

Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont

DAILY MEDITATIONS — September, 2024

September 1, 2024

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father in heaven.

Matthew 7:21

As I watched the 2024 Olympics, I recalled the irritation my mother always felt with coverage of gymnastics. In gymnastics events, commentators seemed to place more importance on the landing than on the skills that precede it, and that emphasis on landings infuriated Mom. “These amazing athletes,” she’d say, “defy gravity, fling their bodies into the air, twist them into spirals and somersaults, and the commentator says ‘Slight wobble on the landing. What a shame.’” I, too, dislike this obsession with landings, and it suggests a spiritual parallel to me. It reminds me of people who focus on the rituals of faith rather than the living of it, people like a woman my parents knew. The woman went to Mass every week. She always ate fish on Fridays. She gave up sweets for Lent, and she prayed the rosary. But the non-church part of her life was a different story. The only men she found attractive, the only ones she dated, were married men. She destroyed several marriages, and deeply hurt the wives and children involved. Wrecking lives apparently didn’t trouble her, but eating meat on Friday did. Eventually, she married ... she married her best friend’s husband. I could never understand how she could be obsessive about going to Mass but oblivious to the heartache she caused. In a way, the focus on the landings in gymnastics, instead of on the skills, became, for me, a reflection of the strange priorities – spiritual and secular – that we humans create. ‘Wow!’ the on-air analyst says, ‘The American gymnast just did two impossibly difficult maneuvers, never before done in Olympic competition, and she did them perfectly! She went airborne!! Too bad about the half-step on the landing.’ Perhaps, in our spiritual lives, priorities are a matter of discernment and choice, a choice made with God’s help and guidance. Will we focus on our total performance in life or on the minutiae of our landings? Will we let a stumble obliterate what is spectacular in us? Do we really think God cares more about a half-step than a whole heart, more about fish than fidelity? Something to think about.

September 2, 2024

Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

When I worked in philanthropy, I saw, first-hand, the good works that grants from our charitable funds made possible. I also saw, up close, the heart-wrenching needs that so many people have. And I often saw things that made me angry; things that shouldn’t exist in our world, in our time. On a visit to a Habitat for Humanity home that was under construction, I met the family who had been given the opportunity to buy the home, on the contractual condition that they put hundreds of hours of ‘sweat equity’ into helping to build the home, in addition to paying the mortgage. The family consisted of a husband, wife, and their two children, ages eight and four. The husband had a full-time job and two part-time jobs; the wife had a full-time job and one part-time job. Their schedules had military precision. When he worked, she was at home. When she worked, he was at home. Five jobs between two adults, and they still fell below the poverty line, thus qualifying for Habitat assistance. Two people, with five jobs, still in poverty, with no reasonable prospect of ever climbing out of poverty. That shouldn’t be possible in America today. I can’t imagine the unremitting stress of working almost around the clock, and knowing that there’s no way out; no way to save money, and few ways, barring a miracle, to get better jobs or have more security. There is soaring demand for people with diplomaed education or special vocational skills training, especially for cutting-edge technical skills and advanced degrees. Without these skills and certifications – or the chance to acquire them – the prospects are very different. At the same time, there is a decline in employers offering health or retirement benefits. For many, it’s a quadruple hit. There are many things we can pray for every day. Important things. Today, on Labor Day, let us pray for all those who labor, especially the working poor, those who struggle each day to make ends meet ... and for whom the ends always seem to be moving further apart. *“Have mercy, Lord. Show them ... show us ... a better way. Bless those whom you love so much— the poor and struggling. Hold them by the hand and lead them to a brighter day.”*

September 3, 2024

Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me.

Jeremiah 2:19

There are some things we can't really understand, fully, unless we experience them: being a parent, being miraculously healed, hitting the rock bottom described by those with addictions, and being separated from God. Chances are, if you are reading these Meditations or other devotionals, you have not forsaken God, you have not known the bitterness described in today's verse. But we can imagine what it would be like to have no God to whom we can turn in either joy or sorrow; no unfailing source of divine wisdom, guidance, or strength; no connection to a creative, loving Force that energizes, inspires, protects, and sustains us. To not have that connection would be, in many ways, to not have life ... life as we wish it to be. *"Lord, keep me close to you. Grant me the wisdom to always know the difference between life lived with you and life without you, and may that wisdom guide my choices and decisions, now and forever."*

September 4, 2024

Jesus said, "If I will that he remains until I come, what is that to you? You follow me." John 21:22

When I was in college, several of my male friends stayed in town each summer, to work in the steel mill or other industries. Five or six of them would rent a house for the summer and share expenses. They did physical labor, and their jobs were dirty and tiring. But most of them, from mid-May through August, could earn enough money – a few thousand dollars – to pay the next year's tuition, and maybe room and board. But today, there is no summer job that could make a dent in tuition costs of \$40,000, \$50,000, even \$70,000-\$90,000 per year. I remember my dad paying my tuition – \$800 per semester – in cash. Only the ultra-wealthy could pay cash for tuition costs now. Decades ago, when the subject of student loan forgiveness first came up, I could predict one reaction: those who had painstakingly paid off their own student loans would be angry about current loans being forgiven or lessened. I was right. The forgiveness of some part of student loans in the past few years has triggered as much resentment as it has relief. As I thought about it, an imperfect but useful comparison occurred to me. In 1986, when my father was diagnosed with lung cancer, he received many radiation treatments and endless rounds of chemotherapy. Nothing helped. He died in September, 1987. In the years that followed, whenever a new and more effective treatment for lung cancer was announced, I felt a twinge of anger: 'Why couldn't that drug have been discovered while Dad was still alive? Why couldn't he live long enough to benefit from it?' My reactions and regret were understandable. The same thing must have happened when Medicare was begun. Those who had paid for their health care for years prior to Medicare may well have been resentful that others would now be getting help. But life moves forward, and good people continue to do what they're called to do: make new discoveries, solve problems, make life better for others. If we want to live as Jesus asks us to, we should rejoice when life is better for others, not be jealous or resentful. I can't imagine graduating with the burden of a quarter-million-dollar debt. I can't imagine starting a new job and not being able to afford rent. Then again ... the low salaries of my day didn't allow for the savings needed to live securely in retirement now. If we're looking for perfect fairness and balance in life, we'll never find it. It is best to follow the teachings of Jesus— wish blessings for all people; rejoice in the good, whenever and for whomever it comes; don't begrudge blessings to others; and resist making comparisons when no answer would satisfy us. "What is that to you?"

September 5, 2024

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have found a bulwark.

Psalms 8:2

In today's verse, the psalmist is praising the fact that God, in his Creator's glory, can cause even infants and babies to utter wisdom and convey strength, just as he has caused stars to be scattered in the skies and depths to be carved under the oceans. "Out of the mouths of babes" is a phrase we hear when someone – usually a child or an innocent, unspoiled person – says something deeply insightful, something profound and perceptive. Perhaps we should be as open to such surprises as we are to the natural wonders that this psalm describes. *"Thank you, Creator God, for the glories of all that you've made, and for those flashes of insight and inspiration that come from unexpected sources, including 'babes and infants.'"*

September 6, 2024

For many are called but few are chosen.

Matthew 22:14

Many people are uncomfortable with the words ‘... few are chosen.’ Why would some be excluded? How could someone pursue a life in faith if he or she was excluded from being chosen? This verse is part of Jesus’s parable about a landowner who paid those who worked only a few hours as much as he paid those who worked many hours. Jesus used the parable to show how human beings can be questioning and resistant. Perhaps, what is really meant by these words is that, just as the hired hands couldn’t understand the landowner’s reasoning and kindness, not everyone is open to hearing, feeling, sensing, or believing in God’s reality, presence, and wisdom. Perhaps it’s not about God’s calling and choosing, but about our responding ... or not ... to God. God simply knows that there are those who will not respond. God does not exclude us. We can fail to include or accept God.

September 7, 2024

The Lord has given a command concerning you: “Your name shall be perpetuated no longer. Out of the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the molded image. I will dig your grave. For you are vile.”

Nahum 1:14

A few years ago, a famous multi-millionaire was arrested on charges of decades of sex trafficking and abuse of underage girls. His female companion, a socialite, was named as his ‘procurer’. He and his activities were linked to powerful, famous people in several countries. In jail, he committed suicide, an act of total cowardice. In the midst of these news stories, I thought of my parents and grandparents sending packages of clothing to relatives in Europe in the 1950s. A neighbor would carefully wrap the big boxes in white muslin cloth and stitch the seams closed. Then she printed the addresses on the fabric with an indelible pencil. I was a little kid, and I watched in fascination as she sewed and then wrote. Her pencil looked black, but when she moistened the tip with water, it came out as dark purple on the muslin. She wrote carefully, printing each letter with large, straight lines. “This will never come off,” she told me in her Slovenian accent. “Indelible.” Decades later, when stories of the millionaire’s abuse surfaced, it occurred to me that, far beyond his extraordinary wealth – his mansions, private jets, and vacation homes – what the world will always remember, what history will always associate with his name, is the hideous depravity of abusing young girls. His companion’s name, for all of her high social standing, will also be linked to this evil. Indelible. There are many things that can be erased or made clean in our lives: mistakes, stumbles, foolish or even hurtful, sinful things we do or say. But some things are so big – in good ways or bad ways – that they are indelible. “This will never come off,” as Mrs. Kadoich used to say. Perhaps, in the merciful expanses of heaven, all slates are wiped clean. But our earthly legacies can be indelible, for good or bad. Perhaps we should, more often, look at what we are doing, saying ... creating as our legacy ... and picture an indelible pencil writing that legacy: permanent printing that will record – on people’s minds and hearts, and on the world itself – what will be remembered of us. Indelibly.

September 8, 2024

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:19

The psalmist says, “...come and save us!” His desperation is clear. God has been angry with the Israelites, and God’s love, compassion, and provision seem to have disappeared from their lives. They are in turmoil. The psalmist begs God to return and to restore. He reminds God that his people are “the vineyard which your right hand has planted ... the branch (he) has created.” Israel had shed many tears and known many sorrows. “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts.” Four thousand years later, we understand these words, these feelings. We, too, have shed tears. We, too, have felt besieged, by everything from violence in the world to chaos and conflict in everyday life. Perhaps we, too, have felt as if God has disappeared from the scene. Perhaps we, too, should remind God that we are his. We can say it as often as we need: “*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts.*”

September 9, 2024

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

It can be hard for us to believe the promise in today's verse. Most of us experience enough pain in life that we're skeptical that something 'good' can come from something 'bad'. In many places, the extreme heat of this past summer, a bad thing, caused undeniable suffering. But during that heat, I got a God-glimpse, of what today's verse can mean. In March of 2012, I went to the Philadelphia Flower Show. I brought home four plumeria stalks from Hawaii. Mom was so happy and excited to have those plants. I put each foot-long stalk into a pot filled with tropical soil. But Mom never got to see the first leaves bud on those plants. She died a few days after I brought the stalks home. In my grief, those plumeria plants took on a huge and important meaning: they were 'Mom's plants'. For 12 years, I've had them inside during winter and out on the deck during summer. They've each had some leaves, but none has ever blossomed. The fact that they're still alive is a testament to God's mercy for my feelings rather than my skill as a gardener. In July, I went out on the deck after a rainstorm. I couldn't believe it: all four stalks were lush with dark green leaves, and one plant had a half-dozen plumeria blossoms in pink and red! Waves of thoughts and feelings flooded in. It was as if God was saying, 'See— even heat can bring something good, and there's never a time limit for blessings to appear.' I thought about the great blessing I'd received from physical therapy this summer: real relief from pain. That relief brought me strength and the ability to do things I haven't been able to do in years. My physical improvement brought joy, gratitude, energy, and a new, positive outlook— a geyser of good things! As I looked at the leaves and flowers on the plumeria, I said "Thank you", again and again, to the plants, to Mom, to God, to the universe. We can't deny the very real loss and pain that come from misfortune, and we might not be able to see the good that God can bring out of what we call bad, but God's promise stands. There is no pain, loss, heartache, or tragedy that cannot be redeemed by God's love and power, in God's time. The cross and the resurrection are proof of that truth.

September 10, 2024

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalm 46:10

Today, if at all possible, make time to sit, just sit quietly, in the presence of God. No phone, no TV. Just silence, openness, receptivity. If it helps, invite God to be with you to share this time: "Lord, be with me. Hear the silent prayers in my heart. Look with love and mercy on me and my life. Speak to me if you wish. Hold me, guide me, heal me, and give me whatever it is that you know I need." It doesn't matter if your mind wanders; you can re-center your thoughts easily enough. It doesn't matter if you drift off into a nap. You'll still be in the presence of God. God will be with you. We seldom make time for such focused companionship with our Creator. Make such time ... today or soon. It will be precious, blessed time; a time of renewal and peace.

September 11, 2024

Jesus says, "For the son of man came to seek and save the lost."

Luke 19:10

The woman was in shock after her separation. She and her husband had been married for decades. She thought her marriage would last forever. Now, separated from him, she felt numb; numb, as if there had been an amputation. And, as often happens after a physical amputation, she still felt connected to him. As amputees sometimes sense the presence of limbs that are no longer there, she still felt his presence. She learned that, after their separation, he met someone; that he was dating a woman. Her torment increased 100-fold. It is one thing to be rejected; another, to be replaced. Her mind and body couldn't contain the pain. How could anyone bear two such blows? But it is a cruel irony that, often, one devastation is followed by another. We ride one wave of miseries and then another one hits. And between these two or more pillars of pain, we have to get our bearings and somehow move forward. Seldom can we manage this on our own. But whether our troubles come from relationships or from health problems, financial woes, or anything else, we can know, with absolute certainty, that God sees our troubles, feels our pain, hears our prayers. And God holds us in his hand to guide us through the difficulties we simply can't navigate on our own. Perhaps most of all, when we feel lost in our sorrows, God lets us know that we're loved, and that ... in God's eyes and heart ... we can never be replaced.

September 12, 2024

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 5:16

I often think of my late father, especially this month, 37 years ago, when he went from this life to the next. Recently, one memory in particular came to mind. In my senior year in college, my close friend, Susan, got a lead role in the drama club's major production of the year, *Mary Stuart* by Friedrich Schiller. The play ran for four nights, and on opening night, my parents and I were in the front row to support and applaud Sue. After cast members took their bows, Sue flung herself from the edge of the stage and into Dad's arms. "I'm so proud of you!" he said, hugging her. She held onto him tightly and tears came to her eyes. I knew something my parents didn't— that Sue's parents couldn't be there for any night of the play. And I realized something that, perhaps, Susan didn't— that Mom and Dad were, at that moment, surrogates for the parental praise she needed and deserved. After hugs all around, Sue left us to go back to the dressing room. As we left the theatre, I told Mom and Dad about Sue's parents not being able to come to the play. Dad stopped walking. He grew silent and thoughtful, and then he said, "Get us tickets for every night of the play. Front row. Every night." It was my turn to have tears. Dad had told Susan that he was proud of her. I was proud of him. I still am. Every day. Every day. *"Father God, Parent of all parents, help us to see and appreciate the love, the encouragement, the blessing of our earthly parents, whether they are with us or long gone. Where there has been such love, help us to remember and appreciate it ... and keep it going. Where such love has been lacking, or where our memories are of pain and hurt, help us to forgive, to move on, and to trust your Parent God's love to heal our heartaches, and to be ... as Dad was ... a source of reassurance that is always present, always front and center."*

September 13, 2024

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1:17

We forget just how radically different Jesus's words and message really were. For centuries, people's relationship to God was defined by laws, rules, regulations, and rituals. A devout Israelite, obeying the laws of God, fulfilling requirements of worship and daily living, might not know about God's unconditional love or forgiveness, and know only the laws and the history of an often-contentious relationship with God. God was 'up there', his people were 'down here'. When Jesus came, 'up there' and 'down here' met, and in that coming together, law was eclipsed by love, rituals by righteousness, and sacrifice by grace. It's almost impossible to truly comprehend how much the world changed, then and ever since, because of Jesus's life and ministry, his assurance that we are loved because we are God's own children, not because of what we have done. *"Thank you, Lord. Thank you for coming to us, living among us, and being with us, now and always, in the Spirit you sent to us."*

September 14, 2024

They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Mark 13:26

When Christ's ascension is depicted in paintings or stained glass, clouds play a prominent part in the scene. People (artists and church members) can be picky about those clouds. They want them to look a certain way— massive, rolling, sunlit, parting, white, fluffy, or pink-tinged. Scripture says that Jesus ascended into clouds. His disciples – who saw him, spoke with him, and walked with him, after his resurrection – saw him disappear into the clouds, the sky, the heavens. Perhaps it doesn't really matter whether there were clouds or not, or what they looked like. When what we call 'the great reconciliation' takes place, it will happen in God's time and way. There will be no question that heaven and earth have met, regardless of the setting, with or without clouds.

September 15, 2024

Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it. Job 13:1

I never knew that God has a gift for irony. I discovered that fact when I went for a hearing test a few years ago. In the mid-1980s, I spent a month on St. Croix at a marine biology lab. A Navy doctor at the NOAA Lab there examined my ears. He told me I had 'scuba ear'— my left ear drum was stretched from deep diving, and I'd lost hearing at the highest and lowest ranges of sound. He said I could dive, but should do no more deep diving. I managed well for decades, with 70-80% of my hearing capacity. But a few years ago, things changed. I was missing words in group conversations. In lectures or shows, I missed whatever was making everyone laugh. I sat in the front pews at church, so that I could watch the pastor's lips. I knew I couldn't afford hearing aids, so I never did anything about my hearing. Then, at a health fair, I entered a drawing and won a \$2,000 credit

toward hearing aids, making them affordable! In one of the tests done on me at the audiology center, a small camera was placed in each of my ears, allowing me to see my inner ears on a TV screen. Fascinating! My right ear looked healthy. The ear drum looked fine. In my left ear, my ‘scuba ear’, the ear drum’s form and coloration looked normal, but around it, like a protective arm, tissue had formed; silvery, pearly-looking tissue, *in the exact shape and design of a nautilus shell*. I gasped. A shell-shaped halo had formed around that damaged ear drum, as if the sea was reaching back to give me something of its own, in exchange for something it had taken. Even the rippled surface of the tissue looked like ocean waves. I’m still amazed by that image ... and by the realization that the same Creator who had placed the protective ‘shell’ in my ear had provided a way for me to get hearing aids. Yes, I know— prize drawings are random. But I believe that the God who fashioned a shell, a touch of the sea I love, in the depths of my ear, provided a way for me to afford those hearing aids. I believe. *“Lord, your Creator’s miracles are everywhere— even in our problems, ills, and challenges; even in our ear drums. And sometimes, they come with a touch of humor or irony, and they always come with love. Thank you.”*

September 16, 2024

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children....

Psalm 103:17

God works in our lives in many ways, sometimes in ways we don’t expect or even want. Often, God uses troubles – even deep distress – to teach us what we need to know. It isn’t that God causes misery to be hammered down on us, but God uses the evolving circumstances of our lives, including the terrible, inevitable times of trial and pain, for good. God opens doors to opportunity; God brings people into our lives (and takes others out), and God transforms our darkness into light. As today’s verse reminds us, God’s love and grace even extend to our ultimate fear and challenge— the prospect of disappearing into nothingness or descending to ‘the pit’. In Christ, we know that light and life await us: God’s light, God’s life, God’s salvation, our reconciliation. As God guides our lives, he redeems our souls. Our lives shall “see the light.”

September 17, 2024

Jesus said, “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

John 16:24

Today’s verse, like others that encourage us to ask God for what we want or need, can lead us to think that praying is something like placing an order at a drive-through: ‘Burger, please, and a chocolate shake.’ We pay, and in another minute we’re on our way with a burger and a milkshake. But the God of the universe is neither a drive-through dispenser of goodies, an ATM, or an account from which we can make withdrawals. Today’s verse should be read in the context of all the other descriptions of God in the Gospels— the God who knows us, better than we know ourselves. The God who loves us, who provides what God knows is best for us, and who wants our lives to be full, joyous, peaceful, and productive. Such a God is unlikely to give us something that would, unbeknownst to us, ultimately harm us, even if we insist that it is something we really, really, really want. God wants to give us things that enhance, illuminate, and strengthen our lives, things that bring us closer to him and to his love and will. Against that backdrop, the words “Ask and you will receive” take on deeper meaning. God wants us to bring our needs and our hearts’ desires to him, and to do so with trust in his will.

September 18, 2024

“Vanity of vanities,” says the preacher, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Many verses in the Bible warn us of the dangers of vanity. Did you know that manufacturers have changed clothing sizes, over time, to appeal to vanity? I thought that a size 10 dress today would be the same as a size 10 dress in 1930 or 1950. Not so. To please those who can’t bear to be a larger size, clothing has been ‘sized down’ over the years. When I first heard of this size changing, I didn’t believe it until I read that actress Lucille Ball – a slim, 120-lb. woman – wore size 14-16 dresses on the iconic ‘I Love Lucy’ show. Today, those dresses would be labeled as size 6 or 8. Most of us have insecurities. Most of us have some feature or flaw that we wish was better or different. Insecurities or vanity? It’s a fine line, a subtle difference. Perhaps we should do an occasional check to make sure that we’re on the right side of that line: honest about our human flaws, but comfortable with them, and not vain in ways that insult the God who created us.

September 19, 2024

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Revelation 7:10

It is interesting that, when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he did so right after Jesus's deeply strengthening experience of being baptized in the Jordan River. On that day, God's voice was heard from heaven: "This is my beloved son." Jesus could not have had a more confirming, elevating experience. Nevertheless, Satan tried to lure him immediately. We often think Satan/Evil comes to us in times of weakness, like a lion pouncing on prey. Yes, this can happen. But, as with Christ's experience in the wilderness, we should realize that Satan – the lure of Evil – can strike at any time. We can rejoice in the strength of our faith, and be glad and grateful that God is with us. But we should never think that we are beyond the reach of Evil, or that Satan has deemed us to be too strong for him. Being watchful, and staying close to the God who loves, guides, and protects us, is best.

September 20, 2024

And no wonder. For Satan himself transforms himself into an Angel of light.

2 Corinthians 11:14

Speaking of Satan.... Literature, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and art work, dating from the Middle Ages, have given us brutal, terrifying images of Satan. Ancient art depicting Satan – and the punishments for those who follow him – would frighten us today. But these are human depictions, human views of what evil personified looks like. The Hebrew Scriptures don't paint such pictures, and the New Testament emphasizes the evil nature of Satan rather than his/her/its appearance. There is a danger in focusing on images of a wiry figure with a long tail, wrapped in red, with horns and a pointed goatee, carrying a pitchfork. For one thing, any guess at the form and figure of evil is just that— a guess. The greater danger lies in trivializing the reality of evil. The horned figure in red can be almost cartoonish, but true evil is far from that. In an episode of a TV show years ago, an older woman is shown in a casino, at a slot machine. Near her sits a scary-looking biker guy, with a cigarette, tattoos, heavy boots, black tank top, and chains hanging from a leather belt. Also nearby is a gentle-looking, elderly man who seems to be a clergyman. As the woman falls prey to the lure of the slot machine, pouring in all her money and all her winnings, it is eventually revealed that the nicely dressed older man is really the tempter, and the biker is the unlikely angel who saves her from her foolishness. It was a surprise ending that stunned viewers. But it was a wise reminder that evil can come in many forms. It may be helpful to personify the reality of evil in the form of a being – Satan, Lucifer, Fallen Angel – but perhaps we should think less about the appearance of this force of evil ... and more about how we should guard against it.

September 21, 2024

The Lord said to Moses, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Exodus 33:20

Perhaps one reason Christ was born where and when he was is because there was little chance that paintings or drawings of him would be made, no chance of a photograph, and no way to record his voice. Many of Jesus's words were remembered and written down, but the human image and sound of Jesus could not be captured. If we had such a depiction, especially a photograph or recording, people would worship an image, not a God; a voice, not a teaching; a man, not a message. Perhaps the same thing is true of the God who spoke to Moses. Although we believe that we are made in God's image, and that God therefore has a human form, God may, in fact, appear ... to the extent that God can be seen at all ... as pure light, vibrational energy (perhaps God can be measured rather than seen?), or something still unimaginable to the human mind. For me, the entity I call God is an 'Intentional Force of Love and Creation'; unfathomable power and energy, love and knowledge, presence and purpose. I want to always be aligned with – linked to – this Force, this Life, this indescribable Being. God conveyed to Moses that what matters is his love, his creative power, his relationship to us, to all of life and creation. Not form, not face, not appearance, lest we worship the image and not the meaning of God.

September 22, 2024

The love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 5:3

Today's verse triggers thoughts of Leviticus, an entire book in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) devoted to rules, regulations, laws, and requirements. In the deluge of hundreds of such laws, it can be hard to focus on the commandments given to Moses in the 20th chapter of Exodus, a book that has more than its own share of laws and regulations. But if we look at those basic commandments in Exodus ("... have no other gods before me ... remember the Sabbath ... honor your father and your mother ... do not kill ... do not covet...."), we see and know that they are not burdensome; they are sensible and necessary guidelines for living, not only as God wishes us to live, but also as most of us wish to live. When we add to these commandments the words Christ gave to us ("...let your light shine ... forgive ... do not lay up treasures on earth ... love one another"), we know that all of these commandments are not burdens, they are blessings.

September 23, 2024

Finally, all of you, be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous ...

1 Peter 3:8

One of the things about which we can always be absolutely certain is that life is surprising and unpredictable. There is so much that we don't know and can't know. This is a lesson we learn again and again, a lesson that I re-learned recently, as I looked for a parking space in a grocery store lot. I spotted a car with an open trunk, and I could see two people behind the trunk, loading groceries, getting ready to leave. I pulled to the side in a drive lane in front of their car, to wait for that space, and I could only see their faces. One was an elderly man with short white hair and a strained look on his deeply-lined face. "Poor soul," I thought. The other person was female, far younger, with curly blonde hair— his daughter or granddaughter, I assumed, helping him with his groceries. They were taking a long time, but I understood. When they closed the trunk, they walked around to the passenger side of their car. The old man walked slowly. He had to. He was supporting the young woman's right arm, which looked twisted and not functional. Her other arm was also twisted, with the hand in a cramped, curved-in position, and she held it protectively against her chest. A full view of them showed that her legs, too, were bent awkwardly, with her left foot bent inward, almost perpendicular to her left leg. It was the young woman who needed assistance from the elderly man, not vice versa. *He* was helping *her* with her groceries, and he would drive the car. We just never know. Appearances can be so deceiving. We get glimpses and we make assumptions. Someone is quiet and withdrawn, doesn't say hello, and we think we're being snubbed. It doesn't occur to us that the person might be hurting or distracted, and not even aware of us. We meet an arrogant, know-it-all type, and we don't consider that, behind the bluster, there might be a pitifully insecure person, or one who has been berated all of his or her life. We envy someone who is rich, not knowing that they're brokenhearted. As my friend Carolyn wisely says, "We never know what battles others are fighting." It's best for us, as today's verse says, to have compassion ... love ... to "be tender-hearted, be courteous."

September 24, 2024

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people. But you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:18

A conversation among women friends revealed that they all had the same habit. They glance through the catalogs that arrive in the mail, dog-ear the pages that show something they like, and then put the catalogs aside, sometimes for weeks or months, resisting the impulse to buy immediately. "I go back to a catalog several times," said one woman, "and occasionally I order things. But most times, I lose interest. I no longer want the item or I decide I can live without it. Putting catalogs aside for a while saves me money, and reduces clutter!" Perhaps we should do the same thing with our grudges and grievances, with the hurts and insults that irritate us, like a pebble in our shoes. Putting aside a hurt doesn't negate it, doesn't deny it. When we've been hurt or offended by someone, the pain is real. But if we can just put it aside for a bit ...dog-ear it, telling ourselves we'll deal with it later ... we'll avoid 'impulse retaliation', avoid striking back and digging the hole of our hurt even deeper, possibly making the situation worse. As time passes, perhaps we'll see things differently. We will have given God time to work within us – and others – and we might even decide that we can live more happily without the grudge or the grievance. That saves us the cost – the emotional and spiritual cost – of nursing hatred or seeking revenge, and it certainly reduces the clutter of negative feelings that can so easily accumulate in our minds and hearts. Forgiving and releasing is not only best for our relationship with God, it is better for us.

September 25, 2024

Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.

Jeremiah 18:6

Most of us don't want to be molded, shaped, formed – controlled – by anyone, not even God. We resist anything that threatens or limits our freedom to make our lives, and ourselves, what we wish them to be. We are critical of people who seem weak-willed, malleable, easily led; those who submit to being controlled and can't seem to stand up for themselves. But this kind of weakness is not what God was speaking about when his words came to Jeremiah. First, he was speaking about the house, the people, of Israel; about his leading them, guiding them, making them into a nation. But this verse has also been interpreted to reflect God's shaping of individual lives. It is no small thing – no easy task, after our childhood years – to allow anyone to have a hand in shaping who we are. But when we consider that it is God who gave us life – who envisioned our minds, hearts, and souls; our personalities, gifts, and characteristics – we realize that it is our Creator who is forming us, as the potter shapes the clay in ways that it cannot shape itself, and that we are, indeed, safe in God's hands.

September 26, 2024

Jesus says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:10

Anyone who has worked his or her way through a difficult relationship, an estrangement, or a deep conflict, and has then come out on the other side – to a place of peace and understanding and agreement – has some idea of the joy God feels when those who have gone astray return to right and good paths. Of course, God is grateful. Of course, the angels rejoice. Every time something that has been wrong is put right, we feel a sense of relief and rejoicing. How much more so when it is a life that is turned around and realigned with God's love. Joy, indeed. Especially when we're the ones who have been brought back.

September 27, 2024

Jesus said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

Revelation 21:6

Jesus often turned things upside down, and not just the tables of the money changers. He chose Peter to play a key role in his ministry and in the formation of the early church. Bumbling, stumbling, weak ("I tell you, I do not know this man") Peter became the rock on which the church would be built. Jesus ate with sinners, touched lepers, and visited tax collectors. He refused to become a warrior king at a time when power equaled military might. He spoke gently and lovingly, paying special attention to children, the vulnerable, and the powerless. He didn't brag, boast, or berate. He rejected the devil's lures of wealth and power. He honored women and made them part of his inner circle. When he left his tomb, he chose to appear first to Mary Magdalene. I can imagine that, if Jesus walked among us today, he would choose us – bumbling, stumbling, weak you and me – to be among his disciples. He would not be a billionaire or a celebrity or a power broker. He would use no guns or armaments. He wouldn't be posing for magazine covers. He would not be preening or posturing on Wall Street, in Washington, in Parliament, in Hollywood, or in an emperor's palace. I think he would probably be healing, teaching, listening to children; helping to clean up oceans, lakes, and rivers; or he might be at a border crossing or a refugee camp, somewhere in the world, arms outstretched, saying, "Let me help you." Still defying our notions of power and importance. Still turning things upside down.

September 28, 2024

Declare God's glory among the nations, his marvelous works with all the peoples. Psalm 96:3

In retirement, I have more time for speaking with, listening for, and simply being with God. I am also more inclined – when someone contacts me or when I am brought into someone's orbit – to wonder, "What do you have in mind, Lord? What do you want of me in this?" Again and again, beyond all possibility of coincidence, I discover that God, indeed, has something in mind. Sometimes, what happens is breathtaking. A few years ago, I got a call from a professor at a local college. I was scheduled to speak to her class in a few months' time,

but a guest speaker for that week had become ill. Could I move my visit up? Of course. The large class, with students of all ages, was already primed for my visit. I didn't need to do a presentation. It was all questions and answers, for 90 wonderful, energizing, enlightening minutes. The students asked questions, and there was non-stop conversation, with lots of laughter and intriguing ideas. I loved it! When class ended, another professor at the college, whom I'd known for many years and who sat in on the class, walked out with me. "Did you feel the electricity in that room?" she asked, with emotion in her voice. I agreed that the class was certainly stimulating. "But that's not all," she said. "You couldn't know this, but the student in the back row, in the blue plaid shirt, has a severe anxiety disorder. He gets up and leaves the room at least two or three times during every class. But he didn't leave today. And, until today, he has never spoken in any class, all year long. He has never made a comment or asked a question in any class. Until today. He has never conversed with anyone in any class. Until today. That's why, when he began to ask you questions and talk with you, the professor and I exchanged excited looks. It's why the students were looking at each other. It's why the room felt electric. More than great communication happened in that classroom today. A miracle happened." With that, she choked up. So did I. God knew why I was supposed to be in that class on that day. I didn't know, but God did.

September 29, 2024

When I thought, "My foot is slipping," your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. Psalm 94:18

It has happened to everyone. A sudden jolt of fear, a feeling of terror that washes over us uncontrollably, and suddenly we're saying, 'O God, O God ... please God.' Maybe it happens when the car is spinning on ice. Maybe in a doctor's office when we learn the results of a test. Maybe when we get a phone call and the first words we hear are "I'm sorry to tell you" We instantly and instinctively cry out to God. Even those who, until that moment of crisis, never believed in God, often find themselves suddenly reaching for that divine hand. Such reaching is as right as it is natural. And the good news is that, when we do find ourselves in dire need, the steadfast love of the Lord holds us up. *"Thank you, God, for being there, for rescuing me and holding me and helping me when I need you most. And thank you for those moments, those happenings, which are unknown to me, when you rescued me before I even knew that danger was near: the accident that didn't happen, the illness that was healed, the plane that landed safely. Thank you, for all those times when your hand was hidden, but was still saving me and holding me. Thank you."*

September 30, 2024

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. 1 Timothy 6:10

She kept herself rail-thin, and made sure that her hair and make-up were flawless every day. She wore designer clothes and accessories, and wore only real gold jewelry. She had a professional position in a large corporation, and she earned a very good salary, enabling her to buy the things – the ammunition, if you will – that gave her a striking appearance. After all, she was on a mission. She wanted to marry money. Big money. Who knows why she had this obsession? Perhaps she had known poverty in her early life. Perhaps her parents had drummed into her the idea of marrying wealth. In time, she achieved her goal. She chose her target and went for him. He was decades older than she was, but he was rich. He was also an alcoholic, and his condition grew worse with the years. Outwardly, she had a country club lifestyle, a magnificent home, a beachfront condo, and the money to buy anything she wanted. But she had a husband who was rarely sober enough or coherent enough to converse with her. The plastic surgery she regularly got, "just to stay ahead of the game", couldn't hide the increasingly lost and vacant look in her eyes. As time passed, she, too, began to drink. She, too, entered the hazy world of not quite knowing what day it is. And one day, when her vision was as blurry as her mind, she missed a step at the top of the staircase ... the curving staircase in their elegant home ... and she tumbled downward, her head hitting step after step after step, until her body lay motionless on the marble floor of the foyer. She died at the hospital. She was not yet 40. I never think of that image. I choose to remember her as a smiling college student, in blue jeans and turtlenecks, when she loved life, not money. The old adage has it right: Be careful what you pray for. Or, as today's verse tells us, "... the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."