

Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont

MEDITATIONS - OCTOBER, 2024

October 1, 2024

These are grumblers, complainers (driven) by their own desires; and they mouth great, swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.

Jude:16

A presidential election is upon us, a time when we hear “great, swelling words”, when “grumblers, complainers” shout at us, and candidates flatter us to “gain advantage”. Perhaps you, too, are using the **MUTE** button when political ads are on TV. When I first participated in political campaigns, as a political science major in college, I saw that many candidates talked *at* people, not *to* them. Busy promoting their own agendas, they never asked people – voters – what they needed and wanted, what mattered to them. Candidates talked, but they didn’t listen. One autumn, in those long-ago years, we students assisted two candidates running for mayor in a nearby city. One candidate talked about redevelopment and attracting new businesses. Important matters, to be sure. But the other candidate knocked on hundreds of doors and asked residents what mattered to them. Many told him that they were very concerned about kids as young as 10 or 12 being ‘numbers runners’ downtown, for what was then illegal gambling. That candidate listened to these citizens’ concerns, focused on the issue, and proposed solutions. He won the election. Sometimes, it’s so simple: listening, paying attention, actually caring about people’s lives and situations ... as God listens to, focuses on, and cares about us. This lesson for politicians – to listen, pay attention, help – is a lesson for us as well, as individuals, congregations, and citizens: pay attention to what people really need and want. Tomorrow: are some of people’s problems as close as their phones?

October 2, 2024

...through love, serve one another.

Galatians 5:13

While candidates talk about national and international issues, perhaps the problems that distress people most are close at hand. If I were running for national office, I’d make three promises that I believe touch on many people’s concerns, frustrations, and needs. First, I’d work toward a requirement that the main phone line in all government buildings, health care facilities, utility companies, banks, and financial services/credit providers be answered by a human being, by a real person who could answer a question or direct the call to someone who could; a phone answered by a person, not a machine. Second, I’d work toward assuring that, for all essential services (health care, banking, utilities, emergencies, insurance), computers would not be required for contact or for billing/payment. No more sending bills only by text/email; no requiring that bills be paid electronically, via credit card, debit card, or digital wallets. For these services at least, customers would always be able to pay by mail, by phone, in person, with cash, checks, or money orders. No computers required. Even checks may soon be obsolete, replaced by ‘instant payment rails’. They may be great, but will I know how to use them in my 80s? My third promise would need major science and engineering, but if the Webb Space Telescope can be controlled from a million miles away, and if miniaturized cameras can be sent through the human blood stream, we should be able to address my third goal. I’d want phones to be equipped with buttons or attachments that could be activated when a scam call comes through. Pressing the button would – in my dream world – transfer the call and the caller’s number to a national data center for identification and deactivation. I’d leave it to legal minds to determine how to prosecute and punish perpetrators. Recipients of scam emails and letters could forward them to a similar center. Americans lose more than \$25 billion annually to fraud and identity theft. (For comparison, the entire Pennsylvania state budget for 2024-25 is \$47.6 billion.) Almost 30 million Americans – one-tenth of our population – are affected by these crimes *annually*, suffering legal and personal anxiety as well as financial loss. These may not be exotic, exciting issues, but I’ll bet that millions of frustrated, sick-of-it, stressed out citizens would like to have phones answered by real people, basic business that doesn’t require a computer, and a major cessation of scamming and identity theft. So what is the spiritual connection to all of this? Why are such ideas in a Meditation? They’re here because these ideas touch on basic and critical human needs, and because God has a singular regard for humanity, for our need to have peace of mind, and for truth itself. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, guards and protects his sheep. He doesn’t ignore them or fleece them (pun intended),

and he doesn't allow harm to come to them. The God who is concerned about our hunger and thirst, our health and our heartaches, is concerned about our mental well-being, our vulnerability, and the threats that are multiplying around us. If we're to help others – as individuals, as congregations, or as consortiums of churches – we need to see current and coming human needs clearly. Tomorrow: the invisible challenge on the horizon.

October 3, 2024

I have been young but now am old.

Psalm 37:25

We know the population is aging. By 2030, those over 65 will be about 25% of Pennsylvania's population. That's at least three million people, based on today's numbers. The idealized image of aging portrays an older couple, in a cozy home, still alert and able to care for themselves, with children and grandchildren nearby to love them and to help with anything they need. Emerging reality paints a different picture. A few years ago, I had to do basic research on projections for Alzheimer's/dementia. The statistics are chilling. Not only will the number of senior citizens increase dramatically, but it is projected that a greater *percentage* of the senior population will be affected by Alzheimer's/dementia. In addition, many seniors will experience cognitive decline at younger ages, in their fifties and sixties. Presumably, these younger senior citizens might live with dementia not just for years, but for decades. We can, and should, pray for cures and for advances in treatment of these ailments. But, barring a miracle cure or treatment, it appears that increasing numbers of senior citizens will be dealing with cognitive decline – a spectrum of mental and memory impairments – at younger ages and for a longer time. Such senior citizens might not be able to use cell phones or computers. They may not be able to pay bills online or access medical information online. They might not be able to work their way through 20 prompts on an automated phone system, or recognize the difference between a legitimate bill and a scam one. Difficulties intensify if the senior citizen lives alone or has no family. The scary chasm that lies ahead is this: at the very time that the number of older Americans affected by dementia increases, banks, government offices, hospitals, businesses, and other entities seem blind to these demographics, and are moving in the opposite direction, ramping up technology faster than ever. As people need more human contact and attention, systems, programs, and processes are being de-humanized. So why should we care, and what can we do? We should care, because these current and future senior citizens with cognitive impairment don't just exist in statistical reports, they're in our pews, in our congregations, in our neighborhoods, in our families. They are – or will be – us. The changing human needs that await us in the future can't be met with only altar flowers and get-well cards. Congregations have mastered the art of food pantries, rides to worship, and fine parish nurse programs. But new levels of advocacy, leverage, and information-sharing will be necessary if we're to fulfill God's command to care for one another, to serve others in their need. "I have been young and now am old." That's something we can all understand ... or soon will.

October 4, 2024

Can you deceive God, as one person deceives another?

Job 13:9

Today's verse makes us pause. Even the most God-focused among us can have things we'd rather not face, much less reveal to others, even to God. We've had thoughts that make us ashamed. We have said or done things we regret. God understands. God is less concerned about our misdeeds and failings than about our trying to hide our sins. In Jesus's teachings, we know this: God is not a stern task-master, pointing his fingers at us or shaking his head in disapproval, and writing us off as hopeless failures. More likely, God's reaction to our downfalls and sinfulness is sorrow, followed by 'Come to me ... let me help you. Let me heal your hurt, forgive you, and lead you forward.' Before such a loving God, we don't need to hide anything. If there is something you've been hiding, denying, or not facing, perhaps today is a good day to hold it up to God – who sees it anyway – and ask for God's help. God is there. God understands and will help ... because God loves you.

October 5, 2024

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1

I remember, very clearly, the first time I thought about God with a question mark in my mind. I was about 10 years old. Bill, a friend of my parents, was proud that he and his five brothers were going to be groomsmen

at their sister's wedding. Their entire, large family was happy and excited about the wedding. On that day, a late-night phone call to our house brought heart-breaking news: the bride and groom were killed in a horrific car accident soon after they left the reception to go on their honeymoon. They died instantly. My child's mind couldn't understand how that could happen. Wasn't God watching over them? Wasn't it God who was with them, to bless them, at the altar where they made their vows? How could they die on their wedding day? A few years later, I began to read about the events of the Holocaust. Once again, the questions came. Didn't God see this horror? Why did it happen? Why didn't God use his power and just stop it? The Holocaust and other torments, including current situations in Ukraine, in Israel/Gaza, and in Sudan, have surely triggered the same questions in other minds. I wish I could say that, after years of prayer and thought and conversations with God, I have some answers. But I don't. The closest I've come is in the famous response to the question 'Where was God in the Holocaust?' when someone counter-asked, 'Where was man?' It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to reconcile the reality of God's power and God's love with the fact that human beings, whether drunken drivers or demonic rulers, have free will to wreak havoc in the world. With a kind of trust that I don't fully understand, I believe that the universal force of love and creation, which many of us call God, has the power to ultimately bring wholeness, good, peace, and reconciliation out of the very real misery that so often engulfs us. I have conceived no profound answers as to how and why tragedy strikes in this life, and that's okay with God. I won't understand many things until the next life, and that's okay with me.

October 6, 2024

Hannah prayed, "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant."

1 Samuel 1:11

We can never really know what is in the minds and hearts of those who are friends, acquaintances, even family, much less know the life situations of people we know or encounter casually. The necessary smile of a waitress might be hiding a broken heart. The doctor who is pleasant as well as professional with us might have great sorrows. Our child's teacher may have troubles that are overwhelming ... and invisible. Christ encourages us to remember others in prayers – known as prayers of intercession – and such prayers have purpose and power, even if we don't know the people well, or know their specific needs, even if they don't know that we're praying for them. That's why the prayers of the day, in worship, often feel so satisfying. When we pray for "all who..." and "those who ..." we are praying as Christ would have us pray. *"Lord, today's verse reminds us that human beings have unbearable burdens, suffocating fears, and troubles we can't begin to know. We ask you to have mercy on those whose names you know even if we don't. Touch their hearts with peace and their lives with hope. Remember them, as Hannah asked, and deliver them from their misery. In your name we ask this. Amen."*

October 7, 2024

...waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

Isaiah 35:6

Few things got the attention of the Israelites more than manna (food) falling from the skies, water bursting from rocks, and vegetation being found in the desert. When we see photos and films of deserts, after the spring melt or after a long rainstorm, we're astonished. Where there was sand, scrub, and barrenness, there is green; acres of spectacularly colored flowers, huge blossoms on cacti. It doesn't seem real, and we are awed by the sight. When we see waterfalls cascading down cliffs, we're struck by their force as well as their beauty. When we see such sights, in person or in photos or films, we grow silent. We're humbled by the magnificence of nature. And we know, deep within, that God caused all of this to be. Thoreau wrote, "The world is so much more beautiful than it is useful." I'd add, "Until we learn to appreciate its beauty, we will never know how to use it wisely." Appreciation begins with gratitude to God, whether you perceive God as human-like and omnipotent, or as an unknowable force of creation with which we ... at our best ... align. Gratitude to God, however we think of God – for mountains and streams, blossoms and fruits, day and night, seasons and sun cycles – adds to our blessings. *Thank you, Creator, for the world's beauty, its usefulness, and the chance to see and live in it all."*

October 8, 2024

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.

Titus 3:4-5

One of the hardest things for us to learn is that we cannot earn God's favor, forgiveness, or love. God's grace surrounds and infuses us. While God welcomes and is pleased by all that we do to enhance life and serve others, God isn't keeping score, or giving us points for our good deeds, redeemable for salvation. But we are hard-wired, through our schooling and in our workplaces (and sometimes, in our family life) to work for and to earn approval: good grades, high profits, new clients, soaring sales numbers, completed projects, impressing a parent and quietly playing second-fiddle to a sibling. That may be how the world works, but it isn't how God works. As Paul says, "...he saved us ... according to his mercy." *"Thank you, God, thank you."*

October 9, 2024

For us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for him.

1 Corinthians 8:6

God for us, we for God. A bond, a connection, that cannot be broken, a relationship on which we can rely. That reality fits with Paul's words, "... there is one God." It would be difficult, if not impossible, for us to have such a singular relationship with multiple gods, many deities. Surely, such multiple allegiances would stumble over each other, contradict each other, confuse us, and prevent us from having an authentic link to the divine. One God. In whom are all things, including us. And we for God. It is the most basic and most meaningful of relationships. *"Father, I know that I am yours. You are the Creator of all, and you are mine. Amen. Be it so."*

October 10, 2024

...why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus is not here, but has risen. Luke 24:5

Pontius Pilate was a smart man. He was also shrewd, crafty, and probably ruthless. He would have to be, in order to hold onto power in the far reaches of the Roman Empire. He was cunning enough to weasel out of condemning Christ to death, abdicating that decision to the crowd that clamored for Barabbas. But once Christ's fate was sealed, Pilate still had a problem. There were many who believed that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God. They had seen him heal, drive out demons, create miracles. The last thing Pilate wanted was for something to happen to Jesus's body after the crucifixion. He didn't want Christ's followers to be able to say that a miracle had occurred, to start a rumor that Christ hadn't really died. Pilate needed Jesus's dead body to remain a dead, buried body. So, he wisely agreed to burial in a secure tomb, and he posted armed Roman soldiers to guard that tomb. No one was going to tamper with that body. Pilate would make sure of that. But we know what happened. On the morning of the third day, Mary Magdalene, and other women who were followers of Jesus, found the massive stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and no dead body in sight. We don't know what happened in the dark of that night. Did angels appear to roll the stone away? Did the sight of those angels terrify the soldiers and cause them to flee? Did some followers of Jesus, led by the Spirit, move the stone away? Or did Christ himself breach that entrance? Perhaps those unknowns don't matter. What matters is that, when God wills something to happen, it happens; and no emperor, no stone, no soldiers, no special weapons will stop it, especially if it involves the reality of Christ, in us and with us.

October 11, 2024

...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of Christ Jesus. Ephesians 5:20

It has been said that some of the wisest and most fortunate people are those who focus not on what they've lost, but on what they have left. A great deal of that wisdom was on display last month, when I attended my 60th high school reunion. Ours was a very large class – almost 1,000 students – so our reunions are well-attended. As usual, the reunion was filled with hugs, laughter, memories, and updates on children and grandchildren. But, as always, we were enjoying each other's company because of what we shared six decades ago: time together. Time spent in classes, in activities, at sporting events, at dances; first dates, first crushes, first kisses, first loves. High school years are major transitional years, and it's not surprising that lifelong bonds form. Perhaps one reason that our being together is so enjoyable is that age and appearance don't really matter. We remember each other clearly as young, healthy, vibrant, and with the natural good looks of youth. In a way, we will always be ... to each other ... 16, 17, and 18. We will always be who we were then as well as who we are now. It was clear, on that September day, that we share something else, something precious, something God honors and values: gratitude. We're grateful for the years, the friendships, the shared experiences – including teenage

awkwardness and goofiness – and the great blessing of living to celebrate a 60th reunion. Gratitude. That’s what made our time together glow. Gratitude. The prophets, the psalmists, Jesus, and the Gospel writers tell us to be grateful. It is some of the wisest guidance in the Bible. *“Thank you, Creator, for youth and age, for friendships and memories, for affection and appreciation. We are grateful for so much. Thank you!”*

October 12, 2024

Solomon prayed, “You have kept the promise you made to my father David; today, every word has been fulfilled.”

1 Kings 8:24

Today’s verse prompts a thought. Unlike Solomon, most of us can’t know what prayers our ancestors offered up to God. Many of King David’s prayers are known or recorded in scripture. But unless our grandparents, great-grandparents, or earlier generations kept diaries or prayer journals, we don’t know what they said to God or asked of God. It is likely that they asked God to bless and keep their children, grandchildren, even generations to come; offspring they would never know but may have held up in prayer, decades and centuries before you and I were born. Just as King David asked for wisdom, for himself and his son, our ancestors, unbeknownst to us, may well have prayed for us, long before we or even our parents were born. Certainly, praying for ‘our children’s children’ would have been common in many denominations. We can’t know these things factually, but it is an intriguing thought. Who knows how those petitions may have arced from earth to heaven over the long spans of time? Imagine: prayers made for *us* so long ago. We should be grateful for such prayers, and we should lift up our prayers for those yet to come: the young who are already in our lives and those who will be their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, ‘unto countless generations.’ Yes, let us pray for them now, long before they are born, and place them into the flowing, infinite stream of love of the everlasting God.

October 13, 2024

For every house is built by someone, but he who built all things is God.

Hebrews 3:4

When we chose the lot for our new home, in 2005, our pastor, Gary, came to bless the land on which our home would be built. He prayed that our home would be blessed from the first turn of the shovel, and he prayed that the builders and workers would be safe and find joy in their work. When the house was completed, before we moved in, in 2006, Pastor Gary returned, to ask God’s blessings for the house itself. He brought a candle, and he led us from room to room; all of them, at that time, unfurnished. In each room, the candlelight created a warm glow, a holy light, matching the tangerine sun setting outside, as Pastor Gary offered a specific prayer for each room— all 14 of them. I love my home, and thus far, by God’s grace, I have been able to care for it. But I also think that God, indeed, blessed this house before and after it was built. We even put a small plaque on the entrance from the garage: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” We asked God to be with us, to dwell with us always. There are many reasons why I love my home— its location, style, design, décor. But perhaps its peacefulness and beauty come from the God who lives there, and who lights and infuses it with love. *“Bless every place in which your children dwell, Father; whether house or apartment, ranch or farm, grass hut or igloo, barracks or bungalow, cottage or shelter, prison cell or safe-house. Dwell in and with each of us and all of us. You have a home with us, here, always, and we know that we will have a home with you, forever.”*

October 14, 2024

...see, I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.

Isaiah 48:10

Ah, yes. The place to which none of us wants to go— the furnace of adversity. Usually, we don’t know that we’re headed for that furnace until we feel its heat. We don’t see trouble coming. The days when crises descend upon us are not marked on the calendar, like holidays or new moons. Adversity tends to pounce on us from out of the blue. The examples are endless— job loss, illness, infidelity, loss in any form. Many verses, such as today’s, suggest that God leads us to this “furnace of adversity” to test us, to temper us, to refine us, as metal is refined in fire. Opinions on this vary. I’m inclined to think that God uses our trials, that God turns our troubles – someday, somehow – into good, for us or for those who follow us. That might not be of much comfort if we are currently feeling the heat of some furnace of adversity, but just as we know that no storm lasts forever ... sunshine and clear skies always, *always*, return ... we can also know that even in adversity, God is with us.

October 15, 2024

And he has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

Journalist David Brooks wrote something very thought provoking. He said that we each have two distinct sets of qualities: resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are qualities that are measurable; assessable skills that seem to define us: how far we've gone in school, the jobs we've had, the work we've done, the skills we've developed, our achievements, and the awards we may have received. Eulogy virtues are those qualities that people will be talking about on the day of our funeral— our compassion, trustworthiness, kindness, love for others, empathy; the things which people appreciate, admire, and will remember about us. Brooks suggests that part of our problems – individually and collectively – is that we spend far too much time developing and polishing our resume virtues, and far too little time cultivating the eulogy virtues, those qualities that touch people's hearts and lives, that reflect our soul-center, and that will be remembered long after the last rose has been placed on our grave. Perhaps that's what Micah – and later, Jesus – was trying to teach us and show us: that we are so much more than what we have or what we do; that it is our love, our laughter, and our connectedness to God and to each other that resound in heaven. It is our eulogy virtues that matter most, now and forever.

October 16, 2024

The righteous are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

Psalms 1:3

Some people seem to have lives that are truly blessed. They have personal happiness and professional success. They have an optimism and joy that come from within; a perpetual hopefulness and a genuine thankfulness. Too often we think of this as some form of luck, or – even more erroneously – a kind of favoritism from God. But perhaps certain attitudes and beliefs – gratitude, joyfulness, hope – bring their own rewards, and make us better able to see and receive blessings. Perhaps those who appear to be 'like trees planted by streams of water' are those who simply know where the light and the living water are, and they choose to be there. If we will ... if we want ... we can be among the righteous, yielding our fruit in its season, knowing that our leaves will not wither, if we are where the streams of water are. We were born at a certain time and place, into certain circumstances, but where we go is our choice. In some ways, where we are lastingly planted is our choice.

October 17, 2024

Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed...

Isaiah 1:17

In today's verse, we have a guideline for right and joyful living. Most of us know what it means to do good, whether it is helping someone directly or supporting the service of others. Seeking justice can be as simple as never lying, always speaking the truth, or it can be as challenging as defending those who have been unjustly accused or unfairly stigmatized. It takes courage – no other word for it – to stand up for someone else, especially if they are weak and we are the ones with power. When we hear the word 'justice', we think of courtrooms and verdicts. We forget that many unjust comments and accusations are made around the water cooler, the lunch table, or even at church coffee hour. Injustice – like justice – has a wide reach. As for rescuing the oppressed, we can certainly support national and international organizations on the front lines of assisting the oppressed, but we can begin even more simply. We can stop thinking of them as being different from us. Having a different religion, a different language, a different homeland, or a different skin color does not make them more or less human than we are. Respecting our basic, shared humanity is not only honorable and – in today's world – necessary, but it is also a holy act, aligning us with God. We can begin anywhere in our heartfelt desire to adhere to today's verse. The important thing is that we do so.

October 18, 2024

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 18:10

I love Halloween. The front of my house is decorated weeks in advance, and by 5:30 on Trick or Treat night I am waiting near the door with baskets of treats. When our neighborhood was brand new and bursting with young families, I'd get 150 or more children coming to the door. A dozen years later, it was more like 50-70. Last year, I was back up to giving out more than 100 treats. I especially love the littlest ones, costumed as caterpillars or lady bugs or bunnies, often carried in their parents' arms. The kids, of all ages, invariably say 'thank you', and parents often take photos or videos of the excursion. I think it's the unguarded delight of the kids that makes this ritual a joy. They're happy to come calling, they're excited to get treats, and they naturally assume you're happy to see them. The kids may be wearing costumes, but – unlike many adults – they aren't wearing disguises. Their feelings are upfront and visible. A few years ago, one little guy exemplified this openness. Dressed as a cowboy, he held out his pumpkin container and shouted "Trick or treat!" I told him that I had to step back inside to get more candy ... and he followed me right in! He walked into my library, looked around with his mouth open, and announced, "Wow! This is the coolest room *ever!*" He then plopped himself down on the recliner, leaned it back, and asked, "Can I come here again tomorrow?" His embarrassed parents followed him in and apologized, but I assured them that it was the best compliment imaginable. Maybe you have to be five or six years old to be that open and natural. Wouldn't it be nice if we, at least sometimes, could let that kind of delight, appreciation, and openness flow through us? It would be a way of letting God-light, the light of life itself, shine in us, from us, and through us ... to others and to the world. All treats, no tricks.

October 19, 2024

And if I have, indeed, erred, my error remains with me.

Job 19:4

Most of us hate making mistakes, especially when they're our fault. I made such a mistake when I used the same Meditation twice, in August and September. When I caught it, too late to change it, I was mortified. I know why it happened, but that's no consolation. Writing is the easy, wonderful part of creating the Meditations, but typing and formatting are not fun. In order to fit the Meditations into a format, I re-write, cut, and sometimes substitute Meditations. Alas, I made the same substitution twice. They say confession is good for the soul. Maybe that good feeling will kick in when my remorse fades. But I know that humility, the reminder that we're flawed and not perfect, is always good for us. *"Thank you, Lord, for doses of humility and for the gift of being human."*

October 20, 2024

Sow with a view toward righteousness, reap in accordance with kindness...

Hosea 10:12

We've heard it often: 'You reap what you sow.' In most of our lives, that proves to be true. Dishonesty and cruelty come back to hurt their perpetrators. Kindness and compassion open the doors to friendship and to being at peace with ourselves. While much of life is routine, little of it is accidental. Doing things (sowing) with the intent of being righteous – ethical, honest – is a choice. So is being kind, loving, and compassionate. How we live our lives is our choice, and we will reap as we sow. Let us sow wisely and lovingly.

October 21, 2024

Your sins have deprived you of good.

Jeremiah 5:25

This verse has powerful – and useful – simplicity. It tells us something we often don't want to admit: that our deliberate wrongdoings tend to bring more wrong upon us. When we sin, when we knowingly do, say, or think things that we know are wrong – that are aligned with what is dark, negative, and evil – we set into motion a pattern, perhaps even a force, that not only generates more negatives, but which seems to also block the good we might otherwise enjoy. The examples are endless. Choosing to take drugs can lead to being unemployable which leads to poverty. Holding onto anger and ill will in relationships blocks communication which prevents understanding and healing. All are negatives born of wrong choices. We know what sin is. We know what it is to say, think, or do wrong things. We know. And we know that it is up to us to choose what is right. We know.

October 22, 2024

...he calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Romans 4:17

Perhaps we can imagine that God – an almost incomprehensible force of creation – called into existence all that is, all that surrounds us: clouds, willow trees, sunflowers, grapes, kids playing in the leaves, giraffes thundering across a plain, glaciers standing majestic, and the little ant carrying a crumb like a trophy. All the things that exist. But today’s verse is written in the present tense – “calls” into existence – and it is unlikely that it means creating the two-billionth sunflower or the last giraffe that was born. Instead, it suggests that there are other things being created, now, that were not part of creation in the past, and things that will come that we can’t even imagine today. Such is the mystery of the Creator. It can be deeply intriguing to contemplate, spiritually as well as intellectually, what might exist tomorrow that doesn’t exist today. The effect of that contemplation is heightened when we project it onto the screen of our lives. What might happen for us or to us that has never happened before? What – or who – might come into our lives? How will our lives evolve as they move through this existence and into the life to come ... and perhaps other lives that follow? These are fascinating things to think about, and while we don’t know answers, we know that a Creator God is ... still and always ... calling into existence that which has not yet existed, in the world and in our lives. Fascinating. Humbling.

October 23, 2024

“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

Isaiah 42:9

God is always doing new things in our lives, but often we’re too busy to notice, too afraid to welcome new things. God’s surprises are intended for our good, to bless us, to help us grow more fully as God’s much-loved children. If we look back in our lives, most of us can see so many blessings— promises fulfilled, even promises that seemed like impossible dreams. If we listen closely in prayer and in our quiet time with God, we can hear that inner voice, hear God’s words of promise for what is to come, for the blessings that await us, even before they appear on the horizon. *“Thank you, Lord, for past blessings and blessings yet to come. Help me to hear your words and your voice, to sense and to know and to believe the promises you are making to me today, for the blessings you will give me tomorrow.”*

October 24, 2024

Jesus said, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whosoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”

Mark 10:42-43

We often think that the difference between Jesus’s messages, and those of other religions in his time, was shown in his selfless, loving sacrifice on the cross. But there were earlier signs of this difference, from Jesus’s rejection of worldly wealth and power to Jesus’s many acts of healing, compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness. Today’s verse illustrates another difference. It calls us to be servants. It calls for the great to be humble, and the humble to be exalted; for rulers to be merciful and the powerful to be just. In these words, these astonishing concepts that help to define Christianity, we can find the standards by which we can evaluate rulers, leaders, those with power, and those who wish to be rulers. Are they genuinely humble? Do they seek justice? Are they truthful and honest, kind and compassionate, forgiving and merciful? Do they behave like servants or tyrants? Mark gives us the answers in Jesus’s own words. These are the standards for those who wish to become great.

October 25, 2024

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Psalm 10:1

One of the hardest things for us to believe is that God is with us in trouble, in the worst moments of our lives. That’s understandable. When we’re terrified by a threat, a loss, or a crisis, we feel alone and abandoned. It can seem as if no one is near us, not even God. When nothing around us has any signs of hope, when we see no escape, no solution, no miracle on the horizon, that alone-ness intensifies, as does the belief that even God is far off, hidden, and not interested. Those are the times when we have to simply set our will to believe in God and to trust God. In the absence of evidence, in the absence of proof, we can simply choose to believe, choose to reach for the best that can happen, not the worst. We can begin by saying, “I believe”, even if there are chasms of doubt within us. God understands. God does not expect our faith to be perfect. And, whether we’re

struggling to believe or to hope or to forgive, we can always turn to the prayer used by Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom: “*Lord, make me willing to be willing*” to trust and believe.

October 26, 2024

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5

It’s a well-known line from a comic strip: “I love mankind, it’s people I can’t stand.” We all understand those words. We’d have less stress ... if it wasn’t for people. We’d be calmer and more peaceful ... if it wasn’t for people. We could accomplish more ... if it wasn’t for people. Whether they’re family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, a clerk in a store, or the driver who cut us off on Rt. 22, we all become irritated ... with people. But if we take on “the same mind as Christ Jesus” when we deal with people, something changes, in us, and sometimes, even in them. To be like Jesus in our dealings with others is to be open and accepting of people, just as they are. To respect the sanctity of their humanity, the fact that they are children of God. It is to understand that other people are as complex, strong, weak, fallible, silly, smart, scared, brave, good, bad, and vulnerable as we are. It is to see their hearts and souls as well as their bodies and actions. It is to understand, as Jesus did, that there is no ‘we’ and ‘them’, there is only ‘us’, and we are all connected. It isn’t easy to cultivate the mindset of Jesus, but it is necessary, especially if we want to stop climbing the walls every time we have a problem with one of those pesky ‘people’. Maybe someday we can say, “I love mankind. I even like people.”

October 27, 2024

The Lord said to Moses, “You shall speak all that I command you...” Exodus 7:2

Several lessons are embedded in today’s verse. First, God told Moses to speak. He didn’t ask or suggest; he told Moses what he wanted him to do. God is often open to dialogue with us, but sometimes his instructions are very direct. Second, Moses had no confidence in his ability to speak or to persuade Pharaoh – or anyone else – with his words. God reassured Moses. God would give him the words. And God makes it clear that he is with Moses— in this, they’re partners. Moses is not alone. In our lives, God gives us the tools and talents that we need to do his will; but often, we don’t make that discovery until we say ‘Yes’ to God and step out in faith to obey him. God was with Moses. God is with us.

October 28, 2024

“Let the little children come unto me, do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.” Mark 10:14

Watching the youngest children in a family is fascinating. Over the years, as our family’s newborns became toddlers, I saw something intriguing. Even with their different personalities, from about age one to three, they have all done the same things. First, they express distress and joy with equal directness. There are no pretenses, no deceptions, and that is refreshing, even if it can be loud. Second, they reach for people. Whether it is for comfort or because they want to be closer to what’s going on, they instinctively reach their arms out to touch others. Third, when they are old enough to hold food in their hands, they hold out pieces of cheese, strands of spaghetti, or half-eaten cookies. They want to feed us, to share. They take a bite, then hold it out for us to enjoy. The desire to share is innate. Fourth, little ones become genuinely excited by new people, new toys, new games, new things to see. Birds’ nests, laundry in the basket, the puppy next door, the laces in their shoes— everything is fascinating, at least for a few minutes. And fifth, they’re ready to explore, whether it’s a ride to the store, helping to make ice cream, or watering a plant. Everything is an adventure, and they don’t have to be coaxed into joining in. I wonder— when do we lose these gifts along life’s way? When do we begin to hesitate to show our feelings? When do we become reluctant to reach out— for comfort, companionship, affection, or support? When does sharing – holding out a cookie, or anything else, for someone to enjoy – stop being second nature? When do we lose the excitement, the genuine joy, of everyday living: going for a car ride, looking at autumn flowers, stopping for ice cream? And when do we start saying ‘No’ more often than we say ‘Yes’ when we are invited to do something, try something new, have a big adventure or a little one? No wonder Jesus loved to be with children— they know how to show feelings honestly, to reach out, share, be excited, and say ‘Yes’ to life. Perhaps it’s not too late, whatever our ages now. Perhaps we can re-learn these holy lessons, reclaim that natural wisdom, goodness, and grace of childhood. We can even start slowly. Want a cookie?

October 29, 2024

Reuben said to his brothers, “Shed no blood...”

Genesis 37:22

Reuben’s statement sounds peace-loving, until we remember its context. Reuben and his brothers were sons of Jacob, living in the land of Canaan. The youngest of the brothers was Joseph, a teenager, the son of Jacob’s old age. Jacob felt special affection for him, even giving him a coat of many colors. Joseph had dreams, which he was naïve enough to share with his brothers. In one, their sheaves of wheat bowed down to him. In another, the stars bowed down to him. His brothers’ resentment grew even stronger. When Jacob sent Joseph to join his brothers as they grazed their flocks, some of them spoke of killing the detested youngest brother. Reuben had a better idea. The brothers placed Joseph into a pit, from which he was sold into slavery. Technically, they had “shed no blood”, but they knew what they had done. Reuben, especially, wept with remorse at what they’d done, not only to their brother, but also to their father who would be heartbroken. It was decades before God would bring a reunion and a reconciliation to the family; years in which Joseph suffered searing injustice, his father suffered endless grief, and his brothers suffered deep guilt. God turned the brothers’ sin to eventual good, but it is a sin that should not have happened. “Shed no blood” means nothing if we still intend to do harm. If we’re saying intimate things to someone other than our spouse ... *‘but it’s only on social media’*, it is harm. If we’re gossiping about someone ... *‘but everybody knows about her already’*, it is harm. If we cheat on our taxes ... *‘but everybody does it’*, it is harm. “Shed no blood” means nothing if we’re still doing wrong, still doing harm.

October 30, 2024

(Paul says) For as there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. 1 Corinthians 8:6

Belief in an entity – a loving, creating force – that is greater than we are is a matter of choice. So are the religious affiliations that usually accompany such faith. We can respond, or not, to that calling in our hearts. In truly free countries and societies, no one is forced to adhere to any specific religion, or any religion at all. Across the world and throughout the ages, people of faith have found what they believe to be true in the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed; in the Bible, the Tao, the Torah, and the writings of mystics. For Christians, Paul says, the reality of a Creator God – a loving, living, life-giving God – and the reality of Christ, he who was God-become-human, define the parameters of our faith. We learn from the Bible, and we can always be open to the wisdom and inspiration in the writings of other faiths, just as we should welcome non-Christians to seek and learn from the teachings of Jesus. Such respect and freedom are a great blessing. So is our choice to affirm our faith and to practice it in peace, love, and freedom.

October 31, 2024

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?”

Matthew 7:11

The family members around the picnic table were reminiscing about childhood days and about friends and family long gone. Kathie recalled days when money wasn’t just tight, it was often non-existent. Her dad had left the family, and her mom’s factory wage was stretched thin. But every day in summer, her mom managed to find the money (20 cents) for Kathie to take the bus to the pool so that she could enjoy swimming and being with the other kids. And every day, her grandfather would give Kathie a dime to give to her cousin, Joe – whose family finances were just as precarious – so that Joe could buy french fries at the pool. Little things in the eyes of the world – 20 cents to take a bus, a dime for french fries – but those few coins not only provided a day of fun in the summer heat (and something to eat), they also allowed Kathie and Joe to be with friends and to feel included. I’m sure Kathie’s mother and grandfather – each long-deceased – never imagined that their kindness would be remembered, and that they would be spoken of with love, more than 70 years later. But often, it is the small gestures, the seemingly insignificant things, that have the greatest effect in someone’s life; an effect remembered with love and gratitude, and shared with next generations, in decades and even centuries to come.