, something is taking place at the center of your life. It is a form of displacement. It is finding the center of life more and more in God so that self is displaced and put into a new relation.

Second, it is important to listen as well as to speak. Any vital personal relationship is a dialogue having a time to speak and a time to keep quiet, a time to make known and a time to know, a time to give of yourself and a time to receive another. The deepest of all relationships we know, that of prayer, also requires our time of listening. But have you tried to listen and heard nothing? If God speaks, what language does he use? God speech is the dialogue of the soul. We know that God has spoken to us when the word of the poet becomes real:

Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in thy presence will prevail to make!
What heavy burdens from our bosom take,
What parched ground refresh with a shower!

Third, real prayer is to think as well as to feel. "How precious are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is this sum of them?" (Psalm 139:17) In real devotion we not only pray thoughtfully, but we also think prayerfully. One of the ways to enter into a time a prayer is deliberately to think upon some passage of scripture in an effort to find a new and deeper truth, you may want deliberately to think upon some experience in your life, which in retrospect remind you that God was wonderfully present.

We find ourselves uplifted, when we think of the life of one who has touched us with healing and redemptive grace.

Fourth, our prayer matures when we learn to accept as well as to ask. So much our prayer is preparing ourselves to receive and not to give. What are the gifts God has already promised?

From the pages of the Bible draw upon the tested experience of men and women who lived in close relationship with God and see what it is waiting to receive: “love, joy, peace”, or example. It isn't a wanting of supply but a lack of demand that keeps us from the spiritual gifts God has willed for us all to have.

If this generation is to be saved, we must learn to orient our lives to God. Then, like Daniel, we shall become sure of God. We shall be sure that the future is in God's hands and that we are a part of his divine plan. Don't be satisfied any longer to go on living “a minimum life in a time of maximum demand. Surely can we come to know our God by being in constant contact with him through prayer. Try it and I know your own life will be different and those around you will be different also.

Necessity and Missions

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-16

The text is chosen from I Cor. 9:16; “For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid before me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.”

Religion is either everything or it is nothing. It is either first or it is nowhere. It is either the best thing in the world or the worst thing in the world. Paul felt that religion was everything, and so necessity was laid upon him to give his religion universality.

Many times, we hear the question, “Why Christian missions?”

First, because of human needs. All we have to do is look around us right here where we are and we see people in need. Millions of people go to sleep each night hungry and without a roof over their heads.

Second, because the Christian must identify himself with humanity in its deepest needs. This is part of being a Christian as Jesus taught us.

Third, because he must show that the sick, the dispossessed, the illiterate, the unlearned, the young, the old, the widows, and the fatherless are all acceptable to God. Certainly, all humans are God’s children and should have these same privileges and opportunities.

Fourth, because if men are to take seriously Jesus is Lord, the Christian must take seriously his own role as servant. You remember that Jesus said he didn’t come to serve, but to serve.

Fifth, because deeds in the name of Jesus, illustrate the Christian’s gratitude to God and the reality of forgiveness and acceptance before God.

Six, because the Christian must bear witness to the reality of the new order, which Christ came to establish. Our scripture reading this morning, gave us a good example of what Christ wants us as Christians to do.

First of all, Paul was aware of the necessity of a priceless possession. He has something other people did not have, and he was restless to share it with them. The sinless life of Jesus, his conscious – compelling teaching, his death on the cross, his resurrection into living power, made Paul feel certain that he knew something about God that others had not yet learned.

Christ was a home missionary in the house of Lazarus.

He was a foreign missionary when Greeks came to him.

A city missionary when he taught in Samaria.

A Sunday school missionary when he opened up scriptures and set men to studying the word of God.

A children's missionary when he took them in his arms and bless them.

A missionary to the poor when he opened the eyes of the blind beggar.

A missionary to the rich when he opened the eyes of Zacchaeus.

Even on the cross, Christ was a missionary to the robber, and his last commandment was the missionary commission which we read this morning.

Actually, I feel certain that once we have seen God and felt Christ in our lives, we too want to be missionaries.

Thirdly, Paul was aware of the necessity of an unsatisfied need. On all sides, the hunger of the world was evident. The pity, the tragedy of it made an eloquent appeal. It was a revelation of a religious hunger that too found no satisfaction in philosopher's dreams or politicians promises. Today, the hungry people look up and are not fed. Once more we learn that man cannot live alone, and if the soul is starved, there is tragedy. Paul knew the need of the heart of the world.

I'm sure this is one of the problems of our young people today that are taking drugs, that are turning to alcohol, that are living their lives in rebellion; they are searching, they are seeking something, and I truly believe in their own ways, they are seeking God whether they know it or not. Unfortunately, many times in our homes as adults, we cannot help them find God because we ourselves have not found him. We want to be nice Christians, but we do not want to overdo it. I'm sure that we who are living here, have a little or no idea of the things that are going on and how people are actually living their lives. There is a desperate need in our world today; a need to find God, and as Christians it is our obligation and responsibility to show the world Christ.

The early church was not an Institution, but rather a mission, a bold and seemingly fantastic mission as a little group of Jews set out to claim the whole world for their Lord, Jesus Christ. Whenever it ceases to be a mission and has become content to be merely a religious institution, or a card club, it has withered up and died. But again, and again it has happened that out of the dry shell, a new missionary has broken for with important consequences for the entire world.

Thirdly, Paul was aware of the necessity of unparallel. He had tasted success. He had had 10 years at least of aggressive missionary service. He had suffered for his faith, but he had seen the victory. And he was impatient to be out and at work with his missionary evangelism. In his letters, Paul draws the contract again and again between what men were before the gospel came to them and what they became afterwards. The necessity is likewise laid upon us to preach the gospel, for it is still the power of God onto salvation.

Renee ended his work, Vida Jesu, with a picture representing a Jew of the peasant class dead upon a cross. Under it was the single word "FIN," the end. But the cross was not the end not many years after Pilate

and Caiaphas left him to the cross, and their names were fading, save further association with this deed, and apostle was exclaiming, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and unto the world.”, and that cross was being carried forth upon a conquest, like none other our world has ever known. This conquest, begun when Jesus took the cross as his weapon, is a conquest which shall be finished only when the uttermost parts of the earth have heard and received the message of that cross; and the last man, woman, and child in the world has been invited to bow at the name that is above every name, and to confess Jesus Lord to the glory of God and the Father.

Kenneth Latourette says that during the great century of achievement between 1830–1930, 75,000 missionaries went out from Europe and North America to the ends of the earth. The fact that 10,000 of them died and 20,000 of them returned broken in health indicates, the risk this peaceful army took. Most of them lost the security of home, the income from a good position, inherited financial resources, even help to be obedient to the heavenly version.

I’m sure most of them felt it their duty as Christ followers to make the supreme sacrifice, and we’re glad they had the opportunity to help in the spreading of the Gospels. In the face of our meager obligations today as Christians, it is too bad we cannot have the same inward feeling. For we do not have to risk our lives, and in most cases make very little if any sacrifices. Indeed, there are many missionaries in foreign lands, still making supreme sacrifices, and the least we can do is support their efforts. This is part of being a true Christian and a disciple of Christ.

Fourth, Paul was aware of the necessity of the preservation of personality. There is such a thing as disintegration of personality. Having the truth, knowing the need, seeing the victory, if we refuse to answer the call, there is no longer any heaven of salvation, honor, duty, right. I think this was what was in Paul’s mind. To save himself, he must go forth and fulfill his obligation. It is by losing life that we save it. The Christian, who knows Christ and his power to meet the world needs and withholds his hand is more than a traitor. Paul knew he would slip from his high place of being a Christian personality and become, like Judas, a traitor whose only destiny was to go out alone into the night and hang himself.

We too, like Paul, are not fulfilling our true Christian obligation unless we are willing to proclaim the Gospels to others, unless we are willing to support our missionary efforts, for indeed, this was Christ’s intent for us as evidenced by our scripture reading this morning.

Only a church that stands out from the world as a new distinctive community has the power to change the world; only a church that stands in with the world, immersed in human need and care less of itself, can be that distinctive community.

I truly believe the only hope our world has today, is the true acceptance of Jesus Christ into each person’s heart. I believe this can only be done through the church of Jesus Christ, through an instinctive missionary effort. I believe, today with our world in so much tension, that we should be working harder and harder to support all missionary efforts; efforts that bring the Holy Spirit into the lives of all people.

People can do change, and when they really find God, they cannot understand what they have been doing

all their lives.

Delegation of villagers in India, waited by the side of the road for the old jeep in which the Christians were riding. When the Jeep came to a stop, the villagers placed garland of marigolds around the necks of the Christians and said they wanted to express their thanks for the food that had been sent to the famine-struck state of Madras, as a part of the work of the Christian missions.

After the mayor had expressed the thanks of the village, a tall, thin man stepped forward to speak. "I do not thank you for "saving" my life," he said, "I thank you for "giving" me life."

Then he explained what he meant. "Three years ago, I was sent here by the Communist party of India to destroy the Christian work of the missionary. But in the process, I was destroyed myself. When I saw the hungry being fed and felt loving-kindness all around me, I discovered I was starving in spirit. Last Christmas I was baptized."

"You see", he said, "I was dead before. But now I live. So, I thank you not for saving but for giving me life."

A true and honest testimony from a person who has found God for the first time.

Perhaps that is what is wrong with us, "our spirit is starving". Perhaps we too are dead, but truly we can be really living. Jesus Christ does most certainly give us life.

We as Christians and members of Christ's church, are to work to witness, and to serve, as we carry out our daily work, as we live in our neighborhoods, and as we share in political, volunteer or labor organizations. These church members, so engaged in the great mission given to us by God, should turn to our local congregation to help, to equip, and support them. Just as a missionary returns to the mission station for rest, supplies, and further training, so we as Christians, in a world of great darkness and challenge, come back to our local churches for rest, supplies, and training. The local church is doing its job when it is a mission station.

No church can be a Christian Church without supporting missionary programs. We know that truly this is the church's first obligation and responsibility; after all, you and I are the church.

A living church is missionary in its very essence. Its members cannot keep to themselves a faith that has changed their lives. The early church stands as a tiny minority in a hostile world. There is the realistic fellowship of the battlefield. All share in the same faith, the same hope, the same dangers.

Indeed, if Christ has touched your life, you must fulfill your responsibility as a Christian. Let's let our outreach, our missionary effort, our witnessing, our evangelistic efforts, go beyond our little group, to all people we come in contact with. Let's stop being like warm Christians. Let's start being Christians 24 hours a day, every day. Let us become the kind of person Christ intended for us to become.

Life in Four Dimensions

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-19

The text is chosen from Ephesians 3:17 & 18; “your roots must be deep and your foundation, strong, so that you and all God’s people may be strong enough to grasp what breadth, length, height, and depth mean.”

The true Christian life is lived in the four dimensions of the text. They are found in many lives, but supremely in Jesus Christ. If we would know them, we must seek them in him. What do breadth and length and depth and height really mean? Let us see them concretely embodied in Jesus.

First, we have breadth. Breadth to him was not an inclusive criticism that lazily accepted all faiths and all ideals of life. It meant breadth of vision, taking in the whole world of need and suffering, and sinning in all embracing sympathy. It meant a world vision, a vision of a New World, released from sin, rejoicing in its freedoms; it meant a culture that embraced truth wherever found, that was a home in the Father’s world, that touched elbows with every doer of the truth of whatever race or class or creed.

Secondly, we have length. Breadth needs length. What long views Jesus took! He refused the shortcuts to desired goals. From Matthew 4:3, we have an example of this when Satan tempted him; “Command that these stones be made bread.” Satan tempted him, but he would not meet the physical need of the moment at the expense of the spiritual values of tomorrow. The present had a little for him, but the plaudits of the crowd who tomorrow would cry, “Crucify him.” For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame. Beyond the cross, and the open grave, he saw the walls of the city that had foundations; above the poor, broken and sinning earth of his humiliation, he saw the new earth wherein righteousness would dwell. From John 12:32 we read, “I, if I be lifted up from the Earth,” he said, “will draw all the men unto me.” And because of his long view, he held to the long purpose and was undamaged.

Many of us today are willing to take the easy and short way out, even though in our own minds, we know it is not right. We try to shortcut life, hoping to become millionaires overnight, hoping to gain popularity, hoping that the existing problems around us will go away, but usually we end up further away from our goals, and sometimes we will never be able to reach them in our lifetimes. Some hope to push themselves ahead at the expensive others. Perhaps this works temporarily, but eventually, we are caught up with, and everything gained is lost and perhaps even more.

There is no shortcut at another’s expense. It is the long run in the long run. There is only one way to go, and that is the true and right way.

The universe is not all together as God meant it to be. We are here, partly to change it. One of the mercies is that as men grow older and used to things, God takes them away and puts the universe in the hands of

young, fresh man.

We do become used to things and overlook them, perhaps hoping they will go away by themselves. But evil will always exist as long as men are willing to let it exist.

Thirdly, we have depth. Breadth and length are on the surface. Depth is also needed. There was no sounding the depth of Jesus's personality with the short line of human understanding. "O depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!", Paul cried, as he thought of God revealed in Jesus.

Bernard of Clairvaux kept in his room, a piece of parchment on, which were these words: "Bernard, why are you here?" This searching question was so placed that it caught his eye every time he entered the room. By keeping the thought constantly before him, he was helped in clarifying his purpose, and in keeping his attention centered on the important things of life. The question is one that all of us may well ask ourselves frequently. In thinking of it, we will be helped in determining the purposes God has for our lives and led to a more faithful endeavor to fulfill these purposes. Doesn't it require a real depth on our part if we are to seek and answer to this question?

What depths of understanding of sympathy, of redeeming love were revealed in his dealing with folk, who to all superficial thought, were quite useless and hopeless! The aged Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms and prophesied concerning him "that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed". Jesus had an amazing ability to see far beneath the surface, to reveal to men the hidden hunger and aspirations of their own hearts, and to set ringing again the long silent bells of the sunken city of the soul.

Gene E. Bartlett told this story, "Years ago in my student days, Wilfred T. Grenfell would visit our campus, coming from Labrador, where he put in 50 years of service. He would say to the students: I need your help in Labrador this next summer. We must build, for example, a new wing to the hospital. It will be desperately hard work, and of course, I can't pay you for it. As a matter of fact, I can't even pay your way to Labrador. But if you will pay your own way and come up for the summer, ready to do hard work, I shall be glad to have you. And he had more applicants than he could use! He had touched a deep need in us all. We have a hunger to live for something other than ourselves.

The librarian of the city library was almost angry at a young man who visited day after day and always ask for funny books. "He stands here in the presence of the written record of the accumulated wisdom of centuries", said the librarian. "He could read the story of man's life and struggles through all history. In this library, there are books of history, science, religion, literature, music, and art. They enrich the mind and strengthen the life of any person, but all that fellow ever asked for is funny books."

In delightful control with this young man was the little old lady who, traveling by air, was permitted to carry only a few pounds of luggage. She turned up with a heavy bag of good books. Then the gaze of her fellow travelers turned her way, she said, rightfully, "if these are too heavy, I'll leave my shoes behind."

This showed her active values. Books were more important to her than shoes.

The soldier who is sent up to the front is called upon to sort his values. Somethings must be left behind, only the most precious can be carried in a pocket. What shall it be: the page of a book a letter from back home, the picture of a loved one? He is faced to make a choice.

It's not easy to know what things are most important in life. There is tremendous pressure on us to put shoddy things first. Jesus spoke of living abundantly! Just what values make life real and meaningful? A verse in the Bible taken from I Corinthians 2:15 says, "The spiritual man is alive to all true values." One reason we are in church now is so we may become alive to all true values. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" if we put God's will, so far as we can find it, first, other values will fall into their proper places. All through life it is necessary to sort out our values properly. Have you tried to sort your values?

So, I believe we need depth in our lives to sort out these things in life that are important and those things which are not important.

Fourth, we have height. The three-dimensional life is not enough. The fourth dimension is perhaps the most important of all - "height." Depth is meaningless without height, as height is perilous without depth. Lofty heights are dangerous unless there is a depth of character to keep one steady. It is of little use to think profoundly unless we can bring our thoughts up into the clear light of day and build them into the lofty character.

The French writer, Ernest Dimnet, in his book, "What We Live By," drew the distinction between living upstairs and living downstairs. He said that most of us live downstairs. It is the supreme opportunity of life to learn to live upstairs. It is the central purpose of religion to lead humanity upstairs. Where do you live; upstairs or downstairs?

The Gothic architecture in church and cathedral is to many an aid to worship because instinctively the eye rises from the ground to the arched doors and windows, to the ground arches of the clerestones and bays, to the vaulted ceiling of the choir and nave. We enter the church and take a seat, coming from life's level humdrum and drudgery, perhaps burdened and baffled. Almost irresistibly, we lift our eyes to the height within the church, and with our eyes, our spirits are lifted up to the height where help comes.

There are also people who do that for us. What a lofty privilege to be able to do that for folks! One of my own closest friends does that exactly for people. I myself, after talking to him find my thoughts lifted, my spirits lifted. He just automatically moves the conversation to include Jesus Christ, and it is immediately put on a lighter plane. It is a privilege and opportunity just to talk with him.

It is Jesus Christ that we find this ministry, perfectly exemplified, and in him, we find the perfect integration and embodiment of those four words: breath and length and depth and height.

It will not suffice to see the meaning of these great words as exemplified in him, or in those who are like him. We will be strong to know, and to demonstrate the meaning of the words, only as we embody them ourselves, finding deep roots for our lives in him.

There is a beautiful story of an event that occurred on the last day of the life of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and 19th century painter. An invalid, at the age of 75, he was confined to his chair. On the day before he died, a young artist came and asked Burne-Jones with great eagerness if he might see one of his paintings. The famous painter, after expressing to the young artist, his regret that he could not take him through his studio, bode him to go in by himself and look about as long as he wished. The young artist did so, and when he later returned, he said to Burns-Jones, what must have been one of the most beautiful compliments of his life: "I enjoyed looking at your paintings, and now I am going home to begin again."

At Hampton Court near London, there was a celebrated grapevine. Year in a year out, through the dry seasons, as well as in favorable circumstances, it never failed to bear a luxurious harvest of grapes. Men wondered at it, until one day, workman digging a drain from the building where this vine grew to the river, some distance away, found the main root of the vine, where long before had forced its way to the river, it's sources of perpetual fruitage.

Indeed, we need to deep and wide in the heart of Jesus Christ, so that we can bear much regardless of what happens in our lives because he will prepare us for all of life.

I prayerfully hope that our young people will heed some of these words. They have so many years of living ahead. Years that can be fruitful or years that can be unfruitful and dreadful. Jesus Christ can make the difference in any life, and he most certainly does. Take Christ into all phases of your lives. Keep him with you always. What a great difference it will make.

The Undiscovered Self

Scripture: Mark 8:27-38

The text is chosen from Mark 8:33; “But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

When Carl Jung speaks of the “undiscovered self,” he is referring to that part of the mind, the greater part at that, which is submerged and hidden, like an iceberg, below the threshold of consciousness.

“Not a day passes”, wrote Jung, “but we make some slip of the tongue, or something slips our memory, which at other times we know perfectly well, or we are seized by a mood whose cause we cannot trace. These things are all symptoms of some consistent unconscious activity, which becomes directly visible at night in dreams, but only occasionally breaks through the inhibitions imposed by our daytime consciences”.

All of us are more than we appear to be on the surface. Far more significant is what we are within, in the “undiscovered self”, in the unconscious, or as the Bible puts it, “in the heart”, the seat of our thoughts and motives many a man is insufficiently acquainted with “the stranger within” and is therefore shocked and horrified by the sudden discovery of his individual self.

We Americans naturally have Simon Peter’s temperament. We are energetic, vigorous, impetuous. We are all for blowing on our hands and doing things in the world. But the times come, not personally alone, but socially in a generation like this, when the world starts to do things to us. Like a hurricane, terrific events tear through our generation’s life. All around us are people who in a time like this might be expected to be cynical, and they are; might be expected to give up great faith, and they do; might be expected to make up their minds that there is no God, and they become atheists. What is it that keeps a country from complete devastation when a hurricane blows through it? It is the trees that at a time when you might have expected them to blow over did not. What is it that keeps this world as a decent and hopeful as it is? It is the men and women who, in a time when you might expect them to be cynical, disillusioned, discouraged, and not a faith, or not.

Many of us are shocked at the “undiscovered self”, some fold and give up and others, indeed, to stand as trees in a storm.

First of all, all need to have confrontation in our lives. It was this way with Simon Peter, a man notorious for acting on impulse, playing his hunches, thinking with his emotions.

Together with his brother, he responded, so spontaneously, and without apparent reservations, to Jesus’s call to discipleship, individuality, leaving their nets and following him. Who indeed would not have done the same?

It was all so tremendous and glorious-at first. But when it became apparent as time went on that to follow, Christ meant to leave self behind, the inward self, with all its secret ambitions, the unconscious self, with all its selfish belongings, the undiscovered self with all its unknown impulses, and that following Christ involved, self-denial and unmerited suffering, then suddenly seemingly without rhyme or reason, Peter exploded in protest. He “began to rebuke him”. It was what we would call a “traumatic” mountain. Peter was as we say, “beside himself”, his undiscovered self” having seized the upper hand.

Jesus on his part, aware of what was happening in Peter, rebuked him in the words of the text.

Under the masterful guidance of Jesus, Peter recovered and went along with growing understanding of what discipleship met until the night of the betrayal.

That night, in a bold reassessment of his allegiance, he said, “even though they all fall, I will not. “But before the night was ended, he had made another rendezvous with his “undiscovered self”, denying his loyalty to Christ three times. Then shocked and filled with total despair, “he went out and wept bitterly.”

If you haven’t met your “undiscovered self”, you may be in for a surprise because sometimes when the pressure becomes great, we react differently than under normal circumstances. If we can, however, bounce back, so to speak, and regain our own self, we can indeed go on from there. If we have let this “undiscovered self” take the upper hand, then we are heading down the wrong path. Here is where our faith, our belief in Jesus Christ pays off; for indeed he will give us the comfort and strength we need.

Each one of us carries around inside himself, I believe, a certain emptiness, a sense that something is missing, a restlessness, a deep feeling that somehow all is not right inside this skin. Psychologists sometimes call it anxiety, theologians sometimes call it estrangement, but whatever you call it, I doubt that there are very many who do not recognize the experience itself, especially no one of our age, which has been variously termed the age of anxiety, the lost generation, the beat generation, the lonely crowd. Part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness, and I believe that this is in itself a word from God, that this is the sound that God’s voice makes in a world that has explained him away. In such a world, I suspect that maybe God speaks to us most clearly through his silence, his absence, so that we know him best through our missing him.

Indeed, we need to confront our “undiscovered self” in order to conquer it. It will not go away by itself, and we cannot say, “I’ll never react the way Peter did”, for how can we be sure until it happens to us. True, some to stand as trees in the storm, but those who do not have to regain their lives and start living them from where they are.

Secondly, we need to have commitment in our lives. That moment of despair was perhaps the most important moment in Peter’s whole life. It was what we call today his- “moment of truth”-the moment when he came suddenly and totally face-to-face with his “undiscovered self”, realizing in absolute disillusionment that by himself he could never subdue “the stranger within.”

The miracle of Peter is the miracle of what can happen to the “undiscovered self” when God takes hold, and by his presence removes and transforms it. “It is the great mystery of God”, Emile Bremner wrote, “that men do not become strong until they know their weakness and expect all things from the power of God”. The crucifixion brought Peter to his true self, “to his senses”. It took dreadful affliction and frustration to reduce Paul to a similar point of view.

Whenever a man is ready to confess his frailty and in humility to fulfillment to seek fulfillment, then God in Christ enters with transforming power and glory.

Many times, we wonder what a Christian is. We hear the question, “What is a Christian?”

A Christian is a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks, and a hand through which Christ serves. It’s a pretty big order for a person to be a Christian, can’t it? But Christ stands ready, willing and able to help us, regardless of the circumstances around us.

Sydney Greenberg, in his book entitled, “Finding ourselves”, wrote a prayer for times like these.

If our lives have become shallow, deep in them.
If our principles have become shabby, repair them
If our ideals have become tarnished, restore them.
If our hopes have become faded, revive them.
If our loyalties have grown dim, brighten them
If our values have become confused, clarify them.
If our purposes have grown blurred, sharpen them.
If our horizons have become contracted, widen them.

Indeed, once we have confronted our “undiscovered self” and have seen ourselves for what we really are, in need to turn to God, aching for forgiveness, asking for guidance and strength, and truly committing our lives to him. God expects us to make a personal commitment, and this is the way it should be. We need to be committed to something and that something is Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we now have gained victory

Peter was desperate with remorse until Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection, removing him from the stigma of disloyalty and filling him with the assurance of things, invisible and immortal. Peter became a changed person, a twice-born man, an integral soul, his “undiscovered self” being unified by faith in Christ with his conscious and outward self in such harmony that he became in fact what Christ predicted, “The Rock”, the one man upon whom the early church could lean without fear. If there was any profound secret to his transformation from instability to stability, from doubt to faith, he revealed it in his simple statement of faith: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that in time he may

exult you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for the cans for he cares for you.

There are many of us searching and seeking joy and happiness in our lives. Where is the joy? If you are just satisfied with your Christian experience, what can you do? First, begin by taking time for the disciplines of Christian living. Replace neglect with genuine concern. Second, make new beginnings; break out of the ruts. Third, follow God's leading in little things. Do what God's Holy Spirit makes plain that you ought to do.

These are some keys to the door of life. Jesus said, "I am the door". Give God the first hour of your day. Give God the first day of each week. Take time to come to his house of worship. Give God the first portion of your income. Something I'm sure very few of us do. Give Jesus Christ, the first consideration in all decisions of life. We usually leave God out of everything until we get into trouble, then we ask for his help. Give Christ first place in your heart of hearts.

If you were going to sum up the yearnings, desires, and aspirations of all mankind in one word, what would that word be? I dare say it would be "happiness".

The search of happiness is as varied as are our definitions of it. Most of us, however, believe that happiness can be real. We have seen people who are happy. Their personalities spoke eloquently of the joy that was in them.

We remember that, while Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief", he was accused of being a wine bibber, so effervescent was his joy. He rejoiced in the world of nature, finding in the flowers of the field, more beauty than in the arraignment of kings. Children were strongly attracted to him; a fact which tells us his smile was both frequent and genuine.

Any world of superficial thinking, there are many superficial ideas concerning what happiness is. The millions of people think so, once happiness does not depend on material possessions. Happiness is relatively independent of external conditions.

Where is happiness? Not in on belief, Voltaire, an agnostic, wrote, "I wish I had never been born." Happiness is not found in pleasure. Lord Byron wrote, "The worm, the canker, the grief are mine alone." It is not found in money. J Gould, an American millionaire wrote, "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth. It is not found in position and fame. Lord Beaconsfield wrote, "Youth is a mistake, manhood a struggle, an old age a regret." Happiness is not found in military glory. Alexander the Great wrote, "There are no more worlds to conquer." Where, then, is happiness found? Christ said, "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."

Happiness is, in the main, a state of mind. Happiness comes from the harmonious expression of the total interests of one's personality. Perfect happiness comes from perfect adjustment to the total experiences of life. A happy person is one who responds to life's experiences with a glowing sense of joy, tranquility,

and hopefulness.

Happiness is never attained when you make happiness, the chief purpose in your life. Happiness is a byproduct that comes from living at one's best.

May I suggest three words that are guide guides to happy living?

The first is Labor-happiness is for those who are so absorbed in a worthy work that they do not even stop to consider whether they are happy or not. Happiness is not in working at what you like, but in liking what becomes your work. The average man spends 1/3 of his time on his job. If he cultivates a love for it, he will develop a feeling of happiness that will permeate his whole being. If he develops dissatisfaction, this will affect his whole outlook on life. To be so in love with your job that you feel you are a co-worker with God makes a happy life.

Second, Life-happiness comes to those who seek to live the abundant life today. Surrounded as we are in the thick of life by timetables, datebooks, and alarm clocks, it is so easy to put off the actual enjoyment of life until we lose the capacity for it. Today is the only time we have. Yesterday is passed and tomorrow is but a promise. If we seek to be happy, we must live for today. Tomorrow may be too late.

Third, Love-happiness is conditional by our willingness to abide by the laws of love. Selfishness precludes happiness. The happiest person persons are those who seem to think, least of themselves and always of others. This is precisely the reason Jesus insisted that there must be no hate, no grudge, no envy in his disciples' lives. Love and love alone, is the foundation for happy living. These three words, I believe, will help us to find happiness in life

Truly, I believe when we find this "undiscovered self" and we have made our commitment to God, he will help us find the happiness we all seek. We can, and we will obtain victory through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thank you.

The Christian's Concern for Civil Rights

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

The text is chosen from Matthew 23:8; "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren."

The issue now before our country and even before the world is more one of integration versus segregation; it has to do with the integrity of our democracy. Patriotism demands individual concern in a matter so close to the public welfare. And patriotism is neither sub-Christian nor outmoded.

For Christians it is plainly enjoined in Scripture. Moreover, ethics are united with patriotism; no Christian can stand passively by when the good of the others is jeopardized. Obedience to the law of love for one's neighbor requires concern for the welfare of one's neighbors.

The attainment of brotherhood in this land and throughout the world relates to man's most difficult spiritual undertaking: the capacity to love the stranger. Scripture tells of Jacob's struggle with the angel of God. As he struggles in the darkness, Jacob endeavors, without success, to learn his assailant's name. To know a name in antiquity was to know the essence of a thing and thereby to possess some power to control it. The failure to comprehend another is to make one impotent in confronting him. That fear which arises from contact with the unknown is quickly transformed by the human apparatus into hostility. Man requires for his spiritual vitality a dynamic interaction with people of all moods and ideas, and this is only possible as he is able to stand face to face with the stranger. The awareness that God is Father, that we are each safe in his love and that we are brothers in flesh and in spirit will aid us in making this essential step toward mature relationship.

What, then, are some guidelines for Christian concern regarding this great question?

First of all, informed opinion is demanded for every Christian who is in earnest about fulfilling his civic responsibilities. Valid opinion cannot be derived from ignorance nor developed out of a fog of second-hand ideas. With an issue so important as civil rights, it is not enough to let others do one's thinking or to reach conclusions based largely upon emotion. Knowing what is involved, a Christian is obligated to come to his own conclusions thoughtfully and prayerfully.

Many of us are weak in digging deep enough into any situation to determine for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. We are easily influenced by others because we apparently are too lazy to investigate, or we are too busy to bother. As Christians we cannot afford to base our opinions on others say so, or because that's the way the majority feel, or I'll lose my popularity if I do not go along with the crowd. Many times, we try to ignore the situation, apparently hoping we do not have to take a stand or maybe the situation will just disappear. Christians have definite obligations and responsibilities and others look to see us as examples as guidelines for them.

One thing we can be grateful for- it is getting very hard indeed for a Christian to think that God likes his race better than the other races. A Christian may still like his own race better than others, but it is getting

very hard to think God agrees with him. And even if he does think that God our agrees with him, it is getting very hard, almost impossible, to say it out loud. Truly we know and believe that all humans are God's children, and the color of our skin has absolutely nothing to do with it and certainly it makes no difference to God.

Secondly, there is a major premise on which concerned opinion must rest that premise is the constitutional right of all Americans to full citizenship. In particular, this means that no American should, because of his color be deprived of his rights to vote, rest, eat, sleep, be educated, live, and work on the same basis as other citizens. Anything short of this is intolerable deprivation of rights for one segment of the population, a deprivation that, by reason of its inherent injustice violates basic morality.

There is a declaration of principles we need to help us. God created man in his own image. Therefore, every man possesses infinite worth and should be treated with respect as a person. Christ died for all men, therefore, the Christian view of man, every man, must reflect the spirit the spirit of the Cross.

God is no respecter of persons. Therefore, prejudice against persons or mistrust mistreatment of persons on the grounds of race is contrary to the will of God.

Christ said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Therefore, Christians are obligated to manifest active good will towards all people and to help them to achieve their fullest potentialities as persons.

Christian love, as exemplified by Christ is the supreme law for all human relations. Therefore, Christians have the assurance that such love, conscientiously practiced, will resolve tensions and bring harmony and goodwill in race relations.

All true Christians are brothers in Christ and children of God. Therefore, they are obligated to cultivate prayerful concern for one another and to show confidence in one another.

Every person is accountable to God. Therefore, the right of individual opinion, tested by the teachings of Christ, and of freedom to express it, always in this spirit of Christian love, should be granted to all and respected by all.

I firmly believe that passing laws making this principle legal is not the total answer certainly, it is a beginning and something that should have been done many years ago. People have to believe them in their lives and hearts and if they do not all the laws in the world will not make it a reality. We have to feel that the black person is our equal; that he is entitled to the same rights as the white person. I'm not saying that I'm in favor of intermarriage, because I am not. All I am saying is that God respects each of us for what we are and the color of our skin or where we were born has nothing to do with God's feelings.

Thirdly, there is the obligation to respect the conscience of those who differ with their fellow Americans and fellow Christians. In a conflict of such divisions there is divergent convictions. Surely it is no compromise to recognize that however wrong one's neighbor may appear to be, he may be sincerely and honestly wrong. To de-Christianize those who disagree with us is incompatible with Christian love and tolerance. Moreover,

to equate any particular position with the gospel of Jesus Christ may come perilously close to the Galatian heresy of proclaiming “another gospel.”

Christian teachings are among the finest expressions of human relationships. The brotherhood of man, equality before God, the common Father, the dignity of human personality, the golden rule - these central teachings of Jesus embrace most of what good men have been striving for through the ages.

While justice for all, regardless of race, is an inescapable outcome of the gospel, it is not itself the gospel any more than any other fulfillment of the law of love is the gospel. Let race prejudice and hatred be unmasked as the sin they surely are but let not a particular stand be confused with the gospel through which alone men are redeemed by faith.

This story is told by a person who has returned from the Swiss Alps. He spent a few nights in the mountains, and one night the gracious hostess told him about an early experience. Her boy went out upon a rocky ledge one morning and seemed to become aware, for the first time, of someone else across the great chasm.

Hello! Hello!

“Hello! Hello!” comes back to him.

“Who are you”? He inquired.

“Who are you”? Was the reply word for word.

Was there another boy across the great chasm who was enjoying mocking him? After a few moments, he became angry.

“Why don’t you step out and let me see you?”

“Why don’t you step out and let me see you?”

“I’m standing right here. Look at me.”

The very words came rushing back at him.

His blood boiling, the little fellow cried: “I’ll fight you!”

And the other little voice called for a fight.

Almost too angry now for words, the boy rushed indoors to his mother. He knew there was a boy in the next mountain and who wanted to have a fight with him and threatened to do him bodily injury. The mother listened and smiled.

“Go outdoors again,” she encouraged, “and shout”, “I like you, and just find out what happens.”

The boys scampered out into the brisk, beautiful sunlight of the Swiss Alps.

“Hey you, over there, I like you.” Another voice replied: “I like you.”

The boy was surprised and rushed back to his mother with the wonderful words; he had made friends with a boy on the other side of the deep chasm.

In real life, people of our age, jump to the conclusions that are not necessarily true. We hear stories about how the Negro lives, and we have made up our mind that we do not want anything to do with them, but actually when we come to know them, they are as good and perhaps even better than we.

True, some do not make good neighbors, but it is also true that some white people do not make good neighbors either. The least we can do is give them a chance. If we can live our lives according to what we say we believe as Christians, then we are on the way to helping solve the civil rights situation in our country.

When the gospel says that in the kingdom of God, there are neither Jew nor Gentiles, does it merely mean that all are equal in the sight of God? No-the gospel wasn't needed for that-the Greek philosophers, the Roman moralists, and the Hebrew prophets had known this long before. But it said: in that new way of living and new form of society, which is born of the heart, and which is called the kingdom of heaven, there are no nations, there are only individual individuals. This is why we cannot judge the Negro race by one person or one incident. We have to look at them as individual persons.

Fourth, there is the principal that law of itself, essential though it is, can be only proximate not the ultimate, solution of the deep problems of society. For the maintenance of the structure of society and the control of evil, laws are essential. Yet it may be that one of our national failings is the misconception that once a law is passed, a problem is forever settled. But laws must be obeyed, and ultimate obedience is a matter of the heart, not of compulsion, necessary though enforcement is. Sin is common to all regardless of color. Therefore, Christian concern demands that ceaseless proclamation of the gospel is the ground of ultimate reconciliation of this social revolution.

Again, I am not saying, I condone the way the Negro is carrying on, demonstrating in hopes of getting more civil liberties, even though if I were in his position, I probably would see it differently. But I think there are other means of gaining what they seek; means that would not be so disgraceful to the rest of the country and perhaps even more effective. I truly believe the answer to the problem, the same as worldwide peace, is the true acceptance of Jesus Christ into all persons' hearts. I believe true Christians can come face-to-face with all problems and reach a peaceful and successful resolution. We need more of the true understanding on the part of both groups. Jesus Christ is the one that can help us; indeed, we all are all called brothers in Christ. And certainly, this is a base for all of us to start from.

The Other End of Concord Bridge

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-27

The text is chosen from Ezekiel 3:15; “And I sat where they sat and remained astonished among them seven days.”

There are two national monuments, at least that I can think of, but stand in vivid contrast to each other. One is in the United States and the other is in Canada.

The American monument was the famous statue of the Minutemen at Concord Bridge, just outside Boston. The other monument is in Hamilton, Ontario. It shows a pioneer young father and mother, standing with their two children beside a plow, and looking in the far horizon as over the fields of a new land. This is a monument to the Tories, who were driven out of New England in the revolutionary war of 1776 and were welcomed into Canada, where they receive certain grants of land.

William Cameron once said that the monument to the loyalist should be looked upon as “the other end of Concord Bridge”.

It may be a good thing for us now, and again to stand at the other end of Concord Bridge and look at life through the eyes of those who have opposed us. This does not mean that we shall compromise our deepest, moral and spiritual convictions, but it does mean that we should try to understand their point of view, their motivations, and their reasons for adopting the positions that they did.

We should always try to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. We should try to see things from their perspective. We can't always be right and some days we will find that perhaps we are wrong; that maybe we would think differently of a certain situation from a different point of view.

If we do this, I'm sure more problems can be solved peacefully. Perhaps we will have to give a little to gain a little and why shouldn't we as long as Christian beliefs and principles remain on the same high plane.

When the Christian sets out to love his neighbors, he begins in humility, asking the lawyer's question, “Who is my neighbor?” If he really is asking the question seriously, the answer will come, not in terms of a flashing revelation from a high, nor in terms of some romantic quest for sanctity. The answer comes in terms of a growing awareness of need, and the wish that you could do something about this. Then your neighbor appears, not as an object of pity or condescending love, but as a messenger of God, a person where love and respect are all important.

A great prophet, Ezekiel, who lived some 2500 years ago, tried to understand his people's point of view. He was preaching in Babylon during the Exile, after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Incensed at the way, the

Jews were forgetting God, and turning to the vain idols of the conquerors, Ezekiel tells us that in anger of spirit he was on his way to tell off his people for their sins, but as he saw these poor refugees in their huts along the river bottoms and sensed their misery and despair, Ezekiel said, "I sat where they sat, and remain there astonished among them seven days." After this, he preached to them with a new compassion. He did not lessen his rebuke of the unfaithful, but he spoke in a spirit of true or understanding. He had crossed to the other end of Concord Bridge.

How much easier it is for us to help other people when we truly understand their problems from their point of view. How much more effective our help can be when we understand their position, when we understand why they feel the way they do. We can theorize about a problem all we want and until we actually know what is going on, we cannot be very effective.

I cannot help believing that the world would be a better and a happier place when people are praised more and blamed less; when we utter in their hearing the good we think, and also gently intimate the criticism we hope may be of service. The world grows smaller every day. It will be but a family circle after a while.

E Stanley Jones said: "We will the builders together," where the suffering of one is the suffering of all, and where the gifts of God are shared with all other children. Into that holy tabernacle of humanity, we can ask Him to come and He will.

Would not all our human relationships be greatly transformed if we all exchanged places from time to time, cross to the other end of the Concord Bridge, and sat down with those we cannot quite understand? It would at least soften our hardness of heart and our angry accusations.

It certainly would be a lot more worthwhile than fighting a war such as we are presently doing in Vietnam if we can talk long and hard enough, there will be no fighting, but when the talking stops, that's when the fighting begins.

When will we be baptized into a feeling of the conditions of the people, as John Wollman expressed it, and looked at life through the eyes of others, so that we will see things from the vantage point of their situation and do unto others as we would have them do unto us?

This would be a value to the life of the family, management and labor, Catholics and Protestants, youth and age, white men and Negroes, all would profit by the practice of this principal.

If you listen to the story of the good Samaritan carefully, you will notice that Jesus never really tells the lawyer who his neighbor is. Instead, the story seems to ask the lawyer who he is. In other words, no one is your neighbor unless you think of yourself as his neighbor. You cannot have a brother or a sister without being a brother or a sister yourself.

Christianity teaches us that our relationships with people depend upon how we think of ourselves. The important question is not “who is my neighbor? But, am I a neighbor?”

We often hear it said that “all men are brothers.” If God is “our Father”, this is certainly true. The trouble is that we say it without really living it. Would it help if we turned the saying around a bit to read, “I am a brother to all other people”. When we think about it, that way, the responsibility is put where it really belongs-right on ourselves.

There is a poem by Gail Brook Burket entitled “Responsibility - Am I my Brother’s Keeper”

Men even this day
Keep asking Cain’s old question,
In his guilt and conscious way
No, not your brother’s keeper
For Jesus blazed another
True path for men to follow:
You are your brother’s brother.

There is a famous cathedral in the city of Gloucester England built 850 years ago and very beautiful. In its crypt lies the body of King Edward II, arrayed in full armor. Up to 100 years ago it was the custom for pilgrims to pass through the little door into the crypt and walk around the body of King Edward and even today his name is not forgotten.

Edward II was the hero of the first great Crusade. There are many crosses on the walls of Jerusalem, carved by the Crusaders, who attempted to regain the land of the Savior, snatched away by the Mohammadans through more than a dozen of these crusades, over a period of more than 200 years and despite repeated failures, they continued in the effort, and many gave their lives in the attempt. They carved their crosses as a sign of their sacrifice and self- dedication.

The crusades were, of course, an extremely crude expression of Christian devotion. And yet, out of the very midst of this war-like period, with armies on the march all over Europe, grew one of the significant phases of the Christian brotherhood movement. Many of the Crusaders helped the poor and practiced the brotherly kindness of the Christian church. In Florence, for instance, Crusaders at this period went out to look after the sick who lay ill in the streets. They put mask over their faces so that others would not find out who they were. We need today the spirit of the crusader-nurses who put mask over their faces in old Florence.

From the modern point of view, the Crusades were a strange adventure, but their motive was that of sacrificial service. For the sake of Christ, the Crusaders plotted along on foot from England to France, France to Italy, then to Greece and at last to Asia Minor. Consider the depth of feeling which must have

inspired them! They were ideal warriors. They would forgive an enemy, if only he would give them leave to worship freely in the holy land of Jesus. They had developed the chivalry which renders merciful service to women and children. It is this chivalry which impresses us in reading the stories of the Crusaders.

One glorious fact of the Christian gospel, let us not forget. Jesus Christ, our Savior crossed the Concord Bridge of eternity and lived among us, that he might redeem us from our sins. Paul reminds us of this as it recorded in Philippians 2: 5-11:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God, a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient until death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him, the name which is above every name, that of the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.”

Indeed, was not Christ more qualified to know what it meant to be human than anyone else? He felt the needs of men and knew man's desires, and therefore better qualified to know how to handle them.

How true this is even for a minister. How can a person minister to people if he himself has not lived a life like or similar to his peoples? How can he hope to know their wishes and desires and needs? I believe it is difficult for a young man fresh out of college to go directly into the ministry because he really hasn't lived life himself, and the experience he has is from textbooks and theory, and not from actual life experience. This is what Christ had. He became human and dwelt among us. He understood men's problems and knew how to cope with them.

As you can visualize the bridge that Jesus crossed when he crossed over from divinity to humanity? On the divine side, cables of platinum shining in the sun, pavements of gold, bridge peers of gems, and precious stones on the human side, the debris of our broken humanity, the rubble, sorrow, and send through which we stumble? But Christ took up the cross, carried it over the bridge, and sat where we sat, sharing our temptations and our tears. Surveying that cross, and that love, how can we resist him, deny him?

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. The 40 days of Lent are meant to be in every year the greatest days for your life. What does that word “Lent” evoke for you? What thought does it bring to mind? What anticipation? What urgency? For many it is a dull, gray word, suggestive of petty prohibitions, restraints.

One clue to the redeeming understanding of Lent is given by the original meaning: “leucten” from the ancient Anglo-Saxon means ‘springtime’. Christians celebrate Lent as a time for cleansing and renewal, the season of springtime for the soul. Like the earth, long weary under the burden of winter, all that is within cries out for spring.

Let us take the light that is in Jesus Christ: our knowledge of the life he lived within our flesh and spirit, the struggles he had within with our temptations, the victories he won. Let us turn that light upon our inner man, searching every depth, testing every motive, measuring every purpose.

Another reward of Lent is one through its invitation to quietness and reflection; from Isaiah 30:15, we read; “in returning and rest shall you be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.”

It was precisely this need to which Jesus called Martha’s attention. She was busy about many things, all of them good. She felt very righteous and noble in her business, but all the while she was overlooking more important matter. She was so busy “doing” that she neglected the importance of “being”. So, all her scurrying about merely made her tense, tired, and irritable, and others uncomfortable. Our Lord looked at her and said, “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needed, and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. Our Lord’s words to Martha may suggest a way by which Lent may become the greatest days of your life.

Let this Lenten period be a time of spiritual growth and renewal for you; a time to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ; a time to think about who your brother is, who your neighbor is and what your Christian obligations and duties to him are; let us look forward to Easter, the most important and highest moment for a Christian. Truly, our Lord did rise from the dead assuring us of everlasting and eternal life and forgiveness of our sins.

A trivial Lent will leave us asking why the innocent suffer; a true Lent will bring us closer to the Lord of life who himself suffered that we might live. In the dying and rising again of the Lord Jesus Christ, God has not answered our questions. Instead, he has given us the ability to love and to live forever. Amen.

Compassion for the World

(World-wide Communion Sunday)

Scripture: Luke 4:14-20

The text is chosen from John 3:16; “God so loved the world.”

Our astronauts bring us pictures of segments of a large ball moving in space. This ball we call the earth or the world. It is a strange fact that it is inhabited. It is not known that any other of the planets or stars have living creatures upon it. Here upon the earth are upward of two billion human beings, bound together in the bundle of humanity. By means of modern communication, we know a great deal about the nations’ great population, as masses and as individuals.

A common observation is that the world is a “mess”. Why do we make such a statement? Because too large a part of the world’s population is hungry. Because too large a part is sick. Because of the aftermath of war and war’s prevalence. Because of the injustices which men impose upon their fellows. Because of poverty which degrades men. Because of the corrupting influence of affluence in many quarters. Because natural and spiritual values have been lost. Because ethics without religious basics atrophies and becomes irrelevant. The reasons could be extended.

There is hope in this situation. If the world is a mess, it is of advantage to know it.

In this world all men share a common humanity.

The prophets and poets no longer need to tell us that we live in “one world”; we know it. Iron and bamboo curtains may be somewhat effective in separating our physical bodies, but the barriers are not impervious to news of one another. Even physical needs leap barriers as when one nation seeks from another nation wheat to feed her people.

Of course, because of our common humanity we can terribly hurt one another. In this we have become exceedingly skillful. This history adds to the mess in which the earth finds itself.

Rabbi Samuel Schulman said, “In a highly civilized society we are more and more in danger of losing our sympathy.”

But by the same token we can marvelously help one another. The Good Samaritan is our example.

We remind ourselves on this World-Wide Communion Sunday that Christians have a fundamental obligation to show compassion toward the world. Christians are in the world and dependent upon others; they have a deep obligation to show compassion to all needy people.

They are under obligation by the example and teaching of their Master. He endured the Cross and won its victory for the sake of the world. His followers under the sign of the Cross take up their own crosses for the sake of others. This is not easy. Its motivation is love. Because he loved, we love.

When Wilberforce, whose name will ever be associated with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, was at the height of his career, one man asked another: "What is the secret of the power of Wilberforce? There are many men with more brains and more culture." And his friend answered: "The secret of Wilberforce is that he has a heart full of sympathy."

Christians show compassion, because of the value that Christianity places upon man. Man is infinitely and eternally valuable. These words are indefensible, but lesser words fall short to express the value of man which God revealed through Jesus Christ. Man is valuable enough to be redeemed and to be given eternal life.

The real art of compassion is to make drama out of the other lives. We might take lessons in the dramatist's art from the Great Teacher. Among the many things he taught was the art of constructing a drama from what went on in their lives. Just before the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus said, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way." (Mark 8:2-3) How quickly did Jesus' imagination construct what would happen to the hungry crowd if they were sent away without food? Again and again in the Gospels Jesus sees drama in the life of people in need, when all that the disciples could think of was to send them away or tell them to keep quiet.

Our minds are overwhelmed and burdened by the number of people on the face of the earth, and the number of those who have lived and died. Can we look at the two billion of the earth's population and say, "Every one of them is a human being?" Our compassion requires this point of view, else it would scarcely be effective. Jesus was accustomed to put a single person in the focus of his thinking and compassion, as when he sat by Jacob's well and talked with the woman of Sychar.

The boys in their Sunday school class took turns in leading in prayer at the meetings of the class. On this particular Sunday it was Larry's turn to pray, and he quite enjoyed the responsibility; so, he began to pray for the nations of the earth. He started with South America, naming all the countries that he knew. He followed with the countries of Europe, then Asia and Africa. In conclusion, he said, "Oh Lord, bless all the uninhibited places of the Earth. "Larry's "Amen" was followed by gusts of laughter and a unanimous exclamation: "the uninhabitable places of the Earth!"

Little Jackson's prayer in the mission school was quite different from Larry's. One night he was called to pray. He offered some general prayers and then he remembered that there were examinations coming up the next week. He started to finish, "O God, may I pass." He paused because he realized this was much too

selfish. He amended the prayer, “O, God, may all the boys pass.” There was another pause and then he finished with a burst of real devotion, “O, God, may the whole world pass,”

Let us catch the spirit of Little Jackson on this World-Wide Communion Sunday: “O, God, may the whole world have food enough to eat. May the whole world have schools and hospitals. May the whole world be at peace. May the whole world learn to know our Lord and Savior.

Referring to the young people present this morning; I don’t know what each of you is going to do in life. Perhaps some of you do not know yourselves, but whatever it shall be, I hope it will be related to the whole world’s needs. Even the uninhabited places may sometime become the dwelling places of men and women and little children.

Our compassion for the world of men and women may take many forms. As in the past through the church we send special representatives to the places of great need. The day of missions and missionaries has not ended. We can support and supplement all endeavors of government to relieve the distress of people. We can support institutions and programs which make for human welfare. Some of us can transfer a portion of our wealth into means of helping others. We can develop a heart of compassion and bring it to bear in the place where we live and labor, we can do something about the mess we are in if we want to. We need compassion for others as Christ had for people. Jesus Christ can teach us how to have compassion.

As we come to our Lord’s table this day, let us think of all the many problems there are in our world. Think of some way you can help, regardless of how small it may be, and then let us go out and give our help. A little help from each Christian will add up to a lot of big help for those in need in our world. May our hearts be filled with God’s Holy Spirit and may the inspiration flow from us into the hearts of men, women, and children in need of help.

Living Your Own Life

Scripture: John 1:35-43; John 21: 9-21

The text is chosen from John 1:42, “Jesus looked at him and said, so you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means rock).”

It is said that there once lay in a shop in Rome a mineral specimen labeled “Rock-Crystal, price one franc”. One day an expert in precious stones came along and brought it at the dealer’s price. It is one of the most magnificent diamonds in the world – a jewel which is now the most flashing gem in a Monarch’s crown.

On a certain location Jesus faced a fisherman named Simon. With his keen perception of people, he knew at once that he had made a discovery. He began immediately to release greatness in the man. He gave him another name. He called him “Rock” – “Peter”. He put the man under the power of expectation. Peter could sense if he was to be something more than he appeared to be.

It was Jesus’s way of dealing with men. He has been called “the discover of individuals.” That Jesus was the discover of individuals is fully illustrated in John’s Gospel. Chapter by chapter the various persons appear. First chapter, Andrew, Simon Peter, Nathaniel; third chapter, Nicodemus; fourth chapter, the woman of Sychar; 5th, the lame man at the pool; 9th, the man born blind; 10th, the sheep that are known by name, 11th, Mary, Martha, Lazarus; 12th, a few Greeks; 13th and following chapters, the disciples including Judas and Peter and Thomas, a few women, his mother, Mary Magdalene. The book closest with Jesus in conversation with Peter; John is nearby. Truly Jesus was the “discoverer of individuals.”

It is now somewhat out of the stream of modern thought to speak of individuals. Too often today the individual is pushed around by the crowd, submerged, lost. He experiences terrific social pressure. Many times, we feel we have to conform to what others are doing even though we know it is wrong. Truly we cannot blame society for our individual weaknesses. We should not be willing to confuse popularity for our ideals and principles. We need to stand on our own two feet. We certainly cannot expect others to do our talking for us or to make sure we have the things we think we should have. Perhaps we are too dependent on others’ influences.

The Gospel teaches us that a man is to be himself. In spite of the society pressures on each of us, and the tendency of the many of us to overwhelm anyone of us, we are individuals.

How conspicuously absent are such words as humanity, society, civilization, and social order from the pages of the Gospels. Jesus never got lost in abstractions. To stress the community and neglect the individual is putting the cart before the horse. After all, regardless of how large a nation, or state, or county, or community, or any organization is, it is still made up of individuals and what each individual does and how he lives his lives has a great deal to do with how the nation, community or organization turns out.

I’ll tell you something else, we will never be saved collectively. Jesus Christ comes to each individual as an individual. Each of us has to experience the presence of God in our lives individually.

First of all, a man should find himself. He ought to discover his own significance, meaning, value and destiny.

We ought to be particular. The old meaning of the word “particular” was “possession” semi: it comes from the Latin root meaning “private property.” A man should possess himself.

Noah in the play “Green Pastures”, using modern Negro dialect, says, “I am not very much, but I’s all I got.”

The call of Christ is for a man to find himself. Christ call to each man is the same as his call to Peter: “You are; you shall be.”

The human self is not a gift, it is an achievement. It is not a static reality, sprung full – blown from the head of God. Rather it is painfully earned progress past lions in the way – a triumph over ogres real and imaginary. The attainment of a self is a running battle, a continuing process, and a victory that is never fully consummated until the chambers of our hearts flutter and feel for the last time.

The insight of Jesus in his parable of “The Prodigal Son”, is true to the facts – the remaking of that young man’s life began when he came to himself! By the same sign our common human tragedy is correctly represented in a recent cartoon. If physician faces his patient with anxious sublimity saying, “This is a very serious case; I am afraid you are allergic to yourself.”

Truly, many times we are our own worst enemy. We really haven’t found ourselves. Christ does not call us to find ourselves, to know what we are, what we want, where we intend to go in life and what we intend to do.

Secondly, a man should accept himself. In John’s Gospel, chapter 21, there is a scene by the Sea of Galilee in which Jesus is still trying to apply discipline to Peter. They have been talking together about Peter’s relationship to the Master, when Peter turns the conversation aside by saying, “Lord, what about this man?” Pointing to John, there is a slight reprimand in Jesus’s reply. “If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?” Live your own life, Peter. Let John live his. You’re Peter, not John. You have found yourself. Don’t compare yourself with anybody else. Don’t weaken your own life with any “if” or “ands” or “buts.” There is a time to accept yourself.

One man says, “I am a failure.” Accept the fact that you have made some failures; but you are not a failure. You are in the process of becoming. You need not accept yourself as a failure – you become a failure only when you do not use your failures as stepping stones to success.

Frankly, if we do not have any failures in life, if we do not make mistakes, I doubt very much if we are making much progress. Certainly, if we do not do anything and try new things we will not have failures. You have to be doing something in order to fail at it. However, we need to profit by our own mistakes and failures and we cannot go right on making the same failures otherwise I’m afraid we would then be a failure. I think probably the hardest thing for any human being is to admit he has failed at some thing or that he has made a mistake. Many of us try to be perfect and everything we do and this becomes frustrating

and practically impossible and certainly impossible to live with this kind of attitude and outlook on life.

Except the fact also that you are a sinner. Then only will you cry out to God, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Only in the acceptance of the fact does the change come, and life become sweet and clean and pure. Only in that acceptance is there that higher individualization that comes in the divine forgiveness.

When we truly accept the fact that we are sinners, then we are well on the road to becoming a reborn Christian. We should never forget that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins. We are now able to have this forgiveness just for the asking. So let us accept ourselves as we really are and not as we think we are.

Thirdly, a man should expend himself. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book, “On Becoming A Real Person”, has a chapter on “getting oneself off one’s hands.” If one doesn’t do this the person doesn’t grow up. Simon remains Simon; he does not become Peter, the Rock.

By the outgo of self, one is delivered from egocentricity, self-centeredness, which makes for a frustrated and unhappy life. But, writes Dr. Fosdick, “A real person, maturely developed, is not egocentric. He has objective interest; he cares for other people for their sake’s; he discovers causes and values for which he lives and may even die; he habitually forgets himself in creative work; the richest values of his life lie not so much in satisfactions are found in letting himself go for aims outside himself and as Jesus said, “he finds life by losing it.”

Some people show an interest in other persons for what they think or what they can get out of it. They do everything hoping for something in return. When we really start caring for persons because they are persons because within us we want to help one someone else, then we are on the right road. Again, I believe it’s placing the value on things in life that are really important and not be concerned for ourselves. Truly, we will find life when we lose it for Christ’s sake.

I heard something the other day which I think it’s worth passing on to you. A young man said, “I want to live a moral life in a moral world.” I wonder how many young people feel like that. Many I believe, and hope do.

Let us change the remark little. “I want to live a good life in a good world.” Let’s look at the remark for a moment.

“I want to live” – this is a sentence just packed full of mystery. We are always asking the question, who am I? What is it “to live?” Why do I want life? Here I am and life is living and I truly want to live. Every cell in my body, every instinct of my soul, wants

“I want to live a good life.” Where is the boy or a girl who would say, “I want to live a bad life?”

A man who was a lifer, in prison, who might be judged as one who was committed to evil, asked for the warden of the prison to come to his cell. When the warden came to the prisoner he said, “Warden, I’ve always wanted to do some good in the world. I wonder whether my eyes could be transplanted in some

blind person to give him vision.” What if somehow that deep drive to do good had been touched in the man’s life before he committed crime? “I want to live a good life” – that’s deep down in you and me, isn’t it?

“I want to live a good life in a good world.” Well, there is a lot of good in the world, if we will open our eyes to see it. It is good to see the beautiful in the world; it is good to see men and women doing noble acts; it is good to read great thoughts and hear music that thrills our souls. It is good to feel that Jesus Christ is in the world.

But then we are compelled to say there is much evil in the world. It is hard to resist the temptation to be a part of evil. We want to live a good life in a good world. What can we do?

We can hold fast to our vision of what a good world would look like. The Bible says the young people shall see visions. We must hold fast, in spite of everything, to the vision of the good world in which we want to have a good life. That good world must be made and it is up to us to make it.

Then we must hold fast to our desire. “I want” – who do you want? I want a good world in which to live. Jesus said that is the first thing to want. I think that is what he meant when he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.”

Then we must hold fast to ourselves. I am I. I have only one life to live. I must live the good life. I must live in a good world. I must make the good world in which I want to live.

If you want to live a good life in a good world, the great God is on your side. He will help you do it.

We can help also to make this world better by thinking about and helping others instead of always thinking and being concerned about ourselves first.

Dr. Fosdick also said this; “Personal life is essentially dynamic and ceaselessly in motion. The common phrase, “building a personality” is a misnomer. Personality is not so much like a structure as like a river – it continuously flows into be a person is to be engaged in a perpetual process of becoming.

Fourthly, I mentioned achieve himself. In other words, he should find himself again. Once Simon answered to the name Simon: later he answers to the name Peter. There are great gaps between what we are and what we shall become, or what we hope to become. These bring tensions in life; these tensions may be a means of growth.

Jesus’s words to Simon as he walked by the sea of Galilee were, “follow me”. His words to Simon Peter on another morning by the same sea were, “Follow me.” I man must find himself, except himself, extend himself, achieve himself. Follow the Christ. Is this the key to living life at its best? I believe it is. The Bible tells us it is. Try it for yourself and find out first hand.

Ways In Which B.F.C. Serves the Community



Many of us struggle with stress, depression, our weight, and other debilitating issues. "Living the Interior Life" is a program that teaches the individual affirmative prayer, meditation techniques, cognitive behavior therapy, overcoming addiction, physical exercise and proper nutrition. In addition, we offer guidelines on how you can learn to effectively apply these principles in your life daily & with God's grace overcome many of life's difficulties that until now you just simply believed you had to live with. Learn to overcome many difficulties and be liberated from them forever. We offer monthly workshops that are available in your church or organization. Call for our free booklet or schedule a convenient time that we can meet to discuss the benefits of this program to your congregation or organization. We are available anytime to serve your needs.

In 1985, Braman began to witness his recovery from addiction in the New York State Correctional Facilities. Braman has presented programs since that time in many facilities including : Greenhaven, Fishkill, Downstate, Summit, and several local and county jails. It is a thorough program using the 12 step method of recovery, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Meditation techniques as well as a program for dealing with violent behavior. In addition, our program helps to provide clarity concerning the negative learned behavior that unfortunately comes out of some families. If you are a correctional facilities administrator please contact us to schedule a convenient time when we can meet to discuss the program. If you are an inmate please contact your counselor to request a copy of our free booklet. There is no need to continue to live in a manner that does not contribute to the well being of yourself and society. Write, call, fax, or email us. May your lives be blessed as you seek greater heights of awareness. Peace to you.

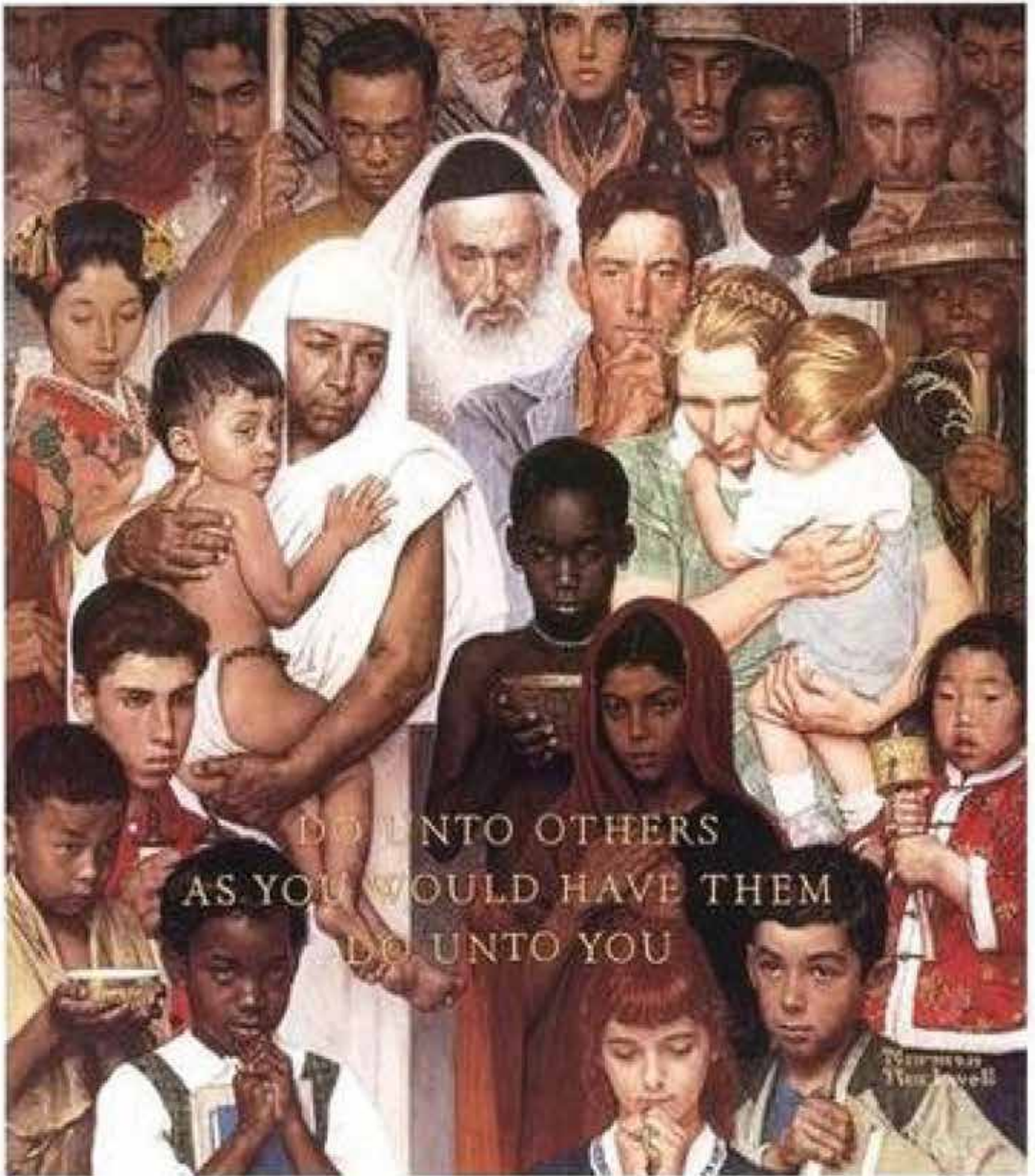


Millions of us suffer needlessly from addiction & depression. The reasons for this are many. In this program we emphasize the 12 step method of Recovery, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Meditation techniques to overcome difficulties. We also rely on God's grace to help you be lifted from your dilemma. If you or a friend or loved one suffers from difficulties surrounding addiction or depression please contact us for our free booklet. In addition we are available to schedule a convenient time when we can present a workshop for your organization to study these principles. All of the principles really are not new, but when presented together in one workbook and when applied in one's life, miracles can occur. Be sure to call, email, write, or fax us. May you be blessed as you seek greater joy & a truly happy life.

Learn about the journey of Love for some of the children in the state of Assam, India. In 1944 the late Julia Rose founded a school and boarding facility called Asapalli (A Village of Hope). Learn how you, your church or organization can donate to support the children of Asapalli. Write, fax, or e-mail for your free booklet: "A Tribute to Asapalli". In addition, it would be our pleasure to talk with you or give a presentation to your church or organization. Call us anytime. Many blessings to you.



Located Southwest of Calcutta, India, Orissa is the home of "Human Care Trust". Learn about our fellow brothers and sisters who struggle to provide education, healthcare, and economic enlistment to the people in the state of Orissa. Read about a few young individuals who have formed "Human Care Trust" and have devoted their lives to helping their fellow brothers and sisters. A free booklet is available upon your request by email, letter, fax or phone. We would be happy to schedule a convenient time when we can meet to present "Our Friends of Orissa" to your church or organization. We thank you!



NORMAN ROCKWELL
"DO UNTO OTHERS"