

January 7

God Moved into the Neighborhood

John 1:10-18

John shows the depth of God's love in these verses. God comes into the world to pursue humanity with His love for the world. God became flesh and came to our hometown. God wasn't afraid of getting dirty, feeling hurt, being rejected or being crucified. God came into the world in Jesus Christ because he loves a broken, hurting, sinful world enough to do something about it.

And just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. 1 Corinthians 15:49

Our baptism is a call upon our lives to be sent by God into the world to be God's love and light.

Where in your world is the light and love of God desperately needed?

How could you flesh out the love of God in the place you identified?

Where does the church need to be the light and love of God?

January 14

A Called Life

John 1:43-51

Jesus lived as one who was sent. Philip was called by Jesus to go out into the world. Jesus showed his disciples what it looked like to live as one sent. The disciples watched him go to a wedding and change water into wine. The disciples watched him talk to a woman sitting by a well in Samaria. They watched him feed 5,000, deliver people from the powers of evil and heal the sick. Jesus wanted his followers to go out into the world and to live their lives as people who are called and sent.

Jesus came into the world to reveal to the world the nature of God. He showed the world what God was for. Thinking about the life of Jesus, what was Jesus for?

Look through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29) What was Jesus for?

In what ways might people respond to God if we lived as people who were sent and we proclaimed what God was for as we understand God's kingdom?

January 21

Expect Change

Jonah 3:1 – 4:1

Isn't it odd that Jonah was "greatly displeased and became angry" because the people of Nineveh changed and God showed them compassion? Why do you think Jonah was displeased that Nineveh changed?

Read Luke 19:1-10

What do you think made Zacchaeus change?

People had written Zacchaeus off as a hopeless loser. Maybe that was Jonah's problem with Nineveh, he had written Nineveh off as a loser and couldn't stand the thought that they could actually change.

As the people of God, we believe that the Kingdom of God is really possible. That is faith. Faith is believing that God can and does change people.

As followers of Jesus, we are not going to give up on people as a missional church.

January 28

There's a Call for You

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

There is a desperate need for leaders who are aligned with God's mission.

A spiritual leader...

- Has a deep relationship with God
- Has a heart that is broken for those who do not know God
- Is a risk taker
- Is uncomfortable with comfort
- Is Creative
- Is Unafraid to have people around them who have diverse interests and theological perspectives
- Challenges the status quo
- Is Radical in pursuit of their vision
- Is Team based

Missional leaders can be born. They are the pioneers of the church leading it to those places where God is at work and in those places where God desires for his Kingdom to begin.

February 4

Real Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

This passage helps us to think what true ministry looks like that arises from an understanding of the Good News of Jesus. Is real or gospel ministry that which comes from a person's charismatic gift, amazing gift of teaching or powerful message? Is the ability to perform amazing deeds and incredible acts of service at the heart of mission and ministry? Is the heart of ministry about entering into human weakness and suffering and transform those experiences? Paul would say it is the last.

The power of the gospel doesn't come from those of us who carry it out into the world but from its fundamental worth. The message of Christ was proclaimed in the way the apostle Paul lived his life and in the way he suffered for the sake of Christ.

What message would my life proclaim about Jesus?

In what ways can our lives be lived in a way that proclaims Christ?

In what ways can our church live out its mission in a way that proclaims the self-giving love of Christ?

February 11

The Transfiguration: A Glimpse of Glory before the Cross

Mark 9:2-9

In the verse preceding the verses for today, Jesus speaks of his own death and rejection by the religious elite. Jesus goes up a mountain and is transfigured before Peter, James and John. Transfigured means that the glory of Christ was shown. The Transfiguration was also an affirmation that in order for the purpose of God to be completed, the Cross had to be a part of God's plan. When it came time for the Cross, the disciples still did not understand but after the resurrection, they could look back and affirm that Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of God. The Transfiguration shows a glimpse of Christ's glory. Perhaps Christ seeing what lay ultimately ahead gave him the courage to face the suffering that awaited him on Golgotha.

A little earlier, Peter heard Jesus says they some would not taste death before they saw the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom (Matthew 16:28) At the Transfiguration, Peter say Jesus in His glory. Perhaps he thought, "This is the start of the Kingdom" so he wanted to make shelters for the celebration of the kingdom of God that had arrived.

The Transfiguration is an affirmation that Jesus is the Christ. The event gives us another reason to make Jesus Lord of our lives and follow Him no matter the cost.

February 18

Lent Series: Choices at The Cross

First Sunday of Lent

Reject or Accept?

Mark 14:43-50

As we begin this season of repentance and transformation called Lent, we need to answer the question, "What do I do with Jesus?" During this season we have an opportunity to allow God to speak to our hearts about where we REALLY are in our relationship with Jesus. Do we make our decisions based on what Christ calls us to do or do we go with our preferences? Does Jesus threaten our way of life so much that we want nothing to do with him? Do we just go to church because "we have always gone to church" or is it something we feel driven to do because of what Christ has done for us?

There is most likely a little of both in our hearts. There are areas we reject the way of the Cross and in others areas we fully embrace the way of the Cross. During Lent, allow the Holy Spirit to lead you and speak to you as to our spiritual condition. Look forward to the transformation that God will bring.

February 25

Saint or Sinner?

Luke 23:33-34

I must decide whether I accept or reject the Cross of Christ. I may reject it because I don't think I have done anything bad enough for God to take my sin upon himself.

Look up Romans 3:21-24

Is there a sin that God doesn't mind we commit?

Is there a scale of good to horrible sin?

John 19:11 Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." What might be a greater sin?

March 4

Cling to or Flee From?

Mark 8:31-38

What do I do with the suffering of the cross? Do I deny the cross so that I can go on thinking the life is good? Do I believe "People get what they deserve"? Do I accept the cross and deny that life is good? Do I accept the Cross and suffering in life and continue to love God and be faithful to Him to the end?

What do our lives look like when we embrace the way of the Cross?

March 11

Life or Death?

Luke 9:22-26

Some of the values of our world are comfort, security and ease. If it makes us uncomfortable, we want to avoid it. If there are risks involved, we want to stray away from it. If it costs something, we want to avoid it. Those are not the values of Jesus. Jesus calls us to take the risk, pick up the cross and follow him.

What risks have you taken for Jesus?

What comforts have you given up?

What would it look like for you to take some risks?

What does it mean when Jesus says, “. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

March 18

God's Purpose or My Preference?

John 19:27

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!’”

Disciples' actions are based upon God's purposes rather than their preferences and comfort.

Read

- Luke 19:29-44
- John 12:20-50
- Matthew 26-27

Notice in John 12:42 “many of the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue”

What fears keep us from following Jesus?

How do we overcome that fear like Jesus did in verse 27?

What is God's purpose/calling for your life where you may be tempted to say, “Father, save me from this hour”?

March 25

What Shall I Do With Jesus?

Matthew 27:11-26

What shall we do with Jesus?

Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus as an infant so that Jesus' ministry would never get started. Jesus' hometown rejected him. The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes could not open their minds and hearts to Jesus' teaching. Peter denied Jesus. Judas betrayed Him.

The question is, "What shall I do with Jesus?" Kill Him again, completely blocking him out of my life? Pass Jesus by with mockery with vanity, pride and self-righteousness? Follow him from afar? Accept Jesus as the Lord of my life?

April 1

Easter: New Life

John 20:1-9

The beloved disciple believes while Peter is still wondering what happened. Both disciples experienced the same events, heard the same teachings and saw the same empty tomb with “the strips of linen lying there.” One runs away confused, the other runs away in faith.

Why do you think one believes and the other doesn't?

What keeps us from fully believing in a living God who has the power to transform lives?

Many of us have grown up in an age in which we need to see in order to believe. Like Thomas and Peter, do I have to see the risen Christ in order to believe?

What would help me become stronger in my belief that God is real that Christ is raised from the dead and I can put my whole trust in Him?

How have you experienced the presence of the Risen Christ in your life?

April 8

**Series: Principles of Making Marriage
(and our relationship with God) Work**

This series is based on John M. Gottman's book The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

Get to know each other

John 17:1-5

It's hard to love someone if we don't know them. In your small group or with your spouse or best friend answer the following questions.

What are God's most important values?

(It may help to look up these scriptures: Micah 6:8, Luke 6:35-36, Romans 8:38-39,

Deuteronomy 31:6, John 3:16-17, Exodus 34:6

What about your spouse, your best friends and/or those in your small group?

- Who is her/his best friend?
- What stresses her/him?
- What is her/his life dream?
- What is her/his favorite music, song?
- What is her/his favorite food?
- What are three of the most important events in his/her life?
- What is one of his/her best childhood experiences?
- What does he/she most like to do with time off?
- Where is her/his favorite place?

How would you like to get to know God more fully?

How would you like to get to know your spouse/friend more fully?

April 15

Fuel Your Admiration

Psalm 145

The Psalms are full of praise of God. Read Ephesians 1:3-10. For what did Paul praise God? To deepen and stay in love with God, it is helpful to remember what God has done and remember why we fell in love with God in the first place. Recall times when you experienced God's love.

Remember times when you were drawn to God. What drew you to God?

How about your spouse, friend or even your church. What traits drew you to her/him (or to the church)? Gottman wrote, "...fondness and admiration can be fragile unless you remain aware of how crucial they are to the friendship that is at the core of any good marriage. By simply reminding yourself of your spouse's positive qualities—even as you grapple with each other's flaws---you can prevent a happy marriage from deteriorating. The simple reason is that fondness and admiration are antidotes for contempt."

How often do you give God praise? How about your spouse and/or friend?

List the ways you appreciate God.

List ways you appreciate your spouse, friend and/or church.

We love God and our significant other as we come to cherish them. We come to love them more as we think about their good traits and minimize their negative traits. The challenge for this week is to think joyfully upon God's and your significant other's good traits.

April 22

Turn Toward the Other

2 Chronicles 15:1-9

God is always the One who is turning towards us. From the moment our lives began, God's love has been surrounding us. We as Methodist call this "prevenient grace." By God's grace we finally turn to God.

In our human relationships it can be a tendency to turn away from each other. Turning toward each other can be acknowledging the various love languages (Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch). Turning toward each other may involve listening, helping with chores, spending time together.... Take some time to add to this list.

Turning toward others, our spouse and God do not have to be the "BIG" deal. Turning toward each other involves simple, every day acts.

What are some ways we can turn towards God?

It might be helpful to flesh out ways we live out the fruits of the Holy Spirit. (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control)

April 29

Practice Humility and Allow Yourself to be Influenced

Ephesians 5:21-30

We want to allow ourselves to be influenced by others. Gottman wrote, "...emotionally intelligent husbands have figured out the one big thing: how to convey honor and respect. All spiritual views of life are consistent with loving and esteeming your spouse. And that's what accepting influence is all about."

In what areas of our relationships do you block being influenced? Why?
In what areas do you welcome being influenced? Why?

When it comes to your relationship with God, is it similar to your relationship with others in terms of how you are influenced?

In what areas/ways do you resist God's influence in your life? Why?

May 6

Love God: Wonder

Genesis 1:1-8

During the next three weeks we want to explore ways that we can love God, love life and love others. This week, let's explore one way that we can deepen our love for God.

Read

- Genesis 1:1-2:3
- Psalm 8
- Job 38-39
- Psalm 104
- John 1:1-5

As you read Job 38-39, notice that the wonders of God's creation are beyond the grasp of our minds. Seeing and experiencing the works of God helps us to love God.

Take time to think about and observe some of the wonders of God.

Try to recapture some of the wonder you had as a child.

Try these things to regain wonder:

- Put down the cell phone and take your kids or grandkids outside
- Look at an event through someone else's eyes. Try looking at autumn woods in Indiana as if you came from southern Arizona. Strive to understand someone who is different than you by looking at them through their eyes.
- Slow down as you walk or read a really good book or scripture so that you have an opportunity to be immersed in what you are doing.

May 13

Love Life: Discovery

Psalm 111

This week we want to explore at least one way we can love life. As children we love to discover things. Even as adults we love to discover new things. When we read a book or a scripture and have a new insight, there is a joy that comes about in our hearts. As we discover something new in the world we get a more colorful picture of how God wants our world and our lives to be in God's vision for the world. With discovery we not only come to love life but we gain a more hopeful vision because we catch a little larger glimpse of the end. We come to love life because we discover God at work.

What events have helped you to see God and work and to love life?

May 20

Love Others: Passion

John 13:31-35

Jesus wants his disciples to love others as he loved us. Jesus set the example for what it looks like to love others. Jesus washed his disciple's feet, he took time to visit with a lonely woman at a well, he wasn't afraid to engage with those who were possessed by the powers of evil and he went to the cross. When we read those accounts, our desire to love others is fueled. In a study conducted at Pennsylvania State University-Erie researchers Michael Brown and Linda Treviño investigated the influence of ethical leaders. One of the findings from the Brown and Treviño study is that people want ethical leaders. (No big surprise) and look up to them.

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you."

As followers of Jesus, what actions of Jesus fuel your love for others?

What young person is influenced by my actions?

Am I fueling passion (love for others) by the way I talk, act and think?

May 27

Only Trust Him

John 3:1-17

Trusting in God is to have eternal life. Jesus defines eternal life as found in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” This text shows us the good news.

- God loves the world
- God does not want anyone to perish
- God gives Jesus so that all may live
- God sent Jesus not to condemn the world but to save
- To trust in what God has done through Jesus Christ gives eternal life.

Maybe if the world heard this gospel clearly and graciously, more people would come to God.

How could you speak the gospel to your friends, neighbors and those God brings across your path?

June 3

Parables of Jesus

What Do We Do Until Jesus Comes Again?

Matthew 25:1-13

Maxine Dunnam wrote in his book Twelve Parables of Jesus

Our most bitter regrets come, not because we were not prepared for the worst, but because we were not prepared for the best. How often we miss golden opportunities because we are not prepared for them? The same is true of nations. How much more readily we prepare for war than for peace. How quick we are to meet the needs of disaster victims, but how slow to plan the use of our resources in such a way that famine, flood, and pollution will no longer plague humanity.”

In what ways could we prepare for the best? What hopeful Christian innovation could be beginning?

Some of the women ran out of oil and asked the others to borrow some. Paul wrote, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” (Philippians 2:12) Paul reminds us that salvation (being made well/whole) is a journey. We need to be prepared every day. What we did a year or ten years ago doesn’t make us ready to Jesus coming today.

What is God asking of our church to prepare for Jesus coming?

What is God asking of you?

June 10

Keep On Praying

Luke 11:1-13

The parable teaches that God is good. Jesus said, “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” (Luke 6:36)

The neighbor didn't want to bother with the need of another but eventually gave in. Sometimes God works through us, even when we don't feel like doing good.

The final lesson, and perhaps the main lesson, from the parable is keep praying and don't lose heart. A persistent prayer is heard by a good God. A persistent prayer enables us to hear more clearly the will of God for our lives.

What prayers do I have?

- A weak will
- Courage
- Purpose for your life
- Raising children to love the Lord
- A different attitude

June 17

Fill Our Lives with Jesus

Matthew 12:38-45

We might not see evil the same way those in the time of Jesus saw evil, but we cannot deny a power that exists in people and societies that sometimes overcome even the best. We see powers of anger, depression, greed, jealousy, hatred and resentment. Jesus reminds us of the presence of evil.

Jesus also tells us that when the evil is cast out that empty space needs to be filled. Maxie Dunnam wrote, "Have you ever heard parents say they're not going to try to bring up their children in the Christian faith because they don't want to indoctrinate them? . . . Parents who have tried that discover too late that their children get their instruction from someone else." (Twelve Parables of Jesus p. 41)

Jesus calls for a commitment to his lordship. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives.

What "demons" reside in my life? What needs to replace the attitudes/actions/thoughts that are in line with being like Christ?

June 24

Bear Fruit

Luke 13:1-9

The bottom line message of the parable is “repent or die.” Christ is always giving us an opportunity to repent and bear fruit yet judgment will ultimately come. George Buttrick wrote, “All affliction is not due to wrongdoing, but all wrongdoing brings affliction” (The Parables of Jesus, by George A. Buttrick (Baker, 1973). Jesus is clear that sin has consequences.

Because Israel was sinful the nation paid the consequences. Our nation is extremely blessed, yet we have 45 million people living below the poverty line. Racism is still a problem. Sexual harassment is still an issue. How long will the Lord allow our self-serving ways?

Churches have been blessed and yet so often they turn inward, only concerned about their own preferences rather than God’s purposes. God may not have need of some churches that bear no fruit.

What does it look like to produce fruit? Are we bringing people to Christ? Are we doing justice? Are people sensing God’s presence as we live in the world?

July 1

It's Worth the Cost

Matthew 13:44-46

In the Lord's Prayer are the words, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done." Those words are saying God's kingdom is where God's will is done. The Kingdom is also refers to God's dream, God's vision for the world where there is no more sickness, death and where people live according to the way God has planned. The Kingdom, living according to God's will, is worth everything. It is worth everything to bring healing to our brokenness. It is worth everything to heal a shattered relationship. It is worth everything for our world to be shaped according to God's vision.

What would the cost be to get the kingdom?

Why is the Kingdom of God worth everything?

July 8

Freed from Materialism

Luke 12:13-34

When it comes to our possessions, we must remember that all that we have comes from God. We may be able to plant a seed but we did not create the earth, design the seed so that it would produce, set the sun in the sky so that photosynthesis could take place or create water. It is because of God's grace and creativeness that we even exist and have any talents at all.

Anyone can have a covetous spirit; rich or poor. Jesus warns about being anxious because being anxious can cause a person to become covetous.

Jesus calls us to cling to the right values. Maxie Dunnam in his book *Twelve Parables of Jesus* asks five questions to help us gain perspective on possessions.

1. Where do I place my security?
2. Do I include God in my planning?
3. Why do I want more?
4. What would I like to be remembered for?
5. Am I rich toward God?

July 15

The Greatest Sin

Luke 18:9-17

Jesus begins the parable by saying, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.” The judgement of God was not upon the one who realized he was sinful but upon the person who thought he was above others.

Questions we might want to ask ourselves....

- Has my devotional life caused me to think I am a little better than other? Has my spiritual life just become routine/mechanical?
- Do I compare myself to others rather than to Jesus?
- Does my attitude keep me separated from others because I think I am just a little better?
- Do I think I’m doing just fine so in my heart I am beginning to believe that I don’t need God?

July 22

Living with the Good and Bad

Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus recognizes that there is good and bad in our world. There is good and bad in every relationship. If we think we will find the perfect friend, the perfect spouse, the perfect church or community.....we are going to keep searching upon Jesus comes.

What do we do with evil in the world? Our baptismal covenant includes "renunciation of all that is evil." The church needs to resist those evils that fly in the face of the gospel. Yet, Jesus warns us about pulling up the wheat with the weeds and basically says, "Let God pull the weeds."

A man by the name of Chappell wrote,

Tare-pulling is one of the most appealing methods of dealing with evil that our world has ever known. In spite of the fact that Jesus did not sanction this method, his servants have never been able to let it alone. . . But while this method of dealing with evil is very appealing and while the man who employs it will always have a following, it has certain obvious defects. First, it requires a wisdom, a power of judgment, that we do not possess. It looks as if anyone could tell wheat from tares, or tares from wheat, but such is not the case. . . Good and evil depend upon that something called motive. . . therefore, we are not to spend our time pulling tares because to do so requires on our part a wisdom that belongs to God alone. The tare-pulling endangers the wheat that grows beside it. . . . I have some members in my own church that, so far as I am able to judge, are very unworthy. . . . Suppose I pull up this ugly tare and fling him out of the field. It would possibly be no better than he deserves, but I hesitate for these reasons: If love will not win him to a good life, ostracism will not. Then his life is interlocked with that of a good woman who is his wife. In addition he has some lovely children. These also would be hurt.

Take time to discuss this in your small group.

July 29

Do You Really Expect Me to Forgive?

Matthew 18:21-35

Maxie Dunnam writes, "So Jesus is calling us with this parable, calling us to get on stage ourselves, (place ourselves in the parable), to recognize that this drama is our life, because nothing is more at the center of life than forgiveness, than forgiving and being forgiven." Twelve Parables of Jesus, Maxie Dunnam p. 112)

Why do you think this statement is true?

This parable lets us know that there will be a day when we will be held accountable for our actions. Hopefully, that day will be for us a day of celebration as we have lived a life in sync with the ways of Jesus. A daily discipline of confession and repentance is necessary for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. At such times we realize how far we are from being like Jesus and how desperate we are in need of the Lord's forgiveness.

"Can't I hold onto that old grudge? Can't I withhold forgiveness and still be forgiven by God?" God's forgiveness only becomes real when we forgive others. George Buttrick wrote, "NO life is open to God which bitterly nurses its resentments. Such a life revokes its own pardon."

August 5

Life Together

Ephesians 4:1-16

God created the Church who is connected. In the Apostles Creed we confess “the communion of saints.” Jesus prays, “

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

We are united by one hope (the resurrection), One Lord (Jesus Christ), one faith (Christ came in the flesh 1 John 4:2-3), one baptism (brought into Christ and His church), One God.

Our common purpose is to become more like Jesus and to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Our purpose is advanced because of our different gifts, personalities, backgrounds, life experiences and resources.

Take time to recognize and celebrate the differences of the people in your family, small group and church.

August 12

Blessing of the Teachers Sunday

1 Corinthians 15:58

Paul says to “stand firm.” He does not mean for followers of Jesus to just hunker down and hang on. To “stand firm” is to keep pushing for the work of the Lord. Paul goes on to address the question, “Do our actions matter?” Paul brings up the issue in Galatians 2:2 “I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.” Philippians 2:16 ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.” Does striving in life make any difference? Paul says our lives absolutely make a difference. We are conduits of God’s love. We can be a part of God’s work of redeeming the world as we do works of justice, reflect God’s love and live in such a way that draws people to Christ.

August 19

**Love in Action
Operation Classroom Sunday**

James 2:14-17

In what ways can I live out my faith in my personal life?

In what ways can we live out our faith as a small group and church?

What are the great needs of our community?

What are the great needs of our world?

What would be a vision for our small group?

What will we do?

August 26

Overcoming fear

Matthew 14:22-33

The following are passages from a sermon by Dave Byrum

“Only God can walk on the waves. That’s what the Bible says, not only here but also in Job, Isaiah, in Habakkuk, and the Psalms ... it is God who walks on the storm. It is God who makes a path in the sea.

*Why does God do this – just to show he can do a miracle ... “Hey look, I’m walking on the water!”? No, that’s ridiculous. Remember now, in ancient times the sea was understood to be the place of evil. The evil monsters were there; Leviathan was there. In the Bible, the sea is the abode of all the forces that are against us in life. **And God walks on the sea.** In other words, there is no power, no storm, no wind, no force in the world that God cannot conquer ... there is no evil over which God is not superior, nothing that can destroy your life because God loves and cares for you.*

- What storms (or demons/powers) are at work in my life?
Loss of your job, serious illness, loss of a loved one, Relationship with your kids, your parents not doing well, marital disruptions
- What would my life look like if I allowed God to have power over those storms/powers?

September 2

Jesus Proclaims It is Not Over

John 21:15-19

While Peter vehemently declared that he would die for Jesus, we found him denying he even knew Jesus. I doubt that Peter got any sleep on Friday or Saturday night after the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus didn't want Peter's failure to destroy Peter's life nor did Jesus want his relationship with Peter to end. Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to affirm his love for Jesus and then Jesus told Peter he would have a chance to live out what he just said.

Jesus gives Peter another opportunity to come back into a relationship with him, even after Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Because of what Jesus did on Friday, on the Cross, a new relationship was possible. Such is the case with Peter and Jesus and such is the case with us. When we believe something is over, Jesus steps in and says, "Not so fast."

Christ calls us to die to ourselves. In what ways could we die to self so that our relationship with Jesus and others would be made stronger?

September 9

Series: A Healthy Church

A Healthy Church is a Missional Church

John 1:43-51

Jesus lived as one who was sent. Philip was called by Jesus to go out into the world. Jesus showed his disciples what it looked like to live as one sent. The disciples watched him go to a wedding and change water into wine. The disciples watched him talk to a woman sitting by a well in Samaria. They watched him feed 5,000, deliver people from the powers of evil and heal the sick. Jesus wanted his followers to go out into the world and to live their lives as people who are called and sent.

Jesus came into the world to reveal to the world the nature of God. He showed the world what God was for. Thinking about the life of Jesus, what was Jesus for?

Look through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29) What was Jesus for?

In what ways might people respond to God if we lived as people who were sent and we proclaimed what God was for as we understand God's kingdom?

September 16

A healthy church is a welcoming church

Luke 14:15-24

“Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place... (Henri Nouwen) That’s what Jesus was showing in the parable. Jesus was offering the outcast, (those whom society thinks has no value) a home. After all, most of us think of ourselves as outcast. We don’t measure up to what other people expect. We don’t even measure up to what we expect. But God invites us to come to His table to share in all that God has to offer.

Hospitality goes beyond saying “good morning.” Hospitality is making someone feel at home, like they belong.

What makes me feel like I belong?

How could our church help people feel like they belong?

Hospitality is extending our gifts to others and recognizing and graciously receiving what others have to offer without imposing our conditions upon them. Hospitality is being willing to really listen to the ideas and thoughts of another. Hospitality is allowing others to try something new, even though we have “never done it that way.”

How could receiving the gifts of others be a blessing?

September 23

A healthy church is a risk taking church

John 1:6-12

J. Oswald Sanders wrote, "The frontiers of the Kingdom of God are never advanced by men and women of caution." A healthy church is a church that is not afraid to take chances for the sake of the Kingdom of God and to bring people to Jesus. A healthy church is not afraid to take the good news of Jesus Christ beyond the walls of the building. A healthy church is not afraid to risk losing time or energy or money for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus took risks in his life and ministry. Every risk he took did not turn out positive; even many in his hometown rejected him, many of the religious leaders rejected him. When we look at the mission of the prophets, their mission and the work of their entire lives were rejected yet they took the risk because they knew they were sent by God.

What risk taking mission do you sense the Holy Spirit is inviting you to be a part?

Where have you seen God at work in mission places (or peoples' lives) that you never thought something could be done?

September 30

A healthy church is a caring church

Galatians 6:7-10

As a church we are guided by the value of caring for the Body of Christ. We are guided by thinking, “Does this action bring people closer to God? Does our worship help people experience God’s presence? Do small groups enable us to care for each other? When life issues arise does what we do draw people into a deeper faith and love for Jesus?” We are guided by the thought, “Does this action help others become all God intends for them to be?”

Each small group, every ministry team, every individual wants to have the question before them, “What will help this individual or group love God and others more?”

How is your small group caring for others?

What ministry is God inviting you to join in order to care for others?

Who have you encouraged this week? Who will you encourage this week?

October 7

A healthy church is a growing church

Ephesians 4:11-15

Lou Holtz (an outstanding football coach) said, "In this world you're either growing or you're dying so get in motion and grow." Jesus (the Son of God) said, "And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." Luke 9:23-24)

Jeremiah spoke these words of God, "For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, "plans for well-being, and not for calamity, in order to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) The plan God has for Israel and for us is to become more like Jesus. Paul wrote, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." (Romans 8:28-30)

How is my life today? Is it more like Christ? Am I more loving? Do I have more joy in doing the will of God? Am I more patient? Do I seek God's will more than my own desires? Am I more gentle? Am I kinder?

October 14

A healthy church is a grateful church

2 Corinthians 9:7

Over the past few years our church has given to all kinds of missions: disaster relief, Operation Classroom, we've drilled wells in Africa, bought literally hundreds of mosquito nets to prevent malaria, we have given hundreds of gifts to children at Christmas, boxes of school supplies, truck loads full of food, built Habitat houses . . .

Why do you think it made you feel so good to give so generously?

How could I glorify God through my giving?

What are some ways we could give sacrificially to God?

Why do you think giving would bless God and change our world and church?

What keeps us from giving with extravagant generosity?

How can we get past those walls and trust God more?

October 21

Series: A Witness for Change

Identify

Matthew 28:18-20

Why should we make disciples of Jesus Christ? The mission of The United Methodist Church is, “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

By making disciples we have a part in transforming the world. How could bringing someone to Christ play a part in transforming the world?

How has your life been made better because you have a relationship with Jesus?

Did you know that 95% of Christians have never brought someone to know Jesus Christ?

What needs do those who know have that the good news of Jesus Christ could address?

October 28

Intersect with others

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

We are sent out into the world to be witnesses for the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. It is easy to be witnesses by doing deeds but if we just do it be deeds, many will not know about the love of God or the forgiveness of God or the comfort that God brings or the courage that God gives or the hope (trust in God) or the joy the comes from being a part of building God’s Kingdom . . .

What other blessings come from having a relationship with Christ?

Sharing our faith is way we change the world and bless the lives of others.

How has living in Christ blessed me?

How could it bless others I know?

How could I share my faith in a way that others I know would hear the good news of Christ?

November 4

Invite others

Acts 8:26-40

“ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, . . . This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Philip overheard this man reading from the scripture. Philip saw the opportunity to invite the man into a relationship with Jesus. Philip was listening for the chance. It wasn’t a forced conversation or invitation; it just came natural as Philip was obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

We are given openings to invite someone to come into a relationship with Christ. It is the most important act we can do because it will change their lives for eternity. A relationship with Christ will bless them in ways we won’t even realize at the time.

What keeps us from holding back inviting someone to come to Christ?

Think of ways you could invite someone to come into a relationship with Jesus. What are ways we could “Go to that chariot and stay near it”? In other words, how can we build relationships with others so we can earn the privilege of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ? Invite them to worship. . . Invite them to a small group gather.... Invite them to go to breakfast and listen for an opportunity. . . “I’m not sure how you feel about faith, but you know, one way it has helped me is . . . “

Write out some of the ways God has worked in your life.

If you are in a small group, share your stories of how God has worked in your life.

November 11

Involve others

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Our mission is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Once someone has decided to make Jesus the center of her/his life, there is growth that needs to happen. We want to help them find a small group where she/he can grow. We want to help them discover his/her gifts so that they may find joy in serving the Lord and have a part in building up the Body of Christ (the church).

Who could I come beside to help her/him develop her/his gifts?

Where are my passions?

Where could I be most helpful in building up the Body of Christ?

In what mission of the church could my gifts be used?

November 18

Motivated by Fear or Faith

Matthew 25:14-30

“Do not be afraid” is used about 80 times in the scriptures. The first time we read the words is in Genesis 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” The last time we find the phrase is Revelation 2:10 ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”

What risks did the people in the parable run?

Why would they risk putting the money to use?

Why did the one person fear losing the money?

Why do we fear putting our gifts to work?

November 25

Thanksgiving Sunday

Colossians 2:6-7 The Message (MSG)

⁶⁻⁷ My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Disciples live faithfully out of their gratitude for what God has done.

Think about all you have learned this past year.

What are some of the things you have learned about being a disciple?

How has God changed you this year?

How have the changes God made in your life made your life more of a blessing for you and for others?

What are some ways our living "spill over into thanksgiving"?

December 2

First Sunday of Advent: Mary's Story

Luke 1:26-38

Mary responds to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Mary is of a very low status in society. Mary is young, perhaps 13 or 14. There is no mention of her family. The status of one's family was important in those days. She was a woman, which put her further down the social ladder. God, in his amazing grace, chooses Mary to be the mother of Jesus. Mary says "yes" to God's invitation. Mary finds her status, not by the world's standards but her identity is found her obedience to God and participating in God's redeeming work for the world.

Mary saying "yes" to God put her status at risk in Joseph's family and in her community.

Where does our world find its identity and status?

How would finding our status in God and God's purposes be different?

December 9

**Second Sunday of Advent: Elizabeth's Story
(the mother of John the Baptist)**

Luke 1:39-45

I wonder what the mother of John the Baptist felt when Jesus was born. She knew her son would be the forerunner of Jesus. John would be the one who wasn't even worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus sandals. Imagine our kids coming in second place, or third place, or . . . receiving a "participation award." In the text to today, we find Elizabeth excited for Mary, even to the point of saying, "...why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Philippians 2:3-4 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Hebrews 10:24 ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

What causes people to be so competitive in our world?

How can we help our children learn to be glad when others excel?

How could we change the world if we were more like Elizabeth?

December 16

Third Sunday of Advent: Joseph's Story

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph did the right thing, in spite of what others said or were thinking. No doubt, Joseph knew he would face ridicule from the town people. If our communities were filled with more people like Joseph, our children and grandchildren would grow up in some great communities.

Joseph was a righteous man. He did what he knew was God's will. He was righteous in that he was kind toward Mary. He was righteous in that he had a close enough relationship with God that he could hear the voice of the angel speaking to him. He was righteous in that God knew Joseph would stand by Mary in the months ahead no matter what the neighbors said.

What would it look like for us to be righteous in similar situations?

December 23

Fourth Sunday of Advent: The Shepherd

Luke 2:8-15

Luke sets before us the social order of his day. He wrote, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree. . ." This Caesar was Octavian who was seen as "the divine savior who has brought peace to the world." Luke's world was structured around status, power and privilege. King Herod and Caesar Augustus are at the top of the ladder and the shepherds are on the bottom.

Place yourself in the position of the shepherds. You are on the bottom rung of the ladder. You have no status or privilege. The upper classes look down upon you. If you are introduced to someone, you might be embarrassed to tell him your occupation. How do you feel?

Who in our world has little status or privilege?

Now, imagine you have just heard the good news of the Savior being born. You have been chosen to hear the message first and visit the newborn Savior. Now, how do you feel? Why?

Why is this good news for the outcast and looked down upon in our world? How does knowing what God thinks about people like the shepherds, change our way of thinking?

December 30

Jesus is the One

Luke 2:22-40

We can learn much from this story. One of the things that stand out in this story is the affirmation of the greatness of Jesus. Throughout Luke's gospel the greatness of Jesus is declared by angels, teachers and a voice from heaven at his baptism. Here, Jesus greatness is affirmed by two senior citizens. They saw in Jesus, the fulfillment of all that they had been hoping and praying.

Think of those people who have affirmed the greatness of Jesus in your life?

What was it about their witness that caused you to accept Jesus into your life?

What in your life are you hoping and praying?

Reflect on how Jesus is the fulfillment of all humanities hopes.