

What Matters?

There is a popular phrase with young people these days: “Whatever.” It often means, “So what,” which also means “What does it matter?”

So, what matters? That question is huge. Why? Because we invest our lives in what matters most to us. If we don’t know what really matters, then we have a really hard time knowing what to do with our lives. We’re not sure how best to invest our time, or energy, our gifts or talents. In short, we’re not sure how to invest ourselves.

Central and perhaps more critical to the question of what matters is a more personal question: Do I matter?

The so-called “I” generation has worked hard at giving each of us a sense of personal identity and importance, and that’s mostly good. But if we pry into the hearts of many of our young (and maybe not so young) people they still wonder, “Do I matter, really?” I know some young people who ask that question a lot. That was the topic of conversation I had with a young person the other day. He thought that he mattered to his mom and dad. But in his words, “They’re supposed to care.” He really questioned whether he mattered to anybody else. Do I matter to those who don’t have to love me? My friends, my boss and co-workers, my class mates. Do I matter to them? And if I do, why? What matters seems to be up in the air for many of us. And as such, we’ve lost our bearings.

This series of devotions and Bible studies is designed to help us find our bearings once again. God has a great deal to say about what matters. He gave us the Bible with the deliberate intention of answering these questions. As we listen to Him and talk together we will be able to answer the question clearly and with genuine conviction: “I know what matters. And I commit my life to it.”

What Matters?

Week One

Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day One: We're our Father's choice, not accidents

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

God starts His conversation with us with these words, "In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth . . ." He tells us right up front, "This universe and everything in it is no accident. I made all of it. Everything begins with me and connects to me."

He's also telling us that creation is personal to Him, that is, an act of His love. Perfect love exists between the three persons of the Trinity and it's out of that perfect, personal love that God created His universe and made people the crown of His creation. We were not made or evolved from some generic spiritual omnipotence. God is a person, with a personal Name, Who desires to know and be known personally. Personal love stands behind God's every action.

God goes on to say, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Of everything that God made, you and I were made to be like Him, that is, to reflect His person, character, and purpose. "Let us make man" doesn't simply tell us how we got here; it also speaks to "Why." We are here because God wants us here. Our existence in this world is God's idea. No human being is an accident; each is His personal choice.

In other words, we actually matter to Him. That points to relationships. God chose to make each of us in order to relate to each of us. Being created in His image means among many things that we are persons distinct from God, who have the capacity to relate to Him and one another personally--to know and be known in the Biblical sense of those words.

How come so many of us start thinking differently about ourselves when someone else takes a genuine interest in us? Is it because once I matter to someone else, I matter to myself. It seems like the question "Do I Matter?" is only answered in relationship to someone else. Why is it that a young teenage boy, complete with a "Whatever" attitude, suddenly acts differently when someone significant—usually a girl--takes a personal interest in him? He often pays more attention to his appearance and his "whatever" attitude begins to soften. His relationship with

her awakens in him the fact that he really matters. He is significant. And that makes a lot of other things matter too.

In thinking about what really matters, St. Paul once wrote, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who had blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:3-4)*. We mattered to God before the beginning of time. We’ve always mattered to Him.

Prayer: Lord God, We thank you that You have made us in Your image giving us value as we live in a relationship with You. Amen.

Week One
Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day Two: We belong to God our Father. That makes us Significant

I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

God gave us two accounts of creation, each telling a different side of the story. The first is comprehensive; the second is personal. In Genesis 1 we learn that God, the all-powerful One, made everything. In Genesis 2 we learn that He has a Name: Yahweh. Knowing God's Name makes all the difference in our relationship with Him. Names matter. Being named says we matter.

Most of us have pet names for our children. I have one for each of mine. I call my second daughter, "Bird." I'm not sure how I came to that name. Perhaps it's because she is such a free spirit. Whatever the reason, the name Bird stuck and continues to stick right up to the present. She's married and a mother of three, but she is still my Bird.

My daughter loves that name--for no other reason than it is my name for her. It signifies a special bond that we share together. By it she knows she belongs to me, that is, she's treasured by me.

God says to each of us through His prophet, Isaiah, "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*" God also tells us that He has chosen a "new name" for each of us, one that's unique to each one of us (Revelation 2:17). If you will, it is His pet name for you and me. It signifies a special and personal bond that we each share with God Himself. It is His way of telling us we belong to Him, that is, He counts us as His treasures.

Prayer: Jesus, You have made us Your own so we thank You that You have given us a name that reminds us we are treasured. Amen.

Week One

Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day Three: We are God "Originals". That gives us Identity.

[Then] the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7)

God tells us that He actually formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into him His divine breath of life. He doesn't tell us exactly how He did this forming, or how He breathed into Adam His divine breath or spirit, but it's clear He was the maker, that is, He was the craftsman. Craftsmen—be they authors, sculptors, artists, potters, composers, carpenters, architects, metal workers, engineers, etc. — join their creative genius with a certain medium and produce a unique product or work. The completed work combines the craftsman or creator's heart and mind with the medium or materials with which he chooses to work.

Different from being manufactured by a machine, the workmanship of a craftsman is personal, that is, he or she has personally designed the work and built or formed it. In so many words, it's "hand made". Also different from being manufactured by a machine no two works by a craftsman are exactly alike. Each is unique.

God tells us through St. Paul that each of us is His workmanship. *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"* (Ephesians 2:10). A couple of key points about this word workmanship. The word workmanship means more than a product that some workman made or put together. It suggests a personal connection between the workman and the finished product. The product, in some specific way, reflects the person and skill of the workman. In other words, *the product naturally gives testimony to its creator*. A painting by Picasso will be spotted as exactly that by anyone who knows art. A Mozart composition bears the mind, heart, and skill of Mozart, not Brahms, Beethoven, or any other composer. St. Paul explains this same point in Romans 1:20, *"For [God's] invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in [His workmanship]*. (Paul uses the this word, workmanship, only twice: here in Romans 1:20 and in Ephesians 2:10. It always points back to God's personal workmanship.)

The second key point is that God's workmanship—you and me--has a purpose. He designed and made us according to His own personal will and purpose. He had a good reason for making each of us. St. Paul told us *"we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works."* That's purpose. Knowing what His purpose and will is for each of us goes a long ways in helping us understand "what matters."

The lesson to be learned for today is clear: We are each a signed original of the Master.

Prayer: Lord God, We thank you for giving us a unique identity and purpose so our lives have significance. Amen.

Week One
Made by God: We matter
But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

Day Four: We are loved by God. That gives us Value

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. (1 John 3:16)

Yesterday we briefly explored the fact that God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. As such Adam was God's workmanship—a personal creation reflecting God's person, character, and attributes. The attributes that Paul identified were God's "*eternal power*" and His "*divine nature*." By looking at all of the natural beauty, uniqueness, complexity, and sheer immenseness of the universe we easily say, "Wow! God is powerful; He is all-powerful!" That obviously fits with His divine nature. His power is huge and by itself points to the fact that He is God. But is His power the main thing He wants us to grab hold of when we look at creation? Or is there something more that He would like us to grasp?

Another way to ask it: Since we are His workmanship we obviously reflect or show His creative genius and ability. What is it He wants to say to the world through each of us? St. John tells us that Jesus is the "*Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world*" (*Revelation 13:8*). That is a hard one to put our heads around. Even so, it tells us that you and I—in fact all of creation—are not simply or primarily products of God's power. We are also products of His sacrificial love.

It would be humanly impressive if a great sculptor invested all of his life's savings into creating a single, magnificent work of art. We would be impressed by his dedication and sacrifice. We would also assume that this work of art is incredibly valuable to the sculptor. We would call it his life's greatest accomplishment. God did even more. He not only invested all of His eternal power into creating this universe including you and me. He invested His own life. In other words, He sacrificed Himself to create you and me and the rest of the world. How valuable, then, do you think each of us is to our Master Creator?

Another way to look at this is to ask a question: What's our value? In other words, "What did it cost God to make us?" What was the price tag? We can answer that first by saying He used a lot, maybe even most of His eternal power. But St. John tells us that Jesus is the "*Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world*." That means that God calculated the cost of creating us before He started the project. He knew the rebellion, the Fall, the consequences, the death, the price tag to buy it back and still proceeded. The price tag was not only His power, but His life. He would end up sacrificing Himself in order to create what was in His heart and mind to make. He counted the cost and went ahead with the plan. What's that all about? St. John writes, "*By this we know love, that [God] laid down His life for us.*"

The next time you picture in your mind's eye God forming Adam from the dust of the ground, study His hands as He works. They have nail scars.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Thank You for not counting the cost of our redemption that we may be Yours. Amen.

Week One
Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day Five: We serve with God. That gives us Purpose

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

We know that we are God's workmanship, created by His unconditional love and inexhaustible power. But why; what's our purpose? We return to this Bible verse in Ephesians: we were *"created in Christ Jesus, for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* Let's consider a couple of things.

First, we were created or made in Jesus Christ. That means that our being here on this earth is completely wrapped up in Him. Our source and purpose in life is found in Jesus. Secondly, God wants good things to happen in and for His creation and He personally chose and prepared each of us to do them. We have specific roles (if you like theater) or positions (if you really like sports) to play in the cosmic plan that He designed. No exceptions, each of us has a specific purpose.

In the beginning of creation, God made Adam and Eve and gave them a specific purpose and assignment. God said, *"Let us make man in our image after our likeness. And let them have dominion over . . . all the earth"* (Genesis 1:26). These words do not apply only to the first man and woman, but to all of their descendants including us. God created us to rule over His creation in His behalf. Let's not think that God didn't care to oversee and take care of His wonderful world, so He put us in charge. That idea could not be farther from the truth. The care, nurture, and growth of His creation matters big time to Him. But what also matters is that He cares, nurtures, and grows His creation through us, His children. He loves having us participate with Him in doing the good things that He is doing. Thus, He made us to be the "crown of His creation" and His partners in serving it. So He made us the rulers and servants of His creation.

The business of ruling and at the same time serving seem to bump into each other. Jesus talked to His disciples a lot about that. Once He told them, *"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . But it shall be so among you. But whoever would be great among you, must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you [that is, the ruler] must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:42-45).

Serving is always about someone else. The focus of attention is on the one being served, not on the one who is serving. That's how God designed our purpose in life. We are here for others, not primarily or simply here for ourselves. Getting that turned around really confuses what truly matters--to Him and ultimately to us as well.

We began this devotion with the thought that we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” We take our cue from Him. You, me, and everything else in creation is a result of His personal service—the investment of His eternal power and His sacrificial love. That is how God works. As we just read, “He gave His life as a ransom for many.” This universe was designed by a Servant who gave everything He is and has for it to exist. It operates properly when we follow His lead and serve others. “What’s in it for me?” simply mucks things up.

Prayer: Father in Heaven, help us to be those co-ruler servants who know how to wash feet.
Amen.

Week One
Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day Six: We believe the Lie, "You're in this Alone."

Did God actually say . . ." (Genesis 3:1)

Begin this devotion by reading Genesis 3:1-7. It records the story of humankind's fall into sin. The fall—more like a plunge—into sin by Adam and Eve really mucked things up. It introduced chaos into a world ordered perfectly by God in His love and service. God had entrusted His creation to His people. He placed into their hands the privilege and ability to serve His universe with Him, or choose a different path. Whichever way Adam and Eve chose to go, the creation had to follow. That is how much God entrusted His creation to them.

The plunge into sin was predicated on a lie. The evil one told Eve that God had not been completely honest with Adam and her when He commanded them not to eat the fruit of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil". "God told you that eating the fruit will kill you. It won't. You're not going to die," Satan told them. "Actually your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. God is quite aware of this possibility and He doesn't want anyone else to be like Him."

The real lie wasn't what Satan said about the fruit. It's what he said about God and His relationship with Adam and Eve. God created them out of His love and delighted in serving His creation with and through them. Their relationship was built on unconditional love and unquestioned trust. Satan put a question mark in Eve's mind regarding God's love for them and His trustworthiness. That's all it took. He managed to create doubt where trust once reigned supreme. Was God holding out? In the end, was he really in this thing for Himself?

Betrayed trust breaks relationships, because trust is the bond that holds them together. Once trust is broken, there is nothing that can hold the relationship together. Each member in the relationship becomes disconnected. Each finds himself or herself suddenly alone. And that's where the evil one was headed. His plan was to break the trust bond between people and the Lord. So he started with a deceitful question, "Did God actually say . . .?" In so many words he told her, "I hate to be the one to break the news to you, but God's not on your side. You're really in this thing alone."

Since that day in the Garden of Eden we have found it impossible to take that question mark out of our hearts. It's built on a complete and unfounded lie, yet we find ourselves believing it. Because we find ourselves questioning whether or not we really matter to God, and whether or not we can trust what He tells us, we consistently make choices from a position of profound fear and insecurity. We think we are really in this thing alone and we do not know what to do.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews considered this very dilemma when he warned: *“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for [God] has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).* Is that why we are so tempted to trust our material wealth to take care of us? Is it because we believe that we have been forsaken? We’re in it alone? It comes down to the question Satan proposed, “Are we really in this thing alone?” Just like Adam and Eve, we can choose to believe the lie, or we can choose to believe the Lord, “I will never leave you or forsake you, I promise.” God hanging on a cross for our sake should tell us clearly whether or not He is telling the truth.

Dear Jesus, You have given Yourself that we may be with You. We thank You for making Yourself our brother so we are not alone. Amen.

Week One
Made by God: We matter

*But now thus says the Lord, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)*

Day Seven: We live the lie, Broken and Lost

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

Biblically speaking, to love the Lord is to know the Lord; to know the Lord is to love Him. We often read in the Old Testament that a man *knew* his wife and she gave birth to a child. Knowing someone that intimately exists only in the bonds of Godly love.

Years ago I was teaching a group of lay leaders in the Philippines about the Biblical understanding of a man "knowing" his wife. During supper some of the guys gathered around the senior leader of the group and asked him a question, "Ama (father) how well do you know your wife?" Having been married some forty years to her he answered, "As well as it is possible."

In the spirit of good fun, they plied him with questions such as, "Ama, how many teeth does she have?" "Ama, how many bones are in her body?" "Ama, how many hairs are on the top of her head?"

To each question he answered, "I don't know."

Jokingly they concluded, "Ama, you do not know Ina (mother) very well at all."

"Oh, I know her very well," he responded. "I know what makes her laugh. I know what makes her cry. I know the sound of her feet on the garden path. I know her."

Adam and Eve knew God that well until the day they chose to listen to Satan's lie and doubt God's love. After they ate the fruit they "heard the sound of the Lord's feet on the garden path" but no longer knew Him. The sound of God's footsteps didn't fill them with love; it filled them with fear. Their relationship with God was broken. It caused them to run away and hide from Him. We've been running from God ever since. Adam and Eve also found that they had to hide from each other. They made aprons of fig leaves to hide their nakedness and shame from each other. We've been wearing emotional aprons of one size or another ever since.

In no time, the brokenness of sin showed its ugly head. When asked by God whether or not he had eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam retorted, "*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.*" "It's her fault, not mine." From that moment on it was every man or woman for himself.

While Adam and Eve's hearts had changed toward God and toward each other, God's heart had not. He loved them just as much now as before they sinned. It was His love that caused Him to come looking for them in the garden that day. God became the seeker that day. He donned missionary garb and waded into the quagmire of our sin-filled world. With these simple words, "*Where are you, Adam,*" He began His work of seeking and saving the lost. From these words to the end of Revelation the Scriptures tell the story of a missionary God who persists in coming to his sworn enemies in order to restore them to Himself and by so doing restore them to their divine image and divine vocation to serve the world. Here we get a real glimpse into the heart of God. Finding those who are broken and lost matters most to Him.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for seeking me as You have loved sinners with Your everlasting love. Amen

What Matters?

Week Two

Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)*

Day One: Restoration--Returned to our original identity and purpose.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

Restoration is serious business. I recently found a website of a French craftsman, who specializes in restoring antique furniture and other heirlooms. The website states, "Jean-Jacques Bernard takes great pride in his history of meeting and exceeding his client's expectations, while maintaining the integrity of the original woodwork." The words, "while maintaining the integrity of the original woodwork" caught my eye. This emphasis is so important to Mr. Bernard that he personally subscribes to the "French Charter of Restoration for Antique Furniture." The charter's objectives state,

- Each article has a separate existence and must be considered in its entirety.
- It has a history, its original shape, the materials it is made of and information about the technology used to manufacture it.
- The responsibility of the restorer [are several]: to protect the article, restore it to its true form, help understand it and therefore ascertain that its aesthetical and historical tenor survive.

Under the rules that govern the restorer's relationship with the article we read:

- Any intervention means a modification of the article. The restorer must abide by the physical, historical, and aesthetical entirety of the article on which he works.
- It is contrary to the ethics of restoration to modify or hide the true reality of an article.

In short, Jean-Jacques Bernard's craft as a "restorer" requires (1) that he appreciate each article as unique, a one of a kind, (2) that he 'know' the article by learning everything he can about it, and (3) that he bring the article back to the original design and purpose of its creator. In doing those things he will bring great joy to the present owner.

The website goes on to tell about a 150 year old clock, a family heirloom of incredible value. It fell from the wall one evening and was smashed to pieces. The owner swept all of the broken pieces that he could find into a bag and brought them to Jean-Jacques in hopes that he might be able to salvage any of it. A few weeks later he returned to Jean-Jacques' shop to find the heirloom completely restored and in perfect running order. He exclaimed, "It's incredible! You're a magician!"

King David found great joy and comfort in the “magic touch” of God on his own life: “The Lord is my shepherd . . . He restores my soul.” He understood that God had sought him out when he was lost and restored his broken soul to be whole once again. Being a shepherd, David also knew that it was impossible to restore himself. So many times he had gone searching after lost sheep only to find them in completely helpless situations. It was up to him alone to save the young lamb’s life.

Likewise with you and me. It’s completely impossible for us to restore ourselves to what God originally intended us to be. Try as long and as hard as we might, it’s not going to happen. For us to be restored to what we were meant to be, we must be restored to our God, since our life and purpose are wrapped up in Him. Thus the prophet’s prayer, “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!”

St. Paul tells us, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”* Jesus made us new again--that is, He gave us back ourselves--by bringing us back to Himself. He took our lives and purpose, broken by sin into a million pieces, and made them new again in Himself. Like Jean-Jacques Bernard, Jesus’ appreciates each of us as unique. He knows us perfectly and completely, and is determined that everything He intended for us to be and do will not be lost. His healing touch restores each of us to the original design and purpose of why He made us. In so doing He brings great joy to the owner—God Himself.

An essential part of that “wholeness” is that we are in “perfect running order,” that is, we are back in the service of our Lord. Our service is not one of hanging on a wall in our Father’s house, keeping perfect time. Rather, He has given us the ministry of restoring others just as we’ve been restored. He knows that such work will give as much joy to us as it does to Him.

Prayer: Lord God, You have redeemed and restored me. May I reflect Your handiwork in my life. Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Two: Restoration--Our Father's statement of value

Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost. (Luke 15:6)

Begin this devotion by reading Luke 15:1-10. Two things stand out in these stories that tell us how valuable the "lost" items are to the ones who lost them: Diligence and Joy. Jesus cast the stories from the vantage point, "Which of you owning . . ." to emphasize that something or someone is never simply lost. They are always lost to someone else who cares very deeply for them.

The owner of one hundred sheep was so concerned about the one lamb that had strayed that nothing else seemed to matter to him. He left the other ninety-nine in order to recover the one lost. At that point, the lost lamb was more valuable to him than all the other ones combined.

Likewise, the woman who lost one of her silver coins committed herself fully to the search. Jesus said that she lit a lamp, swept the house, and sought *diligently* until she found it. That's simply to say, nothing else mattered. She swept every nook and cranny, investing every waking moment in the search. She didn't stop searching until she found it. It's possible that she (and her poor husband) missed out on breakfast, lunch, and supper that day, and perhaps a good night's sleep as well. None of that mattered to her—only the coin. That coin was valued!

When each of the seekers found what they had lost they could not contain their joy. They had to call their friends and neighbors in order to celebrate. Obviously, the neighbors knew how much each of those lost possessions meant to the owners. Their recovery was worth a party. "So," Jesus tells us, "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.*" Our restoration is a big thing to God. He made searching for us his highest priority and didn't quit until He found us. Nothing else mattered! Because of His diligence each of us has been restored to Him. Here we are not talking about sheep, coins, or other property. We are talking about you and me as *God's children*. Can there be anything more distressing than a child who is lost? Is there anything that brings greater joy to a parent, then to have His child finally found? He has us back safe and sound. Nothing else matters.

Prayer: Lord God, We thank You for seeking us when we were lost. As You continue to seek the lost use us in Your search. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Three: Restoration was a choice. God didn't have to.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Many of us might still remember the Greek story about Daedalus and his lost son, Icarus. As is often the habit of young men, Icarus thought his father's advice about flying too high was a bit restrictive, so headed straight for the sun and to certain death. What tragedy! Icarus perished, and Daedalus bore the grief of his son's foolish decision for the rest of his life.

For those of us who have raised an Icarus, or been one ourselves, we connect immediately and deeply with the plight of Daedalus. There may come a time in our relationship with our children when we must watch them make choices that will ultimately bring them to ruin. To stop them would be to control them and in so doing turn them from real children into puppets made of wood. Depriving them of their choice to reject love's wisdom and embrace a fool's pride accomplishes very little. We may control their choices; we don't control their hearts. Only they do that.

So what's a parent to do? Simply choose to "outlove" them. That's what God did and continues to do with us. When looking back on my Icarus years what stands out is not so much the abundance of my foolishness, but the super abundance of God's love for me. St. Paul once wrote, "*But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20).*" The more I rebelled from our heavenly Father--the more I pushed Him away--the more He chose to love me. At that point love really is a choice. In the face of my ungodly self-centeredness and personal rebellion against our own loving Father, He chose to "outlove" me. That is, He chose to love me more than I could ever possibly hate or hurt Him. He chose to "outlove" you, too.

Jesus once said, "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). That makes sense to us. We might be willing to sacrifice ourselves for someone who truly matters to us and to whom we truly matter. We'd give up our life for one of our children. We might even be willing to sacrifice ourselves for someone of noble value, or for a noble cause. But we were none of these things. As fallen and broken people, we had no personal connection with God. We cared nothing about Him, caring only about ourselves. That's what it means to be a sinner. In fact, St. Paul tells us that we were actually God's enemies when He chose to restore us to Himself. That means that we were not looking for Him and, as lost as we were, we were not looking to be found.

So, why all this bother on God's part? The answer is simply, He wanted to. He chose to "outlove" us and won't change His mind. Despite our lack of love and respect for Him, despite our contempt of His will in our lives, and despite our very cruel and self-centered dismissal of all

that He gives and does for us every day, He chose not to reject us or abandon us to our own devices. Instead, He chose to do all within His power to “outlove” our selfish selves, and in doing so, restore us to our true selves—His beloved children.

When we say, “all within His power and love” we mean just that—“All.” He “outloved” Himself on the cross in order to end this madness on our part and to show us, finally, how much we matter to Him. It was the only way that He could tear down (or maybe melt down) the wall of hostility that we constructed between ourselves and Him. With the wall gone we are free once again to belong to Him and be the people He made us to be.

Can we choose to walk and ignore this incredible love? Absolutely. Can we choose to reject what He has done for us and continue to go our “Icarus” ways? For sure. But one thing we cannot do, we cannot force God to change His mind about loving us with all of His heart, soul, mind, and strength. That remains His choice.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank You for choosing to out love us restoring us to our true selves.
Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Four: God's cost, the Cross

For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Crosses and the torture of hanging on them bore a very different weight in the minds of those to whom Jesus first spoke these words, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Matthew 16:24). Jesus' disciples had seen many crosses dotting the highways and byways. Undoubtedly they had pushed past more than one procession of Roman soldiers leading a cross laden criminal to his execution. No insulation of time or civilization protected His disciples from the raw connections of men bearing crosses. Crosses had a single purpose--executing criminals. They didn't simple torture their victims; they killed them.

Bearing our cross, then, is not so much about *accepting our suffering* in this life as it is *owning our sin* and its eternal consequence. It's at this point we begin to consider the cost of discipleship. More than that we begin to grasp the price Jesus paid to restore us to Himself. If bearing my cross is, essentially, owning my sin, then, weigh what Jesus did when He went to the cross in your and my place. *"For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). In choosing to bear our cross, He chose to own our sin, all of it.

Jesus once compared Hell, the place of the lost, to a debtor's prison. In those days people went to prison for failure to pay their debts. The economics were simple: Each day in prison worked off a portion of the debt. Pay the debt, gain your freedom. So why does Hell last forever? Answer, the debt of our sin is that large.

Our debt, that's what our Lord was addressing on the cross. Jesus' cross was Rome's judgment against evil doers; it was also God's. *"Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree."* Not only did our Lord die a criminal, He was forsaken by His Father. From the depths of hell He cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Jesus knew that the cross meant complete and eternal separation from His Father. And he went there anyway.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews notes, *"that for the joy that was set before Him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising its shame"* (Hebrews 12:2). His joy stemmed from the fact that you and I would not have to endure the cross. We would not have to stay in hell's prison until our debt was paid. He paid it in full. The cost was His life; His reward, our restoration.

Prayer: Father, Your love is beyond comprehension to make Your Son be and bear our sin, so we may be righteous. Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Five: Restored relationships, Getting unstuck

We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)

The Gospel accounts of the first Easter divide into two sets of activities. The first set focuses on Jesus’ disciples faithfully traveling to our Lord’s tomb where they expected to find His still, lifeless body. Mary Magdalene and other women arrived there very early that morning only to find the tomb empty. Upon hearing the women’s report, Peter and John made a hasty visit to the tomb and even went inside to examine its contents. Later that morning Mary Magdalene returned to search for His missing body.

We really can’t blame them for going to His tomb. That’s where their Lord had been laid to rest. It was the last place they had seen Him, so it became their point of focus. The real point, however, was that He wasn’t there any longer. He had risen. Jesus had finished His business with death and had moved on. In order for the disciples to find Him they, too, had to move on from the place of the dead to find Him elsewhere. The problem is, they couldn’t. They were stuck.

That’s where we meet the second set of Easter activities. Jesus went looking for His disciples at their “tombs,” that is, where life had stopped for them. He personally sought each of them—some on the road, some in the upper room, one back at the tomb, another on the seashore. Each was stuck in his or her own tomb. Mary was frozen by inconsolable grief; Thomas by overwhelming doubt. Peter was stuck in his guilt for denying his Lord when Jesus needed him most. The rest were immobilized by fear.

He found each “dead” disciple and with a word brought each back to life. “Mary,” he said, and her grief turned to joy. He told Thomas, “Do not be faithless, but believe,” and doubt evaporated. Hearts burned within confused disciples as the Lord opened the Word and their minds to understand it. Peter’s guilt lifted as his Lord spoke with him by the sea.

What makes life stop for us? What losses get us stuck and discourage us from living the lives and doing the work the Lord entrusts to us? Perhaps circumstances outside of our control forced us to give up important hopes or dreams. Or, our sinfulness persuaded us to surrender our integrity or purity in a moment of temptation. Maybe our loss is a broken relationship or a loved one’s passing. Those losses can trap us like a personal tomb. Our lives stop at that place and can go no further.

It’s in these dark places that our resurrected Lord comes looking for us. There He speaks a Word to us that raises us up and gives us back our lives and ministries. *“Why do you look for the living*

among the dead?,” He asks us gently. And by “the living” He is referring to you and me as much as to Himself. “These tombs are not our place anymore. I was finished with them when I rose from the dead and you are finished with them too. You were raised with Me in your baptism. From this day forward you and I live on the outside of the tomb.”

Living on the outside is the business of our faith, the confidence that is ours in our resurrected Lord. It means that we do not let lost hopes or dreams rob us of pursuing new hopes and dreams. It means that we cling to God’s life giving Word of forgiveness instead of our past sins, and we move on in His grace. We live the reality, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”* It means that we apply completely God’s life giving Word of forgiveness to relationships that have been broken by sin, thus giving the opportunity to rebuild them in Christ. It means that the loss of our loved ones who died in the Lord is temporary. We remember the angels’ words—“Why do look for the living among the dead? “

Prayer: Lord Jesus, enlighten our dark places and free us from our self made tombs so we receive back our lives and ministries. Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Six: Restored purpose, Beyond forgiveness

“Feed my lambs.” (John 21:15)

One of the Easer stories begins with Peter telling the other disciples, “I’m going fishing.” There was a lot more to his words than simply an announcement of his evening plans. He was announcing his decision to return to the business he had been in when Jesus first called him to be a disciple. He had failed miserably at the discipleship job, so was going back to something that he thought he could manage. “I quit. I have to.” Peter concluded. I failed Him when He needed me most. He called me “the rock” and I crumbled like a sandcastle. I am no longer worthy to be called His disciple. Peter was stuck in his sin and its guilt.

As with other disciples, Jesus came looking for him. He found him on the sea having fished and struggled all night. He needed to be raised up and restored. So Jesus and Peter went for a walk along the shore. Three times Jesus asked him a question, “Simon, do you love me more than these?” The words pierced Peter’s heart like a dagger. His thoughts returned to the upper room where he promised the Lord that even if all the other disciples abandoned him, he would stay. Using Jesus’ standard for love, he vowed, “Even if I have to die, I will not leave you.” There’s no greater love than that.

But Peter hadn’t loved Jesus more than the others. He hadn’t loved Jesus at all. He knew that and it was tearing him apart. He was truly and deeply grieved. Only Jesus’ word of forgiveness would remove his guilt and heal his soul.

Jesus’ words of forgiveness are profound. He said simply, “Feed my lambs.” By them he told Peter, “Simon, you are still my disciple. You are not only restored to me. You are restored to Me and the man I called you to be the first time we met. Friend, we have a world to save; let’s get to it.” It was not enough for Jesus only to restore Peter to a relationship with him as brother. Jesus wanted Peter to experience the fullness of his grace by including him in His Father’s plan to restore all creation.

There can be no greater way to tell someone that you forgive them after they have failed to do what they promised, then, to put them back to work. And that’s what Jesus does.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, may Your Word remove my guilt, heal my soul, and restore me to serve You. Amen.

Week Two
Restored by God: We matter more than we can imagine.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Day Seven: Trust Restored

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:12)

Does God trust you?

That's probably a question we do not ask ourselves very often. But it's one that's very important. Does God trust us? We know that He loves us. The Gospel itself begins with that fact: God so loved the world . . . God most certainly loves us, but does He trust us?

The question is very important in understanding our relationship with God, or better, His relationship with us. The entire story of God's relationship with us turns on the fact that God not only loves us, He trusts us. When we speak of God's love we picture ourselves as the object of His affection. God loves us and we receive His love with gratitude. When we speak of God's trust, however, it changes the picture slightly but significantly. Not only does He trust us, He entrusts to us those people and things that are precious to Him.

For example I love my children very much. They have been the object of my devotion and affection from the moment they were conceived. They know that I love them; that I would give them anything and everything that they truly need even at the point of personal sacrifice. While they depend on my love to grow up and grow strong in their own ability to love, at some point in their lives they also need to know that I trust them. How pleased my children were when each got behind the steering wheel of the family car for the first time. Even though they had a lot to learn about driving, they knew that I had confidence in them being able to drive and do it safely. They were even more pleased when they got their driver's licenses and were allowed to take the family car out on their own. They knew that I *trusted* them, because I *entrusted* into their care something very valuable to me. Having my trust as well as my love played a large role in them growing to mature adulthood.

Now let's say that one of my children did something irresponsible with my car and as a result smashed it up pretty good. I wouldn't stop loving him. In fact, I would run to his aid and protection. But would I still trust him? That is, would I entrust to him my car to use again?

The question, "Does God trust you?" is not only very important, it is also very difficult for us to answer, especially when we consider the many times we break trust with God. We sin daily and greatly. Each sin betrays the trust that God places in us. We trace that betrayal all the way back to our first parents, Adam and Eve. Consider the trust God placed in them when He entrusted His creation to them to rule and serve it in His behalf. Consider what their personal rebellion against God did to that trust. They chose to misuse and discard that which God had entrusted to them. Inheriting their sinful nature, we, too, prove ourselves untrustworthy of the treasures God

has entrusted to our care, be they spouse, family, friends, neighbors, vocation. You fill in the blank.

Thanks be to God, however, that His grace triumphs over our sin. God's grace not only moved Him to make us His own once again but it moves Him to continue trusting us with His treasures. As we daily awaken to our vocations as spouse or parent, sibling or friend, boss or worker, we do so as forgiven children of God, trusted by Him to serve in His stead and with His promises. His choosing to continue "entrusting" these treasures to us speaks a holy absolution as powerful as His words, "I forgive you for my Son's sake."

It also gives us courage to do what He has entrusted to us to do. More often than not we doubt ourselves and our ability to follow through on what God has assigned to our care. We probably have good reason, especially when we look at our long list of failures in the past. But God asks us not to base our confidence, or lack thereof, on our failures but on Him alone. Can we learn to be confident of His trust in us when we are unable to trust ourselves? Furthermore, He stands alongside us with the grace needed to honor the trust He has placed in us. He makes it His responsibility to enable us to live and serve according to His heart's desire. Thus St. Paul can look back at his own life and ministry and confess with all confidence, *"I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me."*

So, does God trust you? How we answer that question speaks volumes about our understanding and confidence in the grace of our loving God and what He has made us to be in His Son.

Prayer: Lord God, we value Your love and treasure Your trust. As You forgive our faithless moments may we be found trustworthy. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Three

Called by God: Lives that matter

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Romans 8:14-17

Day One: The Father's Business, Making all things matter again

[He is making] known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Maybe some of you remember the bumper stickers popular a few years ago: "Save the Planet." The well intended slogan attempted to awaken us to a world suffering ecologically as well as socially and to enlist us in a global effort to do something about it. Our Lord has "Save the Planet" on His mind as well. In fact St. Paul tells us in our Bible verse today that He's committed to a plan that in the end will "*unite all things in [Jesus].*" What St. Paul means by the word "unite" is to pull all creation back together in the perfect alignment and working order that God first made it to be. He pictures a finely conditioned and coordinated body working in perfect harmony with its head, Jesus Christ, and through its head with each member.

Everywhere we look we are able to see vestiges of God's original and perfect creation. At the same time we see the effects of sin. Things are broken. We see this brokenness in ourselves. We don't have to look very far to see it in the rest of the world. Paul calls it "*the bondage to decay*" and it's present in every nook and cranny of creation. God's plan is to restore everything and everyone to the perfect place and purpose for which He designed them to be in the beginning. As we considered in previous devotions, God is in the restoration business, fulltime. His *business goal* is to restore all things, to make all things new again. His *business plan* is to enlist all whom He has already restored to Himself to work with Him in restoring the rest. Elsewhere, St. Paul tells us, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation . . . All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). God, in His great love, made the business of restoring creation His business. In His love, He has made it our business too. "Saving the Planet is a *Family Business.*"

God's goal will be accomplished. All of creation will be restored to Him, every aspect of it made new. It began with our Lord and brother Jesus Himself as He was restored to life on Easter morning. He is called the "First Born" of the new creation. From that morning right up until this day, God's restoration plan has been carefully and patiently unfolding. Each of us, in time, has

been brought into His business as each of us was born into His Family through Jesus. And so it will proceed until all things are united in Him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You gave us birth in baptism. Help us work in the family business restoring people to You one by one. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with
him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Romans 8:16-17

Day Two: Restoration, A Family Business

On a recent plane trip I was seated next to a woman returning home from buying inventory for her family owned tile and granite business. She and her husband owned the business and operated it along with their two sons, and their wives. She talked at some length about the challenges and risks of owning a family business. But she concluded her remarks on a note of pure joy: “This business is something my husband and I hoped to pass on to our sons and their families. We loved starting this business from scratch, seeing it grow, and serving many people. We hope that our sons will be able to love and enjoy it as much as we do.”

What a different spirit she had from many who grumble about their 8-5, forty hour a week jobs. They express very little joy, very little future, and very little commitment. In contrast, the woman on the plane spoke with appreciation and some sense of accomplishment of the long hours required to build their business and the bright future she hoped it would continue to bring her family. While not all family businesses are so fortunate, this one reflects what a family business can be when all have a real love for each other and each has a true sense of ownership and commitment to what the business is about.

We do well to understand our work in this world from the vantage point of the family business. I might add that we think of this idea of “Family Business” not as metaphor but as reality. God’s Kingdom is family owned and operated if we take seriously what St. Paul writes to us, *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.* Paul calls us “*children of God*” and “*heirs of God.*” Heirs eventually inherit the family business from their parents. Until that time they work for mom and dad like other employees. But with this one significant difference, they personally belong to the family that owns the business.

Family businesses work well when all have a real love for each other and each has a true sense of ownership and commitment to what the business is about. Nothing could be more true regarding the Father’s Business. *God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.* Here we see what love, ownership, and investment is finally all about. God invested everything He is and has in order to restore creation. Out of love our Father started, expands, and keeps the Family Business alive and strong. He did and does it all. He also loves having us co-own it with Him. What joy is ours when we follow His heart and choose to invest in the Family Business even as He has. Perhaps that’s what He meant when He called us to seek first the Kingdom and its righteousness.

Prayer: Dear Father, You give us co-ownership in Your Kingdom, the church on earth. May we as heirs live now as we will one day live in heaven. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with
him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*
Romans 8:16-17

Day Three: Called from⇒Called to

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,
that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous
light. Once you were not a people, now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).*

Christians in the New Testament were a lot like us. They felt pretty small and insignificant in a world governed by the politics, economics, and morality of people who did not know God and did not care to. St. Peter wrote them a letter in order to encourage them by helping them see their part in the big picture, that is, the picture as God sees it--a picture and plan for this world's healing far greater and wonderful than anything human beings could either design or make happen. Central to St. Peter's message was a *call to action*.

In order for St. Peter to call the Christians of his day to action he needed to root them in their history. Who they were and why they were here. For that he returned to Mt. Sinai, where God first called His people to join Him in caring for this world. Picture the children of Israel standing before Him at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Just weeks earlier, they languished under the chains and cruel whips of Egyptian masters—broken, divided, without hope. In those few weeks, they witnessed God personally rescue them from the bondage and death of Egypt. They watched Him drown their Egyptian enemies in the Red Sea as they walked safely across it on dry ground. They received supernatural food and drink as God personally attended to their daily needs. God Himself had rescued them and given them back their lives.

Now they stood before the Lord at Mt. Sinai. Men and women who had only known slavery were suddenly and completely free. But freedom *from* slavery and death was only the first installment of the good things He had in store for them. Here at Sinai God added the second--He gave them freedom *for* living a new life—a life in which they would be privileged to share His love for the world and work with Him in its salvation. He said to them,

*You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on
eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey
my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all
peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and
a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).*

At Sinai, God formally made these one-time slaves His children—His treasured possession. In Egypt they had no identity. Now they were *His People*, that is, *His Family*. He went on to forge

a partnership with them that focused on serving as “priests” for the nations. Priests are in the business of serving others. They connect people who are broken with a God who intends to restore them. So, at Sinai, the entire nation of Israel—every man, woman, and child--was chosen by God to serve as one of His priests, to be a royal family of priests, not for service primarily to themselves, but rather, for service to the other peoples of the world.

God’s work of restoring our lives always carries two parts: Saved *from* sin, death, and the devil and saved *for* life and service in this world. Both the *from* and the *for* of our salvation center in what our Lord Jesus has done for us and now through us. Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, “[Jesus], redeemed [us] lost and condemned creatures, purchased and won [us] from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil . . . that [we] might be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness . . .” The entire business of the “who” and “why” of our lives here on earth wraps around this one great concept: We Christians have been set free by Jesus to serve along side Him as priests in this world—connecting broken people with a restoring Father. That’s the priesthood of all believers. Like a golden thread, it weaves through all of the pages of Old and New Testaments informing and inspiring Christ’s people in every age of their divine purpose in the world.

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, with a mighty hand You have saved us from sin, death, and the devil. We praise You for saving us for a life of service in the world. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with
him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*
(Romans 8:16-17)

Day Four: Jonah's Sign

But no sign will be given to [you] except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39-40).

What is the Sign of Jonah and what does it mean for us? To answer that question we need to ask ourselves, "Why?" Why was Jonah in the belly of a big fish, or our Lord in the bosom of the earth? In a word, rebellion. Any one who knows Jonah's story will tell you, "He disobeyed God. God told him to travel to Nineveh to warn the people that if they did not repent of their evil ways they would all be destroyed. But Jonah said no. Instead of sailing to the doomed city of Nineveh, he booked passage on a ship going in the opposite direction." He refused to serve as God's priest for a people who were not part of the nation of Israel. In fact, the people of Nineveh were Israel's historic enemies. So, naturally, Jonah didn't want them to hear God's word which would lead them to repentance and new life. He did not want the Ninevites to share the restoring grace of God upon which he and Israel so desperately depended. Listen to his complaint to God when the people of Nineveh believed God's message and repented: *O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

The Prophet Jonah became a sign for all of God's people. Almost from the day that God rescued them from Egypt they rejected the priestly purpose for which God had set them free. They were more than happy to receive God's grace and mercy, especially in time of great need (like being slaves in Egypt for four hundred years). They weren't so happy, however, to work with their Father in offering that grace and mercy to the world. They did not think that the world deserved to receive God's kindness. What they lost sight of was the fact that they did not deserve it either. Instead of remembering that they too had once been separated from God, strangers to God's promises, and without hope in this world, they had grown to expect God's grace as their due. They came to believe that God owed it to them and only to them. They refused to be His family of priests and prophets, connecting the nations to a gracious and loving Father.

The sign of Jonah tells the story of God's desire to save the nations and to use his sinful children in the process. It's the story of God coming in love to broken people, inviting them to join Him in restoring the world, always being resisted, yet never being overcome. Generation after generation of God's people rejected their call to serve as priests for the other nations. Finally, God sent His own Son to serve as Priest and Prophet for all. It's in His Son Jesus that the sign of Jonah becomes a symbol for a new beginning. In Jesus God fulfilled His priestly plan for

restoring the world. Jesus obediently took into himself the sins of the whole world and the particular rebellion of Israel His elect priests for the nations. He was willingly slain and lay dead in the belly of the earth for three days. He cried to His Father for mercy--for Himself and for all whom He carried in His Body. God heard His plea, raised Him from the dead, and declared Him to be Lord of all. In Him, God restored His sinful people to their place as His priestly people by pouring out His Spirit on them.

We Lutherans become uncomfortable when we hear that, like Israel of old, we have not been faithful partners in the Family Business. Yet, like God did with Jonah, His Spirit leads us to true repentance and trust in His death on the cross. His Spirit raises us again to be His treasured people, a holy nation, a divine priesthood for the world. You and I must continue to be in the middle of this great tension between saint and sinner; priest and parasite; resurrected and dead until the day Jesus completes the plan that His Father entrusted to him and in Him to us. This reality leads us to daily repentance and keeps us in everlasting hope.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we lose sight of how undeserving we are of Your love. Give us the eyes to see Your love for all people and to rejoice in the privilege of being about Your business. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with
him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Romans 8:16-17

Day Five: Now in Christ

“Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke . . . But this is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

As we learned yesterday, the sign of Jonah was a sign of universal failure on the part of God’s people to carry out the purpose for which He had called them out of Egypt. Over and over again they broke the commitment that they made to God to serve the other nations as His priests, to join Him in the Family Business of connecting and restoring broken people to God and to themselves. What had gone wrong?

It seems that God’s people never really owned their part in the Family Business. It was God’s work, not theirs. True, they had promised that they would do the things that God had commanded them to do, but it was all God’s idea not theirs. And while they honored God with the lips, their hearts remained far from Him.

So God decided to begin again with them. He made a new covenant, different from the one He made on Mt. Sinai. It would have the same ultimate purpose—restoring the world—but it would operate in a very different way. This time, instead of writing His covenant on tablets of stone God would write them on people’s hearts. In other words, they would choose to work with God in the Family Business, not because He told them that they had to, but because they wanted to. It was now their heart’s desire.

That’s what God means when He said, *“I will write my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”* Moses was never able to create the internal motivation needed for God’s people to willingly and joyfully serve. He delivered the Law—the Business Plan—to them, but He couldn’t make them own it. It remained external to them, written in cold, hard stone. If you obey it you will live; if you don’t you will die. As such, then, it became coercive, reminiscent of their harsh and joyless lives in Egypt. It seemed like the Israelites were simply exchanging one kind of slavery for another; one kind of cruel taskmaster for another. Moses, the Lawgiver, was not able to give them the true freedom they desperately needed. They needed someone else.

That someone else was our Lord Jesus. St. Paul tells us that, *“when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were*

under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5). Jesus was sent by His Father to be our second Moses. Moses delivered God’s people from the slavery of Egypt. Jesus delivers us from the slavery of legalism. Moses gave the Law of God for us to try to keep. Jesus kept the Law for us, completing what we were completely unable to do. And in so doing set us free to be God’s children. God used Moses to write His Plan on stone. God used His Son to write His Plan on our own hearts, thus making it our own. The Israelites were baptized into Moses in the Red Sea. We were baptized into Jesus Himself. Paul writes that, *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”* We have His heart beating inside our chests. That means that the motivation for us to belong to God and serve in the Family Business doesn’t come from God’s command, but from our own desire. Like Jesus, we desire to do our Father’s will.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as You clothed us in baptism create the desire in us to work in the family business. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Romans 8:16-17

Day Six: Co-heirs with Christ

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:15-17).

I saw a sign in the back window of an RV recently that read, "We're spending our children's inheritance." The intended humor rests on the fact that doing such a thing is unthinkable. We work, even sacrifice, to provide an inheritance for our children. We highly value the privilege of passing on to them the fruits of our labor.

Our heavenly Father thinks likewise. As an essential component of Him making us His own children, God has prepared an inheritance—imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us. St. Paul reminds us in more than one place that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with our Lord Jesus. In other words, you and I share the inheritance that our Father has prepared for and promised to His Son.

What's that inheritance given to Christ and to us? Is it eternal life? No doubt that is a significant aspect of it. The Scriptures, however, speak of an inheritance not only of life in heaven, but of life already now and what we do with that life. Regarding Christ's inheritance, the Old Testament states that He rules the nations. Psalm 2: *I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.* Again in Daniel 7: *And to [the Son of Man] was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him, His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.* In short, our Lord Jesus inherited the nations, all of them. They are His, and He rules over them forever. It's that inheritance of which we share a portion. We will rule with Him in heaven; we also rule with Him on earth.

So who are the people over whom we rule? Perhaps the better way to ask the question is, "then who are the people over whom we 'serve?'" since ruling in God's family is all about serving—*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10).* Our inheritance does not consist of myriads of peoples who are here to serve us, but are here to be served, that is, to be loved and cherished by us and our Lord forever. We are not just kings and queens, we are *servant* kings and queens. That is our inheritance.

St. John tells us that through Christ's blood we have been made "*a kingdom and priests to our God*" and that we "*reign on earth*" (*Revelation 5*). All the nations, languages, and peoples of this earth are ours to "reign over," that is to serve as co-rulers with Christ. We serve them even as our Lord served them, to give all that we have and to invest in the Business of "[*delivering*] *from the dominion of darkness and [transferring] them to the Kingdom of [God's] beloved Son*" (*Colossians 1*), His Kingdom and ours, if indeed we are co-heirs with Him.

The rub in all of this is that the nations, languages, and peoples of this world don't necessarily want to be delivered from darkness and transferred to our Kingdom. The Psalmist asks, "*Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?*" He goes on, "*The Kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and His anointed saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us''*" (*Psalm 2*). Note, the "bonds" the nations so disdain are those of unconditional love; the chords are of God's grace and mercy. It's sheer insanity for the nations not to want to "live under Christ and His Kingdom." Yet that is the world that we have inherited to "rule" with our Lord.

So, St. Paul reminds us that in reigning with our Lord we will suffer with Him. Not in the way He suffered obviously, for we hold dear that "One died for all." Only one suffered the pains of death and hell in order to secure eternal life for all. He suffered to earn life for all; we suffer to offer it to all through the proclamation of the Gospel. Still, we suffer with the same mind that is of our Lord—the people of this world are worth our suffering. They are precious to our Father and therefore precious to us. They are our inheritance now and forever.

Heirs inherit something. That something includes eternal life. It also includes God's riches of the forgiveness of sins and the restoration it brings. These riches belong, not only to us, but to all of the earth. The Family Business is the business of giving to the world the riches we inherited with and because of our Lord. He earned them for us by His suffering and death. He freely and joyously shares them with us and calls us to share them with the rest of the world.

Prayer: Lord God, You have made us rich in grace and mercy. Enable us to give out of this abundance to those in need of You. Amen.

Week Three
Called by God: Lives that matter

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with
him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Romans 8:16-17

Day Seven: Co-Owners or Hired Hands?

Consider two young ladies working in a family bakery. Both work hard, are conscientious, and greet customers with a smile. From the outside their dedication looks the same. But there is a significant difference in the two of them. One girl is the daughter of the bakery's owner and the other is a young university student working there for the summer. The daughter arrived at the bakery with her father at 4:30 that morning so that she could open the doors at 7:00 A.M. She will stay until the bakery closes at 8:00 P.M., then, clean up, lock up and make sure everything is properly prepared for the next day's operation. The co-ed arrived just before opening and after eight hours of work will leave for the day. She probably won't think about the bakery until she arrives again the next morning. For the co-ed the bakery is a good summer job. For the baker's daughter, it's the family business. She loves it. She knows it's story--what it cost her father to start it and grow it. She knows what it means to him that she works along side him in the shop. She knows that her service matters to the family and that she is contributing to building something with her family that matters to them and to others in the community. There's hard work, long hours, great responsibility and considerable risk. But it's her business. She will inherit it one day and very possibly pass it on to her own children.

Those who have owned and operated a family business understand that building and running it often require long hours of work and great personal sacrifice. But they also understand that their hard work and sacrifice is actually an investment. They are in it for the long haul. That creates a motivation entirely different from those who work in the business for a salary or hourly wage, but have no personal ownership. They may work diligently, but are not expected to invest more time or energy than that for which they are compensated.

That brings us to the primary focus of this week's devotions: we are heirs of God and co-heirs with His Son Jesus Christ. That means we co-own the Family Business with Him--a business dedicated to making all things new, things in heaven and things on the earth. It's the business of restoring every broken person and relationship to the original and divine purpose for which they were made. God built the business with the cost of His own dear Son—His death on the cross. Then He invited us, His beloved children, to join Him in owning it and running it with Him. We didn't earn our place in the business; He simply gave it to us. As His children we matter to Him and working with Him in the business matters to Him. And the business, because we own it with the Lord, matters to us. Because it's our business, we consider our personal sacrifice of time, energy, and financial resources as investments. We're not hired hands. We're heirs of God and co-heirs with His Son, Jesus. What a difference that truly makes in our service to God and His world.

Prayer: Jesus, You are the Son not a hireling. You make us co-heirs in the Father's business. As we share in this business enable us to labor and not run when the work is hard. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Four The Family Business

*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples . . .
You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:8,16)*

Day One: Abundant Life, A life bigger than me

“I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Some of us might remember a “science” experiment from grade school years in which we placed several dried bean seeds around the inside edge of a jar, holding them in place with a dampened paper towel. After a few days we noticed the beans splitting open and new plants bursting out. Each bean’s outer skin (structure) was destroyed; its *integrity* as a single seed sacrificed. At the same time each bean became a new and more productive life. They now were plants that “lived abundantly.” It’s this understanding of *abundance* that Jesus had in mind when He said, *“I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).*

We often think that abundance in life is measured by the amount of our personal possessions. An abundant life is one free of want. We have all that we need materially and even more. I have plenty of food, a nice home, at least one car, a spouse, a family, etc. Notice that the focal point for all of these possessions is me. All of these things or people are here to make me happy. In so many words, the abundant life, as I too often understand it, is all about me. Is that what Jesus is offering to us when He promises us life and one that is abundant? I don’t think so. Elsewhere He said, *“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).* According to these words the Abundant Life He promises has little or nothing to do with accumulating possessions. In fact in another place He tells us that focus on the “riches” of this world actually *“chokes”* (Matthew 13:22) the real life to which He restored us—a life that really matters.

The abundant life Jesus promises is not measured in the abundance of what’s been given to us, but in what we give to others. That is, how much is produced in others through our lives. Consider again the beans in the jar. While each bean’s skin remained intact, the bean remained the center of its tiny existence. It had its life—safe, protected by a thick skin, and all that it needed to exist. But it remained alone, one single seed. The number “One” is not the number for abundance. In order for each seed to become abundant it has to stop remaining a single seed. Instead, it needs to produce other seeds, other fruit. It must invest in a life bigger than itself. That’s the business of the Family Business—investing in something bigger than ourselves and by doing so we produce much fruit as Jesus likes to describe it. *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”* Jesus tells us that using our lives to bear abundant fruit in others brings glory to His Father; we beautifully reflect our Father’s heart and mind.

An abundant life—a life that bears fruit in others—lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. It's the life our Lord purposed for each of us when He made us His own. "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.*" We didn't choose Him; He chose us. He chose us to be His own and as His own to join Him in the business of investing our lives in others so that we bear much fruit.

During this week of devotions ask yourself, "In whom and how am I investing my life?"

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You for choosing us. Make us fruitful in the family business to Your glory. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Two: The secret to bearing much fruit

“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am there will my servant be also.” (John 12:24)

Even as I write this devotion, the vineyard growers in the Napa Valley are celebrating. It's harvest time with the reward of much fruit. Bearing much fruit suggests expansive vineyards with vines bent over from their heavy load of grapes. It affirms the rigors of labor, the long hours in the heat of the day and the aching muscles at night. The abundant fruit gives us the smell and feel of success.

Jesus had much to say about the business of bearing much fruit, especially when the fruit is people restored to a new life in God. The secret to the sweet smell of success, He tells us, is dying. *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* Death has a very different aroma from the smell of success. So what is Jesus talking about? What success can be accomplished in death? From man's perspective, none; from God's perspective, much. The entire universe and all that is in it was redeemed *by His death*. You, and I, and billions of others across time and space have been made sons and daughters of the almighty God *by His death*. Indeed His “failure” (from a human point of view) bore and still bears much fruit.

The secret to our Lord's ability to “bear much fruit” lay in His complete willingness to sacrifice Himself for the sake of His world. Notions or needs of self-survival, or of “what's in it for me?” found no quarter in His heart and mind. If they had, He would not have planted Himself as a human Seed in the poisoned soil of our sinful world. He did not want us, or this planet, to perish but rather that we live and flourish. That was His single concern. Jesus knew that if He did not die all of us would. He was not willing to stand by and watch that happen so He gave up His need for and right to live. In short, He chose to die.

Look at what fruit His death accomplished. Three days later He rose from the dead, the *first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*. Through our baptism into Him all of us have been added to His Father's abundant harvest of fruit. And that's only the beginning. In the end, all the earth will know the salvation of our God and the harvest of souls will be complete.

It's into this abundant harvest of souls that our Lord graciously invites us to follow Him. He's chosen us to be His own and as His own to join Him in the harvest, in the bearing of much fruit. It's an awesome call and at the same time a sobering one. In short, it's a call to die to ourselves so that others may also receive and enjoy the abundant life God has chosen for them. He calls

each of us and our churches to die to our personal or institutional self-interests and with renewed minds invest ourselves and our churches in His Business and its single purpose to “seek and to save the lost.”

Jesus tells us that the business of bearing much fruit is costly: *“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any man serves me, he must follow me.”* Following Jesus always leads to a cross, even as He said *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”* (Matthew 16:24). Jesus’ price tag of discipleship: a cross. The way of the cross is a journey of personal suffering and profound loss. It cuts deeper than any human loss we can imagine. More than the loss of people or things that we love or need, the cross marks the loss of our very own life. But herein lies the secret to bearing much fruit. No one really loses his or her life in following Jesus; they invest it. When we speak about the “crosses we have to bear” we often refer to the various kinds of suffering *in this world* and losses we must endure. Jesus’ reference to a cross is about our suffering *for the world* and the gain it brings. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* (John 12).

The focus of Jesus’ teaching was not on the seed dying, but on the abundant fruit it would produce. Such abundance was the source of the “joy set before Him.” That joy enabled Him to “endure the cross, despising its shame.” He concluded His conversation about “dying seeds” with these words, *“and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”* You and I are among those many seeds, made forever alive, through the dying of the Seed from heaven.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, free us from notions of self survival so we take up our cross and invest ourselves in bearing much fruit. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Three: Chosen for this World

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Peter 1:1-2)

What a difference a comma makes! Consider this opening sentence of St. Peter’s letter to the first century Christians scattered across the Roman Empire. The New International Version (NIV) Bible that many of us have enjoyed for years translates Peter’s words this way: *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God’s elect, strangers in this world, scattered throughout . . .* The NIV placed a comma in between the words elect and strangers, signaling us to the fact that being elect, that is, chosen by God to be His children is essential to who we are; being strangers in this world and scattered all over is not. The latter conditions are simply unfortunate circumstances that we must endure for a season.

The English Standard Version (ESV), on the other hand, reads, *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion . . .”* The ESV forgot the comma and by doing so changed everything. By losing the comma it tells us that we are not only elect by God to be His own, He chose us to be His own in this world. Being strangers and scattered across the globe are not unfortunate circumstances. They are by His deliberate choice and for His Divine purposes. The ESV got it right. There is no comma in Peter’s opening words to the Christians and that is key to understanding the rest of his letter to them.

Peter’s letter was basically a “how to” manual for how God runs the family business on earth. But, as you can already tell from this week’s devotions, God runs His business on earth in ways that many people would call counterintuitive—running in the opposite direction from the normal patterns of life. Abundance is measured by what we give away, rather than by what we accumulate. We save our lives by losing them. Living as strangers in this world is by design. God’s ways are simply different from our own. Peter wrote this “how to” manual in order to instruct us in God’s way of doing business. For the next several days we will explore Peter’s letter with the intention of understanding who we are as His children, the different positions each of us holds in the business, and the roles each of us plays.

If you remember from last week, the Christians in St. Peter’s day felt pretty small and insignificant in a world that did not know God and didn’t seem to need Him. We might sympathize with how they felt. So Peter wrote to encourage them by helping them understand their part in what God is doing to reconnect this world and its people with Himself. Peter reminded them of their calling--they had been chosen by God to be His priests in and for this broken world.

Priests connect. They serve as bridges, connecting God with people who need Him. Their service divides into two functions. They connect people with God by praying, that is, speaking to God in their behalf, bringing to Him their needs and concerns. They also connect God with people by speaking to them in God's behalf, telling them of His goodness and unconditional love for all, especially for those who are lost, broken, and hurting. Peter informed his readers that they were "royal priests"--priests who serve by the appointment and in the employment of a king. In this case, their employer is the King of Kings Himself, the almighty God.

There is an old hymn that many Christians love to sing. Its opening stanza reads,

*I'm but a stranger here, Heav'n is my home;
Earth is a desert drear, Heav'n is my home.
Danger and sorrow stand Round me on ev'ry hand;
Heav'n, is my fatherland, Heav'n is my home.*

The poet, Thomas R. Taylor, correctly calls us strangers in a world that when compared to heaven is more desert than paradise. And he's right to point us to heaven, our true and permanent home where we will dwell with God in a world free from sin, brokenness, pain, and death. While that's home and we really look forward to living there, God has placed us at this time in this world. We're here because that's where broken people live and die. The King wants to connect with them, so He has us here to do that. That is not an unfortunate circumstance; it is the will of our God our Father, *who desires that all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

Prayer: Lord God, You have called us by the Gospel. Employ us as priests to a broken world. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Four: Set apart for service

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1 Peter 1:1-2)

Contrary to popular opinion, priests are not necessarily extraordinary people. More often than not they are very ordinary. Like any other person they sin; they also need a Savior. Priests are ordinary people; they've simply been set apart by God for extraordinary service. That's what St. Peter means when he tells us that we are "*elect exiles of the dispersion . . . in the sanctification of the Spirit*." "Sanctification" is the process by which the Holy Spirit sets us apart as God's priests for this world.

One of my favorite childhood memories is of my grandmother and grandfather coming to our home for Easter dinner. It was one of the few times we used my mother's beautiful China. She stored her China in large boxes with exotic red characters printed on the outside. The day before Easter mother would send my brother and me out to the garage to fetch the several pieces of China that she needed. She was very specific, "I need seven dinner plates, salad plates, soup bowls, cups, saucers. Bring them to the kitchen and be careful." So my brother and I would "set apart" the several pieces she requested from the rest of the China in the boxes.

Once in the kitchen mother would have us wash each piece thoroughly and dry it by hand. (Fine China could not go in the dishwasher.) Then she would hold each piece up to her face to inspect it. Each had to be spotless, reflecting my mother's face back to her. If any didn't, they were washed and dried again. After the inspection my brother, sisters, and I set the table in preparation for Easter dinner. My mother loved her mother very much and wanted everything at the table to be at its best.

The China did not stay spotless and pretty very long. While beautiful, they had not been set apart, washed, and dried simply to be stared at and admired. They were meant to be used for dinner. Soon they were filled with and "soiled by" the food my mother served.

That's "sanctification." The Holy Spirit set us Christians apart from the rest of the people of this world for God's service. We were washed clean in the blood of Jesus, made spotless, able to reflect the face of our heavenly Father. Then, like fine China, we are put to work, serving all those He loves.

In the Old Testament God "sanctified" His priests through a particular ritual. They were set apart from the other people in the community. Then they were washed with water and dressed in robes, turbans, and caps specially made for their office. Special oil was poured on their heads

to anoint them as priests. Finally, they were sprinkled with the blood of a ram that had been sacrificed for their sins. Blood was also sprinkled on the tent of meeting where God's people worshiped and on every vessel and utensil used in worship. Everything had to be purified with blood. Through blood the priests, the tent, the vessels were separated from the ordinary and made ready for extraordinary service to God. What must be kept in mind is that while they were set apart *from* the other ordinary people through this ritual, they were set part *for* them. The priests now faced the people to serve them with God's good gifts. God did not sanctify them as priests simply to serve themselves or Him. He sanctified them as priests to serve those from whom they had been set apart.

Peter tells us that each of us was sprinkled with blood and thereby set apart as God's priests. This sprinkling took place when we were baptized into Jesus. Better than the blood of a ram, we were sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Himself. His blood truly washed us spotless, fully prepared to serve. Indeed we are ordinary, but through the blood of the Lamb we have been sanctified for extraordinary service in and for this world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we confess that we are sinful like all people. As You have washed us in baptism and set us apart may we serve others with Your gospel gifts. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Five: Living on Passport

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1 Peter 1:1-2)

Sometimes I get the feeling that I am back in a foreign country and I haven't left home. Granted the several languages and cultures with which we interact here in the California-Nevada-Hawaii District creates an international flavor reminiscent of Manila, Singapore, or Jakarta. However, the sense of "foreign" comes from something much less exotic, much more everyday.

I have shown a video in most of the circuits and congregations that I visit that features a young twenty-something woman. She's an Anglo, articulate, and speaks English without foreign accent. Yet the world she describes as her own is so different from mine it might as well be Mars or Jupiter, something other than earth. "We speak the same words," she begins, "but not the same language." The more she talks, the more I have to agree with her. Her twenty-something world is not informed in any significant way by our churches, our Faith, or the Hope that shaped my twenty-something world of the 1970's. Those days are gone and I miss them terribly. I understood that world so well. More than that, I knew my place as a Christian in that world. I knew how to serve in that world. Now I'm not so sure. And that puts me off balance.

The last time I was this "off balance" was when my wife, Priscilla and I, along with our two year old son arrived in the Philippines. Descending the stairs from a giant 747 to the tarmac below only to be directed by uniformed guards with automatic weapons, suggested that we weren't home. The exotic smells and sounds teamed up with the absence of orderly lines and personal space left us no doubt. I reached for my dark blue passport and clung to it tightly, the last reminder of who I was and to what country and people I belonged. My passport, however, also reminded me that I wasn't home. For the next several years I would identify myself with a passport, the mark of the foreigner.

Peter describes all of us Christians as exactly that: foreigners. "*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the elect exiles of the dispersion . . . grace and peace be multiplied to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.*" We translate his words as strangers, exiles, or sojourners. But they all mean roughly the same: We're not home; we're living on the passport given to us in our baptisms. More than that, our "alien" condition is not by accident or coincidence. Peter says that we were *elect*, that is chosen by God to live our lives on passport, far from the place we call home.

No wonder we feel as if we are in a foreign country. We are. Like the great saints of old we have no permanent place here. We're not home; we're on assignment. That's something else

about which my passport reminded me. Priscilla and I had been issued our passports through the Board for Mission Services. We were foreigners for a reason. We had a very deliberate and specific purpose: to speak the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who still dwelled in darkness. With that in mind our foreignness wasn't so foreign any longer. Our foreignness made sense.

It makes sense now as well. I hope it does for you, too. As our world becomes increasingly more foreign, it will do us well not to lament it but rather to understand and appreciate what God has done. He has called us by the Gospel, elected us to be His own, and made us co-heirs with His Son Jesus Christ. As such we live on passport. And as such we live with purpose, the same purpose for which He lived among us—to seek and to save the lost.

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, we are but pilgrims here. We thank You heaven is our home. In our pilgrimage let us live the good news before a watching world. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Six: Seed sown

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1 Peter 1:1-2)

“Exiles of the Dispersion,” as St. Peter refers to them in his opening sentence, held no kind memories in the minds of his readers. Like the Holocaust of our own day, the Dispersion or Diaspora was the darkest period of Jewish history, filled with profound loss, suffering, and pain. The armies of the foreign and pagan King Nebuchadnezzar attacked God’s holy city of Jerusalem. They destroyed the sacred Temple that Solomon had built and reduced the rest of the city to rubble. They slaughtered most of the inhabitants, including women and children, and hauled the rest back to their country, Babylon, in chains. There they remained exiled for seventy years. They went almost over night from being God’s treasured people with a land and home of their own to being “not a people,” aliens, scattered across the Babylonian Empire. The Holy Spirit moved a Jewish poet to record the bitter events for all generations to remember,

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?
(Psalm 137:1-4)*

It made no sense to be called “Exiles of the Diaspora.” The word “Diaspora” was a curse word in their minds. It wished the worst harm on another. And then, to add insult to injury, Peter told them that it was by God’s choice. They were the *elect* exiles of the Diaspora. Maybe the NIV got it right after all. This idea was simply impossible to understand.

What they couldn’t understand was that while the Diaspora was not a good place in the minds of His people, it was a God place. God wanted to be there and to restore the broken sinners of those places to Himself. He used the seventy years of Babylonian Captivity to carry His healing Word to the ends of the earth. Even the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar, the man responsible for bringing great harm to God’s people, was won over by the Word and became a follower of Yahweh. He even testified of his new faith to the entire known world of that time. God’s people never followed through on their promise to be His “priests for the nations” all the time they were safe and snug in their homes in Israel. But their service touched every, “*people, nation, and language of those who dwell in all the earth*” during their exile in the Diaspora.

The secret is in the Seed. The word Diaspora means “scattered.” But tucked into its meaning is the tiny syllable “spor” from which we get our word spore or seed--Dia-Spora. The word scatter often carries a negative connotation, referring to the dislocation and destruction of something. But when scattering is associated with seed, it takes on an entirely different meaning. Scattering seed is better known as sowing or planting. It’s productive. Taken together, then, the Diaspora was no mere scattering of people across the Babylonian Empire. It was the deliberate planting by God of His people, His chosen Seed, in the world. It is the method that God used to spread His Word to the ends of the earth and have it produce abundant fruit everywhere. Remember our theme verse for this week: *But I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain.*” Remember also how our Lord told us “much fruit” would be produced: *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* The seed must be scattered if it wants to be abundant. Once scattered by the farmer, it sinks into the soil, *dies to itself*, and gives birth to much fruit. What the Son of God chose for Himself, He has also chosen for us.

What would the Lord of the harvest do with the many seeds His death produced? Too often we harvest them (new Christians) only to store them in God’s barn (our local congregation) to keep safe until His return. We may select a few people to plant in the foreign and nonChristian world to grow another plant or two. We might applaud the commitment and sacrifice of the few missionaries who are planted in the nonChristian soil of our communities, but it falls far short of what Jesus intended with His death. Seeds produce more seeds. Any seed that is harvested and then stored in a barn has been robbed of its purpose as a seed. It might be cozy and safe in the barn, free of the destructive elements of the cold hard ground of this sinful world, but it remains alone. It might be in the company of hundreds or even thousands of other seeds also stored in the barn, but it never grows (matures) to be more than a single seed. It produces no fruit, that is, nothing of its own kind. That’s not our Lord’s intention. Discipleship as our Lord describes it results in a mature seed that produces much fruit, or at least dies trying. Thus, the final resting place for Christ’s disciples is not a holy barn but the broken world. There they learn the true purpose of discipleship; there they experience the vitality their resurrected Lord died for them to own.

Peter tells us with these words *“elect exiles of the Dispersion”* where we live out our priestly service—the family business. For the most part it is not at the church or on Sunday morning. It is where we are scattered in life through our families, friends, workplace, school, and neighborhood. It is especially where God plants us among nonChristians. With God’s business in mind, life in the Diaspora is good.

Prayer: Lord God, plant us in our world so we produce fruit for Your harvest. Amen.

Week Four
The Family Business

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go
and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain (John 15:16)*

Day Seven: Vocation (Who we are and What we're about)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10)

What a contrast these words of St. Peter are with what he said earlier in the opening sentence of his letter to the scattered Christians, the “*elect exiles of the Dispersion.*” Here he tells his readers they are the very people of God. The Diaspora told them they were “*not a people*” at all. He tells his readers here that they are “*a holy nation.*” The Diaspora told them they were no nation, just individual captives of a defeated country, scattered across a foreign empire. Why the great difference? Peter's readers located their identity and purpose in a place. Peter located them in God. Change of location did not effect a change in vocation. Wherever God placed them they remained His Priests in Royal service to Him.

When we think of priests, we generally locate their vocation in a church building. There they preach, teach and preside at the Lord's Supper. We tend to locate priestly activities in the sanctuary. So we restrict the priesthood in person and activity to what happens there. Peter tells us, however, that nothing else could be farther from the truth. All baptized Christians are God's priests in this world. All of them exercise their priesthood where God has located them in the world. Martin Luther called this idea the “*Doctrine of Vocation.*” Ingemar Öberg, in his book, *Luther and World Mission*, writes,

For Luther, the various ordinances, ranks, careers, and kinds of work are not merely sterile jobs. They are ordained and chosen by God and are ultimately parts of God's creative activity. They are an expression of God's love and care for creation and for life on earth. God takes people into his service by caring for and developing his world. Thus people become God's co-creators . . . whether they know God or not. In all this co-creation and work, the need of the neighbor is the aim. Human beings, God's co-creators, become the means and the channels for the giving and sustaining love of the Creator (Öberg, 2007:26).

The divine nature and purpose of every vocation is essential to understanding our ministries as Royal Priests. For example, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, neighbors are vocations ordained by God. Men and women serve as priests in these vocations. Vocations were instituted by our Lord as the basic means through which He cares for His creation. He personally works through people to bless other people. Our Lord cares for little children through their mothers and fathers. God loves and supports men through faithful wives and vice-versa. God governs through governments, protects our homes and communities through police and firemen, brings health and

healing through medical personal, etc. God uses you and me as His priests to accomplish the blessings that He promised to give us in this life. Serving our families, neighbors, and larger communities is as much a sacred activity in God's eyes as a "priest" leading worship on Sunday morning. That is the divine nature of human vocation.

The Royal Priests, however, have an additional responsibility that distinguishes them from the general population and its daily vocations. The priesthood has a particular function that arose not as a result of God's creation, but as a result of humankind's fall into sin. God created the Royal Priesthood with the deliberate purpose of serving the fallen world with the regenerating power of His forgiveness of sins. Through you and me, God's Royal Priests, God breaks into a broken world with His grace and forgiveness to restore people to Himself and to each other and to give them a new life and a new start. Restoring people in Christ is the holy ministry of Royal Priests; our daily vocations are the divine arenas in which Christ's grace and mercy are able to touch every facet of life in this world. So, while a mother serves in her divine vocation by nourishing, protecting, and raising her children, her unique role as God's priest is in the enabling grace and healing forgiveness she offers her children in Jesus' name.

How many families suffer and are being destroyed because the pain and injury caused by sin is left unattended in their homes? People languish under the crushing weight of guilt with no one to lighten their load with a forgiving word from Jesus. All of us are intimately familiar with the damaging effects of sin in our lives and relationships. But we feel helpless to do anything. We need God's intervention. But, because we do not often hear God's words of grace or forgiveness we wonder if He cares. Either He's too far away to hear us, or He's upset and giving us the silent treatment. In any case we do not hear the forgiving word we so desperately need in order to be healed.

God, however, does speak. That's the business of the Royal Priesthood. Our primary vocation as God's priests is to speak a healing and encouraging word from God to hurting and broken people. God's word heals and He calls each of us to speak it to others, especially our loved ones. St. Paul wrote, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has past away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). The sins we forgive, God forgives. The Divine healing of broken and weary hearts lies at the heart of our priestly service, even as Peter instructed his readers, "*But you are . . . a royal priesthood [so]that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*" The excellencies of God are nothing less than His restoring and empowering grace and forgiveness. Through them we are all given new life and new beginnings. Consider just how awesome your service as a Royal Priest really is.

Prayer: Lord God, You make every day activity our Royal Priesthood. Let us never lose sight of the need of our neighbor to hear of Your love. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Five

Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Day One: Building with Love

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:22).

Just prior to the Civil War a strong young slave named Ben sat on the bench in the open market in New Orleans. As Ben waited his turn to be shown and auctioned off his thoughts plunged him into deep sorrow. He remembered as a child watching his father worked to death in the field. At ten he was taken from his mother and sold for \$25.00 on the block. Now, he was being sold again along with his wife and little son. Anger, mixed with shame and helplessness burned in his heart at the thought of once again having his family torn from him.

Ben's turn on the block came all too soon. Looking back at his wife and baby he climbed the platform steps and took his place next to the well-dressed auctioneer. The bidding began high and raised quickly--\$300, \$350, \$400. One man, bidding louder and more fervently than the others shouted, "\$1500." No one bid again. Fifteen hundred dollars was the most any one had ever paid for a slave. Ben climbed down the steps and approached his new master. "Well sir," he said bitterly, "where do you want me to start slaving?"

The buyer looked at Ben, smiled, and said, "Friend, I did not pay \$1500 for you to be my slave. I paid that money to set you free and I plan to do the same for your wife and baby." Ben's anger changed in a flash to sheer joy. He was free, not just from the chains of cruel slave owners, but from the chains of his own embittered soul. This unconditional act of love on the part of a complete stranger enabled him to love and trust others once again. He was given a new life.

Peter describes a similar story of ransom in his letter to scattered Christians. His words are also directed to you and me. *"[You] were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:18-19).* Jesus precious blood ransomed us from futile lives of slavish self-service to purposeful lives of loving service as Royal Priests under God.

St. Peter continues, *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."* "Put

your new life to work,” Peter tells us, “[by loving] one another earnestly from a pure heart.” We may not have the opportunity or the ability to love as extravagantly as the man who purchased freedom for Ben and his family but we can still invest ourselves in other people so that they may grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually. “*Love builds up*,” St. Paul reminds us. Building one another up in love is our service to each other in the Body of Christ—growing each other—our children, grandchildren, spouses, and others for whom we have direct responsibility—helping each other grow to reach the full potential our Lord intends—“*to mature manhood*” as St. Paul calls it, “*to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*”

Like Ben, we may be enslaved by some besetting sin, or by crippling guilt, or the lasting effects of abuse. Perhaps we’ve experienced the death of a loved one or a broken relationship. A few weeks ago we looked at several factors that cause our lives to become stuck with no way out. Often, we lack the resources to get unstuck and move forward with the new life God purchased for us in Christ. That’s when we really need Christ’s restoring love, and that’s where we find our opportunity to serve. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book *Life Together* wrote, “I need my brother because of Christ.” He went on to explain that our hearts are often puffed up with pride and self-centeredness, or they are weighed down by guilt and doubt. In either case they get stuck and are unable to look to Christ for help. So our Lord comes to us in the loving words of another brother or sister. They are able to speak a word from God that we need. It may be a word that humbles us, so that we do not think of ourselves more highly than we should. Or it may be a word that encourages and builds us up in love. Either way, Jesus comes personally to us in the words of our fellow Christians. That’s why we need them.

“*Speaking the truth in love*,” writes St. Paul, “*we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love*” (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You have redeemed us with Your precious blood, suffering and death. Let us live in Your kingdom serving our brothers and sisters in Your body. Amen.

Week Five
Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Two: Rebuilding in Love

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

A different kind of investment

Yesterday we talked about investing ourselves in growing or building other people to maturity as it is measured in our Lord Jesus—bearing much fruit. More often than not, *building* people up has mostly to do with *rebuilding* them and that’s an investment too, a very expensive one.

“*Love covers a multitude of sins,*” Peter tells us. Covering sins is love’s most powerful and effective work; it’s the foremost business of our priesthood. Such love, however, has a price tag. Forgiveness always costs. “Wait a minute!” you might protest. “Weren’t we taught that forgiveness is a free gift from God offered to us unconditionally, even without our asking? What’s the cost?”

Forgiveness is free, but only to the one being forgiven. It always costs the one who forgives. In teaching the “Lord’s Prayer” to his disciples, our Lord referred to our sins as debts: “*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*” His was pointing out that when we sin against someone we essentially take something precious away from them. As such, we become indebted to them. As with all debts, we are obligated to restore the loss we’ve caused by repaying it in some way. Forgiveness literally cancels the debt, or more true, transfers the debt from the one who sinned to the one who must forgive. The one who forgives gives up his right and opportunity to recover his loss. He removes the obligation to restore the loss from the debtor and places the obligation upon himself. That’s the expensive part.

It’s also the essential part. That is, it’s the essential part of restoring the relationship. That’s what’s really at stake in covering the sins of one another. It’s not about cosmic ledgers and balance sheets; it’s about personal relationships between ourselves and the Lord, and between ourselves and others. When we sin, we drive a wedge between ourselves and the ones against whom we sin. As long as the debt remains, the wedge remains. Restoring the relationship requires restoring the loss—paying the debt. The power to restore belongs, not to the debtor, but to the one who suffered loss. That’s why Peter exhorts us, “*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*”

Such love seems one sided and, at least humanly speaking, impossible. Humanly speaking it is. The Scribes were right when they asked, “Who can forgive sins but God?” Forgiveness is unique to God’s character, for “*God is love.*” Our Lord, while on earth, didn’t even claim the right or authority to forgive sins, except that it had been given to Him by His Father (Matthew 9,

28). Ultimately, then, covering sins is something only God can do, or, *something only God can pay*. So, God obligated Himself to restore all of our debts of sin in order that our relationship with Him and one another might be restored. We know the price tag: the life of His own Son. The price was paid: One for all, once for all. Our sins covered, forever.

That brings us to Peter's call for us to love by covering the debt of those who have sinned against us. The question is, "How important are these relationships to us?" Being restored to a right relationship with God by God, we have the authority to restore the relationships with those who have broken them by sinning against us. Transformed by our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection we now possess both the desire and ability to cover their sins and by so doing invest in rebuilding people in Christ.

Covering sins has an incredible price tag, but it's been paid in full by the precious blood of our Lord. While covering the sins of our brothers or sisters has a price tag for us, it is one we well can afford, since we pay it always and only out of the inexhaustible account of Christ's love and merit for all.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You paid our debts with the life blood of Your Son restoring us to You. As You have forgiven us, let us forgive those who have sinned against us reconciling them to us.
Amen.

Week Five

Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Three: Making Connections, Part 1 (Prayer)

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and for all in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:1-5).

In our devotions last week we suggested that Royal Priests serve as connectors. They connect our God, who desires to forgive and restore, with broken people who need His healing touch. Priests do two things to connect God and people: they pray for those who cannot pray for themselves, and proclaim light to those still in darkness. Today we consider our service of prayer.

Moses records in Genesis 18 a most tender story of priestly partnership between the Lord and His people. He had just visited Abraham and Sarah to announce that, even in the old age, they would soon be the proud parents of the baby boy. As the Lord took His leave, Abraham walked along side Him for a while. It was then that God asked Himself a question, *“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him?” (Genesis 18:17-18)*. The answer was obviously, “No.” What hung in the balance were the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. *“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave,”* God told Abraham. *“I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that come to me. And if not, I will know.”*

God wasn't simply giving Abraham His travel plans. He was inviting him into his personal counsel. God wanted Abraham to talk to Him about what He was about to do, to join Him in what He is doing in the world. Here was a divine invitation to connect sinful people deserving nothing but God's wrath and punishment with a God Who desires only to save.

The Lord extends that same invitation to us. As Lutheran Christians, we emphasize the fact that God invites and leads us to pray. Our hymnals refer to our Sunday morning worship service as the “Divine Service,” focusing on our Lord's leading role in our worship life. *He comes to us* personally with His gifts of grace and mercy. And, as is His nature and habit, *He comes through us* to the rest of His world. The church in prayer for the world most reflects our Lord's presence and leadership in our priestly worship. St. Paul urged, *of first or highest importance*, that the Christians in Ephesus offer *“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings . . . for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions.”* He went on to explain that such prayer *“is*

good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He capped off his instructions with these precious words, *“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.”*

St. Paul tells us that our Lord Jesus, who redeemed all people, continues to minister to the world as its mediator. As the first and highest of the Royal Priests, He stands between God and the world and in that place prays to His Father in behalf of the world. As is the work of any priest, Jesus prays for those who are not able to pray themselves. Since they do not know their heavenly Father, they're not able to talk personally to Him. But Jesus knows His Father and He knows His Father's heart that desires all people be saved. So He prays.

What's fascinating is that Jesus personally mediates for the world through the hearts and lips of His church at prayer. There is a direct connection between St. Paul's statement that *“there is one mediator between God and men,”* and his urging, *“supplications prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.”* Jesus prays in the prayers of His people. That's why it is so important that the church at prayer learn to pray with the heart of her Lord, *who gave Himself as a ransom for all.*

Just as He invited Abraham to intercede for the nations thousands of years ago, He invites us to intercede for the nations today. Who are those in our community that are disconnected from God? What groups of people, good or bad, need prayer? Take a close look at our prayers in worship and ask ourselves, *“How many of our prayers are directed to God in behalf of those who cannot pray for themselves?”* If we find that the unsaved are not on our priestly radar screen, then, let's make a simple change and include them. Such change will be *“good and pleasing in the sight of God”* to be sure.

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, You gave Jesus as our high priest who prays our prayers before You. May we come to You with the needs of those who cannot pray for themselves so they may come to know You. Amen.

Week Five
Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Four: Making Connections, Part 2, (Sharing the Hope)

“[In] your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

What makes you and your family different from those people and families that are not Christian? Do you have fewer problems? Do you have less worry or stress? Are your family relationships smoother? How about sin; do you sin less than nonChristians? What makes you different?

Perhaps a better way of asking the question is, “What difference does Christ make in your life, or your family, or your other relationships?” Why is He important to you? As you ask yourself these questions and honestly answer them you will put personal definition to what St. Peter calls “*the hope that is within you.*”

In some ways we are no different from those who do not know Christ. We experience the same set backs, hardships, and crises in every life. We can become anxious and afraid when we face difficulties or challenges that are bigger than we are to handle. Yet, as Christians, we can face them with hope. A sure hope that is anchored in Jesus.

A friend of mine’s faithful ministry as a pastor came to a screeching halt one day as he resigned from his parish. He had experienced an emotional breakdown. After a number of years he was asked by a neighboring congregation to serve as their pastor. He reluctantly agreed. He continued to be plagued by his emotional problems, feeling guilty for the fact that he had this flaw or crack in his personality, until one morning he was reading St. Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4, “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*” He discovered that it was through his very weaknesses that God intended to touch other people with the healing power of the Gospel.

Soon afterward a young mother came to talk to him. She, too, had suffered an emotional breakdown. She poured her heart out to him, confessing her feelings of guilt for not being able to live the “triumphant Christian life” and allowing the problems of her everyday world to get her down. My friend asked her, “May I share with you what our Lord Jesus is doing in my life as I battle these same kind of emotional hurts?”

“Pastor,” she responded with surprise, “I did not know that you had these problems, you seem so full of faith and hope.”

“I have real hope,” he answered, “but it’s not a hope that I created for myself. It’s hope that comes from God Himself. It’s anchored not in me or how I feel, but in what God did for you and me on the cross. He bound us to Him forever and promised that absolutely nothing in this world would be able to separate us from His love. Everyday He meets me where I am and puts me to work in the lives of other people. Instead of being constantly ashamed of my emotional struggles I am learning that He uses them as a way to touch others with His love.”

Sharing the “*hope that was within him*” touched her spirit deeply. That conversation began a healing process in her heart and mind that changed her life.

I visited my friend a few months later. He could not contain the joy of seeing Christ’s love transform another person’s life. “I see it now,” he said. “Jars of clay, cracked and marred with imperfection don’t hold water very well. It always leaks out. So with us. We’ve been given an incredible treasure of God’s love and grace. The very nature of this treasure means that it’s supposed to flow through the cracks in my own life to touch others similarly broken.”

Again I ask the question: What difference does Christ make in your life, or your family, or your other relationships? What difference does He make especially in those areas of your life that you would call “broken?” It’s in those places where our hope, born of the Gospel, is meant to do its encouraging work.

We may think other people have all the resources they need to make it in life and succeed as people, spouses, parents, students, etc. We’re the only ones that are struggling. That’s simply not true. They, like us, are broken jars of clay. The question is whether or not their jar is filled with the hope of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Your jar is. And that makes all the difference. For the sake of those who have no hope, let yours leak.

Gracious Father, we are broken and cracked thinking we are of no value or use to You. By Your outpouring of forgiveness let Your treasure of love pour out to others. Amen.

Week Five
Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Five: Making Connections: Part 3, (Where do I begin?)

“Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:15-16)

“Dad,” my daughter asked me one day, “I have a friend who is not church-ed at all. I want to share the Gospel with her, but I’m not sure where to start. Where do you begin?” I commended her for her honest question, knowing that she is not alone. I would venture a wager that most, if not all of us, have wanted to share the Gospel with someone we know, but we don’t know where to begin.

Years ago, when “Evangelism Explosion” was popular, the starting place was simple: We asked, “If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?” Then, we followed up with a second question, “If you died tonight and found yourself standing before God on His throne and He asked you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ What would you say?” Those were the days when the eternal concerns of the church were shared by our general society. The heaven questions seemed to be on peoples’ minds, so they made a natural and effective starting place for Gospel witness and defending the “*hope that is in you*”.

Those days are gone for the most part. The church today does not play a significant role in framing the real questions people are asking. We Christians, therefore, don’t get to determine the starting places for conversations about faith and God. That may make us very uncomfortable. Feelings of insecurity rise up within us and, as often as not, prevent us from speaking of the hope within us. We resign ourselves to the notion that witnessing our faith is the business of professionals, people trained to tell the story. My daughter’s question is real, “Dad, you witness all the time. Where do you begin if you want to tell someone about Jesus?”

The good news is that the starting place is not for us to determine. The choice belongs to the non-Christian. It rests in his or her life, not yours or mine. Often, the questions they’re asking have more to do with this world, than they do with the next. They are questions and concerns about the things in their world that don’t work well, that are broken. They are about relationships and hopes, fears and insecurities, losses and grief in the here and now. The here and now of a non-Christian’s world is the perfect place to begin. The here and now of the non-Christian was where Jesus usually began in His own ministry. The same thing is true of Christ’s Apostles. If you read their sermons in the Acts of the Apostles, you’ll see that all of them started with a question or concern of the hearers. By the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples used the questions of the unbeliever to speak of the Gospel of Jesus. They had no need to control the starting place of the conversation. They knew that the Holy Spirit would lead them from there to the cross of Jesus Christ and His empty tomb.

Something else the disciples understood and depended upon in their witness. Jesus was intensely interested in the life and world of the unbeliever. They saw Him going out of His way to meet nonChristians where they lived in their world. The disciples finally grasped the fact that Jesus came into this world to seek and to save those who were lost. So, they did the same. They deliberately lived, worked, and shared conversations in the world of the unbeliever and watched the Holy Spirit provide the opportunities. They also learned to pay attention. That is, they learned to focus their attention on the world and lives of those who were lost and broken. They opened their eyes to see their hurt and their ears to listen to their cries. In so doing they discovered the answer to my daughter's question, "Dad, where do I begin?"

Prayer: Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see the needs of those in our neighborhood; open our ears to listen to their hurts; and give us the words that point to the help in You. Amen.

Week Five
Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Six: My Gifts, Focused on others

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace . . . in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 4:10).

What’s your gift? That was a question asked frequently some years ago at the height of the so-called “Charismatic Movement in American churches.” Pastors and people busied themselves with discovering what special gifts each of them had received from the Holy Spirit and how they could be used in ministry. Bible classes were conducted to teach about spiritual gifts; special tools and inventories were developed to assist people in the process of discovering which gifts they possessed. The desire to learn about spiritual gifts and to know what gifts each member had been given by the Holy Spirit was God pleasing. The fact that each Christian had been given particular gifts by God revealed another facet of His incredible love, goodness, and creativity. God is the giver of all good things.

Discussions regarding “Gifts of the Holy Spirit” show up in a number of places in the New Testament which suggests that they are a big deal to God. They are. God loves to give gifts to His children. Each gift that He gives is personal and deliberately chosen for each person. You know the joy you have in choosing gifts for your loved ones during the Christmas season. You select each gift with care, always with the recipient in mind. Your gifts are statements of love and relationship. The same holds true with our heavenly Father. When He made us His own children in the waters of Holy Baptism, He also gave us His Holy Spirit. His Spirit came to us along with particular and personal gifts. The Spirit and the gifts that He has given to us mark our place and purpose in the Family Business. No person has been forgotten; no gift is insignificant.

Where the “What’s your gift?” question sometimes goes awry is when it focused the discovering of spiritual gifts on the wrong purpose, or maybe I should say, the wrong people. “What’s your gift?” was often followed up with the statement, “I have such and such gift.” The problem lay with the word “I.” Too often it drew the attention from the giver and intention of God’s gifts and centered it instead on the one to whom the gift was given. “I have the gift of teaching,” or “I have the gift of mercy.” In each case the gift was being used to build or maybe even “puff” up the possessor, rather than be put to work as God intended.

Spiritual gifts are given by God to bring us joy. That joy, however, is only realized as we put our gifts to work in serving others. The ultimate purpose of the gift is not in serving the person who has it but serving the people who need God’s personal ministry. God uses our Spiritual Gifts to connect with other people and their needs. They make up a giant system of thousands of different pipelines that connect God’s resources with people in need. He connects with a person in need of mercy through a person whom He has gifted with mercy. He connects with a person

or group that needs help in making a difficult decision with a person whom He has gifted with wisdom. And so it goes with each and every need. God supplies through people He has gifted. *“There are varieties of gifts,”* St. Paul tells us, *“but the same Spirit; . . . there are varieties of activities but the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”*

That’s why St. Peter instructs us, *“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another.”* He calls us to employ our gifts as *“good stewards of God’s varied grace.”* One of the several definitions of “steward” that Webster’s dictionary gives is, “an officer on a ship who is in charge of stores and culinary arrangements.” His business is managing and distributing the food and other resources on board. It includes responsibility for the careful use of those stores keeping in mind the needs of the other crewmembers and passengers. Spiritual gifts come from the bountiful stores of God’s grace. They never run out, so we can be lavish in our distribution.

Grace is the operative word here. Someone once defined GRACE as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” That makes it clear. The Spiritual Gifts we received were purchased at a dear price. Not one of gold or silver, Peter tells us elsewhere, *“but with the precious blood of Christ.”* Grace also defines the purpose of our gifts. Through these gifts, God comes to broken people with the restoring power of His Gospel.

So, “What’s your gift?” That’s a very good question. A good place to start, however, in discovering the gifts the Holy Spirit gave you is to ask a different question, “Who is in need?” If you were kept awake some night thinking about other people in need, who would come to mind? What needs would come to mind? Would you think about the children in your neighborhood that do not know Jesus? Would you think about people in our community who do not have proper food or clothing? Would you think about people who are lonely, or need assistance with everyday tasks? Would you think about people in Africa or other places who are ravaged by malnutrition or disease? Who would come to your mind? Chances are, that’s the starting place for finding the precious gifts our Father gave you in His Son.

Prayer: Dear Father, You have made us Yours in Jesus Christ. You have also given us gifts to serve others. Let us respond as we see their needs in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Week Five
Working The Family Business

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9)

Day Seven: Even the least of these

“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Peter 5:5-6).

One day, as men often do, Jesus’ disciples were going on about which one of them was the greatest. So Jesus took a little boy and placed him by his side. He told his friends, *“Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is greatest (Luke 9:48).* Jesus was giving them a lesson on humility, patiently teaching them to stop needing to be a somebody in their own eyes in order to truly matter to Jesus. “You see,” He told them, “this little boy, whom you didn’t even notice while you were arguing, matters to me. You considered him insignificant, but He does great things for Me.” And he did. We do not know the identity of the little boy Jesus talked about that day, but He employed him to teach an essential lesson to the great Apostles of the Church. No one is too small or insignificant to hold an essential position in the Family Business.

I served part of my pastoral internship in a farming community in central Illinois. One Sunday after worship my wife and I were invited over to one of the member family’s home for dinner. After the meal the owner of the farm took me out for a tour of his new barn and new John Deer tractor that he had bought. That tractor was huge. His oldest son, about four years old at the time came along with us. “Son,” his father said, “tomorrow I’m going to use this new tractor to get our fields ready to plant. Do you want to come along? We have to get up really early, long before the sun comes up.”

The little boy’s eyes grew as big as saucers at the thought of riding in that giant tractor with his dad. I don’t think he slept all night just thinking about the next day. He was up at 4:00 a.m. with his dad, pulled on his coveralls and hurried out to the barn. He watched his dad hook up the farm implements to the tractor and then climbed into the big cab with him. Dad fired the great big tractor up and began to pull out of the barnyard. Before he had driven a hundred yards, his little boy had fallen fast asleep in his lap. He stayed asleep all morning while dad worked on.

It didn’t really matter. His son’s little hands could barely grip the bottom of the steering wheel. His feet came nowhere near the pedals on the floor. And he had no idea what all the levers and buttons operated. For all intents and purposes, his son was not much help.

I’ve asked people, whenever I’ve told this story, whether the father needed his little guy that day to help him in the fields. Most of time people shake their heads, “No.” But if you asked his father you would get a completely different answer. Without hesitation he would tell you, “Of course I did.” He’d continue, “I didn’t need him to steer the tractor, or to push all the levers. I

can do that just fine. Besides, that will come in time as he grows up. I needed him with me in the tractor because he makes everything I do worthwhile. He's my son. And it means the world to have him by my side and sharing what I am growing out in those fields. He matters."

If an earthly father desires to include his children in his business, how much more does our Heavenly Father. His Fatherly love builds, empowers, operates, and directs the Family Business. In that love no one is too small or insignificant to serve or to have the opportunity to make a godly difference in this world.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You chose us. We did not choose You. Help us grow in Your mercy, so we may serve those You want to save. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Six Stuff gets in the way

*“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Our theme verse this week suggests that living the abundant life God has given to us is difficult. Like running a marathon, it demands patience, perseverance, and above all faith. It also recognizes that there are things in our lives that weigh us down, that even cause us to stumble in our desire and ability to live lives that reflect who we are in Christ and what he has made us to be in this world. Stuff gets in the way. This week, we need to explore a number of the sinful thoughts and behaviors that get in the way of our ability to trust our loving God above everything else and live His abundant life for others. While our exploration is a bit of a downer—our sin—the ultimate goal is not to focus on ourselves but on our Lord Jesus Christ for the remedy. For that to happen, we will use God’s Word to shine its light on our souls. Like a spiritual x-ray machine His Word searches our souls to identify what’s not working right with the intention of applying the healing of His forgiveness and the power of His grace.

What Matters?

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(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Day One: It’s all about me.

*“Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed”
(John 8:34-36).*

Jesus once told the people who had come to believe in Him, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* His words offended them. “We’re Abraham’s children”, they retorted, “we’ve never been slaves to anyone.” They seemed to have forgotten four hundred years of slavery in Egypt and the several years of their captivity in Babylon. In both cases God personally came to their rescue and set them free to be His own people. More than that, they missed Jesus’ point. He wasn’t talking about being slaves to other people and needing to be set free from them. The slavery to which he referred was slavery to our own selves. Jesus calls it being *“a slave to sin.”*

How is it possible to be a slave to my own self? It’s simple. I’m a slave to me, when I am the single focus of me. God designed you and me to live lives that reflect Him, that invest themselves primarily in other people. When I put myself ahead of others, that is, use them to serve my own wants, needs, or pleasures, I become a slave to myself. Such self-centeredness is driven by the slavish fear, “If I do not take care of ‘number one,’ who will?” It’s believing the lie that Satan told our first parents in the Garden of Eden, “You’re in this thing alone. Neither God, nor anyone else really cares about you. If you don’t put yourself first you will lose big time.” That fear, even though it’s built on a lie, has haunted all of us since the Garden, and it drives us to make choices that serve ourselves regardless of whom we may hurt in the process. That’s slavery!

It’s also self-consuming. All of us are all too familiar with cancer. Cancer cells are completely self-centered; their DNA is all twisted up. Consequently, cancer cells cannot regulate themselves, nor can they respect the boundaries of other healthy cells. They simply consume everything around them until there’s nothing left. In the end they even consume themselves. The end is death. So it is with slavish preoccupation with self. It feeds an insecurity that grows with each bite of self-centeredness. That’s why St. Paul warns us that being slaves of sin will only lead to death (Romans 6).

Jesus put his finger on our dilemma, our slavish preoccupation with self. He also offered a cure: Himself. *“So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.”* Jesus dealt firmly and finally with the power of sin by dying on the cross. St. Paul tells us, *“And you who were dead in your*

trespasses . . . God made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him” (Colossians 2:13-15).

Jesus set us free by cancelling the debt of our sins, thus freeing us from their legal obligations. Satan uses these legal obligations to fill our hearts and minds with the guilt and fear that drive our insecurities. He replaced our insecurities with His peace. He also set us free by disarming Satan and his minions who use our sins to keep us enslaved. Jesus literally “stripped” Satan of his legalistic “weapons”, rendering him powerless to enslave us anymore. His slavish control over our lives ended at the cross. In our baptisms, you and I joined our Lord Jesus on His cross, and died with Him there. Regarding our baptisms, St. Paul tells us, “*We know that our old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6).* This “old self”—that part of each of us that’s totally consumed with itself—has been crucified. It, like Satan does not have the power to enslave us anymore, unless we choose to let it.

As God’s children, we actually have choices here. We choose to live in the reality that Christ has set us free from sins’ chains or we continue to let Satan’s hollow lies enslave our hearts and minds. Paul reminds us that we have “*put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9-10).* Literally we have “stripped” ourselves of our “old self,” in the same way that God “stripped” Satan of his power on the cross and have “clothed” ourselves with a “new self” made in the image of our heavenly Father. This “new self” belongs to God and lives the abundant life that we have been talking about in these devotions. We really are new creatures in Christ. Paul tells us that our “new self” is being renewed or “restored” in knowledge, that is, God’s truth, rather than Satan’s lies. This restoration continues to grow in us, day after day, as we learn to see ourselves as the new people Jesus freed us to be and, at the same time, learn to turn a deaf ear, or better yet, a dead ear to Satan’s enslaving lies. The fact of the matter is simple and sure: We are no longer slaves to wretched self-centeredness unless we choose to be; Jesus set us free.

For personal reflection: All of us have fears or concerns that cause us to focus on ourselves at the expense of others around us. At the same time, we know that Jesus set us free from such slavish insecurities. What fears and concerns cause you to focus on yourself at others expense? How can you use your freedom in Christ to address your fears and concerns?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have set us free from the bondage to sin in ourselves. Let us use our freedom to provide for others to live freely in You. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

*“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Day Two: My comfort zone.

“Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth” (Genesis 11:4)

Read Genesis 11:1-9. It’s Moses’ account of the “Tower of Babel.” The story points out our basic insecurities as sinful human beings and our preoccupation with building “comfort zones” around ourselves for protection.

After the great flood that destroyed all the inhabitants of the earth except for Noah and his family, God began once again to restore His creation. Repeating the same words he first spoke to Adam and Eve, the Lord told Noah and family to *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,”* (Genesis 9:1). You can hear in His words the divine call to live an abundant life. To do that Noah’s descendants needed to leave the comforts of the ark and their own company and venture out into the world. They did what God asked them to do, at least for a few generations. Eventually, however, they said, “No more. The more we “scatter” the more vulnerable we become. Let’s gather in this place, build a city and settle down.”

The city they designed had two important features: walls and a tower. The walls protected them from wild animals and unfriendly people. The tower intended to reach into the heavens, both to challenge the sovereignty of God, and to provide a perch from which to spot any approaching danger threats while they were still a long way off. With a tower to predict impending danger and walls to protect them when it arrived, Noah’s descendents felt secure. They had created a comfort zone, a place in which they could control their environment. The problem, however, is that they sacrificed fruitfulness for security.

Like the Babel folk, we too feel the need to control everything in our lives, present and future, in order to maintain a “comfort zone”—a place where we feel less anxious. So we tend to build walls to protect ourselves against what we perceive as threats—other people, needed change, investing ourselves for Christ, etc. We also build various “towers” in the hope of predicting the threats in our future so that we can avoid them. The need for protection and prediction are not wrong in themselves. We live in a broken world. But when these needs become preoccupations like “The Tower of Babel” they impede our ability to live fruitful lives for others. They work against the “Trust” we need in order to make a godly difference in others’ lives. Like a seed locked in its “husk” we remain insulated from the pain and brokenness of this world and at the same time unable to “produce the abundant fruit” of restored lives.

In response to the rebellious actions of the inhabitants of Babel, the Lord called to Abraham: *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show*

you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). In contrast to the Babel folk’s penchant to guarantee themselves security and blessing by building a walled city, God promised those blessings and more to Abraham in leaving his “city” behind. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews notes, *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).*

God called Abraham to exchange the protection of his walled city for a tent. A tent can’t match a brick wall for stopping an enemy’s arrows. God called him to give up a humanly secure home for a life of wandering as a foreigner in a land that would become his inheritance at some unknown date in the future. The protection and prediction he needed in order to feel secure were not his to create or maintain. They would come from God alone, if they were to come at all. They were built completely on the promises the Lord made him when He called Abraham to join Him in the Family Business. Abraham could experience the abundant life the Lord promised by following Him in faith, or cling to manmade securities at the expense of God’s blessings. You and I are the blessed result of the fact that Abraham believed God’s Word and followed.

Scripture calls us “children of Abraham” and as such are heirs of the same promises that God made him. Like Abraham we’ve been called to live by God’s promises, lives of faith set in stark contrast to those who commit themselves to building for themselves manmade securities. We’ve seen in recent years just how secure these human “comfort zones” have proven to be. Like castles made of sand, they can’t stand up against the forces of this broken world. Abraham’s faith in God’s promises rather than man’s accomplishments proved wise. The Lord calls us to such wisdom and to follow his example.

For personal reflection: What are the “comfort zones” in your own life that compete with your ability to live an abundant life? How are they working for you? What promises has God made that offer the security you need?

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, You have called us to give up the illusion of control, and follow You. Help us make a difference in this world until the day we enter the heavenly promised land. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Three: Walking by sight, not by faith

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14)

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” God is the One who asked the question. He asked it of His good friend Abraham. You see, Abraham and Sarah were stuck. They’d left their home and family, their planned future and security at God’s request, to venture off to a strange and hostile country. They lived in a tent, wandering from place to place, armed only with faith in what the Lord had promised them—a name, a family, and an inheritance. Twenty-five years later they were still venturing with no name, family, or inheritance in sight. Abraham at nearly 100 years old and Sarah at 90 and still childless, they were running out of time. Promises might be promises, but biology is biology. These weren’t in sync and that’s what got them stuck.

Please understand, Abraham and Sarah trusted God with all their hearts. They weren’t struggling with which God they would serve or whose will they would follow. God’s will was their will, His work their work. They joyfully followed God’s lead, joining Him in His Business of restoring the world. They understood that they were to have a son and that their descendant would bless all the nations of the earth. They knew God would keep His promises to them and to the world; they just didn’t know how. So they decided to help Him out by taking matters into their own hands. They would accomplish God’s work their way. If they could “see” that is, *control* the various factors that needed to go into the process of bearing the promised son, they could guarantee the outcome. That’s what it means to “walk by sight and not by faith.”

Sarah figured that they could improve the odds for God keeping His promise if they cut their liabilities in half. Instead of two old people trying to have a baby, what if one old person tried to have one using a younger partner. The plan made sense to Abraham so they proceeded. Abraham slept with Hagar; Ishmael was conceived. Abraham and Sarah had their promised son. God’s work was accomplished. Almost.

How often do we try to accomplish God’s work our way? Like Abraham and Sarah, we succeed, almost. Like diligent Marthas, in our desire to serve the Lord, we become *“anxious and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41)*. What’s worse, in our more anxious moments we are tempted to abandon or adjust the promises of God by taking His matters into our own hands. By so doing, we effectively “shorten the hand” of God, at least as He would want to work in and through our own lives.

J. Hudson Taylor, the legendary 19th Century missionary to China once wrote, “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.” Following God requires more than desiring to do His will; it also requires doing it His way. God’s will and work always require more of us than

we can manage on our own. His plans and designs are not those of a human being, even a super human being. Being divine, they lie beyond the realm of human capacity. Doing God's work is not impossible. It's just humanly impossible. It takes God's ways to accomplish God's Business. That's what He wanted to teach Abraham and Sarah. He intended for them to learn to look with the eyes of faith to God to supply what was needed to do what He was asking of them. In short, to *"walk by faith, not by sight"* (2 Corinthians 5:7) .

Walking by faith is not walking blindly. God gives us plenty of signs by which to gain our "bearings" so that we do not wander aimlessly. God gave Abraham the stars of heaven as his sign, a sign that Abraham could use as "True North" in guiding his every step. The Lord told Abraham, *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them."* Then, after a few minutes He added, *"So shall your offspring be"* (Genesis 15:5-6). What was the sign Abraham was supposed to see in the heavens? What were the stars telling him in those few moments in which he gazed heavenward? It was more than the fact that he would have millions of descendants. True, he needed to know that. But the real question was not, "How many descendants will I have?" but, "How will I have so many descendants?" How is it possible?

That's the question the stars were asked to answer. "Abraham, look at all of us. We number in the millions, don't we? Abraham, how did all of us stars get here?" Good question. Scripture tells us that God made the stars on Day Four of Creation Week. People—Adam and Eve—didn't show up until Day Six. They weren't much help. So, how did God make all of those stars without any human assistance? That was their question. Here was their answer: "By His Word, alone." God said, *"Let their be lights in the expanse of the heavens . . . And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years. . . And it was so"* (Genesis 1:14-15). And so they implied, "Abraham, if God was able to make us in a day from nothing, with simply the Word of His mouth. Don't you think He is able with His same Word to give birth to a mighty nation through an old man and his wife?"

Thus, God's question at the beginning of this devotion, *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"* God addressed it to Abraham; He addresses it also to us. Is anything too hard for the Lord? What is God laying on your heart to do for Him and for others? Hopefully it is something a lot bigger than you can personally accomplish. Tonight is a good time to go outside and look heavenward. (Hopefully you'll have a clear sky.) Count the stars; ask the question. Then, walk by faith.

For personal reflection:

- 1) What shortens the hand of God in your own life? That is, what keeps you from doing the things God has placed in your heart to do?
- 2) What did the stars have to say to you when you looked up at the heavens?

Prayer: Dear God Almighty, we think we see so clearly how You will accomplish Your will through us. Give us the trust to walk by faith as we live our days as pilgrims of the tent. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Day Four: Love my enemies? I don't think so.

“But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?’” (Matthew 5:44-47)

Jesus put His finger on a giant mud hole that really bogs us down in “running the race.” It's called “Conditional Love.” We heartily concur with Him that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Our problem is that we operate with a definition of neighbor very different from the one our Lord uses. Neighbors in our minds are those who like us, and for the most part, are like us. In other words, they do not cause us pain or anxiety. They do not pose a threat to our security. Those who pose threats are not neighbors; they are more like enemies. Does Jesus want us to love them too? Where do we draw the line?

We may not have any enemies, but we know people who are very different from us, generally nonChristians. Their lives and behavior are a turn off and we place them just outside our circle of neighbors and, by inference, just outside the reach of God. Like the church leaders of Jesus' day we grumble about them and the problems they cause us and others. They challenge, even threaten the way of life we enjoyed in our more Christian community of a few years ago. They've upset our Sundays, competing for our families' time and attention with soccer games and camping clubs. They've stripped us of our right to pray in public, even to greet each other with a Merry Christmas. Worse, they're attacking the very Christian values—marriage and family--upon which our nation and communities stand strong. We have good reason to grumble!

Our Lord, however, asks us to open our eyes to see these people from His vantage point. From His view they would be seen as potential causes for rejoicing rather than for grumbling. We need to consider His kind but thought provoking words to the devoutly religious people of His own day. *“Which man of you,”* He asked, *“having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. . . Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:4-7).* The context for his reflection was the fact that these good people were grumbling about people in their own communities who were living lives contrary to God's Word. What really got their goat, however, was the fact that Jesus chose to call these sinners his neighbors. He even invited them into his home and ate dinner with them. *“This man receives sinners,”* they grumbled, *“and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2).*

Interestingly enough, the cause of their grumbling stemmed from the fact that these “sinners” were actually “*drawing near to hear [Jesus].*” They were coming to Him. What was it about Jesus that they found so attractive? What made Him different from the “Christians” of His day or the churches to which they belonged? Why were they comfortable coming to hear Jesus in His home, but not comfortable to meet with God and His people in the Temple or local synagogue? What might we take away from this story for our own consideration? Are there “sinners” in our own community that don’t draw near to us on Sunday morning but might be willing, even desirous to draw near to Jesus to hear Him? Is that even possible?

We struggle to “love our enemies” while Jesus gladly receives sinners and even eats with them. I believe that you and I would all agree that we are glad He delights in eating with sinners. Every Sunday I look forward to joining Him at the Table and eating the meal He consciously and carefully prepared for sinners—His own Body and Blood. Where would we be if He didn’t live by His own words: “Love your enemies.” I recall the words from St. Paul that we looked at a few weeks ago, “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life*” (Romans 5:6-10).

Jesus personally changed you and me from being His enemies to being His kin, sons and daughters of His Father. The Family Business focuses on doing the same for those who are still His enemies. That’s what lies behind His command to “Love our enemies.” If they are our enemies, then they must also be His enemies too. As His enemies, He loves them enough to die for them and by so doing to reconcile them, along with us, to His Father. That makes them His brothers and sisters. That makes them our brothers and sisters too. Being family, they become a lot easier to love.

For personal reflection:

- 1) St. Luke tells us that “sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.”
 - a. What do you think they found so attractive about Jesus?
 - b. Why do you think they were comfortable coming to hear Jesus in His home, but not comfortable to meet with God or His people in the Temple or local church?
- 2) Are there “sinners” in our own community that don’t draw near to us on Sunday morning but might desire to draw near to Jesus to hear Him? How would we address that reality?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You loves us so You came to live among us the life we should live and die the death we should die so we are no longer enemies but friends. Let us reflect Your love to those we label enemies as they may become our brothers and sisters in You. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

*“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Day Five: Physician, heal yourself.

“Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well” (Luke 4:23).

Read Luke 4:16-30. The story takes place in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth at the very beginning of His public ministry. Just prior to this story Luke tells us that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist, where His Father publicly consecrated Him as the Messiah by anointing Him with the Holy Spirit. From there He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to face the temptations of Satan for forty days. Returning from that ordeal, *“in the power of the Spirit,”* Jesus began to preach and teach in the synagogues around the Sea of Galilee. Now, He was returning to Nazareth after being gone for some time. The people were delighted to see Him and hear Him preach. Jesus had become somewhat of a celebrity.

The first part of Jesus’ sermon drew great approval from the congregation. They *marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.*” We would have too. Jesus was explaining to them that their time of waiting was over. God’s promise of the Messiah—a promise He made to their ancestors thousands of years before—was being fulfilled right in their presence. God had sent Him and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit to proclaim God’s favor to the destitute, to give sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free. In short, their Messiah had come to restore them to their position as God’s chosen people in the world. That was truly Good News.

It didn’t stay good news, however. Jesus went on to explain to His friends and other town folk that they needed to address a serious problem: Their sense of entitlement. *“Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.”* The people of Nazareth were overjoyed at the thought that one of their own was the promised Messiah. But they stumbled over the fact that He was the promised Messiah for the rest of the world as well. Their admiration turned to murderous anger when Jesus reminded them that God had, on more than one occasion, reached out to minister to people who were not Jewish. There was the widow of Zaraphath in Sidon (the home country of the wicked Queen Jezebel). The Lord sent the great prophet Elijah to care for her and her family while many widows in Israel went hungry. Likewise, the Lord used the prophet Elisha to cure Naaman (the commanding general of the Syrian army, responsible for attacking several Israeli villages) of his leprosy even though many lepers in Israel continued to suffer. Jesus made it perfectly clear to his hearers: You cannot truly embrace Me as Messiah without also embracing my universal mission. That was simply too much for them.

God’s people wanted Him as their personal Messiah, but rejected His messianic mission to the nations. Rejecting His mission led them, finally, to reject Him as their Messiah with the result

that their position in the Family Business was “*taken from them and given to a people producing its fruits*” (Matthew 21:43). Luke records that Jesus left his hometown that day and made his home in a different village. We don’t know if he ever returned. Their sense of entitlement cost them everything.

That sense of entitlement is something that we stumble over too. We begin to think that as God’s forgiven children, we are more deserving of His grace or blessings than those who do not yet know Him. Or worse we may even think that he owes us something. We begin to dictate to God where, when, and whom He may serve rather than following Him wherever and to whomever He wants to go. We embrace Him as our Savior, yet struggle with His mission to the world. Like His hometown, this inseparable connection between Savior and Mission becomes the very stone on which we stumble.

Entitlement suggests that, as God’s children, we deserve His favor. We don’t. Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we were “*by nature children of wrath,*” not children of God. God’s wrath and eternal punishment is all that we “deserve”. He continues, “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4)*”. Grace and entitlement are antonyms. One cannot stand with the other. Either we grasp what God offers us in grace—His eternal riches in Christ--, or we grasp that to which we are entitled--God’s wrath. Praise God that He did not give us what we deserve. Grasping that reality is a sure cure for a bad case of entitlement.

For personal reflection:

Consider what God owes us by entitlement.

Consider what God has chosen to give us by His grace.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank You that You do not give us what we deserve. Mercifully You withhold justice. We thank You that You give us what we do not deserve. Graciously You forgive, love, and provide our eternal home. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

*“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Day Six: Den of thieves (Hoarding)

“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17).

From the Garden of Eden to the present participation in the Family Business seems burdensome to God’s people. Our service with Jesus as priests in this world is by definition self-effacing and we find that uncomfortable. We came into the Family by grace alone without any merit or worthiness on our part. There’s nothing that we bring to or contribute to it. Jesus washed us clean by His own blood and clothed us in His robe of righteousness. His robe is a priestly garment of eternal service to others. That’s why we find our priestly robes so uncomfortable. It takes a lifetime to grow into them (Ephesians 4:15).

When God’s people abandoned their priestly call God sent his prophets to call them back both to Him by faith alone and to their vocation as His priests to the world. When they continued to disobey His call He brought their prideful self-absorption to ruin and scattered them among the nations. But even that disciplinary action was in accord with their divine call at Sinai. He scattered them as his priests. He brought them to repentance in Babylon and raised them once again as His own people, which included their priestly vocation.

God’s prophetic word to Israel reached its climax in Jesus’ speech to the religious leaders as He cleansed the Temple during Holy Week. Important for understanding our Lord’s actions are the words He spoke while overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and driving out all who were selling and buying animals for sacrifice: *“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers”*

We generally connect His words with the selfish behavior of the Temple staff--tampering with the scales that weighed out the money or with the prices of the different offerings. They were essentially “robbing” the saints who were coming to worship God in the Temple. The context, however, suggests that He was speaking to something much deeper than cheating people out of their money. His real concern rests in His words, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.” Our Lord was teaching that they--His own people, elect by Him to be His precious possession as His priests for the nations (Exodus 19)--had taken the salvation that was intended for the other nations and kept it only for themselves. God’s people had effectively stolen the inheritance of eternal life that belonged to all peoples.

There are several ways in which to be a robber. One way is to break into a neighbor’s home or business and steal what belongs to him. Another way, as Martin Luther reminds us, is to choose not to help our neighbor keep his property or business. A third way to steal is to choose not to

give to my neighbor what is actually his own. For instance, if I were the executor of an estate and it was my responsibility to distribute to all the heirs their portion of the estate but I chose instead to keep their portions of the inheritance for myself, then, I stole their inheritance from them. That is what our Lord meant in these words, “but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Consider what He’s saying. Rather than using the Temple as God intended it, a giant distribution center of God’s universal grace, His people turned it into a den of robbers. A “robbers den” is the place where thieves stash their stolen treasure and hide out from those who would bring them to justice. That’s what God’s people were doing. They used the Temple to hoard all of the grace God had given them to give to the other nations. They went there regularly to get whatever grace they needed for themselves all the while thinking, “God’s grace protects me. It even hides me from the punishment I deserve for my self-centered hoarding.”

This robbery lies at the root of our rebellion against our Father. It also lies at the root of God sending His true Son into the world for our salvation. A few weeks ago we looked at the Prophet Jonah as a sign of Israel’ rebellious hoarding of God’s saving Word. Like Jonah, they refused to be God’s restoring voice to the world. Our Lord Jesus, however, did not use the Jonah’s story primarily to condemn His people. He pointed out that as Jonah was “dead” for three days and nights in the belly of a big fish, He would lay three days and nights in the heart of the earth. Jesus was telling us that He would pay for our robberies on the cross. And like Jonah, we would also be raised up with Him from the grave and be given a new life by which we continue to participate in His Father’s plan to bring salvation to the nations. Consider the incredible kindness of our God--our Father has, in His Son, set us free from hoarding and given us a new opportunity to be about His Business in the world.

For personal reflection:

- 1) In what ways have you or your congregation been tempted to turn your church into a “den of robbers”?
- 2) What does the “Sign of Jonah” mean for you?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us not to horde Your grace and restore us to faith in You and living out our calling as priests in the world. Amen.

Week Six
Stuff gets in the way

*“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Day Seven: Recalculating!

*“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand’
(Matthew 4:17).*

Having used GPS devices for several years now I find myself both amazed at and grateful for the genius that lies behind their development. My GPS has proven to be a true travel companion. Furthermore it has become a real lifesaver for my marriage. Priscilla’s frustration at my inability to pull into a service station to ask for directions has all but vanished, and my “male pride” of having to know where I am and where I’m going at all times remains intact. Over time I’ve grown to depend on my GPS like a trusted friend. True, it is only a machine. But its almost human voice breaks in at just the right time to guide me along the way. No matter where I find myself, no matter how hopelessly lost I am in some unfamiliar community, my GPS calmly and confidently directs me to my chosen destination.

The feature of my GPS that I most appreciate is its ability to “recalculate.” When I get off the course that it set for me, it simply adjusts itself to direct me from where I am at present to where I need to be. It doesn’t become frustrated or give up on my inability to follow its directions. It simply recalculates based on *our* present position, keeping the goal in mind of where *we* ultimately want to be. Furthermore, it never says, “Listen Bob, if you keep getting off course, I am not going to be able to help you.” Nor, “Listen Bob, if you had listened to me in the first place we would not be lost.” Nor, “Listen Bob, you are going to need to find your own way back to the course I laid out for you, and then, I will take it from there.” All it says is “Recalculating.” No guilt, no reprimand, no long conversation about what went wrong. My GPS simply begins again from the place that I lost us, recalculates the best route from there to our chosen destination, and starts leading us once again. By following its lead I eventually hear it speak those wonderful words, “Arriving at your destination on the left (or on the right).”

Consider the work of Christ’s Spirit in our lives. More perfect than any GPS He is able and willing to lead us on the divinely mapped route of our life and purpose as Christ’s people in this world. Daily and often we choose to get off course. We find ourselves hopelessly lost and bogged down in the *“sin which clings so closely.”* That’s when we need Him to call us to “Repent,” or if you will, “Recalculate.” Repentance is not an exercise in self abrading and condemnation--how we let ourselves and our God down again, or how could we have been so foolish to allow this situation to take place. No, it’s following that clear, gentle voice of the Spirit, “Recalculating.” “Let’s begin from where *we* are at this moment and proceed to where our Father has designed us to go.” The Kankanaey people, whom Priscilla and I served as missionaries in the Philippines had a word for such a person: Kailian (ka-ili-an). It means simply, “Companion on the road.” What a fitting description of the Holy Spirit.

Like a GPS, the Holy Spirit is never lost because He secures His bearings, and ours, from a source outside our present context and situation. A GPS zeroes in on a number of satellite signals coming from outer space which inform it at all times of its exact location. With those bearings it is able to guide with confidence. The Holy Spirit zeroes in on our crucified and risen Lord. He stands above time and space, unaffected by past, present, or future realities of our fallen world. Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Pointing to Christ, the Spirit calmly and confidently leads.

The secret to running the race, to living the Abundant Life is learning to trust the Holy Spirit to get us where we need to get each day as we navigate our relationships and responsibilities. Wouldn't it be great if we followed the Holy Spirit's lead as we go about our Father's Business? No anxiety producing behaviors, just recalculating through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For personal reflection:

- 1) How does the idea of "Recalculating" shape your understanding of "repentance?"

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as we hear, learn, and take Your Word to heart, may the Holy Spirit guide us in the living of our days. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day One: What really matters.

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15)

It’s time to wrap it up. For six weeks we have been exploring the question, “What matters?” The hope of our study was to better inform us about who we are and what we were intended to be and do in this world. Knowing what really matters enables us to know what to do with our lives. It gives us wisdom to know how best to invest our time, our energy, our gifts or talents--to invest ourselves. It’s time to bring this study to a close, recapping a few essentials and, then, putting what we’ve learned to work.

The most significant of these essentials is this: What really matters most in life finds its origin in our heavenly Father. Your life—its wellbeing and purpose—matters to you. It matters even more to God. He made you. Your family members matter to you. You want them to live full, happy, safe, and fulfilling lives. Again, they matter even more to God. The chances are good that if you made a list of all of the things that matter most to you, you would find that most if not all of those things matter also to the Lord.

Another essential is that we desire that all things be made right again. We have a clear and strong sense of what this world and what life in this world should be. We know that everything that God created, He called good because it was. We also know that everything that God made has been horribly distorted by sin. Everything is broken. At the same time, everything longs to be restored to what God originally meant it to be. As St. Paul writes in Romans, *“For the creation was subjected to futility . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21).*

Which brings us to a third essential. God is in the restoration business, making all things new. It is His Family Business shared by His beloved Son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God . . . that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).* His restoration centers in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. Our Lord Jesus continues steadfast in this ministry until all things—in the heavens and on earth--are restored.

Finally, as the above paragraph suggests, our heavenly Father chose each of us to belong to Him and enlisted us to serve with Him in the Family Business on earth. Our participation in God’s

ministry of restoration is an essential characteristic of His restoring work. It marks the fact that we have been restored. As restored children of our heavenly Father we share His loving concern for this broken world and choose to invest our personal time, talent, and treasure to make an eternal difference. I find it simply amazing that God chose to make us, sinful, broken people essential partners in His ministry of restoration.

Three great stained glass windows, each standing 55 feet tall and 12 feet wide, adorn the chancel of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Lodi. These theological masterpieces were designed by LCMS artist Roger Hogan to confess the creating and restoring work of our Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They shed light and wisdom on those in worship and those on the street, detailing the story of our salvation in Christ and our partnership with Him in the salvation of the world. The pastor told me that one of the purposes of these windows is to speak to the hundreds who daily drive past the church of God's love for them in Christ. "We hope that these windows will speak to people who are feeling tired from a long day or defeated by the challenges of life. They will see these windows and be reminded that God has not abandoned them."

Near the top of the window depicting the work of God the Father appear the figures of our first parents, Adam and Eve, cut from purple glass. Adam is found running away from God while Eve stands still shoulders bent in sorrow and shame. At the same time, Mr. Hogan depicts her carrying a man-child in her womb, with radiant beams streaming from his face to all creation. The scene recalls God's words to Satan, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.*" God said in so many words, "Satan, do you see that woman over there bent and broken by shame and guilt for what you deceived her into doing? She still belongs to Me and I choose her this day to join Me in my cosmic war against you. She will give birth to the Champion who will destroy you and at the same time restore all that you have destroyed." While these words were spoken to the evil one, imagine the impact that they had on Eve. Still tortured by the question God asked her in the garden, "*What is this that you have done?*" she overheard God speak of her essential role in the salvation of the world.

Satan did not anticipate God's choice. He planned that Adam and Eve's fall into sin would force God's hand of judgment against them. God would have to eternally condemn His children for their rebellion just as He had eternally condemned Satan and his army of evil angels. However, instead of condemning Adam and Eve, He enlisted them to serve with Him in restoring the world they had broken. God's choice determined Satan's undoing.

The pastor at St. Peter, Lodi, pointed out to me that some of the glass used in the three windows was made of shards of stained glass taken from other windows that had been broken. How apt to use broken glass to tell the story of God's work of restoring His creation. Each of us was designed by our Father to be a theological masterpiece, reflecting His light and glory in the world. Each of us by our own sin has shattered what God made beautiful; our lives lying broken like so many shards of glass on the floor. Here, too, lies the genius of His restoring work: our Lord in His death gathered all of our brokenness into His own body and in His resurrection raised us up, shards and all, as new stained glass windows to reflect His beauty and grace to the world still shrouded in darkness.

For personal reflection:

- 1) What does our Lord's words to Satan concerning Eve say to you as you participate in the Family Business?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, in Your Son You restored us to Your family. We thank You for making us partners in the ministry of reconciliation. Amen.

Week Seven
Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day Two: Our Father’s eyes, Seeing what matters

“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

What’s to be seen at a shopping mall or a busy street? We might only see crowds, conglomerations of individual people going this way or that. Jesus sees much more. Matthew tells us that the sight of crowds filled Jesus with compassion, an emotional reaction seated deep in his soul. We might say, “His heart went out to them.” What did Jesus see that moved Him so deeply? In a word, “Life without God.” Matthew described their condition as *“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* In case they were sheep trying to survive without the kindness and protection of the Good Shepherd.

The descriptions, “harassed” and “helpless” are intentional. Harassed describes sheep in a panic. Picture a wolf harassing a flock of sheep with no shepherd there to protect them. The sheep circle up facing outward, while keeping the helpless lambs behind them in the center. The wolf darts here and there making the sheep shift their attention from one place to another. With each shift they become increasingly anxious. With mounting anxiety they begin to break rank distracted by their own immediate predicament. Soon they scatter leaving the lambs defenseless. The wolf, without much effort snatches a lamb and makes off with a tasty meal.

That’s harassed. And it describes peoples’ lives fairly well. Like big sheep they work hard to provide for their families and protect them from life’s difficulties. One thing after another, however, causes them to get off balance—expenses greater than income, commitments greater than time in the day, conflicts at work or at home, Satan’s constant accusations . . . The accumulated effect is panic. Many people feel in a panic most days. In that panic they lose focus on those they love and how best to serve. It becomes every person for him or herself.

At the same time, Matthew tells us, the sheep are helpless. That is, cast down. Sheep that are cast down are really stuck. They can’t get back onto their feet and they are unable to bleat for help. Unless a shepherd finds them and gets them back up they become an easy mark for a predator. That’s helpless. People get that way too. They may be cast down by the sins they commit, or guilt, or seemingly unbearable problems. Some are rendered helpless by their pride. Some are convinced that that no one else cares. Still others simply do not know to whom or how to cry for help.

That’s what Jesus saw in the crowds. These weren’t random or isolated incidents. Matthew says that Jesus *“went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues . . .”* He saw harassed and helpless everywhere. Rich, poor; slave, free; men, women—all were the same.

What do we see when we look at our communities, or our schools, or our neighbors? Do we see what Jesus sees?

One of the ways to begin seeing with the eyes of Jesus is to connect with people who spend a great deal of time and energy dealing with the “crowds.” As an example, what would happen if you invited the mayor of your community, or the principal of one of your elementary or junior high schools to address your church council some evening. The purpose of the meeting would be to listen to what they have to say about the “crowds” for whom they are responsible. You might ask them questions like, “What might keep you awake at night about our community?”, or “What is it about the children in your school that might cause you to lose sleep?” Then, listen. We listen with our ears, but listening opens our eyes.

From those kinds of conversations we begin to see the crowds the way Jesus sees them. And we will begin to serve them the way Jesus served, beginning with prayer. *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38).* We begin to use part of our prayer time in worship services to pray for the needs of those who are “harassed and helpless.” Then, we pray that the Lord will “send out” laborers, that is, people who will serve them. Finally, we are moved by the Spirit to be God’s answer to our prayers.

For personal reflection:

- 1) Jesus saw people as harassed and helpless. What do you see as causing people to feel harassed and helpless? What do we want to do about it?
 - a. Personally: Who around me is harassed and helpless? What do I want to do about it?
 - b. As our church family: Who around us is harassed and helpless? What do we want to do about it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us Your eyes to see people as You see their needs. Let our hearts go out to them so we may show Your mercy to them. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day Three: Sacrifice: Determining what matters

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (Matthew 16:24-26)

These words of our Lord have shown up a number of times throughout these seven weeks of study and for good reason. They comprise Jesus’ clearest, most straightforward statement regarding the true cost of discipleship. Yet, they raise a question. How can someone find his life by losing it? That seems confusing.

It is confusing unless we understand that Jesus didn’t mean that we should “lose our lives” by throwing them away. No, we lose them by investing them in someone or something other than ourselves. We’ve looked at this idea of investing in previous devotions. The point Jesus wants to impress on us in these words is that real investment always requires sacrifice. We have to give something up in order to gain something we believe is more important or desirable. Sacrifice involves setting priorities—determining what is more or less important and attending to the more important at the expense of the less.

At the beginning of every month I sit down to pay my bills and financial obligations. There always seems to be more things that I need to pay, (or, perhaps, want to buy), than I have money. So I have to make choices which involves setting priorities. My tithe, mortgage payment, groceries, utilities head to the top of the list; items that I deem less important move toward the bottom. Since I know that I cannot do everything on the list I sacrifice those things I consider of lower priority in order to attend to those things I consider of higher. The things that matter most get addressed.

Now, consider Jesus. He deemed us more important or of higher priority than Himself, so He pushed our lives to the top of His list and placed His own at the bottom. He attended to that which mattered most to Him--the restoration of our lives and purpose at the expense of His own. That’s what it meant for Him to lose His life. He didn’t consider His sacrifice a loss. It was an investment. And it bore much fruit.

That’s the “losing” to which Jesus calls us as His brothers and sisters, serving with Him in our Father’s Business. It requires sacrifice, even as St. Paul instructed the Christians at Rome, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1)*. As with

our Lord, sacrifice involves setting priorities. How or to whom do I give the time, talents, or financial treasures that I have been given? Who or what moves toward the top of my list, ahead of myself? What moves to a lower place? Those people and things will become evident in our hearts and minds as we look at our world through Jesus' eyes. By so doing we "*discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*" (Romans 12:2). In short, we determine what really matters and invest in it.

For personal reflection:

1) If you were to make a "list of priorities" that follows the heart and mind of our Lord, would anything change in the way you use the time, talents, or treasures that you have been given? What would move to a higher priority on the list? What would move to a lower place?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You did not count the cross as loss keeping Your eyes on our salvation. Give us such vision as we respond in gratitude to serve You and our neighbor. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’
(Luke 15:31)”*

Day Four: Storing up Treasure in Heaven, Investments that matter

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

We live today in the wake of what is reported to be the worst financial crises since the Wall Street crash of 1929. Like then, many people today have lost most if not all of their financial investments. Resources they were storing up to provide them a source of income and financial security in their retirement. This financial crisis has further impacted our lives as people are still losing their homes or jobs. Investments that seemed so sure, so secure a few years ago have gone up in smoke. Recent events underscore Jesus’ teaching regarding earthly treasure, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.”*

Jesus’ words need to be understood as clearheaded financial advice on how to invest our earthly resources. He tells us that we can focus our investments in company(s) that will eventually go under and all that we invested is lost, or invest in a company—the Family Business—which endures forever and promises an incredible return that no one and nothing can diminish. He is not simply spiritualizing human experience regarding financial investments; he is placing His Father’s work right in the middle of all of the “Dow,” “Nasdaq,” and “S&P 500” and asking, “Where do you want to invest your earthly treasures?” Note, He didn’t tell us that investing in earthly enterprises is a sin. He’s simply telling us it’s foolish to set our hearts on them. They’re not permanent. So, set your heart on what is permanent, that which the schemes of men, or ravages of time, or even the gates of hell cannot take away.

What, then, are these heavenly treasures in which He exhorts us to invest? Many of us were taught that they refer primarily to our personal salvation. By trusting in what Jesus has done for us on the cross, rather than trusting what we have done, we receive eternal life. That is absolutely true. But I have to wonder, especially after hearing Jesus talk about “bearing much fruit” and that such fruit will “abide” or last forever, if my personal salvation was the major investment He had in mind. Once again, the focus turns back on me. As we learned in earlier devotions, Jesus’ idea of a fruitful or abundant life speaks to matters greater than simply my life and where I spend eternity. The abundant life He promised can’t be measured in the abundance of what’s been given to us, but in what we give to others. The same must be true for treasures that we store in heaven. They must refer to more than my eternal life.

They do. My heavenly treasures are those people whose lives I shared a part with God in restoring. They include the once pagan priest in the Philippines to whom I spoke the Gospel and witnessed his life renewed by faith in Jesus. They include my wife, my children and grandchildren, the members of my parish, my next-door neighbor, my best friend of more than 50 years. My heavenly treasures consist of all the people in whom I have invested God's love in Christ. You have treasures stored up in heaven too. Who are they?

Our heavenly investments do not decrease or fade away. Moreover, consider the great dividends already being distributed--*Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents (Luke 15)*. Such are the treasures (investments) our Lord exhorts us to store in heaven.

For personal reflection:

- 1) Consider the "Family Business" as an investment opportunity. What would that mean for you and how you presently invest the time, talent, and treasure that you have been given?

Prayer: Lord God, our dear Heavenly Father, You invested Your whole being in us. Enable us to invest ourselves in those whose lives we touch. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day Five: More than a servant

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants’” (Luke 15:17-19).

We don’t know the reasons behind the young man’s decision to demand his share of the family estate and then leave his family behind. Was it a perverted sense of entitlement? Did he think that he had been held under his father’s thumb all his life and needed to wiggle free? Or was it simply that he was completely self-absorbed? Whatever the reason, he took off leaving a big hole in the heart of his father.

After months or maybe years of debauchorous living he ran out of cash and options. His so-called friends deserted him. Humiliated and destitute he hired on to a local farm to slop pigs. Despite the shameful and desperate conditions of the pigpen, the job gave him time to reflect. It was impossible to ignore the radical contrast between the life he despised and discarded as a son in his father’s home and his present existence as a despised and discarded servant. Even the pigs fared better.

Eventually, as Jesus tells us, the young man came to his senses. With what mind he had left he recalled how good the servants in his father’s house were treated. Life as a servant on dad’s estate was infinitely better than what he had presently. So he turned his face toward home. He banked on his father’s kindness, yet, even that was a stretch after what he had done to the family. Perhaps he had miscalculated his father’s love.

In fact he did miscalculate his father’s love. He grossly underestimated it. Dad virtually ignored his confession of sin and interrupted him before he could ask to be hired on as a servant. It’s not that his humble confession wasn’t significant. It simply couldn’t improve his standing before his father. His father had already received him back as his son, nothing less. *“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”* The boy’s life and privileges as a son were completely restored.

I often think about the radical change such love must have made on this young man. I picture him rising the next morning, while the servants were still sleeping, and heading out to his father’s fields to work. He would work hard all day and head back to the house long after everyone had gone home. This extra investment of time and energy was not generated by a prolonged sense of guilt nor by obligation for how kindly his father received him. No, its single

source was his father's incredible love. He had truly come to his senses and that made all the difference.

The goal of these devotions has been to help our hearts comprehend more fully and grasp more firmly the *“breadth and length and height and depth”* of our Father's love for us in Christ. As St. Paul prays that we may *“know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God”* (Ephesians 3:19). It's His love that moves us to invest our lives in what really matters, dedicating all that we are and have to Jesus and His business of restoring His creation. St. Paul described such motivation in these words, *“For the love of Christ compels us, because we have concluded this: that one had died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised”* (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Jesus' love moves us to join Him. His death doesn't obligate us to serve with Him in His Father's work. Rather, it provides the opportunity. We died and were raised with Him so that once again we might live and love as true children of God.

For personal reflection:

- 1) Do you find yourself underestimating the love God has for you in Christ? If so, in what ways?
- 2) What does the phrase, “The love of Christ compels us” say to you about your work in the Family Business?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we will never understand the depths of Your love. As it touches our minds and hearts, may we live in gratitude to Your goodness. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day Six: All that I have is yours

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found’”
(Luke 15:31-32).*

The boy who ran away wasn't the only son who struggled with his father's love. His older brother did too. In fact, the real focus of Jesus' story is on the son who didn't leave. Consider the context in which Jesus told the story of the “Lost Son” as well as the “Lost Sheep” and “Lost Coin.” Devoutly religious leaders—men who fully dedicated themselves to following God's Word without compromise—were struggling. They couldn't grasp Jesus' love for those who had left the “fold” and were living lives of sin. Something was terribly wrong. Jesus heard their grumbling, understood their struggles, and left his party with sinners to talk things over with them. You see, He deeply loved them, too.

Jesus' story is about two boys, not one. The famous one left in rebellion, the other stayed and served; neither understood their father's heart. We focus in this devotion on the older brother who didn't leave. By all respects he was a faithful son to his father. He invested his whole life in the “family business.” Undoubtedly he was up before sunrise, worked long hours, and came home late each evening. We find him still in the fields after dark while dad and little brother are partying away in the house. He was truly faithful, and, at the same time truly stuck. He was stuck in his inability to comprehend who he truly was as his father's son; how much he was loved, without condition; and how much he truly possessed as an heir of his father's world.

This inability to comprehend his father's love manifested itself in his inability to love his younger brother and serve him. Like the story of the Lost Son, Jesus' stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin share common elements. Something or someone is truly lost. The difference lies in the response of the owners. The owners of the sheep and coin do everything in their power to find what belongs to them. In the story of the Sons, no one goes looking for the lost boy. Jesus wants us to catch that point. The question before us is who should have gone seeking? The answer lies in the story. Jesus tells us that when the younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, the father, *“divided his property between them.”* That means that both sons received their inheritance that day. The younger one received a goodly share. But his older brother received, by far, the most generous portion. In effect, the entire family business had been handed over to him to own and manage. Included in the business were all of the servants and siblings, for whom now he would care. In other words, his younger brother became his “possession.” Thus, he was the owner, and the one responsible to go search for him in “a far country” until he found him. He didn't. Even worse, he was so stuck he was unable to celebrate

the return his brother—his property. He was truly lost. So his father left the party to go in search of him, and upon finding him to restore him to the family. Such is this father’s love.

The older son unloaded: *“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”* Can you hear the pain and confusion?

I picture his father coming near him, putting an arm around his son’s shoulder and drawing him close. *“Son,”* he said gently, *you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.* “You didn’t have to ask me for a young goat. It already belonged to you. It was yours to do as you pleased.” Such was this father’s love. The story ends with the two of them in the field. We do not know what happened next. But I think we can appreciate the struggle this faithful son was having. We, too, struggle much in trusting our Father’s unconditional love and inexhaustible treasure. Yet, He won’t give up loving us and sharing His life’s work with us.

When we lose our way He comes looking. He first sent our true older brother to find us when we were hopelessly lost. Our Brother not only searched until He found us, He laid down His life to ransom us from the hopeless situation--slavery to sin and death--in which He found us. No price was too high for Him to pay. Like the younger son, we were found and brought home. Like the dad in Jesus’ story our Father raced to greet us at our return. He placed His best robe on us and gave us a place at the table and in the Business next to our Older Brother, Jesus. Like the younger son, it may take us awhile to comprehend just how great is our Father’s love.

It’s that love that grows us from the place as younger siblings to that of older ones. In other words, our Father’s love matures us to become older brothers and sisters, who like the older brother in our story was given all things--the most precious gift being the loving heart of our Father. From His love we live, serve, and rejoice in the growth of our Family. Like dad, we cannot help but celebrate the return and restoration of each of our siblings. The passion our Father has for those children still lost, becomes our passion; we desire to invest ourselves in His work of seeking and saving all of His lost; and we share in His exceedingly great joy at their return. We finally understand what matters.

For personal reflection:

- 1) Which family member do you most identify with in the story: Dad, big brother or little brother? Why?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we have known Your love from the day we were adopted into Your family in the waters of baptism. Help us to grow so Your passion is ours reflected in love for the people You seek. Amen.

What Matters?

Week Seven Love Matters

*“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)*

Day Seven: Father, send me!

“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” (Isaiah 6:8)

Read Isaiah 6:1-8. This last devotion finds us standing with the Prophet Isaiah in the very heart of God’s Temple. We face the Lord Himself, seated on His Throne, the train of His robe filling the entire building. He’s surrounded by two great seraphim, with one proclaiming to the other,

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

The sound of the angel’s voice shakes the foundations and God’s house is filled with smoke. As with Isaiah, the vision is too much for us. Overwhelmed, we cry out with the prophet, *“Woe is me! For I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*

The curtain between heaven and earth has been pulled open and we see God, the Creator of all things as He really is. We also see ourselves—people of unclean lips. That is, people incapable of speaking His Truth, and, therefore, of representing Him accurately in and to this world. God’s work of restoring all things has everything to do with speaking His Truth. By His Word He created all things. By His Word He restores all things. People of unclean lips can’t do such work.

From our heavenly Father flies one of the angels with a burning coal he took from the altar. Touching our lips he announces, *“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”* The Lord has spoken; we are again restored to Him.

Then, God asks His incredible question, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* Our healing at the hands of the angel intended more than forgiveness. It also carried a personal invitation to join our Lord in His service to the world, complete with a “restored desire” to be about the Father’s business.

Our time together finishes with a practical consideration of how we choose to answer our heavenly Father’s question, “Who will go for us?” There is an implied “blank” in His query: “Who will go for us to _____.” It’s time that we honestly and prayerfully ask God to help us fill in the blank and, then, respond with Isaiah and all the other saints, *“Here am I! Send me.”*