

SEPTEMBER 2021

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September 1, 2021
Meeting People Where They Are

Readings for today: Psalms 134-137, 1 Corinthians 9

Human beings are deeply complex creatures. They are an inscrutable mix of desires, passions, thoughts, life experiences, and core beliefs. They cannot be flattened into two-dimensional caricatures. They resist broad categorization. They refuse to conform to general stereotypes. Each person is unique. Each person fearfully and wonderfully made. I love how Christian Smith puts it in his book, *What is a Person?*...

“By person I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who - as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions - exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world.”

If you are like me, you had to read and re-read that statement several times to really understand it and that makes perfect sense. After all, we are made in the image of God. We are finite creatures created to reflect the infinite. We are temporal creatures created to reflect the eternal. We are mortal creatures created to reflect the immortal. As such, we should expect complexity. We should expect intricacy. We should expect enigma and inscrutability. This is normal when one speaks of the human creature. It's also why we have to meet each person where they're at. We can't make assumptions. We have to lay aside any expectations. We have to approach each person individually with a heart to listen and learn.

This is the genius of Paul. He finds a way to meet each person right where they are. He treats each person as a unique creature worthy of God's unconditional love. He believes with all his heart that no one is beyond the reach of God's amazing grace. Listen to how he describes it from our reading today, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) If Paul were using today's categories, he might say, “To the Republicans, I joined their convention in order to win Republicans. To the Democrats, I joined their administration in order to win Democrats. I invited both conservatives and progressives into my life, listened and loved them well, in order to win them with the gospel. I spent time with those who were masked and unmasked, vaccinated and unvaccinated, refusing to use shame or fear to coerce behavior, instead choosing the way of grace in order to win them to Christ. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.” This is the way of the Kingdom. This is the way of Jesus.

Over the last year to eighteen months, my heart has been broken by the number of divisions that have fractured the Body of Christ in America. Rather than cling to Jesus and walk in the way of grace, we cling to Self and walk in the way of the devil. We judge our brothers and sisters. We exclude and divide. We isolate and separate. We justify our sinful attitudes and actions by claiming “healthy boundaries” or by cutting those we consider “toxic” out of our lives. We rarely, if ever, acknowledge our own “toxicity”, of course. We shift blame. We externalize responsibility. Our problems or the

world's problems are always someone else's fault. Even more tragically, those who differ from us are not just wrong, they are evil. They are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness and grace. They are not worth our time or attention. They don't deserve the gospel and they certainly shouldn't be allowed in church. Sadly, I've heard and read these comments from people in my own church family and it breaks the heart of God. It is not the way of Jesus.

Friends, Jesus met us where we're at. He came to us while we were still sinners. While we were still dead in our trespasses. While we were still at war with Him. He became our peace by tearing down every wall that separated us from Him. How can we - who call ourselves Christ-followers - not do the same for others?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 138-141, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

September 2, 2021
God is Pro-Life

Readings for today: Psalms 138-141, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

Recently, the Supreme Court decided not to act on a law passed in Texas banning abortion after the detection of a fetal heartbeat which is usually around six weeks. It is the latest in a series of legal challenges seeking to overturn the landmark decision of Roe vs. Wade in 1973. I imagine there will be a flurry of lawsuits filed in the weeks ahead. The rhetoric will heat up and debates will rage over the lack of exceptions for rape and incest, a woman's right to govern her own body, the lack of quality post-natal care in many cases, the quality of life for children born into poverty or with severe special needs, etc. And many of those debates are absolutely worth having. However, what is often lost in all the noise is the fundamental truth that every child conceived is an absolute miracle from God. Every child conceived is precious in His sight. Known and knit together by God's own hands.

Human beings are sacred creatures. Made in God's image. Fashioned after His likeness. Created to enjoy a unique and special relationship with their Creator. Listen again to how the Psalmist describes it in Psalm 139:1-18, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it." Why on earth do we deserve such divine attention? What have we done to catch the attention of God? God loves us so much He pursues us. He seeks after us. He will not rest until we rest in Him. He wants to know us and He wants us to know Him. He sees our every move. He knows every thought. He is acquainted with all our ways. There is not a moment when His eye is not upon us.

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you." God is ever-present. He is always with us. Not because we have earned it. Not because we deserve it. But simply because He has decreed it. He is with the good and the evil alike. He is with both victims and perpetrators. He is with the Pope in His cathedral and the worst despots the world has to offer. That may surprise you. It may even upset you. But you have to remember God is a God of both comfort and conviction. He is a God of mercy as well as judgment. He is a God of grace as well as justice. To the godly, His presence is a joy. To the ungodly, His presence is a terror. His goal in abiding with humanity is to draw all of us to Himself. There is no place we can run from Him. No place we can hide from Him. Before God, all our secrets are laid bare.

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." God initiates a relationship with us even as we're being formed in the womb. Even as He forms our inward parts, He is calling out to us. Singing over us. Looking forward to the day when we will embrace Him as Father. Even as our heart begins to beat, God looks forward to the day when it beats for Him. Even as our hands and feet begin to take

shape, God looks forward to the day when we will reach out to Him. Run to Him. Even as our minds and hearts come into being, God is already planting in us a deep longing for Himself. This is true for every single child who has ever been conceived or who ever will be conceived.

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:1-18) When our eyes are opened to the wonders of God, we are overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by His goodness. Overwhelmed by His greatness. Overwhelmed by His grace to us. God is unabashedly pro-life. Pro my life. Pro your life. Pro every life. From the womb to the tomb, God is on our side. He is with us. As believers, our place is to stand on the side of life. Always. Forever. In every area of life. We stand with the unborn whose lives are so fragile and vulnerable. We stand with the criminals whose lives could be cut short by the death penalty. We stand with the immigrants who have risked their lives for a chance at a new and better life. We stand with the refugees who had to flee for their lives from places like Afghanistan. We stand with the impoverished whose lives are a struggle every single day. We stand with the victims who have suffered in their lives from abuse or injustice or brutality at the hands of someone in power over them. We stand for life because God stands for life.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 142-144, 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

September 3, 2021
People Pleasing

Readings for today: Psalms 142-144, 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

“I’m a people-pleaser.” I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard that phrase. Mostly in a negative context. It usually signals a person struggles with healthy boundaries. They exhaust themselves trying to make those around them happy. They take too much responsibility for the emotional health and well-being of their loved ones or peers. They lose any sense of their own identity as they wrestle with staying self-differentiated. As a pastor, I’ve helped many people re-assert themselves in relationships. Reclaim a sense of their own God-given selfhood as they seek to relate to others. Recover a healthy sense of value and self-worth as a human being made in the image of God.

The temptation in these conversations, of course, is to simply flip to the other side of the coin. It’s to let the pendulum swing too far the other way. The people-pleaser becomes the people-offender. Their boundaries become hard and strong and unyielding. They become inflexible and distrustful and resentful. They become self-absorbed and self-centered. They refuse to serve others. Sacrifice is a word that no longer fits their vocabulary. They live in constant fear of going back. They are constantly on guard against anything that might suggest a return to their former ways of doing things.

Neither of these approaches leads to life. Neither of these approaches will lead to the kind of intimacy God desires for us as human beings. Both are based in manipulation, power, and a desire to control those around us. God shows us a different way. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes it, “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor...Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 32-11:1)

At first blush, it looks like Paul himself has fallen into them trap of unhealthy people-pleasing. Let no one seek their own good? Give no offense to anyone? Try to please everyone in everything? I can almost hear the people-pleasers reading this beginning to hyperventilate a bit! ;-) Take a deep breath. Look at the very last verse. Christ, as always, holds the key. So confident was Jesus in the will of His Father, He could relinquish all things - including His very own spirit - into His Father’s divine hands. Jesus knew His Father was faithful. Jesus knew His Father was just. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to fill Him even as He poured Himself out. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to exalt Him even as He humbled Himself by becoming the Suffering Servant for all humanity. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to raise Him even as sacrificed His own life. What the Father did for Jesus, Jesus will do for us. Remember, Christ died for us. Christ gave up everything for us. Christ willingly sacrificed Himself for us. He did this not out of any sense of guilt or obligation but because He loved us. And the Apostle Paul knew this love. He abided in this love. He lived his life empowered by this love.

If you are confident in Christ’s love for you then you are set free to serve. Set free to place the needs of others before your own. Set free to sacrifice your rights willingly, even gladly, in order to please others. You no longer need to seek your own advantage. You no longer need to seek your own good. You no longer need to seek your own happiness or well-being. You are able to focus on what’s most helpful to those around you. Build them up rather than tear them down. Encourage rather than criticize. Bless rather than curse. Why do we do all this? Once again, Paul gives us the answer. Just as Jesus gave His

life to save a lost world, so we must give our lives to save lost people. We must be willing to lay aside anything and everything in order to draw those we love - and even those we don't love!!! - to Christ. This is why the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. It's why the church exists. It's why you and I were put here on this earth. Make it your aim to imitate Paul as he seeks to imitate Christ. Look for ways to please those around you so that you might win them for Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 145-147, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

September 4, 2021
Cultural Blind Spots

Readings for today: Psalms 145-147, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Today's New Testament reading is a weird one. Why in the world does the Apostle Paul care so much about hair style? Of all the issues he could have spent time on, why head coverings? Is that really the most pressing issue for the church at Corinth? Were the Christians there that caught up in how they looked? This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how these words fit if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights that will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and hear what God is trying to say to His people.

One of the foundational principles we must understand as we approach the Bible is that God never speaks to His people in a culture or a language they cannot understand. He meets them where they are. Consider Genesis 1 as an example. It is written to a people who held to an Ancient Near East cosmology. As such, they believed creation was less about how all the "stuff" of this world came into being and more about how they functioned. Creation was about bringing order to chaos rather than creating everything out of nothing. They would care less about how many actual 24 days God used to create and would have focused more on how God's creation functioned for their benefit. Day One would be less about light and darkness and more about the creation of time. Day Two was less about the creation of heaven and more about the creation of weather systems. Day Three was less about the creation of earth and plants and vegetables and more about the creation of food. (For those interested in this topic, I would suggest reading John Walton's excellent book titled, *The Lost World of Genesis One*.)

Fast forward a few thousand years. The Apostle Paul is speaking to a largely gentile audience in the Greco-Roman world about Christian worship. He speaks to them through the cultural norms of their day. It was a patriarchal society. Men most of the power. Women had some rights but only if they were freeborn Roman citizens. Culturally speaking, married women wore a veil over their heads as a sign of their virtue and honor. If a woman walked about unveiled, she was potentially signifying her availability. (This was not always the case. There is some evidence from ancient sources that married women did occasionally go out in public with their heads uncovered.) Furthermore, they only cut their hair during periods of mourning or if they dishonored their families. Men, on the other hand, rarely covered their heads. About the only time they did was when they entered a pagan temple to offer sacrifices. At such points, they would throw a bit of their toga over their heads to symbolize humility and submission. What's the point? Well, entire theological systems have been built on passages like these despite the fact that they addressed to particular Christians in a particular culture at a particular time. Paul himself even prefaces his advice by saying, "Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you." (1 Corinthians 11:2) This is not a "Thus saith the Lord" situation but one in which Paul acknowledges he's passing on a human tradition. Contrast his words with what comes later in verse 23 where he says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you..." Obviously, Paul makes a distinction between when he's speaking for Jesus and when he's speaking for himself or his culture.

So what can we draw from this passage? After all, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) First and foremost, it’s important to note that both men and women were involved in leading public worship. They both are expected to pray and prophesy within the context of the gathered worshipping community. Second, both men and women were expected to exercise humility. They were not to draw attention to themselves by the way they dressed or the way they styled their hair or any other thing having to do with their appearance. Third, and perhaps most strikingly, men and women enjoy equal standing before the Lord. “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.” (1 Corinthians 11:11-12) Men are not greater than women. Women are not greater than men. They both have an equal share in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most important questions we must ask as we read Scripture is not so much “what does this mean for me?” but “what did this mean to the people who first heard it?” What was the author’s original intent? Why did they address the issues they did? What was going on in the culture of the day? How did the people back then understand their world? If we fail to ask these questions, the Bible can often seem anachronistic and old-fashioned and irrelevant to the issues we face in our own day.

Readings for tomorrow: None

September 6, 2021
The Beginning of Wisdom

Readings for today: Psalms 148-150, Proverbs 1, 1 Corinthians 11:17-12:11

The world suffers because it lacks wisdom. It lacks understanding. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. No one takes responsibility. There is always someone else to blame. We live in a world where it is hard for people to accept instruction. Hard for people to humble themselves and receive correction. We resort to yelling and screaming and pouting far too easily. We are a fragile and foolish people.

The world is full of challenges. Monumental tasks that cannot be solved by human effort or ingenuity or intellect. The reality is we are not rational creatures. We are far more driven by desire than we like to admit. Far more inclined to selfishness and greed and hatred than we are inclined to acknowledge. Far more susceptible to temptation than we'll accept. The reality is we are our own worst enemies. Every time we stare in the mirror, we are looking at one of the greatest barriers to progress in our world. We are broken creatures with an innate propensity for self-destruction. Our corrupt nature so often derails any chance we may have at making the world a better place.

What this world needs is wisdom. Godly wisdom. And Solomon tells us if we want such wisdom, there's only one place to go. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise His wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:7) God is the fount of all wisdom and understanding. It is God who sees the deep things of this world. God who makes sense of the universe and all that is in it. God who creates order out of our chaos. God who guides us through the maze that is human life. God who is our light in the midst of our darkness. God who is truth in the midst of all the lies. The reality is we live in a world awash with information. Google has given us access to the vast wealth of human knowledge but we don't know what to do with it. Heck, we can't even decide what is true or false, good or evil, right or wrong much less integrate that knowledge in any useful way. So if we truly want to make this world a better place. If we truly want to experience the abundant life Jesus promises those who would follow Him, we have to turn to God. We have to trust Him. We have to seek His wisdom above our own.

How often do you pray over the decisions you make? How often do you ask God for wisdom when faced with a difficult situation? How often do you go to God's Word and rely on His Truth even it conflicts with how you think or feel? If this never happens, then I submit you are trying to live your life apart from God. You are trying to survive based on your own wisdom and strength. And I am here to tell you, it will eventually fail. God promises to grant wisdom to all who follow Him. All who will submit to Him. All who will surrender to Him. The fear of the Lord is truly the beginning of wisdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 2-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

September 7, 2021
Belonging

Readings for today: Proverbs 2-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Irenaus. Origen. Cyprian. Cyril of Jerusalem. Ambrose. Augustine. All of them believed in the doctrine of Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus - "There is no salvation outside the church." This idea, of course, doesn't sit well with us. We are highly individualistic. Suspicious of outside authority. Resistant to authentic community. Distrusting of institutions. We prefer to be more gnostic when it comes to our relationship to the church. We much prefer to describe our relationship to the church in generalities and abstractions. We say things like, "I don't need to be part of a local church." "I'm a member of the universal church and that's enough." "I can worship and serve God just fine on my own." For a lot of us, these are not flippant comments. They are rooted in very real hurt. Very real pain. Very real betrayal that we've experienced at the hands of a local church. Perhaps it was a priest or pastor who abused us. The legalistic and pharisaical environment we grew up in. Maybe the church failed us in our hour of greatest need. Or maybe our protests truly are simply culturally conditioned. We reject the church for her hypocrisy. Reject the church for her bigotry. Reject the church for her outdated morality. Whatever our issues, too many of us keep the local church at arm's length.

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. There is no salvation outside the church. Would it surprise you to know the Apostle Paul believed this? Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

There are several key ideas to ponder and pray over from this passage...

The Spirit of God makes us all one in Christ Jesus. Unity is not homogeneity. Unity is not unanimity. Unity is not about the erasure of our social, racial/ethnic, or economic distinctions. It is the submission of those things to the greater identity we share in Christ.

The local church is like a body. It has hands and feet. Eyes and ears. Head. Heart. Muscles. Organs. Bones. Each member of a local church is created and equipped by God to play a particular role. No role more or less important than the other. But not all roles are the same. A body is not made up of all feet. Nor is a body all hands. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of smell? God has ordained that all the members of the local church - working together - make up the one body of Christ.

The local church has many parts. We are not a church of one! We cannot be the church on our own. We cannot say to our brothers and sisters, "I have no need of you." That would be like cutting off your hand or tearing out your eye. There are parts of the body that are weaker. Parts of the body that are stronger. Parts of the body that are younger. Parts of the body that are older. Parts of the body that are richer. Parts that are poorer. Parts that are white. Parts black. Parts brown. Parts more educated. Parts less educated. Not all parts are the same. Not all are gifted in the same way. But all are necessary. All are equally important. All have value in God's sight.

We are a part of the body of Christ and individually members of it. There is no salvation outside the church because there is no identity outside the church. Our love for God gets expressed in our love for one another. Our unity together reflects the unity of the Godhead itself. To keep the church at arm's length. To never commit oneself to a local body of believers. To try and do the Christian life on our own is oxymoronic. It doesn't make any sense and it certainly isn't biblical.

I know we live in a time where we feel pulled in a lot of different directions. We have a lot of things competing for our time, attention, and resources. Furthermore, we tend to take a consumeristic approach to the local church and judge her by her ability to entertain us or hold our attention. As soon as life in the local church gets hard, we tend to bail. As soon as we feel let down or disappointed, we leave. Such immature behavior only stunts our spiritual growth and prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God's grace and love. The next time you think to yourself - "I don't need to go to church" or "Maybe it's time for me to find a new church" or "I'm done with church" - take a moment and read through 1 Corinthians 12. You cannot love Jesus without loving His bride, friends. And love is defined, not as a feeling, but a conscious decision to bear all things, believe all things, endure all things just as Christ did for us.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 5-6, 1 Corinthians 13

September 8, 2021

True Love

Readings for today: Proverbs 5-6, 1 Corinthians 13

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still “love” each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

To many people have fallen for the lie that they must “love” themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person’s needs above one’s own is anathema in our culture. Love must be “self-serving.” Love must lead to “self-actualization.” Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that “love” is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our animal attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear...God is love, love is not God. It’s a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God’s love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the “other.” It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God’s love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don’t want to do and we don’t do the things we do want to do. We can’t help ourselves.

God’s love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. “God believes in you.” God’s love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God’s love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desire is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God's love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God's love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God's love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God's love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God's love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren't talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God's love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 7-8, 1 Corinthians 14

September 9, 2021
Listening to Jesus

Readings for today: Proverbs 7-8, 1 Corinthians 14

“Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.” (Proverbs 8:34)

Listening. Watching. Waiting. Three essential ingredients to a deep and vibrant relationship with God. But they do not come naturally. I am much more apt to speak rather than listen. Much more apt to take action rather than sit back and watch. Much more apt to jump in and get involved rather than wait for the right time. I am an impatient man. I do not like waiting in lines. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for much of anything.

Listening, watching, and waiting on God has always been a challenge for me. My prayers tend to be monologues. My time with Him can turn into a spiritual “to-do” list. Read your Bible. Journal. Pray. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Historically, I’ve spent so little time in silence before the Lord. So little time waiting for Him to speak. I am always in a rush. Always in a hurry. Always on to the next thing.

I think this is why we are so quick to create idols. We want a god we can control. We want a god who meets our demands. A god who operates according to our schedule. Remember the people of Israel? Remember when they made the golden calf? A careful reading of the story reveals their impatience. Moses had been gone a long time. For all they knew, he could have perished on Mt. Sinai. They grew impatient. They grew restless. They wanted to get on with it. Lay hold of all God had promised. They wanted to worship. To celebrate their deliverance. Their motives were not all bad. They simply wanted it to happen on their timeline rather than God’s. So they turned to Aaron and asked him to get a move on. Aaron was anxious as well. So rather than lead, he followed. He gave into the people’s demands, making an idol for them to worship. A tangible God they could see and feel.

It is easy to criticize the Israelites. How foolish of them to worship a golden calf! As if we are any better. Sure, our idols are not made of gold or silver but they are no less real. We worship all sorts of things. A cursory glance at our checkbook or schedule reveals all we need to know about our true priorities. Our struggle to simply sit in God’s presence each day to listen, watch, and wait shows us the depths of our impatience. We want God to fit into our lives. We’ll give Him the gaps in our schedules. We’ll give Him the leftovers of our resources. We’ll throw Him a bone every now and then just to cover our bases.

There are consequences when we fail to listen and watch and wait for God. How many times has our impatience cost us? How many times have we gone off half-cocked? Or rushed into a situation we did not understand? How many times have we made a decision we later regretted because we didn’t take the time to get all the information we needed? Blessed indeed is the one who patiently listens to God’s voice. Watches at God’s gate. Waits beside His doors. How different would the Exodus story have been if the people of God had simply waited for Moses to come down before taking action? How different would your life or my life be if we simply waited for God to speak before taking action?

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

September 10, 2021
The Beating Heart of the Gospel

Readings for today: Proverbs 9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anywhere close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

September 11, 2021
Inherit the Wind

Readings for today: Proverbs 11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

I will never forget where I was on September 11th, 2001. I was sitting in my car at the intersection of Canal Pointe Blvd and Alexander Road, heading into class at Princeton Theological Seminary. I had the radio on like normal when the news came out that the first tower had been hit. At first, I couldn't believe it. Once I got to school, I rushed into the library to find a computer. I hit the "refresh" button over and over again but the news websites were crashing with all the traffic. Then the second tower was hit. Then the Pentagon. Then Flight 93 goes down in Pennsylvania. I tried to get ahold of my wife. (This was before we had cell phones.) She worked for the local school district and was frantically trying to locate the parents of all the children in her program, many of whom worked in New York City. In the wake of that day, I watched a nation come together. First responders laid down their lives heroically. Construction crews worked tirelessly on the site to rescue those buried under the rubble or identify the remains of those who had been killed. Sanctuaries were filled with people seeking solace and a safe place to process their grief in the aftermath. We cared for each other. We comforted each other. We came alongside each other.

Sadly, that spirit of unity didn't last. Instead, we turned on each other. The demonic forces lurking inside all of us have broken the cordon around our hearts, overtaking the "better angels of our nature" that President Abraham Lincoln once put so much trust in. Once again, we are seeing the self-destruction of a nation. Once again, our passions strain the bonds of our common affection to the point of breaking. Our faith in human progress has been terribly misplaced. Our trust in an achievable social utopia has been betrayed. Evil is extending rather than reducing its limits. Humankind cannot help itself. Humanity cannot save herself. Everything we touch seemingly turns to lead. We are slowly but surely discovering the truth of Solomon's words, "Whoever troubles his own household will inherit the wind..." (Proverbs 11:29)

Thankfully, God is not done. He pursues us relentlessly. He presses in on us from every side. He rattles the shutters we work so hard to close. He knocks on the door we try so hard to bar. He shows up at every window. Slips through every crack. He will not let us go. Human beings can only ultimately be understood within the frame of reference that is God. Our life simply shows too many symptoms of another Life impinging upon it. As the late Paul Scherer once wrote, "we are impossible conundrums without God, answerless riddles." And yet, things always seem darkest before the dawn. Things always seem to get worse before they get better. We have to be driven to our knees before we will relinquish our natural pride and arrogance and let go. The Bible declares God's mercies to be new every morning. What that means is that each day is yet another opportunity for God! Perhaps, as Scherer himself put so well, we are being driven from our ruined Edens into a new era where humanity will once again - humbly under God - rise to reclaim her rightful heritage. Not by might. Not by power. But by Christ's Spirit! Her brave and stubborn hopes shaped by a Will that is braver and more stubborn still. Her deep and dark condition matched only by the One who holds in His scarred and steady hands the swinging movement of the years!

This is ultimately where the Apostle Paul lands. Did you catch his final words to us today? "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:57-58) If we seek to serve Christ. If we dedicate our lives to Him. If we humbly offer our lives as a living sacrifice, we will not inherit the wind but the full weight of glory God has prepared for us in His Kingdom!

September 14, 2021
The Power of Forgiveness

Readings for today: Proverbs 17-18, 2 Corinthians 2

“Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.” (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

Do you want to outwit Satan? Do you want to thwart his designs on your life? Do you want to avoid the traps he has set? Do you want to be protected against his evil intentions to kill, steal, and destroy all that is good and godly in your life? Practice forgiveness. Forgive freely. Forgive generously. Forgive unconditionally. Forgive completely.

Forgiveness is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable “news” organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I’ve had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive, they began attacking the other person’s character. Impugning motives. Words like “betrayal” and “wounded” and “abuse” get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And the only way they will survive. The only way they will ever serve as salt and light to those around them is to practice forgiveness.

What is forgiveness according to Paul? It starts with God. God forgiving us. God extending grace to us. God lavishing His unconditional love on us. No matter how many times we hurt Him. No matter how many times we betray Him. No matter how many times we walk away from Him. He never walks away from us. His arms are always open. He always turns the other cheek. He forgives as many times as is necessary. As far as the east is from the west, that’s how far God separates our sin from us. As someone once told me many years ago, it’s like God takes all our sin, drops in the deepest part of the ocean, and then posts a “No Fishing” sign. Now if this is how God forgives us, is this not how we should forgive others? Having been forgiven much, should we not forgive much? Forgiveness requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person’s trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to keep a record of the other person’s wrongs. Most of all, it requires us to love others as Christ loves us. Unconditionally. This doesn’t mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered his child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate

criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with forgiveness and love? How weak! How stupid! Only a privileged white male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that's partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of forgiveness. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their "record of wrongs" and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God's message of forgiveness to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 19-20, 2 Corinthians 3

September 15, 2021
Pastoral Effectiveness

Readings for today: Proverbs 19-20, 2 Corinthians 3

Recently I took a trip to Orlando to attend some denominational meetings. Part of the agenda was to discuss some of the common issues so many of our pastors and churches are facing during this season. According to the latest research from Barna, one third of pastors are considering leaving ministry due to the challenges of the past 18 months. A significant percentage are struggling with their mental health and well-being. Many more report feelings of exhaustion or being overwhelmed. Many are simply tired of being caught in the cross-fire of the decisions they've had to make that dwarf the normal conflicts of the church. Arguments over musical style, sacred space, or different programs have given way to outrage over COVID restrictions, ethnic tensions, ideological purity tests, and political debates. We see many of these same dynamics present in our own denomination and it's causing us to ask some deep questions about how to prepare and train pastors for this brave and difficult new world.

Before we begin evaluating our training methods, however, we need to know what outcomes we're shooting for. What's our target? What qualities and characteristics make a pastor effective? What metrics can we use to measure pastoral excellence? Here's where it gets very tricky. We've never actually done this before! We've never actually developed assessment tools to help us in this process. We've never set down benchmarks by which we can measure pastoral "success." If anything, we've gone the opposite way. We consider such conversations anathema on some level because of how unbiblical they sound. But then we run into these words from the Apostle Paul today...

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Paul had a rocky relationship with the Corinthian church. He wrote no less than four letters - two of which we have in the New Testament - and probably more. Just a cursory reading of 1st and 2nd Corinthians reveal a host of problems. Factions. Sexual immorality. Class divides. Abuse of spiritual gifts. I imagine this church kept him up at night. Paul even shares how much he grieves over the pain he's caused as he confronted them on their sin. "For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." (2 Corinthians 2:1-4)

Clearly if one were to evaluate the effectiveness of Paul's ministry in Corinth based on the surface level tensions that existed, one would have to conclude Paul wasn't a very good pastor. But when one probes deeper, one sees the fruit of the gospel present in their midst. Despite the conflict, lives were being changed. People were coming to faith. Miraculous signs and wonders were being performed. God was on the move. Paul is so confident in what was happening in Corinth that he literally calls them his "letter of recommendation." In other words, if anyone ever wanted to question the validity of his ministry, all Paul had to do was point to what was taking place in their church. It's a powerful reminder

to us all that no matter how challenging a season we may be going through, God can and still do His work through us if we are courageous enough to lean into the tension of the moment.

So back to my questions...what makes a pastor effective? What characteristics or qualities make for a "good" pastor? What metrics can we set to evaluate pastoral excellence? Surely at the top of that list has to be the number of lives being changed? The number of people being saved and the number of people growing more into the likeness of Christ? If we can't point to living "letters of recommendation" like Paul then perhaps we need to take a good hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves if we truly are called to pastoral ministry.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 21-22, 2 Corinthians 4

September 16, 2021
Jars of Clay

Readings for today: Proverbs 21-22, 2 Corinthians 4

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them bake in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It's simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God is His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. It's why so many compromise. It's why so many turn to "disgraceful, underhanded ways" or "practice cunning or to tamper with God's word..." (2 Cor. 4:2) They are trying to maintain an image. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure - especially among younger leaders - to be "real" and "authentic." Doubts. Questions. "Deconstructing the faith" has become extremely popular, not to mention lucrative, to many with a platform. They often curate their brokenness on social media in the service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They flip the script and ascribe power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart. I've seen it happen far too many times in my own life. I've seen it happen far to many times in the lives of those I love and admire.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves as Jesus sees us, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections, giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand the "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustices we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. We can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it is now poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all he has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must

surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:1-6:13

September 17, 2021
Who's in Control?

Readings for today: Proverbs 23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:1-6:13

Who's in control? It's a relevant question. Especially in our current cultural moment. Some argue it should be the government. The people charged to look out for our best interests. Those who have the authority to enforce the common good. But what happens when those same entities become corrupt? Influenced by power and money? Ideologically driven? How much control should they really be given? Some argue it should be the individual. Each person is responsible for themselves. They should be trusted to look out for their own best interests. They should have the power to make their own choices. But what happens when those choices result in consequences that negatively impact others? What happens when the choices we make become abusive, neglectful, irresponsible, or self-destructive? Do we really believe we are not influenced by selfish desire? Vanity? Ambition? Addiction? How much control can we really be trusted with?

The Bible makes it clear that God is in control. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not. Whether we want to accept it or not. God reigns over the universe and all that is in it. He runs things from His control room in heaven. His hand is always on the wheel. His sees all. He hears all. He knows all. And He exercises dominion over all He has made. To be sure, the world He has created exists in a state of rebellion against His sovereign will. The devil and his demons seek to disrupt God's designs. The human race continually rejects His control over their lives which is why we experience so much suffering and pain. Thankfully, God is patient with us. He refuses to abandon us to our fate. He is constantly at work, taking all things - including the evil of this world - and bending them towards His purposes. He will not give up. He will not let go. He will not rest until all things are set right once again. This includes us. We are God's chosen instruments sent out to proclaim the good news of what God has done to re-assert His control over the world. In Christ, God has re-staked His claim over the world and over our lives. In Christ, He has rescued us from the dominion of the devil. In Christ, He has redeemed us and set us free.

This is the heart of the message the Apostle Paul proclaims in our reading for today. Listen to his words again... "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has 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. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 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 reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 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. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2)

What is salvation ultimately? It is the re-assertion of God's sovereign control over our lives. It is our humble submission to Him as Lord. It is our acknowledgement that He now is our King. Our lives are His to command. Our resources are His to use as He sees fit. Our talent and time and energy and passion are His to direct so that He might accomplish His purposes in and through us. We are no longer

our own. We are new creations. We no longer represent ourselves. We are ambassadors for Christ. We no longer get to be in control rather it is the love of Christ that controls us. What does that mean? It means we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh but treat every human being no matter their creed, color, or culture as someone beloved by God. Made in His image. A creature of inestimable worth and value in God's sight. It means we join Christ in His mission to make disciples of all nations, starting with the people living right outside our front door. It also means the work begins right now. In this moment. For now is indeed the favorable time! Today is indeed the day of salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 25-27, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

September 18, 2021
Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance.

Readings for today: Proverbs 25-27, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Many years ago I heard God speak audibly. It doesn't happen all that often to me. Most of the time God speaks to me through His Word or through other people but in this particular instance, God spoke directly to me. I heard His voice. He gave me three words - obscurity, anonymity, and insignificance. I was taken aback. These are not normally words I would associate with myself. In fact, my tendency is to go the opposite way. I like attention. I want to be known. More than anything else, I want to make a difference. Do something significant with my life. That's how I knew these words were from God. They cut against the prideful grain of my heart. They confronted my natural arrogance and called me to a life of relinquishment, humility, and surrender.

When I asked God what He meant by giving me those words, He explained. "I want you to labor in obscurity, embrace anonymity, and pursue insignificance." Again, this is not my natural way of operating. I was raised to work hard and chase success. My whole life has been wrapped up and even defined to a great extent by what I can achieve. I am naturally competitive. I like to stand out. I like to be honored. I live for the praise of those around me. That's why God gave me these three words. God knows the sinful tendencies of my heart and He wants to set me free. So He called me to decrease rather than increase. He called me to a life of demotion rather than promotion. He called me to fade into the background rather than step into the limelight. One sees the same dynamic in play today in our reading from the Proverbs...

"Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." (Proverbs 25:6-7)

"It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory." (Proverbs 25:27)

"Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." (Proverbs 27:2)

"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise." (Proverbs 27:21)

Now why would God do this to me? Or as I have come to understand, why would God do this for me? It's because He's after my heart. He is shaping my heart to look like the heart of His Son. "As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man." (Proverbs 27:19) God wants my heart to reflect His heart. Rather than pride, He wants humility. Rather than arrogance, He wants submission. Rather than striving to reach the top, He wants me to race to the bottom. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. The one who gives up his life shall find it. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. The Son of God emptied Himself to become a slave, suffering the most humiliating death imaginable. To be made like Jesus is to take a similar journey. We humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and in due time, according to His sovereign plan and purpose, He exalts us just as He did His Son.

Here's the strange thing I've learned since I first heard God speak those words to me. The more I embrace them, the more He lifts me up. The more I pursue godly humility in my life, the more I find myself exalted in His presence. The more I empty my hands, the more He pours in. The more I let go of my trophies and achievements and honors, the more success He gives. What's the difference between

my former way of living and the way I live today? None of these things have a hold on me. In my former life, they would have become idols. They would enslave me. I would spend so much time and energy protecting them. Guarding them. Making sure everyone knew what I had earned. What I had achieved. What I deserved. Now I've been set free. God has unclenched my fists. He has opened my hands. All that I have is a gift from Him. A blessing from above. A grace I can enjoy without any pressure to perform.

Readings for tomorrow: None

September 20, 2021
True Repentance

Readings for today: Proverbs 28-31, Ecclesiastes 1-2, 2 Corinthians 7:2-8:24

John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance. Paul traveled all over the known world at the time preaching a message of repentance. Clearly “repentance” lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But what is repentance? Is it simply saying sorry to God? An existential feeling of guilt or condemnation? A deep sense that we are wrong? And how does one actually “repent?” Kneel in sackcloth and ashes? Engage in self-harm like the monks of old? Beat oneself up emotionally and spiritually? Subject oneself to rigorous, daily self-examination?

I love how Paul describes repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” The key to repentance is the fruit it produces in a person’s life. If your grief - as deep and profound as it may be - produces death it is not from God. On the other hand, if your grief leads to salvation without regret than you can be sure it is from the Lord.

I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled someone whose grief only produced death. They were sorry they got caught. Sorry for the mess they found themselves in. Sorry for the way life turned out. Sorry for the bad choices they made. But they weren’t sorry enough to make a change. Their sorrow did not lead to repentance. It did not lead to surrender. It did not lead to submission. They still wanted control. Still wanted to be in charge. Still wanted to justify themselves. So we’d scratch the surface of their grief only to find excuses. Blame-shifting. Denial. As a result, their lives seemed perpetually locked in a death spiral.

At the same time, I have had the joy of walking with people through their grief as it produced salvation. Their sorrow was less about them and more about God. They had come face to face with the depth of their sin. The depth of their depravity. They realized no matter how hard they tried, they simply didn’t have it in them to make things right. In their despair, they cast themselves at the foot of the cross where they found freedom and healing. Hope for their journey. And all their regrets. All the guilt from past mistakes. All the shame they carried was washed away. They fixed their eyes on Christ. They surrendered to His love. Submitted to His will. Gave Him control over their lives. Scratch the surface of their grief and you find beauty. Joy. Peace. And they enter a virtuous cycle of living that leads to fulfillment and true happiness.

Where do you find yourself this morning? When confronted by the Spirit over mistakes you have made. Sins you have committed. Ways you have fallen short and let people down. How do you respond? Is your grief grounded in Christ or in the world? Does your repentance lead to a changed life or are you still holding onto past regrets? Let me encourage you to let go of the death-dealing ways of this world so that you may receive the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 3-4, 2 Corinthians 9

September 21
Incarnational Community

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 3-4, 2 Corinthians 9

It is not good for human beings to be alone. From the opening pages of Scripture we hear these words and we know in our bones they are true. We are suffering through an epidemic of loneliness in our country these days. So many people feel like they have no one to talk to. No shoulder to cry on. No one to lean on when times get hard. No close friendships. A few years ago, the surgeon general released a study designating “loneliness” as a major health crisis. It is one of the major sources of depression, self-harm, and suicide. It reduces our life expectancy. Many therapists I talk to tell me that much of their practice is simply sitting and listening to people share about their daily lives. Their clients aren’t seeking therapy so much as friendship. This is not to minimize the very real mental health crisis in our country today only to point out that one of the root causes is a lack of any kind of deep relationships.

Over and against this lonely way of life, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers this sound advice. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) Now I know we usually reserve these verses for weddings but they apply to all of life. Woe to the one who falls and is alone. Woe to the one who is cold and is alone. Woe to the one who is attacked and is alone. I’m sure we’ve all had these experiences at some point in time and it is painful.

God made us for incarnational community. He created us as relational beings. Cast in His image, we are built to relate to others in the same way the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Our hearts crave deep relationships. Our souls need to be knit together with other people. We all have this longing deep within. Not only that but we were created for a relationship with God! A threefold cord is not quickly broken! As we intertwine our lives with God’s life and with the lives of other people, we find ourselves growing stronger, more confident, and more at peace. With God at our side and our brothers and sisters at our backs, we can withstand anything. This is how life was intended to be but sin separates. Separates us from God. Separates us from one another. So we must repent. Repent of our ungodly impulse to “go it alone.” Repent of the excuses we make that keep us separated from flesh and blood community. Repent of the way we prioritize tasks and activities and technology over face to face interaction with the people we love.

I learned a long time ago that God most often shows up in my life with skin on. He speaks to me and He ministers to me through flesh and blood people. My family. My friends. My colleagues. My church family. I am blessed by these relationships and the more I let them into my life, the more I am encouraged, comforted, strengthened, and inspired to live for Christ. Who is God sending into your life? Who has He sent and what are you doing to grow that relationship? Are you open to new relationships? New people? New experiences? Or do you find yourself pulling back? Isolating? Growing more and more lonely with each passing day? Don’t believe the lie, friends! You were made for community! You were built for relationships! You are hard-wired for connection! Lean into Christ! Lean into your family! Lean into your friendships! Let God fill your soul!

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 5-6, 2 Corinthians 10

September 23, 2021
Handling Criticism

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

We live in an age of outrage. We live in a time where personal attack has become not just acceptable but almost virtuous. Motives are impugned. Character is assassinated. People are crucified for the littlest mistakes. These things have real world consequences. People lose jobs. People lose relationships. People lose opportunities. Often because of something careless they said or did years ago. We do not allow for any growth. We do not extend any grace. It is a merciless, pitiless, Darwinian process that tears everyone down.

The Apostle Paul has been pointing us to a different way. The way of Jesus. Throughout chapters 10-13, Paul is answering his critics. People who have personally attacked him. Self-proclaimed “super-apostles” who seem to follow Paul around to correct his theology. They take it on themselves to serve as the theological police of the fledgling early church. They preach that everyone must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. They attack Paul’s methods and speaking skills. They attack his character and reliability. They accuse him of being a conflict avoider. They claim to have the same mission credentials as Paul and a better spiritual pedigree. Their CV’s are filled, so they say, with church plants and signs and wonders and visions. This forces Paul’s hand. He has to do what he hates. He has to defend his apostleship by citing his own hard-won credentials.

As we read, it is important to discern his tone. In our current cultural and political climate, it would be easy to assume Paul feels as we do. It would be easy to read anger and rage into his words as he defends his apostleship. That would be a mistake. Paul says right up front that he is coming to them in meekness and gentleness. Though confident in his authority as an apostle of Christ, he will not “boast beyond limits” nor will he “overextend” himself to make his point. He calls himself a fool numerous times throughout the reading and mocks his former “credentials.” Over and over again, he reminds them of his love for them. Reminds them of his great desire to see them restored in their faith. I love how he ends his letter, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11) This is Paul’s heart on display.

Originally, Paul came to them in humility. He placed no financial burden on them, preaching the gospel free of charge. Living off the support of other churches, like the one in Macedonia which was extremely poor and yet very generous, he was able to live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ. He didn’t lord his authority over them. He didn’t pass out his resume. He refused to promote his past success. Instead, he came to them in weakness. He shared in their sufferings. He intentionally relinquished his rights in order to build them up as a church. I love how he describes his love for them. “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 11:2) “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls...” (2 Corinthians 12:15) “For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.” (2 Corinthians 13:9)

Perhaps the most famous part of this set of readings has to do with the “thorn in Paul’s flesh.” Commentators throughout history have argued over what exactly Paul is referring to here. Is it an illness? An addiction? A persistent temptation? I believe Paul clearly identifies the thorn when he calls it a “messenger from Satan.” In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul writes “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan

disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.” The Greek word for “angel” can also mean “messenger” and it is the same word in both cases. Essentially, Paul believes that these false apostles are being used by God to keep him humble and utterly reliant on grace. God is using these evil men and their lies to protect Paul from pride and arrogance. He is using them to remind Paul of his weakness and dependence on Christ. He wants Paul to understand that the power he possesses does not come from him but from Jesus Himself.

I remember several years ago having a member of my congregation turn on me. For months she would write hate-filled notes and put them in the offering plate for me. When the deacons started to throw them away, she placed them in an envelope with my name on it. Soon that wasn't enough. She began writing in our pew Bibles, calling for me to be fired. Attacking my character. Her anger and hate festered to the point that she even wrote a message on our Communion table cloth! It was brutal. We tried to talk to her. We tried to confront her. Even told her she would not be welcome if she persisted in her behavior. None of it deterred this woman. Eventually, she passed away. She certainly didn't want me anywhere near her funeral. I remember the morning of her memorial service sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my next meeting. As I prayed for this woman and her family, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart. “I have used this woman to keep you humble. To remind you of your need to depend on Me. To teach you the truth about grace and unconditional love. You will miss her. You need people like her in your life to keep you trusting in the sufficiency of Christ.” It was a powerful lesson and one I will never forget.

How do you handle hate? How do you handle unfair criticism? Remember God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Rather than lash out, take a step back. What is God trying to show you? What is God trying to teach you? Is His grace truly sufficient for you? Is His power made perfect even in your weakness?

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

September 24, 2021

Choose Joy

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

We haven't talked a lot about Ecclesiastes so I thought I'd recap a bit from the last couple of days. Lost in all Solomon's talk about vanity and emptiness and chasing the wind in this book is the number of times he encourages the reader to enjoy life. Enjoy the time they have been given. Enjoy the hours and days of blessing. Enjoy the seasons when life is good. Yes, you will experience bad times. Yes, you will experience hardship and adversity. Yes, you cannot place your trust in wisdom, wealth, influence, or a good name. But you can still find joy. Simple pleasures of feasting, friendship, and family.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

"And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9-10)

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

To be sure, Solomon is encouraging a "sober" joy. A joy tempered by the realities of hard work, adversity, judgment, and death. A deeper joy that transcends superficial happiness. A joy that springs from a deep love of life and all the blessings God has given. The profound joy that comes from a life lived before God in this world. The joyful life for Solomon is not all bubbles and rainbows and unicorns. It's an utterly realistic joy. A joy that acknowledges the harsh truth about our broken world. A joy that walks eyes wide open to pain and suffering. A joy that doesn't run from trouble.

I've been a pastor for almost twenty years. I've spent countless hours counseling people from all walks of life. I've served congregations on the East Coast. The Deep South. The Midwest. And for the last decade or so, out West in Colorado. A common thread running throughout all those conversations is the universal desire for happiness. A craving for joy. But it's a joy without hardship. A happiness without sorrow. An unrealistic expectation that life can be lived...indeed should be lived...without pain and suffering. In the most extreme cases, the person seems to believe God "owes" them such a life. It's why one of the most frequent questions I have to help people wrestle with is "Why, God?" Why did God let this happen to me? Why didn't God protect me from this tragedy? Why does God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Such questions, at their best, reveal the longing we all have for the world to come. The world where God will wipe away every tear, end all injustice, and heal every hurt. At their worst, they reveal a deep misunderstanding of the world around us. A false expectation that this life can be lived without experiencing hardship and pain. Solomon is clearly confronting the latter attitude.

So how do you experience the world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Success and failure? I love how Solomon closes out this book, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) Or as Jesus put it, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40) Friends, you and I were created to love God and enjoy Him forever. May you choose the joy that comes from knowing and loving Jesus Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 1-3, 2 Corinthians 12

September 25, 2021
Intimacy with God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1-3, 2 Corinthians 12

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We don't want to picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. So we flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is this book about? The love of a man for a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? It certainly was for many of the ancient rabbi's. They put a content warning on this book, restricting it to those who were 30 and over. Then again, the ancient church often read this text as they approached the Lord's Table. They recognized the deep intimacy God desires to have with us and they affirmed such love by tying this book to the most sacred act of worship. I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book reveals how deep our corruption runs. We are so confused when it comes to human sexuality. We buy the lie that it's all about our personal pleasure. We depersonalize it through pornography, casual hook ups, and apps like Tinder. We see sex as dirty yet secretly gratifying. Something to be enjoyed yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom but then seems shocked when such freedom leads to broken relationships, unplanned pregnancy, STD's, abuse, and violence. We want all the pleasure sex brings but none of the responsibility. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us, it's that our sexual appetites are insatiable. Our lusts are impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? The Song of Solomon is an invitation. An invitation from God to deeper intimacy. If you find yourself struggling to embrace Him, prayerfully meditate on this book. If you find yourself battling inner demons or shame from your past, let the words of this book assure you and heal you as you read about God's great love for you. If you've never submitted your sexuality to God or never even connected the gift of sex with God, let these words gently convict you and re-shape your thinking.

Friends, there's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a

man and a woman become “one flesh” before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the “oneness” God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 4-8, 2 Corinthians 13, Galatians 1, Isaiah 1

September 27, 2021
Death-Defying Love

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 4-8, 2 Corinthians 13, Galatians 1, Isaiah 1

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.” (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

I will admit I am partial to these verses. My wife inscribed them on my wedding ring. We’ve been together over twenty-five years now and the words ring more true than ever. Life has not been a fairy tale. We’ve had to weather some storms like all couples do. The loss of a child. The failure of a ministry. The dangerously premature birth of our twins. The battles with our children as they grew older. Facing our own demons as they revealed themselves over the years. It’s been a journey. And there have been moments when I wasn’t sure we’d make it through. In fact, I almost lost my marriage many years ago due to my neglect and workaholicism. So we’ve definitely had our ups and downs. Our peaks and valleys. But the biggest lesson we’ve learned is that God’s love never fails.

You may or may not believe that last statement. I remember talking to a friend several years ago who challenged me on this point. She pointed to her divorce as an example of the failure of love. She pointed to the estrangement of her children as an example of love letting her down. She gave me example after example from her own life of the many times she had been disappointed by love. Betrayed by love. Abandoned by love. It was heartbreaking. After listening, I asked her about the love of Jesus. She broke down and wept. Though she had so many negative experiences with human love, she found herself still holding on to the love of God. As we talked further, she slowly but surely was able to recognize how God’s love had sustained her through all the “floods” and “fires” of her life.

In my last devotional on Saturday, I pointed out that the Song of Solomon is not simply a human love poem. Traditionally it has been interpreted by many as describing the love God has for His people. I know this was a new thought for many. Perhaps it even made your reading a little awkward or uncomfortable. Hopefully today it becomes more clear. It is God who sets us as a seal on His heart. It is God who sets us as a seal on His arm. It is God’s love that is as strong as death. His love that is as fierce as the grave. When the devil offered Jesus the entire world in exchange for love, Jesus utterly despised him. God’s love is eternal. Steadfast. Loyal. True. It is the one sure thing in this uncertain world in which we live.

Ponder the love of God today, friends. A love that will not let you go. A love that will relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. A love that was demonstrated on the Cross. A love that defeated the grave. A love that lives even now eternal in the heavens. A love that is being poured out continually by the Holy Spirit onto God’s people so they will share it with the world. This love is available to us! This love never runs dry! Trusting in this love will save your marriage! It will transform your family! It will deepen your friendships! It will change everything if you let it. If you will simply let go and let Christ reign and rule in your heart. Rest in His love, friends. Let God quiet you with His love. May you walk today in His love and may you experience the blessing that comes from abiding in His love.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 2-3, Galatians 2

September 28, 2021
On Earth as it is in Heaven

Readings for today: Isaiah 2-3, Galatians 2

We live in a fallen world. A world full of pain and suffering. A world full of anxiety and fear. A world full of tragedy and heartbreak. Humanity is a fallen creature. Driven by passions it cannot control. Enslaved by desires it cannot constrain. We are our own worst enemies. Over the years, I've had lots of conversations with people from all different walks of life. All different backgrounds and culture. Because I am a pastor, they often ask me questions about the meaning of life. Why things are the way they are? Why the world is the way that it is? Why is humanity seemingly so hell-bent on self-destruction? The Bible has an answer. A diagnosis. It's not an easy one to hear. It's called sin. Human beings - made in God's own image and given dominion over all He has made - wanted to play god, wanted to be their own gods, and the results have been horrifying. We've made a huge mess of things. We can't get out of our own way. No matter how hard we try. No matter how many plans we put together. No matter how much we strive and toil and struggle and fight. We tend to relapse into the same evil behaviors. Violence. Greed. Selfishness. Outrage. Hate. This is the fruit of a corrupt nature. We are rotten to the core. And if you doubt the veracity of this statement, go spend time in the slums of our world. Stand at the mass graves of the victims of genocide. Listen closely to the overheated rhetoric of politicians across the world and across the political spectrum. We are as helpless as we are hopeless.

Thankfully, God knows we are poor and powerless. He knows we are weak and feeble and desperately anxious and afraid. So He makes a way where there is no way. He lifts high the deep valleys. He lays low the tall mountains. He makes smooth the rough places and straightens the winding roads. He tears down every dividing wall of hostility and eliminates every barrier that keeps us from His presence. His promise is sure. Our future secure. His vision for this world will come to pass. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes it, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." (Isaiah 2:2-5)

It's beautiful, is it not? A world full of peace. A world full of righteousness and justice. A world full of grace and mercy. A world where there is no need for self-promotion, self-protection, or self-preservation for God is the inexhaustible source for all we need. And He is more than enough. It's a world where the nations seek God. The nations serve God. The nations obey God. A world where God's name is lifted up. God's house is the center of all of life. And the worship of God becomes humanity's highest end once again. All things are made new. All things are restored. All things are full of light and life and love. This is God's vision for His world. God's vision for humanity. God's vision for our future.

I love that last line. Verse five. "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." To put it another way, "Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray this prayer with great regularity. Some traditions even pray it every Sunday. It's the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray and it reflects His heart for our world. Jesus wants His people to walk in the light of the Lord. To live

as heavenly creatures in this earthly realm. To be a community of life in a culture of death. He wants us to embody our future in the present. He wants us to live as if we were already there in those “latter days.” We are to give people a foretaste of heaven. A glimpse of God’s Kingdom. In our worship. In our fellowship. In our relationships with each other and in our service to the lost and least of these in our world.

What does this practically mean for our day to day? It means we allow no human divisions or distinctions to separate us from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Not politics. Not ethnicity. Not economics. It means we practice forgiveness and pursue reconciliation when we’ve been hurt or wounded. It means the strong lay down their lives for the weak. The powerful seek to serve the powerless. Those in authority exercise it with grace and mercy and compassion. It means we cling to the truth and reject all lies. It means we refuse to let the ends justify the means, especially when those means require ungodly compromise. It means we humble ourselves continually under God’s mighty hand, trusting Him to lift us up in His time and according to His will. And these are just the outskirts of His ways.

Friends, each day presents a new opportunity for God’s mercies are new every morning and His faithfulness is great! Today can be the day of salvation! Today is yet another chance for the Kingdom in your life and in your world! Hear the Word of the Lord! Walk in the light of the Lord! Surrender yourself to His purposes! Let Him use you for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3

September 29, 2021
A Prophetic Call

Readings for today: Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. You may know their stories. You can find them in the histories of the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation’s ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced the miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendents up for disaster when he shows off his riches to the envoys of Babylon.

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. I often ask myself what sustains Isaiah? How is he able to find the strength to persevere throughout his life and ministry? The answer, of course, comes in chapter six...

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.” (Isaiah 6:1-13)

Isaiah has what’s known as an “epiphany.” He comes face to face with the glory of God. In the midst of his deep grief over the death of his beloved king, he receives a vision that will set the course for the rest

of his life. It is honest. It is real. It is raw. No holds barred. God essentially tells Isaiah that by answering this call, he will experience a lifetime of futility. A lifetime of failure. He will speak words the people will not hear. He will see things they cannot understand. He is called to the prophetic ministry. Not so much a ministry future-telling as much as a ministry of confrontation. Confrontation not birthed out of anger or frustration but out of hope. Hope for repentance. Hope for a return to the Lord where the people can find grace and healing and mercy. Listen to some of things he says over these first few chapters...

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18)

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3)

“In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6)

One can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degradation we see all around us? We lament the lack of prayer in our schools. The absence of the Ten Commandments in public spaces. The encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to prophetically confront the deeper questions of why prayer doesn’t seem to fill our homes? Why the Ten Commandments aren’t posted and followed in our churches? How we have marginalized our faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and return and re-commit ourselves to God’s ways?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4

September 30, 2021
Layers of Meaning

Readings for today: Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4

The prophetic books are difficult to interpret. There are often many different layers of meaning. They serve as a great reminder that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. The people who heard Isaiah speak interpreted things quite differently than we do today. They recognized Isaiah was addressing current events happening all around them in their world and it is only later that they would come to recognize he was also speaking prophetically about what would happen in the future as well. Take Isaiah 7:14 for example, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is one of the great Messianic texts Matthew picks up in his gospel but it also has immediate implications for King Ahaz. Ahaz is staring down the barrel of a great invasion. His worst enemies, Syrian and Ephraim, have joined forces to conquer his kingdom. Ahaz and his people are rightly afraid. Isaiah 7:2 even says their hearts “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” In the midst of their fear, God sends Isaiah with a word of comfort. A word of hope. A word of victory. “And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah...thus says the Lord God: "It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” (Isaiah 7:4, 7-9) But Ahaz does not accept the Word of the Lord. He cannot believe it. Ahaz has spent his entire life worshipping other gods so it shouldn't surprise us when he doesn't recognize Yahweh's voice. So God takes it one step further. Not only does He give Ahaz a word of promise but also a tangible sign to hold onto so he knows these things will come to pass. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!” (Isaiah 7:14-17) Some scholars suggest this is Isaiah's son who appears in the next chapter. Others suggest it is the name given to a baby born in the king's household, an event unrecorded in the Bible. Whichever it is, the point is that God will bring to pass His will for both Syria and Samaria as the Assyrian Empire rises up, spills its banks, and floods through both regions. This is the immediate meaning of the prophecy.

But there is an eschatological meaning as well. As mentioned above, Matthew picks up this text and applies it to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate sign of comfort. The ultimate sign of hope. The ultimate sign of God's victory on behalf of His people. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin and enters this world to bring eternal life through His death and resurrection. Because of Christ, we do not need to be afraid. We will not fall before our enemies. We are not left to the mercy of our circumstances. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We are set free. By His great love and mercy and grace. Like Ahaz, we hear these words, “Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint...” (Isaiah 7:4) And we are reminded again to place our trust in God.

I've been studying the Scriptures for over two decades now. I read through the Bible every year. I study it in-depth both personally and for my profession. I have spent countless hours meditating and praying over these texts and here is what I've discovered. Not only does Scripture have an immediate meaning

for those like Ahaz who are hearing it for the first time. And not only does it often have a secondary meaning as it relates to Jesus Christ or future world events. But it also takes on a third meaning. A personal application in my own life. When I read these stories and place myself in Ahaz's shoes and try to imagine his fear and trepidation; I realize God is speaking to my life as well. My circumstances. My struggles. My fears. How often have I stood face to face with my own enemies? My heart shaking like a tree before the wind? How often has God brought me a word of comfort, hope, and promise in those moments? How many times have I graciously been given a sign? How many times as I have waited on the Lord have I seen Him come through? Deliver the victory? My job is simply to wait. To hold onto faith. To trust. To surrender. To let Him do the work. When I do, I can look back and see the hand of God as He sovereignly directs all things according to His will in my life for my good and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 10-12, Galatians 5