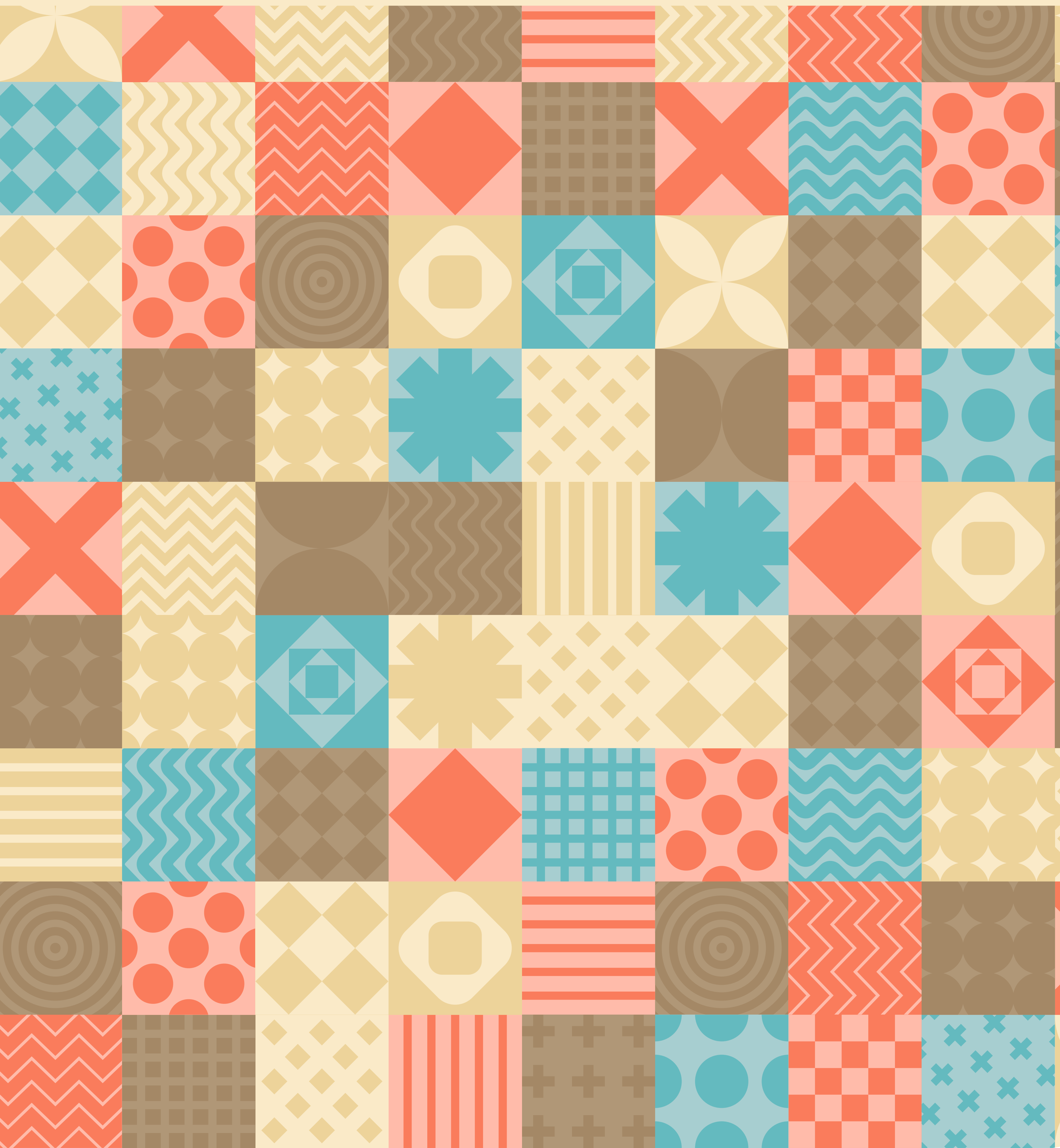


That They May All Be One

THE FIRST STITCHES



A Quilt

And What It Means



Not to insult you by calling your attention to the obvious or anything, but the front cover of this little guide is a quilt. You will also notice that several of the other pages within this work bear a quilt-like background design. We chose this not only because it looks pretty. Which it does, don't you think? We chose it also because of what a quilt represents. Specifically, we wanted to call to mind the idea of a patchwork quilt. Patchwork quilts are built up over long stretches of time. They are made using whatever stray bits of material a person might have lying around. One doesn't go out buying new material for a patchwork quilt. Rather, the quilter finds a place for whatever is at hand. Then, out of all these disparate patches, emerges something not only beautiful but also exceedingly useful.

As we've spent time creating this guide, we've become enamored of the idea of people of faith as a patchwork quilt, called to be united in Christ. We are not all the same. We come from a variety of places and perspectives. Each of us has lived a unique life with a set of experiences that cannot be reproduced. We have, each of us, come to hold to different core values and identities. Sometimes our adherence to these things drives us apart from one another. And yet, Christ calls us to be one--to be completely one, in fact. In a fractured and splintered world, is such a thing even possible? Can we find some sort of common ground with our perceived enemies?

We believe that such things are possible. Even if, for now, all we are able to do is make the first stitches, we remain hopeful that this guide will help us move in more unifying ways. And if we are able to make room for one another under the banner of Christ, then something beautiful will emerge. Not only that, but we will also find new ways of being exceedingly useful in building up the peaceable Kingdom of God's love. As we move throughout this study and explore what it might mean to move in more unifying ways, let it be our desire to become a patchwork quilt of Christ followers, united in our devotion to God and to loving our neighbors.

Ash Wednesday

February 17



In the Gospel of John, almost immediately before he is arrested, Jesus prayed on behalf of those who would follow him. Read his words from John 17:20-23.

I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Knowing he would be betrayed, perhaps knowing the guards were just outside the garden gate, understanding that Peter would deny knowing him, and, no doubt, sensing that his group of disciples would be tempted to splinter apart, Jesus offers a prayer for their unity. He wants for them to be completely united. He desires this because he understands that the more they are united, the more others will believe in their proclamations. The better they love one another, the better others will come to believe in the love of God. If they splinter and divide, their witness will be diminished, and it will be all the more difficult to build up the peaceable Kingdom of God.

The world in which we live has no shortage of splintering divisions. Surely we don't need to tell you such a thing. But it is into such a world that we offer this guide and study, founded on Jesus' desire for unity. The goals of this work are pretty basic but also potentially life- and world-changing. We have crafted a sequential guide that we hope will help followers of Jesus move beyond division and rancor into places where they can more easily act with compassion and love for those with whom they disagree. It is our expectation that this guide will help people of faith cultivate evermore unity in the world.

Each day in this study is designed to build upon what came before it. Therefore, your spiritual growth and development will be best supported if you truly commit to the daily work. This means setting aside 10-30 minutes each day for thought, reflection, and prayer. Since this study was designed to be used during the season of Lent, we did not include devotions for Sundays. We did, however, include prayers for you on those days. Your task for Sundays during Lent is to participate in worship, reflect on the seasonal themes of repentance and reconciliation, and join in the prayer from this book as it is read during the service. You may also find it helpful to keep a separate journal to record your ponderings throughout your Lenten journey. You could make notes in this booklet itself, but if you are sharing this booklet with others, you may want to keep a separate journal for yourself.

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Ash Wednesday

February 17



Additionally, this guide will ask you to be honest about your perceptions of yourself and others. Specifically, it will ask you to consider those with whom you disagree on some specific issues. Be willing, please, to take on something big. I could argue all day and night with people about the correct way to hang toilet paper, but ultimately I know it doesn't really matter. Pick things you think may actually matter. Go deep. You've got 40+ days for this. We're in no rush.

Action - Each day you will find an action for you to perform. Some involve reading a story. Others involve examining your home décor. Some will have you making lists and timelines. Each action is designed to help you more deeply engage with your faith and your understanding of yourself and others. Today's action is designed to help get you acquainted with some of the key terms of the study. Here's your task: make a set of flashcards with the following key words and definitions. Study them a bit and keep them handy. You may find it useful to be able to return to them quickly and easily as the weeks progress.

Dichotomy: a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different.

False Dichotomy: a perceived division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different, though they are not so.

Identity Markers: traits, preferences, or associations through which one draws a sense of identity. These can be official or unofficial, chosen or unchosen. Examples of types of identity markers include gender identity, race, marital status, place of origin, political party, alumni institution, profession, church affiliation, personal interests, clubs, etc.

Personal Alignments: a phrase synonymous with "identity markers"

Prayer - Gracious God, may I be led by your spirit during this season of Lent. May I learn to repent of the things that lead to undue division. May I learn to seek reconciliation with all of my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Thursday

February 18



Here's an old story. You most likely know a version of it.

There existed a small community of jungle animals. Though all different, they had managed to figure out a way to live with one another in peace. Among their numbers were an orangutan, a tapir, a macaw, and a sambar deer. The animals rather liked their little community and had developed no small amount of pride in the fact that they had been able to join together in such a way. They had even gained a bit of a reputation among the other jungle animals for being willing to welcome all into their midst.

One day, the group was approached by a Bengal tiger. Their renown had reached his ears, and he was interested in joining their group, if they would have him. This, of course, was no problem for this particular band. They welcomed him and invited him to live with them.

That very night, the tiger ate the macaw. The other animals confronted the tiger about his actions, and he quickly admitted to his wrongdoing. He was contrite and apologetic. He recognized the error of his ways and swore such a thing wouldn't happen again. He really loved the community and asked for mercy from the group. He would really like to stay if they'd let him. The animals discussed this among themselves, and while they were hurt and offended by the tiger's actions, they also felt that the tiger's contrition was honest. They were happy to have him remain as part of the group.

That very night, the tiger ate the tapir. This time, there was even more true shock and outrage among the animals. They quickly confronted the tiger. Again, the tiger professed his humility and apologized for the error of his ways. He was truly sorry and assured them all that such a thing would not happen again. The rest of the animals conferred among themselves. Yes, another devastation had occurred, but if they were truly committed to their principles, they would let the tiger remain among them, wouldn't they? After much debate, they chose to let the tiger remain as part of their group.

On the third night, the tiger ate the sambar deer. Again, the tiger was confronted. Again, he apologized profusely and sought to remain among the group. The animals were now beside themselves not knowing what to do. Finally, after much deliberation, the orangutan suggested they seek the council of the wise old elephant. She would know what to do.

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Thursday

February 18



The animals that remained found the elephant at her usual watering hole. They told her of the events of the past days. They expressed to her their quandary. The elephant paused from her drinking, looked at them, and said, "If you want the tiger to remain with you, you'll have to put him in a cage."

This guide does, in fact, seek to move us in a direction of unity with others. It seeks to move toward unity with those we may perceive as being our enemies. Such a task is not without certain risks. We believe wholeheartedly in Jesus' call to unity. We are convinced that too often we've been encouraged to see others as our enemies when really they only have a differing set of interpretations or guiding principles. We believe that in a climate of division and mounting factions, we are called to seek out mutual respect and common ground. We also are not naïve. We acknowledge that there are true dangers on this path. In particular, we recognize that for survivors of violence (physical, emotional, sexual, or otherwise), seeking out connection or relationship with those who have caused them harm may lead to more traumatic consequences.

This guide will ask you to name the identity markers you choose for yourself. It will ask you to identify the meaning and value you find in those things. It will guide you in a process for discerning where those identity markers came from. It will also ask you to envision those who are on the "opposite side" of such things and encourage you to find common ground with them. However, it is entirely possible that there are some divides that cannot be crossed, and attempting to do so would only cause more harm. We encourage everyone to use some degree of caution while engaging with the practices in this devotional guide.

Metaphorical tigers need to be put in metaphorical cages. We recognize that. We do not encourage anyone reading this to try to live with their tiger. That is not the issue we seek to address. What we seek to address is the growing tendency to think of everyone who disagrees with us as a tiger, even though they are not. Sometimes we do have true enemies in our midst, and when we see an injustice, we must name it and put it in a cage. Many times, however, we are simply told that we have enemies, and we choose to believe that it is so. It is the latter of these things that this study seeks to address.

Action - Procure a journal and writing utensil. You'll use these to track your reflections and questions throughout this Lenten process. Also, plan to join one of three discussion groups hosted both on-line and in person via First Presbyterian Church. The meeting days and time are: Sundays at 12pm, Tuesdays at 12pm, and Fridays at 7am.

Prayer - As I begin this journey, O God, grant me a heart that is open to the possibility of your love for myself and others. Amen.

Friday

February 19



Much of the world is now structured to sort people out into what are presented as exclusionary affinity groups. Nearly the entirety of internet culture is based on this very concept. Have you been on the internet recently? There is no middle ground on the world wide web. You do not have conversations on the internet; you post things. A post, as innocuous as it may seem, is by nature a declaration. You don't really peruse the internet; you subscribe and bookmark the things you already know you like. You give a thumbs up or you give a thumbs down. Like or dislike. Those are the options. There is no nuance. There's no button for "I agree with many of the ideas and opinions being presented in this material while also maintaining a fair degree of scepticism when it comes to some of the finer points." There's not even an "I would like to give this more thought and consideration before I respond" button. It's the worst thing ever or the best thing ever. Agree or disagree. In or out. That's it.

Everything, it seems, is presented as a binary choice, a dichotomy. But we are not led to believe that the choices are equal. One is right, and one is wrong. In other words, we are perpetually being presented with *false* dichotomies. Did you know that you can prefer dogs and still appreciate the unique qualities of cats? It's true! These are not mutually exclusive concepts. Did you know that there are such things as evangelical Presbyterians? Shocking, I know. But again, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts and affinities.

One of the goals of this guide is to help us identify the false dichotomies into which we may have fallen or into which we may be tempted to lean a bit too much. We'll play around with this more as we go along, but for now it is enough to introduce the concept. Not everything is either/or. Some things can be both!

Action - Read this article from the Pew Research Center on how well voters in the 2020 presidential election felt they were understood by the other side.

<http://bit.ly/fpclent1>

Do you feel understood by those with whom you disagree? Do you feel that you understand them? Why or why not? What would you want them to know about you?

Prayer - In you, O God, there is no East or West. Help us to see past the false narratives of division that we have been handed. Amen.

Saturday

February 20



Those with even a passing knowledge of the parable of the Good Samaritan will be familiar with just how many labels and personal alignments there are in that narrative. We get a lawyer, robbers, a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, and an innkeeper. The story works as well as it does because the use of these labels is supposed to tell us something about the characters. We assume, as readers and hearers, that for these characters, these alignments serve as the primary indicators of their identity. And so, we assume, these labels should guide their behavior. However, we never really see any of these characters claim these things for themselves. We are told one particular thing about these characters and then, based on our understanding of that thing, we become either disappointed or impressed by their actions.

We're quick to assign labels and identity markers to people or simply accept what we've been told about them. We're less quick to hear how people actually define themselves. If we are going to make it very far in our attempt to move toward unity and away from division, we'll need to start by listening to how people define themselves for themselves. What would happen if we started to set aside what we're told about one another and replaced it with what others are telling us about themselves?

Action - Today's action is fairly simple. As you go through the day, what identity markers or personal alignments do you witness people using for themselves? Start a list and see how long you can make it. Some things will be obvious, but keep looking and listening. How are people defining themselves?

Prayer - Help me, O God, to begin to see others the way they see themselves. Amen.

Sunday
February 21



O Most High and Glorious God, who art the Author of peace, from whom do proceed holy counsels and righteous desires: give unto us thy servants that peace which the world cannot give, that both our hearts and works may answer thy commandments, and that our days through thy protection, may be always quiet from trouble.

Let thy salvation be nigh them that fear thee, that glory may dwell throughout our land. Let mercy and truth meet together; yea, let justice and peace embrace each other.

Bless, Lord, all countries, cities, towns, and places where thy Word doth abide, and increase the number of them in the universal world.

O God of peace, which makest an end of war throughout the world: protect us from war and slaughter. Scatter the kingdoms that delight in war; break and hinder all evil counsels. Let them come to shame and perish.

Give all people a desire of peace, contented minds in their vocation, and a care to advance the welfare of that place they inhabit. Where strife, contention, and discord is present, reconcile hearts and minds that these flames and fires may speedily be put out, for thou canst conclude a truce for us and all people, and make the wolf to dwell with the lamb and the leopard to lie down with the kid.

Make our tabernacles safe and quiet, that about them there may be a rich tranquility which may abound like the stream running over the banks, and our righteousness as the waves of the sea which is never dry. In thee shall we have our wished for peace, and thy people shall dwell in safe places of comfort.

Hear us, O Lord of peace, and grant that thy peace which passeth all understanding may keep our hearts and minds in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever more. Amen.

O Lord, increase our faith in peace.

--John Norden, 1548-1625

Monday

February 22



At one of its most basic levels, the world is simply full of atoms floating around and bumping into one another. Sometimes that works out great. A couple of hydrogens get together with an oxygen, and just like that, some H₂O is born. Isn't that refreshing? Sometimes, however, the reactions tend to be a bit more volatile. Similar things, of course, happen with people. When folks with different personal alignments bump into each other, sometimes the reaction is great. Sometimes, however, their differing values and perspectives lead to tension and discord.

Action - Spend some time looking through the list of alignments/identity markers you created yesterday. Now, give two examples from the real world where you see tension related to items you identified yesterday as identity markers or personal alignments. Be willing here to take on something hard, something that feels big and important or almost overwhelmingly personal.

Prayer - May we, O God, not get lost and overwhelmed by the tension we see in our lives and in the world. Help us to move beyond it to see the people in the midst of the tension. Amen.

Tuesday

February 23



Tension is a curious thing. Just the right amount of it on those guitar strings, and they sing in beautiful harmony. A little too much, however, and either they sound discomfoting or they break. The tension we see around us in the world isn't necessarily a bad thing. But it does have consequences. Sometimes a little bit of tension helps people clarify their thoughts or determine their path. When a coach or teacher applies the right amount of tension, people feel motivated to strengthen their resolve or increase their skill in some way. But if tension among people becomes too much or is applied in the wrong way, it has a way of splitting everything apart. Families splinter, institutions get stuck, and guitars get out of tune. Today we want to spend time noticing the effects of the tensions we observed yesterday.

Action - Spend time in reflection on the tension you observed in the world yesterday. To what sort of things does that tension give rise? What are the consequences of the unresolved tension? Try not to associate positive or negative connotations with these tensions. Simply notice them. In your journal, give three examples (one personal, one community related, and one on a national scale) of the effects that exist as a result of the tensions you noted yesterday.

Prayer - O God, may the tension we feel help to keep us in tune with you and with our neighbors and strangers. Amen.

Wednesday

February 24



I will confess to you now that I introduced my family to a board game that encourages us to lean into some of our worst impulses. The game is a variation on a genre of board games known as hidden role games. Essentially, this is how it works: we play in a group of eight, and, as a group, we have a set of tasks to complete. However, within that group of eight, three of us have secret identities as saboteurs. It is a game of five against three, but the group of five doesn't really have any idea who is on their team and who isn't. The game naturally leads to conflict as lies are told and people struggle to figure out one another's actual identity.

If you play as something other than a saboteur, you are instantly compelled to be suspicious of everyone else. Suddenly, no one can be trusted, and friendships and family ties are put to the test as accusations start to fly across the table. Yes, I've seen real feelings get hurt. On the other side, if you play as a saboteur, you quickly discover that one of your best strategies is to sow seeds of mistrust and discontent among the other players. It is to your advantage to create an environment in which the other players distrust and dislike one another.

The conflicts and tensions that we see around us in the real world have similar consequences. When tensions boil over, it causes pain and anguish. Families splinter. Churches split. Political discourse grinds to a halt, threatening the well-being of millions. And likewise, there are some who have discerned ways to profit off of such conflicts. Cable news, for example, is awash with people and companies that have figured out how to make money by feeding into these divisions. The University of Iowa Athletic Department makes money by encouraging my loyalty to them above all other things. Why would I buy a boring, plain-old pizza cutter when I could buy an "Iowa Hawkeyes" themed pizza cutter? Why go anywhere in the world for my vacation when I could go to an Iowa bowl game? The more loyal I am to them, to the exclusion of everything else, the more money they make off of me.

This is how it is with divisions. Some people are harmed, and some stand to gain. As we continue our reflection on the world around us, we'll spend time today noticing those who are harmed and those who benefit from the divisions in the world.

Action - Continue to examine the conflicts and tensions you identified earlier in the week. Pay careful attention to the various forms of harm and pain that arise from them. Be specific. Who is being harmed or experiencing pain? What is the form of the pain? Also, is there anyone who benefits from the division? How and to what extent?

Prayer - Open our eyes to the reality of our world. Help us to see the pain caused by tension and division. Help us to notice when people benefit from that pain. Amen.

Thursday

February 25



The Apostle Paul was familiar with the sorts of self-identifying labels we've been noticing in the world. In the third chapter of Philippians, he lists some of them. He was a

"member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

He also came to understand that those things couldn't possibly describe all that he was. He ultimately found them to be incomplete because in the proceeding verses he describes such markers of self-identity as "rubbish." Along with his perspective shift on the road to Damascus comes the realization that such markers don't mean much compared to his identity as a follower of Christ.

We, however, aren't quite that far along just yet. We still get lost and absorbed in the markers of self-identity and personal alignment we claim. So far, we've been focused on the world around us. We've attempted to take stock of what others are claiming and how those identities can lead to conflict and tension in the world. Now we begin to turn inward. If you were writing a letter like Paul was, what things would you list as being part of your identity?

Action - Make a list of the identity markers you claim for yourself. Are you Nebraskan? Are you a member of a political party? Since you're reading this, we might assume you are Christian, but what kind? Parent? Child? Musician? Employed? Graduate? What are the markers and affiliations that you claim for yourself?

Prayer - Grant me, O God, an awareness of myself. Who am I? What is important to me? Help me to know myself better so that I know who I am and who I am being called to be. Amen.

Friday

February 26



A visitor, a guest for whom I provided food and drink, came into my house one day, and after a few pleasant hours of interaction, began to criticize some of my personal decor. "I really like your house," they said. "But, I don't know. You've got all this yellow in here. Doesn't that bother you? I don't think I could stand that." At first, I had absolutely no idea as to what they were referring. The walls are white and blue; the curtains are similar shades. For a moment, I wondered if there was some new kind of yellow mold that I wasn't aware of and that he had somehow spotted growing in some dark corner. I flashed him a look of helpless confusion. "Well, like there on the couch and here on this chair." My eyes swung over to the couch and to the chair. Folded on the couch was an Iowa Hawkeyes themed blanket. Resting on the back of the chair was an Iowa sweatshirt that I had hung there to dry. "Umm, that's black and gold actually," I said. "And no, it doesn't bother me. Though I realize it is an uncommon motif in the state of Nebraska."

I understand that he was simply trying to make a friendly joke, even if it wasn't graciously received by its audience. I also realize that he was simply responding to exactly what the blanket and sweatshirt were supposed to do. Those items (and a few others in the house) exist for the express purpose of communicating one of the identity markers I claim. I put them in my house, and I wear them on my shoulders not only because they keep me warm. Any old blanket could do that. I have those items because they tell me something about myself, something that I feel is an important part of who I am. But they don't just speak to me. They speak to anyone who comes into that space. Today's task is to gain an appreciation of all the ways we communicate our identity markers and alignments to those around us. This may help us begin to understand the degree to which we've wrapped ourselves in ourselves.

Action - How do you communicate your identity markers to others? Do the clothes you wear and the way you adorn your house communicate anything? How about your license plate holder or perhaps more simply the kind of car you drive? Whom or what do you follow on social media? What images are you posting? Make a list of all the various ways you communicate these things to others and yourself.

Prayer - Gracious God, grant me an awareness of how I present myself to others. Do I set a hard edge without even knowing it? Help me to be open to others and true to myself. Amen.

Saturday

February 27

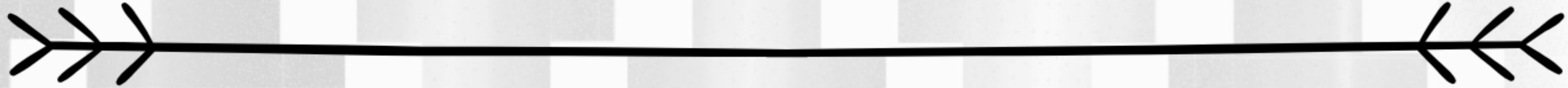


I don't know about you, but when I discover something I like--a product, style of music, or an interesting topic, for example--I want to engage with and enjoy more and more of that thing. Advertisers, app developers, and computer programmers have studied this human tendency and figured out ways to assist and enhance that drive to get "more and more of what I like." This is accomplished by computer algorithms that do things like track the articles individuals read on their smartphones, follow the items individuals shop for on their computers, and note the "likes" that users assign to songs, memes, and posts in music and social media apps. For consumers, it can feel convenient and helpful when the results of refined algorithms that track our interests and preferences provide us with more of that sort of thing. For advertisers, such algorithms enhance the efficiency of directed marketing. For app developers, these processes provide a lucrative way to sell more advertising. Thus, there are times and circumstances when the outcomes of the development of refined interest-based algorithms can be seen as positive. That being said, a balanced assessment must also recognize the existence of some short-comings of these same processes. For the purposes of this Lenten guide, we might want to think about what we are missing out on as a result of these algorithms. When we only get more and more of what we already know we like, to what are we not getting exposed? What are we not learning about?

Action - Today, instead of ignoring the ads that pop up when you open a web page, take a look at them. How do these ads relate to what you already know that you like? And when you open a music app, news app, or social media account, note the degree of similarity of the offerings that are presented to you. How much diversity of style, thought, and perspective can you find there?

Prayer - God, help me today to grow in awareness of what I am taking in for information and entertainment. Grant me willingness to consider both the benefits and the costs of engaging with what I already know I like. Amen.

Sunday
February 28



Lord, receive our supplications for this house, family, and country. Protect the innocent, restrain the greedy and the treacherous, lead us out of our tribulation into a quiet land.

Look down upon ourselves and upon our absent dear ones. Help us and them; prolong our days in peace and honor. Give us health, food, bright weather, and light hearts. In what we meditate of evil, frustrate our will; in what of good, further our endeavors. Cause injuries to be forgot and benefits to be remembered.

Let us lie down without fear and awake and arise with exaltation.

--Robert Louis Stevenson, 1850-1894

Monday

March 1



It's quite possible that your preferred news source today is different from what it was 10, 20, or 40 years ago. It's quite possible that your preferred news source is different from that of your spouse, sibling, neighbor, or daughter. You may get your news from a paper, a TV channel, an internet web site, or from your sister, or you may feel so overwhelmed with the heavy concerns of the world that you have sought to avoid the news as much as possible. With the flowering of the internet and cable TV has come a huge increase in the number of news options available, each of which can be placed somewhere along a continuum describing it according to its degree of neutrality of reporting.

A few decades ago, news sources were not described in terms of their left/right political emphases, but now it is easy to find those that trend toward the "left" (more progressive/liberal viewpoints), those that trend toward the "right" (more conservative viewpoints), as well as some that might be said to try to take a more midline "neutral" approach. Each individual is entitled to his or her own preferred news perspective, but for the purposes of today's reflection, we want to consider the pros and cons of receiving news reports from sources that intentionally represent certain perspectives to the exclusion of others. When one "side" is perpetually presented as "right" and the other as "wrong," what feelings toward the "wrong" side are elicited from the audience?

Action - Today, let's consider how certain ways of presenting news can reinforce potentially divisive positions. Identify and note in your journal three ways in which potentially divisive information enters your awareness. It might be through a podcaster you listen to; it might be through your angry co-worker; it might be through the 24/7 cable news channel that's always on in the background of your home. Check out this website (<http://bit.ly/fpclent2>) for an additional resource that may be helpful in your consideration; it lists various news sources along a continuum of bias/neutrality.

Prayer - God of peace, I know that you want me to be a force for peace and reconciliation in the world. Help me to grow in awareness of how various inputs in my life lead me toward or away from your call upon me. Amen.

Tuesday

March 2



Yesterday, we thought about how some of the sources through which we get our news can have a certain lens or perspective through which they present the news. In fact, we could probably find sources that differ so widely in perspective that they could take the exact same event and report it with completely different interpretations. This indicates that events do not inherently and objectively contain meaning; instead, meaning is conferred upon events by the one(s) doing the interpretation. This is true not only for news and news reporters but also for each of us and all the small and large events in our lives. For example, suppose it snows today. One person might look at this event as delightful: "Now I can go sledding!" Another person might look at this event as distressing: "Now the roads are too dangerous for me to get out to visit my friend." Same event, two entirely different meanings--delightful and distressing--meanings that were not inherent to the event but conferred upon it via the interpretations of the individuals experiencing the event.

Action - Read this story:

A farmer and his son had a beloved horse that helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away, and their neighbors exclaimed, "Your horse ran away; what terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading a few wild horses back to the farm as well. The neighbors shouted out, "Your horse has returned and brought several horses home with him. What great luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

Later that week, the farmer's son was trying to break one of the horses, and she threw him to the ground, breaking his leg. The neighbors cried, "Your son broke his leg; what terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

A few weeks later, soldiers from the national army marched through town, recruiting all boys for the army. They did not take the farmer's son because he had a broken leg. The neighbors shouted, "Your boy is spared; what tremendous luck!" To which the farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

Now, think of a recent event in your life that felt distressing/uncomfortable/upsetting to you, and then come up with an alternative interpretation of that event that would help you to see it in a more positive light.

Prayer - Lord of all times and places, help us to see the events of our lives through your eyes--with hope and trust in you. Amen.

Wednesday

March 3



Yesterday, we thought about how the meaning we experience in events is neither natural nor inherent to the event but is conferred upon the event by the one who interprets it. Can the same be said of categories/groups of people? Let's explore.

- How about people in different age groups? In some eastern cultures, older people are venerated, while in some western cultures, it's the younger folks who are considered "best."
- How about people of different skin colors? Those in white supremacy groups consider white people to be "supreme," while others would argue that all skin colors are equal.
- How about people of different body sizes? Around the time of the Renaissance, having excess fat was considered beautiful as it was a sign of health and prosperity, whereas in America today, thinness tends to be the more celebrated body type.

In other words, just as two different people can interpret a snow event (see yesterday's reflection) completely differently, two different people can interpret categories or groups of people completely differently. This is a common human response, but how does God look at it? Galatians 3:26, 28 says, *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* Our faith calls us to view all people as equal--all "children of God through faith," but the fact remains that prevalent cultural interpretations can cause us subconsciously to view certain groups with greater or lesser value. For the purpose of today's reflection, let's try to become aware of when this is happening in our lives, recognizing that meaning/value assigned to being part of a particular group is *conferred upon* individuals via interpretations made about the group; it is not naturally occurring nor inherent in the individuals at birth.

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Wednesday

March 3



Action - Watch this recording (<http://bit.ly/fpclent3>) of a reflection given at the 10:30 worship service on January 19, 2020, by Kim Stein Borrell. In her reflection, she describes the shock and challenges she faced just days after her son Brooks was born when she learned that he needed heart surgery and also had been diagnosed with Down Syndrome. To supplement her reflection, Kim offers additional thoughts for users of this devotional booklet:

"Society has taught us to believe that having a disability might be bad. I remember very vividly the moment the doctor told me that Brooks had been diagnosed with Down Syndrome. I cried and told Brooks I was so sorry. I wanted to make it better, wanted to fix it. Looking at the situation now, I realize it's not Brooks that I want to fix, as though there's something wrong with him; it's the world that he lives in that I want to fix. I want the world to accept him just as another child of God, as 'fearfully and wonderfully made,' like Psalm 139:14 says."

After you watch Kim's reflection, reread her words above and then write in your journal your answers to the following prompts.

- If I'm really honest, I realize that I consciously or subconsciously view certain groups or categories of people as "less good" than others. Three such groups are...
- When I think about how God views these people, I think...
- Sometimes it's easier to avoid people who are different from me because I'm not sure how to interact with them. Next time I see someone who is different from me in this way _____, instead of avoiding them, I will _____.

Prayer - Creator God, you made humans with a diversity of shapes, sizes, colors, skills, interests, and so on. You love them all, equally. Help me to love all people, too. Amen.

Thursday

March 4



From biblical times right up through today, people of faith have struggled to answer for themselves, “How should I conduct myself so as to be *in* but not *of* the world?” Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist were contemporaries of one another who answered this question quite differently. As you may recall, John the Baptist lived an austere life, subsisting on very little while he preached and baptized in the desert. Jesus, on the other hand, preached and healed in the towns and villages, sometimes showing up at weddings and dinners and parties where there was wine and food, not to mention “sinners.” Both John and Jesus were viewed as religious leaders, and each attracted followers. We can surmise that when potential followers were deciding whether to give their allegiance to John or to Jesus, they made their choice based on the meanings that they associated with each. For example, one who chose to follow John may have made that choice because they felt doing so expressed zeal for a particular form of religious purity, while one who chose to follow Jesus may have made that choice because they felt doing so expressed endorsement of the idea that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

The past few days, we’ve been thinking about how an event or a group of people can be perceived very differently by different individuals. This is true at the level of meaning as well. Thus, just as, in the example above, one person might see following John as meaning zeal for a particular form of religious purity, someone else might see things very differently. Jesus observed this himself: “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’” (Matthew 11:18, 19). Again, the meaning and value of certain actions/events/people is not inherent but is determined by the interpretations made about them.

When we become “followers” of certain ideas, leaders, movements, etc., we are aligning ourselves or even identifying ourselves with those ideas, leaders, movements, etc. AND with the meanings we associate with them. To give a contemporary example, suppose someone identifies herself as “rural.” Not only is she identifying herself as “rural,” but she is also identifying herself with what she believes that *means*. Now, of course, “rural” might mean different things to different individuals, so to accurately understand this person, we would want to ask her what “rural” means to her; we wouldn’t want to assume that our own understanding of what it means is necessarily true for her. Possible meanings she might ascribe to her version of “rural” might include “self-sufficient,” “simple,” or “connected to nature.” Chances are, she might not be aware of the meaning(s) she associates with “rural” until you ask her and she takes the time to think about it and list them for you. Similarly, you and I tend not to be aware of the meanings we associate with our own identity markers until we stop to think about it, and so that’s exactly what we’re going to do for today’s action step.

Thursday

March 4



Action - From the list of identity markers you use to define yourself (see the list you made on February 25), select three that you will work with throughout the remainder of this devotional booklet. Because we will ask you to refer back to these three many times, these selections are quite important! To guide your selections, please choose markers that are sincerely important to you. Additionally, selecting markers that are potentially divisive will best dispose you to benefit from the exercises and reflections in this devotional booklet. Once you have selected the three identity markers that you will work with for today and the rest of Lent, please list them in your journal.

Then, for each of these, describe/list the meaning(s) that you see in each. Dig deep here; be honest; be vulnerable. Some meanings are subconsciously held, so it may take a little reflection to fully recognize them. One way to get at the meanings you associate with your identity markers is to ask yourself, "What makes it important to me to associate myself with this idea/category/etc.?"

Prayer - Loving God, you love me just as I am. May I sense your reassuring and encouraging presence as I go deeper in exploring myself and my perceptions of the world around me. Amen.

Friday

March 5



Around here, being a “Husker” is common, so common, in fact, that it’s considered to be the norm. While this is generally experienced as a positive, lighthearted mode of operation, it’s also true that those who fall outside of the norm can encounter a certain degree of disapproval. I have neighbors from Iowa who are big fans of the University of Iowa. Their 9th grader often wears his Iowa sweatshirt to school, and every time he does so, his science teacher (a devoted “Husker”) threatens to fail him unless he changes his ways. The teacher is teasing, of course, but repeatedly calling attention to this student’s status as “different” or even “substandard” compared to the rest of the kids can have a hurtful impact over time. The student may begin to worry that his teachers or classmates view his support of his team as “yucky,” “misguided,” or even “inflammatory.” Perhaps the teachers and classmates actually are viewing his support of his team as yucky, misguided, or even inflammatory.

A person’s team affiliation is a common identity marker, and identity markers have certain meanings/values attached to them that are arrived at by the interpretations we make or have been taught to make. These interpretations are chosen, though perhaps not consciously chosen. When we become aware of our interpretations, though, we gain the freedom and power to choose different interpretations, which can result in different meanings. A classmate who might be inclined to interpret the wearing of an Iowa sweatshirt in a Nebraska high school as an inflammatory act could, through greater awareness and benefit of the doubt, choose to interpret the same act as an act of authentic self-expression based in love for “one’s team” rather than opposition to the “other team.” If they chose, they might see the other student not as inherently wrong but as simply having made a different choice.

Action - Relative to the three identity markers that you selected yesterday, list for each one an alternative choice that someone else might make. (For example, if you chose “Republican” as one of your identity markers, “Democrat” might be the alternative choice that you would identify. If you chose “Presbyterian” as one of your identity markers, “Evangelical Free” might be an alternative choice that you could identify.) After you’ve selected an alternative choice that others might make for each of your three identity markers, write about the meanings that you associate with each of those alternatives. (Thus, if you identify as “Republican,” list meanings that *you* associate with “Democrat,” and if you identify as “Presbyterian,” list meanings that *you* associate with “Evangelical Free” [or whatever alternative identity marker you choose to explore].)

Prayer - Triune God, all this talk about meanings and interpretations is getting confusing and deep. Please help me to understand this, get insights, and make connections as you want me to. I am doing all this work to grow closer to you and more in line with the life you want me to live. Amen.

Saturday

March 6



In the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are informed that Joseph and Mary had gotten into the habit of making an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. On the twelfth such trip that Jesus had been on, he decided, unbeknownst to his parents, to stay and hang out in the temple for a few extra days. Ultimately, Mary and Joseph find the child (nearly an adult according to Jewish religious practice) “in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”

I always find it important to remember that the values and the teachings Jesus espouses when he’s older came from somewhere. The child, Jesus, was raised. He was instructed. At least in Luke’s gospel, Jesus is shaped and molded. He was influenced. In like manner, we don’t come to our positions in life on our own. We aren’t born as Democrats, or musicians, or even Presbyterians. The things and perspectives we feel are important came to us from somewhere. So where did they come from?

Action - Create, for each of the three identity markers you have chosen to work with, a list of the people who influenced your thinking in those areas. It is also possible that certain experiences or institutions shaped your thinking. Take notice of those things as well. For extra credit, you may also want to spend time thinking about who influenced your influences. How far back does this thing go?

Prayer - Grant, O God, that I may see the long line of which I am a part. Help me to offer my thanksgiving for all those who have watched over and shepherded me in ways that have led to evermore peace, justice, and love in the world. Amen.

Sunday
March 7



Thou God in Christ, there is no ground anywhere that is not holy ground, for in the cool of the evening thou hast walked upon it, and in the heat of the day thou hast died upon it, and at the coming of dawn thou hast returned and art always and everywhere returning to it and to us who walk upon it, too, this holy ground, though heedless of its holiness. O make us whole. Set us free.

Thou didst shape us each in the darkness of a womb to give us life and thou knowest us each by name, and not one is forgotten by thee, not one but is precious in thy sight--the ugly with the beautiful, the criminal with the child, the enemy with the friend. Lord, give us eyes to see each other and ourselves more nearly as thou seest us, to see beneath each face we meet, and beneath even our own faces, thy face.

Help us to know that for each thou hast died as though he were the only one. Amen.

--Frederick Buechner, b. 1926

Monday

March 8



To say that Saul experiences a conversion on the road to Damascus may not be entirely accurate. When he starts out on his journey, he considers himself to be Jewish. When his journey ends with scales falling from his eyes, he still considers himself to be Jewish. However, he does come to understand Jesus and himself in an entirely new way. What Saul experiences here is a paradigm shift. He receives a new way of seeing himself, his faith, and the world around him. Suddenly, he can't go back to being and believing the way that he was and did before.

Sometimes we come to be who we are and arrive at how we think by way of a dramatic conversion or paradigm shift. A new learning sparks us to see the world differently. An alternative perspective challenges what we've always assumed to be true. A new friend from a different place widens our understanding. Our understanding of who we are and what is important shifts and changes over time. Today we start to explore some of the paradigm shifts we've experienced.

Action - *Leonardo the Terrible Monster* is a delightful children's book by Mo Willems. In it, Leonardo experiences his own paradigm shift related to what it means to be a terrible monster. If you have the book, please reread it. If you don't, you can view a recording of a reading done by the Beaverton City Library via the link below. Once you've taken it in, spend some time reflecting on your own conversion or paradigm shift experiences.

Leonardo the Terrible Monster (<http://bit.ly/fpclent4>)

Prayer - My path through life may have had its twists and turns. Through it all, I thank you for your constant presence. Continue, please, to journey with me as I go. Amen.

Tuesday

March 9



As we continue to reflect on how we came to hold the markers and alignments that make us up, we'd like to offer you this story from Denny Storer. In it, Denny relays an experience he had, which altered his path through life. As you read it, please reflect on both the reinforcing and converting experiences you have had in life. And now, from Denny.

I grew up in a white, middle class family in Kansas City, in the 1950s. My father had little affection for persons with skin color darker than his. Even so, I somehow became fascinated with Africa in the eighth grade, and that fascination guided my life choices for a long time. It led directly to a year living in Nigeria, West Africa, as I gathered data for my dissertation.

There were many moments in Africa that brought the vision of the world I had been handed and the new vision I was gaining into sharp relief. One of those moments took place on Easter of 1966 when I accompanied my friends to their Anglican church for celebration of the holy day.

The church was filled to capacity with about 500 Africans and 10 Europeans (as all with pale skin were called). I had come of age in a Disciples of Christ Church that celebrated communion with individual cups of juice. Having never experienced an Anglican service, I suddenly realized that communion on that Easter Sunday would use a single common cup out of which both the Africans and the Europeans would drink. "Gasp!" I thought, "What do I do?" I was outside of my comfort zone and caught between the beliefs others had tried to hand me and the beliefs I was forming for myself. I had taken communion countless times before and not given the act this much deep contemplation.

God must have gently poked me that morning and said, "It will be just fine." I left the pew for the long line to the altar. After drinking from that common cup, I realized an epiphany had just occurred. I was better than alive. In leaving that pew and in sharing that cup, I had left all of that Kansas City baggage forever. I have never forgotten that Easter.

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Tuesday

March 9



Action - Make one timeline for each of the three identity markers you've chosen to work with. You're going to end up with three timelines. On each timeline, put down marks and notes for both the reinforcing and converting experiences that led you to that alignment or identity. Also make a note of the people who influenced you and when. Once you've created your timelines, spend some time reflecting on your journey.

Now, using a scale of 1-10, determine the degree to which you hold each of these markers as a core component of who you are. The less central a marker feels to who you are, the lower the score it will receive. If something feels as though you absolutely cannot live without it, then give that a 10.

Prayer - Thank you, O God, for the clarity of vision you are beginning to offer to me. Thank you for helping me to gain a better understanding of the world around me and myself within it. Amen.

Wednesday

March 10



Here are the top four expenses in the Jensen-Heitmann household on a monthly basis: 1) Mortgage 2) Groceries 3) Utilities 4) Entertainment (internet & various streaming services), all of which makes sense because in a typical day we wake up (mortgage), cook breakfast (groceries & utilities), watch/listen to something while we eat (entertainment), get ready for the day (utilities), then go to work. I return home at noon for lunch and generally watch a little something while I'm there (all four). And in the evening, we return from work and do a lot of the same activities, which involve a lot of the same costs. My point is, it makes sense that these are our most expensive items because these are the things we spend a lot of our time doing. I'm glad they line up in this way. If one of our biggest expenses were elephant food, I'd be worried. We don't, typically, spend any time on or around elephants. And even if we did, I'm not sure why it would be our responsibility to feed them.

Yesterday, you concluded the action step by rating each of your three identity markers on a scale of 1-10. You did this in order to determine the significance of your alignments. Today we continue that assessment by looking at some very practical data. One way of assessing the extent to which we identify with certain ideas and alignments is to track how much time and money we spend on them. It's crude, perhaps. But it does lead to some pretty keen insights.

Action - Think back over the last month. How have your expenditures of time and money reinforced your identification with each of your three identity markers? If you can, estimate how much time you spend with them each day and month. Take a look at your bank statements or checkbook. How much money did you spend in alignment with these things? Knowing this will help us get a better sense of who we actually are.

Prayer - As I continue to examine myself, grant me the courage to be honest with myself without judgment. And as I learn about my own habits and ways of being, help me to seek out ways to align my resource spending with the goals of your peaceable kingdom. Amen.

Thursday

March 11



In 1970, the singer-songwriter Cat Stevens (now Yusef Islam) put to verse a depiction of the way in which our unfailing allegiance to identity markers and personal alignments can serve to shatter and break our human relationships. The song “Father and Son” depicts the growing strain between, you guessed it, a father and son. Going back and forth between the two voices, the listener begins to get a sense that there is a growing chasm between the two characters.

The father insists that “It’s not time to make a change. Just relax. Take it easy.” The son replies in indignation, “If they were right, I’d agree. But it’s them they know, not me. Now there’s a way, and I know that I have to go away.” As I listen to it, I get the sense that both characters believe themselves to be the hero of the story. Both insist on their perspective. Neither is willing to compromise with the other. It is heroes, isn’t it, that refuse to compromise? And yet, all that leads to in this song is sadness and frustration.

Not every argument is a righteous argument. God may not be on either character's side in this scene. I suspect that from God’s point of view, both the father and the son look more like fools than heroes. Each fails to grasp what they risk losing by adhering so strictly to their perspectives. Is there really no middle ground? Is there truly no compromise that can be struck? From God’s perspective, I suspect this is actually a song of lament.

Today we begin to shift away from looking only at ourselves. Having gained a better understanding of who we are and how we got to be who we are, we now start to look at ourselves in relation with others.

Action - Listen to the song “Father and Son” by Cat Stevens as a song of lament. As you listen, consider areas of your life where its themes and ideas seem to resonate. What relationships in your own life have been strained or severed as a result of someone’s adherence to one of the three identity markers, or its “opposing” point of view, that you’ve chosen to work with? Looking upon your relationships from God’s perspective, is there anything to lament?

“Father and Son” (<http://bit.ly/fpclent5>)

Prayer - Help me, O God, to work to repair that which has been torn. Amen.

Friday

March 12



When the Apostle Paul writes to the community of faith in Corinth, he is writing to a fractured and splintering community. Paul is very much aware of this. In fact, he describes the community as being full of jealousy and quarreling. This is part of the reason why he launches into the famous bit about there being many gifts and yet one spirit. It's why he includes that stuff about love that was read at almost every wedding you've ever been to. It is also why he includes a reference to the limited nature of human beings in verses 11 and 12 of Chapter 13. *"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."*

Here Paul points out an essential element of the human experience. We have a limited capacity. We cannot see everything. We cannot know everything. We see in a mirror dimly. We know only in part. That must mean that we need the experiences and perspectives of others in order to gain a more complete understanding of ourselves and the world. In reality, though, we spend a lot of time looking to correct others. We spend little time wondering just what it is that we don't know. An important step in being able to more fully appreciate the perspectives of others is to recognize just how limited our own perspective can be. We'll never seek what we don't have unless we know we don't have it.

Action - The three identity markers you have chosen to work with each compel you to view the world in a particular way. They compel you to read certain articles, to watch particular programs, and to follow particular feeds. What are you lacking? What are you missing? Whose voice never reaches your ear?

Prayer - God, I acknowledge that I am human, that I am incomplete, and that I will always have a limited view of things. Grant me the wisdom to be aware of my blind spots. Offer me the courage to fill in my lack of understanding with the perspectives of others. Amen.

Saturday

March 13



Read the passage below (John 3:1-9) paying special attention to the questions that Nicodemus asks.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

As we know from the beginning of this passage, Nicodemus is a Pharisee. That means he is very knowledgeable, basically a religious lawyer. People in his position were known for answering questions, not asking them. Perhaps this is why he went to Jesus at night; maybe he was a little embarrassed about what he was doing, or maybe he was worried about what his other Pharisee friends would think of his asking questions of this rabble rouser, Jesus. After all, immediately before this interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus, we find the story of Jesus' clearing the temple...not exactly a popular move with the Pharisees. Nevertheless, Nicodemus goes to Jesus. He asks questions. He brings his curiosity. In this short passage, it's not clear whether Nicodemus is "converted" to being a Jesus-follower; it's not even clear whether he gets satisfactory answers to his questions. What's important here (for the purposes of our reflections) is that he is open enough to ask questions of and be in conversation with someone he has been taught to disagree with and to stay away from.

As we know from yesterday's reflection, there is value in learning from others. Full stop. What if we approached conversations with those with whom we disagree with the goal of learning rather than the goal of changing their mind? Is it OK to be in relationship with someone you fully disagree with and who fully disagrees with you? What feelings might be involved in such a relationship?

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Saturday

March 13



Action - Watch the TED Talk (<http://bit.ly/fpclent10>) entitled "A Black Man Goes Undercover in the Alt-Right."

After watching the video, consider these questions:

- Mr. Wilson says he gained "just enough compassion to understand how they got to where they are." How did he grow in compassion?
- Mr. Wilson encouraged listeners to "embrace curiosity." How are curiosity and empathy related? Can a person be curious about or empathetic toward another person's ideas without endorsing those ideas?
- The idea of "digital echo chambers" was introduced in this talk. How might echo chambers be impacting your life? If you are residing in any echo chambers, how can you get out?
- On what topic(s) would you like to have a "courageous conversation"? With whom (individuals or groups) would you like to engage in a "courageous conversation"?

Prayer - Thank you for the examples of Nicodemus and of Theo E. J. Wilson. Help me also to be willing to learn about and to grow in compassion toward those with whom I disagree. Amen.

Sunday
March 14



O Lord, thou hast commanded us to love not only our friends, but also our enemies, to forgive them that offend us, to bless them that curse us, to do good to them that hate us, to pray for them that do us wrong and persecute us; yea, if our enemies hunger, to feed them, if they thirst, to give them drink. But our corrupt nature, which ever striveth against thy blessed will, seeketh all means possible to be revenged, to requite tooth for tooth and eye for eye, to render evil for evil, when vengeance is thine and thou wilt reward. By this means we grievously offend thee, and break the order of charity and the bond of peace.

O most merciful Lord, through the operation of thy Holy Spirit, may we be content, according to thy blessed commandment, and after the example of thy Son Jesu Christ our Lord, and of that blessed martyr St. Stephen, freely and from the very heart, to forgive our enemies, to speak well of them, to love them, and to do for them whatsoever lieth in our power, and by this means show ourselves to be children of a God which causeth the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous, giving us example, that if we should do likewise and show ourselves kind not only to the good and godly, but also the wicked and ungodly by this means we may lure even the adversaries of thy truth to speak well of those who profess thy blessed name, and to glorify thee our heavenly Father, which fashionest us according to thy manners, through the mighty working of thy Holy Spirit, to whom, with thee and thy only-begotten Son, be all glory and honor. Amen.

--Thomas Becon, 1512-1567

Monday

March 15



The following passage is from John 8:2-11.

Early in the morning, he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

How would you describe the attitude with which Jesus addresses this woman? What do you think Jesus believes about adultery? After interacting with her, do you think he changed his mind about what he believed (regarding adultery)? When we encounter someone doing something that is clearly inappropriate or even immoral, it can feel very tempting and even justifiable to "condemn" them. In his interaction with the woman, Jesus says explicitly, "Neither do I condemn you." Why do you think he chose not to condemn in this situation? What was the value in this choice...for him? for the woman? for us readers who would learn of the event much later?

Action - Keeping in mind the three identity markers you have chosen to work with throughout this Lenten journey, think of three people who believe differently from you, one for each of your three identity markers. Please select people you actually know and interact with in real life (not celebrities nor people from the past). Now pray for them as Jesus would if he were in your position. After praying, take a moment to jot down in your journal how this process of selecting these individuals and then praying for them made you feel. We will refer back to these three individuals over the next few days.

Prayer - Dear Jesus, sometimes I want to condemn. Help me instead to live as you would, showing compassion, empathy, and a desire for understanding, especially toward the three people I'm thinking of right now. Amen.

Tuesday

March 16



Read the passage below (Mark 8:27-29) thinking about what it meant to Peter to say what he said.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Jews of this time had been awaiting a Messiah for centuries. They expected the Messiah to act in particular ways: to powerfully save his people from oppression and to set in motion a new era of Jewish political independence. Thus, when Peter interprets Jesus as "the Messiah," he is thinking of that as meaning certain things (i.e. Jesus is powerful; Jesus is soon going to be a political king; etc.). Additionally, Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah not only says something about Jesus but also something about himself, since he is a close friend and follower of Jesus. He might be thinking things like,

- "If Jesus is the Messiah, then that means I'm powerful and important, too";
- "If Jesus is the Messiah, then I'm a part of a major political and religious development";
- "If Jesus is the Messiah, then I no longer need to be afraid of the Romans";
- "If Jesus is the Messiah, then my religious expectations were correct all along."

If Peter were following along in our Lenten journey, he likely would have chosen "follower of Jesus, the Messiah" as one of his three identity markers. We can see that this identity marker does certain things for him, such as allaying his fears and making him feel important and integrated.

Action - Yesterday you thought of three people who align opposite of you on three topics that are important to you. Today, keep those same three people in mind and, using the power of empathy, consider them one at a time with the following questions: How might he/she have come to hold this position? How might taking this position align with his/her values? What might this alignment do for him/her? Are there any fears that this alignment addresses?

Prayer - Lord and savior, imbue me with fresh commitment to this journey that I may take the time to really dig deep and thoroughly engage each reflection, trusting that I will draw closer to you as I draw closer to my neighbors. Amen.

Wednesday

March 17



In the following passage (Luke 18:9-14), what is the tax collector's character trait that elicits praise from Jesus?

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Each of us holds dear a certain set of beliefs and values. We did not select these randomly as though all possible beliefs and values are equal. No, indeed! We selected our beliefs and values based on thorough research and objective assessment in an open-minded quest to arrive at pure truth. Well...or maybe it's somewhere in between.... Our dearly held beliefs and values aren't randomly chosen, but neither are they selected in some sort of error-proof scientific process. The reality is that we often pick up or absorb our values and beliefs through our parents, our culture, our friends, and so on. Some of these change over time because an event or conversation calls a particular idea into question. Some never change because they are never examined.

However we happen to have come to hold the values and beliefs that we hold, we experience them as "right." That being said, since we do not actually arrive at our values and beliefs via an error-proof process, it's possible we are not "right" sometimes, and so it's probably good to keep that in mind. Always. Even in the areas we think it's impossible for us to be wrong. In the scripture passage above, Jesus shows how one man, who believed that he was right, was wrong, while another man, who humbled himself and recognized that he was a sinner, was actually justified. Let us, too, humble ourselves.

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Wednesday

March 17



Action - Again today we consider the positions that are different from our own, specifically the positions that might be considered “opposite” of the three positions (or identity markers) you have chosen to work with for this devotional booklet. For each of these three positions that are “opposite” of your own, answer the following question: When I humble myself to fully consider the other side, what can I identify as positive in it? Then, for each of your own three positions, answer the following question: When I humble myself to be truly honest about my own position, what do I recognize as imperfect, incomplete, or problematic in it?

Prayer - Humble me, Lord Jesus. Humble me. Amen.

Thursday

March 18



Remember the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)? Not only have you probably heard the story in church many times, we also referenced it back on February 20 in this booklet. It's an important story, so we'll revisit it again here, beginning with a summary. There's a guy walking along a road who gets beat up, robbed, and left for dead. A priest (presumably a "good guy") walks by on the other side of the road, unwilling to help the hurt man. Later, a Levite (also, presumably, a "good guy") walks by, also unwilling to help the hurt man. Next, a Samaritan (undoubtedly a "BAD guy") walks by but does not ignore the man. Instead, the Samaritan bandages the hurt man's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper out of his own pocket to provide additional care for the hurt man, who is a complete stranger to him. (By the way, Samaritans were considered "bad" by those listening to Jesus' telling of this story because of their perceived imperfect adherence to Judaism and their partly pagan ancestry.)

The story of the "good" Samaritan is the classic example of an unexpected plot twist: in this story, the good guys turn out not to be good, and the bad guy turns out to be the good guy. If we're completely honest, there are certain people we sort of think of as "bad," or at the very least, we think of them as holding "bad" positions. From the reverse perspective, there are people who think of me and you as "bad," or who at least think that the positions that I or you hold are "bad" positions. Turns out that pretty much everyone--me, you, and all the "good" people and "bad" people around us--have the capacity to do both good things and bad things. None of us acts in ways that are exclusively good or exclusively bad.

Action - Continuing to hold in mind and heart the three people you've been considering the past few days, bring to mind at least one thing for each of them. The "thing" you're going to bring to mind for each is this: something good that you have seen them do or that you imagine it is likely that they do. After you've done that, give thanks to God for working in positive ways through each of these individuals. Finally, because it's possible, if not likely, that you're seen as the "bad guy" by them, do an act of kindness for at least one of these three (bonus points if you do something kind for all three!).

Prayer - God, please help me to see the good in all people, and help me to do good toward all people. Amen.

Friday

March 19



Yesterday, we challenged ourselves to do an act of kindness toward someone with whom we disagree. The disagreement we have with that person may elicit feelings that exist on a continuum from slight discomfort when around him or her to outright pulse-pounding rage. The farther along the continuum your feelings are, the more difficult it likely was to do something kind for that person. When we think of ourselves in relationship to God, we recognize that we have all done things and believed things (at one time or another) that are offensive to God. Though we like to think of ourselves as “pretty good,” the gap between our fallible, sinful selves and God is rather wide, so much so that God would be justified in responding to us at the far end of that earlier-mentioned continuum: with pulse-pounding rage. Instead, however, God responds to us with love, compassion, and self-sacrifice: *“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). I know I’m glad that God does not relate to me as I deserve. I’m thankful that God instead relates to me with love, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Shall I hold those who offend me to a higher standard than that to which God holds me?

Action - Today we confess to God that we have actually held others to a higher standard than that to which God has held us. This is not only hypocritical; it’s also hurtful to God. Thus, we confess the error of our ways, ask for forgiveness, and consider how to change our ways in the future. Additionally, as a physical representation of our sincere desire for repentance, we will fast from one meal, either today or tomorrow, spending that time in prayer instead of preparing and eating the meal.

Prayer - Righteous God, I am so sorry for the times I have judged others. I know that you judge me only through the lens of Jesus’ righteousness, and in that knowledge, I am humbled and grateful, and I ask for the strength to see others not through my hypocrisy but through your love. Amen.

Saturday

March 20



All this week, you have been thinking about three people. You were to have selected them back on Monday, representatives of the “opposing side” for each of three identity markers that are important to you. Through the week, you have prayed for them and considered how they came to believe as they do; you’ve acknowledged what you can see as good in their positions, and you have even done kind things for them. In other words, if you took this week’s action assignments seriously, it may have been a difficult week.

Doing the things you’ve been asked to do this week may have elicited mixed emotions. You may have found yourself feeling angry but also compassionate, resistant but also hopeful, defensive but also curious. All these mixed emotions can leave one feeling confused and vulnerable, uncertain and maybe even with a hint of guilt, as in, “Why is this so hard?! I’m a good person!”

There is value in taking the time to notice our felt responses to this week’s reflections. The desire to move with love and curiosity toward someone whose position is “other” or “contrary” to our own is a gift of grace, and we would do well to thank and praise God for whatever grace we have been given for this purpose. At the same time, the tension we feel--that hesitancy that keeps us from fully recognizing the humanity of the “other”--is a form of sin, and we would do well to confess that and then receive the forgiveness that is always available to us in Christ. Remember how our weekly traditional liturgy always has an element called the Prayer of Confession? It’s that time when we “confess to ourselves and to one another that we have fallen short, that we have done things that have caused separation between ourselves and God and between ourselves and others.” Well, that continuing separation is what we just identified, and that act of confession is what we did yesterday!

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Saturday

March 20



And so, here we are today. Can you recall what follows the Confession in the traditional liturgy? If you said, "The Assurance of Pardon," you're right! These two pieces are always side-by-side in the liturgy, and we need to keep them always side-by-side in our personal spiritual lives as well, for we are human. We are forever blessed with the grace to move out in love yet always also restrained by our sinful nature that resists fully empathizing with the other. Whenever we notice that resistance, we simply confess it to our loving God, receive forgiveness, and then keep trying.

Action - Read the passage below out loud to yourself. Imagine the words flowing over you in a physical way, perhaps as warm sunshine on your back or perhaps as a warm pool of water in which you are floating. Hear the words as a gift, cleansing, reassuring, strengthening you for the road ahead.

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. This is the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Alleluia! Amen.

Prayer - Faithful God, I keep trying, and I keep falling short. It's comforting to know that you are not surprised and that you never give up on me. Thank you for your forgiveness, which covers my past shortcomings and for your grace that gives me strength for the future. Amen.

Sunday
March 21



Just and Holy God, you suffer in human sin and suffering; lead us into the way of justice and peace.

Bless our church and our country.

Set us free from all corruption and evil. Restrain the power of those who exploit the weakness of their neighbors. Inspire and strengthen the efforts of those who strive to ease the burden of daily suffering weighing on their brothers and sisters. Speed the establishment of a just and charitable order. Grant to each one the will to live for all, and to all, the will to live for each, in Christ our Lord. Give us all goodwill, honesty, and faithfulness in our task. By the Spirit of your Christ transform relationships between peoples and classes, employers and employees, rich and poor. Let all realize that they are your family, and that they are one in the church of your Son Jesus Christ, through mutual trust and love.

Bless those who work with their hands or with their minds in the service of their neighbors. Keep in your unending protection those whose work is dangerous. Be the light of those called to guide human thought: writers, scholars, specialists, artists.

We entreat you, Father, for men and women anxious for their daily bread, those who have no work and find themselves homeless. Be the help of all the afflicted. Take pity on the rebellious, the desperate, those who are slandered. Come to the aid of the weak who can bear no more, those tempted to take their lives, those who doubt your grace.

Lord, as you have promised us that your reign will come and have taught us to pray for its coming, make us always grateful for the signs of its dawning, and give us the mind to work for that day of joy when we shall see you face to face, and when you shall be all in all, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

--Reformed Church of Berne (Switzerland), 1955

Monday

March 22



A reminder here that it is Jesus himself who calls the people of faith to unity in John 17:20-23.

I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

With these words, Jesus sets a standard that we rarely meet. The standard is not to tolerate one another. It is not to make a bit more room. It is not to find the right way to tweak and modify our language so that no one could possibly take offense. The standard is being one. To be united in such a way means that we have to be able to see one another as true children of God, equal bearers of the image of God. Today we start the work of attempting to find some common ground with those with whom we disagree.

Action - Select *one* of your three alignments/identity markers as the focus of your reflection for today. For that particular subject area, ask yourself the following questions: How might each “side” of this perceived divide be serving God’s will? How might each be moving away from or acting in opposition to God’s will?

Prayer - Grant me, O God, a generous heart. May I begin to see others not as my enemies but as your children. Amen.

Tuesday

March 23



The calls to Christian unity can be found all over the place in the scriptural witness. We, of course, read the words of Jesus yesterday, and today we note that the Apostle Paul also makes such appeals. In the fifth chapter of Galatians, he reminds the new followers of Christ that their identity in Christ supersedes all of their other markers. In Christ, *“there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* When we identify ourselves primarily as followers of Christ, all of the other markers of identity that we use begin to shift into the background. They take on less primary roles. The more we identify ourselves with the banner of Christ and his love, the more we become able to see the potential good and harm in all of our other ways of being.

Action - Select *one* of your three alignments/identity markers as the focus of your reflection for today. Make sure it is different from the one you used yesterday. For today's particular subject area, ask yourself the following questions: How might each “side” of this perceived divide be serving God’s will? How might each be moving away from or acting in opposition to God’s will?

Prayer: Release me, O God, from any narrow-minded way of thinking. Open my heart to see the potential for your truth in others. Amen.

Wednesday

March 24



One final vision of unity for you to consider: in the tenth chapter of The Acts of the Apostles, Peter is spending time in prayer while hanging out on a roof. This is not strange in the context of the story, trust me. While praying, Peter becomes hungry. It is then that Peter receives a vision. The apostle sees a large sheet being lowered before him. Contained within the sheet is a wide variety of animals considered to be unclean under Jewish law. He then hears a voice: *“Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”* The apostle finds himself in a conundrum. He is hungry. There is potential food in front of him. None of the food is ritually clean. He protests, saying, *“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.”* To his protestation, God replies, *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”* This happens three times, and Peter is left feeling perplexed.

Clarity, for Peter, arrives along with a centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius (a Gentile, a non-Jew) has received a vision from God to seek out Peter. It is then that Peter comes to understand what God was attempting to show him. *“God has shown me,” says Peter, “that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”*

We put a lot of stock into the various categories we use to sort people out. Yet this vision Peter receives clearly calls all of them into question. Who is it that you’ve deemed to be profane or unclean? Why? What if God doesn’t really care about all that?

Action - You should have one alignment/identity marker with which you have not yet worked. Use it as the focus of your reflection for today. For that particular subject area, ask yourself the following questions: How might each “side” of this perceived divide be serving God’s will? How might each be moving away from or acting in opposition to God’s will?

Prayer - Forgive me, O God, if I have called unclean what you have called clean. It is a challenge, but let me never again call anyone clean or unclean. Amen.

Thursday

March 25



We've now spent the last three days slowly working through and imagining how both sides of some of our most central supposed dichotomies might both align and not align with God's will. Prior to that, we envisioned specific people with whom we disagree in a process that involved imagining how they arrived at their conclusions and what their alignments might mean to them. You maybe even baked a loaf of bread and took it to them in an act of generosity. At this point in our Lenten journey, we know ourselves much better. We are also much better acquainted with those with whom we often disagree. But can we yet go further? Can we do something more than cultivating a way of being more generous in our thinking and acting towards others? After all, we have not yet arrived at the ideal put forth by Jesus: complete unity. Such an ideal may be a little beyond us at this point, but we can find common ground. We can find some point of connection.

Action - What areas of common ground can you identify with those whose personal alignments differ from yours?

Prayer - Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is discord, let me find common ground. Where there is fracture, let me bring unity. Amen.

Friday

March 26



The cat who lives at my house has a strong desire to inspect everything that comes through the door. This has led to at least a few moments of friction. Let's say, for example, that I receive a box in the mail. I bring the box inside and place it on the table. The cat then instantly jumps on the table to check out the box. This creates a problem because the cat isn't supposed to be on the table. I force the cat off of the table. She offers a protest such as a noticeable whack on my leg or gentle bite of my hand. And we both live through a moment of tension and discord. Over time, this routine has caused no small number of disturbances between us. Until, that is, I began to imagine things from her perspective.

My cat doesn't go outside. She's in the same place with the same views, and most importantly, the same smells all the time. So when something with new smells enters the house, she gets excited and wants to check it out. This is not a behavior she can really resist. Who could? With this realization, I began to imagine her not as a potential nuisance whenever something new came in the house but rather as a dutiful member of the Kitty Cat Home Security Administration (HSA). It is her job to inspect all packages that are brought into the home. She isn't getting in my way. She is simply doing her job and keeping us all safe! What if some undesirable creature had managed to stow away in one of those boxes or bags? I'm sure my local Kitty Cat HSA agent would get it sorted out right away. What a relief!

The household is a bit calmer now because when I bring things in, as long as they are safe for her to inspect, I simply set them on the floor. She inspects them, gives the all clear, and then goes about her day without getting on the table. And we don't get into any fights (about that). And the only thing that really changed is my own thinking and perspective.

At this point in the process, I hope that you have come to think of yourself and the people around you at least slightly differently than you did before. As we begin to move into a more reflective stage in the process, we'll begin by taking a look at the value of the new perspectives and habits you are beginning to cultivate.

Action - Take time to reflect or journal on the insights you have gained over the last nine days of readings and actions. As you reflect, consider the following question: what is the value or benefit (for me, for my community, and for God) of doing these reflections and activities?

Prayer- Let me be less, O God, so that your kingdom may be more. Amen.

Saturday

March 27



Family, for me, has always been inextricably tied to church, faith, and my experience of God. For starters, my Grandpa Sietsema was a pastor himself, and though he died before I was born, his presence was still felt. Grandpa's son-in-law (my uncle) was my pastor for a time when I was a child. I went to church every Sunday with his wife (my aunt) and their children (my cousins). In addition, another of my aunts (other side of the family) was the church accompanist, and my Grandma Heitmann was in attendance every Sunday as well. So between my own little clan and representatives of both sides of my family, every Sunday really was a little family reunion, as was, by the way, every choir practice and committee meeting I sat through as well when I was not yet old enough to be left to my own devices at home.

It also meant that every family gathering was also a little bit of a church meeting. Every birthday party, every Fourth of July, every "y'all just come over" contained within it at least a little bit of church business, even if it was just a bit of gossip over what someone brought to the last potluck. Such co-mingling of realms meant that it was sometimes difficult to discern just what was family thinking and just what was Godly thinking. Did God really care where the choir stood, or was that just a Mom thing?

As the years have passed, I've gained more clarity on what was family, what was God, where the two reinforced one another, and where they seemed to butt heads. But the challenge of being able to discern what is of God from that which is of Something Else remains for me and, I suspect, for all of us. The identity markers, personal alignments, and core values we hold came to us from somewhere. Today's activity is similar to what we did from March 4th to 6th, but this time we know ourselves and others better. Plus, this time we get to be expressly theological. Today we'll consider directly whether God is calling us to hold to the perspectives we've learned.

Action - I now see both "my side" and the "other side" with a fuller perspective. Bearing that in mind, I consider the following questions for each of my three identity markers: Has God called me, and is God still calling me, to hold this identity marker or personal alignment as primary in my life? Have I come to hold this as primary in my life because of God, or because of other influences in my life?

Prayer- O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I lie down and when I rise up. You know even my inward thoughts. Grant me a spirit capable of discerning your call and your will for my life. Amen.

Sunday
March 28



Open our hearts to your love, so that we may be free from touchiness, jealousy, and bad temper. We pray to you for the people with whom we have any complaint, for those with whom we are in any enmity, or who have got us blamed, and so made our life difficult. Give us the power to meet them with the will to be reconciled.

*--The Evangelical Reformed Churches in
German-speaking Switzerland, 1972*

Monday

March 29



When my son was about ready to be potty trained, I purchased a book called *Potty Training Your Child in 24 Hours*. I read every word; I selected and planned for the perfect 24-hour period; I purchased all the prescribed special drinks, special underwear, and the optional-but-highly-recommended plastic tarp with which to cover the living room furniture. The day arrived, and my son and I commenced the plan. Twenty-four hours later (actually, it was probably only about eight hours later), we were both in tears, and I was ready to throw the book at the wall.

Something kind of like this happened to the crowds with Jesus around Palm Sunday. They were convinced they had found the guy that was going to make it all happen for them; they had already seen his miracles and healings, so all that was left was to overthrow the Romans and usher in a new Jewish political kingdom. And so, on what we call Palm Sunday, they celebrated and cheered. But only a few short days later, Jesus was arrested. The crowd's expectations no longer seemed likely to come true, and so they turned on him and altogether abandoned their support for the idea of Jesus as Messiah.

At this point in the journey through this Lenten devotional booklet, you may be feeling hopeful, more open-minded...maybe even, dare I say, "enlightened." This is what we hope for you! It's the "Palm Sunday" effect or the "I just read the book and know exactly what to do" effect. But take my word for it, this feeling will not last. Yes, this feeling is real; this hope we have in ourselves through the power of God is real; and the work we have done in this process is real. It's just that difficult situations will come along, and the hopeful feeling you now have will seem to be at risk, and you may begin to doubt the process and want to throw the whole thing out the window. Please don't! This devotional booklet has been created out of concern for the division and polarization that exists in our country and even within Christianity. It seeks to lead readers through a process of reflections on scripture, self, and neighbors, hoping that the end result is a reduction in division and polarization due to learning and growth in areas such as recognition of common ground, less fear of the "other," shared sense of humanity, appreciation of diversity, and recognition of the value of learning from the "other side."

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Monday

March 29



This big goal--“reduction in division and polarization”--could be more positively stated as “increase in unity,” which is exactly what Jesus was yearning for just before his arrest. As he prayed for his disciples, he also prayed for us (John 17:20-22):

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.

If this passage seems familiar, that could be because we also referenced it on February 17 and March 17, and we reference it again today because it is so central to the focus of this Lenten work. The goal of increased unity may at times seem as far-fetched as potty training in 24 hours, but it is not. No, there is no “easy button” to achieve unity, and this booklet certainly does not claim to be a one-stop guide for fixing our nation’s woes, but what we have explored together the past few weeks is a great place to start. We know that because the goals we are working toward were also claimed by Jesus, passed on to the disciples, and now are part of our call as Christians.

Action - Commit to not giving up on this process, even when things get difficult.

Prayer - Jesus, I want to be a part of creating the unity you envisioned for your people. Please help me day by day to remain committed to that long and arduous process. Amen.

Tuesday

March 30



Though we're nearing the end of Lent, and therefore the end of this devotional booklet, we acknowledged yesterday (and we do so again today) that this is only the beginning of a very long process of working toward unity. Yesterday, we observed that we might be tempted to give up on this important work if we think that it's going to be quick or easy. Thus, we acknowledge and accept that it is NOT going to be quick nor easy. Not only that, but we also acknowledge that, even if we dedicate our entire lives to this work, we may only see slight improvements. Nevertheless, we persevere because this is what God, through Jesus, has called us to do. And the first step toward persevering beyond just "reading the book" is taking a first step. So today, our topic for the day is brainstorming some good options for a possible first step. Here are some suggestions to jump-start your personal brainstorming:

- Change your news sources (perhaps switch to a less potentially divisive source, or perhaps reduce the amount of time you spend consuming potentially divisive content).
- Find and follow (on social media) people who are hopeful about and committed to working for unity.
- Work through this devotional booklet again, this time choosing three different identity markers to explore.
- Create a plan for reducing the amount of time you spend with individuals who fan the flames of discord and division.
- Intentionally strike up a conversation with someone about your desire for increased unity (decreased polarization) and attempt to instill that same hope and desire in another person.
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Action - Fill in the two blank bullets above with your own ideas. You can add more than two if you wish!

Prayer - God of hope, fan the flame of my hope for unity by helping me to think creatively about how I can really be a part of your work in this area in this time. Amen.

Wednesday

March 31



As a spiritual director, I was trained primarily in Ignatian spirituality, and one of my favorite concepts from Ignatian spirituality is what is called the *Presupposition*. It reads as follows:

It should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favorably, one should ask how the other means it. If the meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved.

As you can tell, the *Presupposition* is basically saying, in so many words, that we ought to give others the benefit of the doubt. Giving others the benefit of the doubt is something we've alluded to at various points in this devotional booklet. It's definitely an approach that supports the goals we are working toward, which, again, are to increase unity and to decrease polarization. Additionally, giving the benefit of the doubt could be considered an "action" that one might choose to take, though it's not an action in the concrete sense (like the actions we listed yesterday). Instead, this is more of an "intangible" action, and intangible actions are our topic for today.

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Wednesday

March 31



Just as we did yesterday, we want to prepare ourselves to continue this work beyond the season of Lent 2021. To do that, we are brainstorming both concrete actions (yesterday) and intangible actions (today) that we will consider taking in the near future. As you begin to think about the intangible actions that might be right for you, here are some suggestions to get the ideas flowing:

- Approach all conversations with a commitment to giving the other person the benefit of the doubt.
- Notice when an idea you encounter feels “wrong” and choose to respond to it with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Utilize sincere empathy as a pathway to understanding and common ground whenever you’re in conversation with someone with whom you disagree.
- Commit to talking less (whether in person or digitally) and listening more.
- Embrace and daily reinforce the values that enhance this work, things like patience, hope, humility, and seeing through God’s eyes.
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Action - Fill in the two blank bullets above with your own ideas. (You can add more than two if you wish!)

Prayer - God, you work in ways that are both visible and invisible. I want to work with you. Please show me how. Amen.

Thursday

April 1



Today is Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” is a word that comes from the Latin for “command,” and so the day is called “Maundy Thursday” because it is the day on which it is believed that Jesus told his disciples about the “new command” he was giving them. After washing their feet, Jesus said to his disciples (John 13:34-35):

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

What a commandment! The challenge Jesus gave his disciples, he also gives to us: to love one another as he has loved us. Wow! And how did he love us? We read in Philippians 2:6-8:

Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

That’s a lot of love! We are challenged to love like that. Why? Because doing so will prove to the world that we are his disciples, that we are Christians. It’s like that song says, “they will know we are Christians by our love.” Sometimes these days it has become common to attempt to “show that we are Christians” by what we oppose, or by what flag we fly, or by whom we vote for. The Bible makes it clear, though, that *love* is what really matters.

Action - Look back at the lists you created yesterday and the day before. Select one or two items from each list that will help you to fulfill Jesus’ commandment: “*as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” Then, commit to putting these into action. Also, for “bonus points,” consider sharing your plans with someone else in the church family. This will both encourage them to make their own plans and will also create accountability for you.

Prayer - Lord Jesus, your love is amazing and perfect. I know I am not perfect and thus cannot fully comply with your command to love as you loved. Nevertheless, you call me to try. Please give me the strength to do that to the best of my ability. Amen.

Friday

April 2



Two traveling monks reached a town where there was a young woman waiting to step out of her sedan chair. The rains had made deep puddles and she couldn't step across without spoiling her silken robes. She stood there, looking very cross and impatient. She was scolding her attendants. They had nowhere to place the packages they held for her, so they couldn't help her across the puddle.

The younger monk noticed the woman, said nothing, and walked by. The older monk quickly picked her up and put her on his back, transported her across the water and put her down on the other side. She didn't thank the older monk; she just shoved him out of the way and departed.

As they continued on their way, the young monk was brooding and preoccupied. After several hours, unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "That woman back there was very selfish and rude, but you picked her up on your back and carried her! Then she didn't even thank you!"

"I set the woman down hours ago," the older monk replied. "Why are you still carrying her?"

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Today is Good Friday. It's only "good" because we know the end of the story. When Jesus was on the cross dying, and his disciples and followers were traumatized, terrified, and grief-stricken, it was anything but good. But, again, we persevere in calling this day of death and loss "good." We do that because the great "Pattern of the Passion," as it's sometimes called, demonstrates to us in no uncertain terms that death and loss are not the end of the story.

In our life journey, we encounter innumerable "little deaths." These include all sorts of losses, from the "death" of our innocence when we first come to understand hurt/evil, to the "death" of our singleness when we get married, to to the "death" of our pride when we get fired from a job, to the "death" of a grudge when we finally forgive, to the "death" of our independence when failing vision means relinquishing the car keys. Sometimes these losses are forced upon us; sometimes we get to choose when we're ready for them. Some are easy to accept; others are terrifying and heart-breaking.

Today we consider things in our lives that God is calling us to let go of, to let die, or to "stop carrying" as illustrated in the story above. Anytime we make a change in our lives--even a change for good--there is a degree of loss that comes along with it. Whenever God nudges us toward a change, though, we can trust that it is for our good and that it is NOT the end of the story.

Action - Yesterday you chose some actions that you will soon be integrating into your life. New actions will lead to changes. Changes necessarily include certain losses. Today, jot down some notes about what losses are likely to accompany the changes you intend to make. What are the attitudes, beliefs, practices that you need to "stop carrying" in order to live in the way that God is calling you to live now? What are the remaining questions, fears, or resistances that are getting in the way of your moving forward?

Prayer - Dear God, I'm thinking about changes and losses, and this is getting a little scary, and I'm feeling myself resisting it all. Please remind me again that any changes and losses you call me to make/endure are not the end of the story. Amen.

Saturday

April 3



Today, Holy Saturday, we try to imagine what the disciples' experience was like in the time after seeing Jesus brutally killed and before becoming aware of his resurrection. We know that after Jesus was crucified, the disciples ran away and hid in fear. While they were hiding, what were they doing? thinking? feeling? talking about? It's hard to know for sure, but I imagine there were lots of tears and lots of despair about how this whole enterprise of identifying and following Jesus as Messiah had been a big error, a bad mistake, a cruel joke. I also like to think, though, that after they expressed their anger, despair, and fear, they also tried to comfort each other. They probably held each other and cried together and tried to come up with explanations for what had happened and ideas about what they should do next.

In our journey toward unity, we will frequently encounter setbacks, disappointments, and doubts about whether this was all just a silly idea that we should abandon and forget about already. In those moments, we need to come together with others who have encountered the hope that first inspired us. We need their companionship, support, and help because we will likely live the rest of our lives in a version of Holy Saturday. That is, we have *already* seen (and continue to see) the tragedy of division and polarization, and we have *not yet* seen the unity that will exist one day. According to John's vision, recorded in Revelation 7:9, ultimate unity may someday look something like this:

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

It's impossible to know exactly what that ultimate, perfected unity will really look like, but it probably doesn't really matter because we are--and only can be--where we are now: somewhere between the bad stuff that's already happened and the good stuff that is to come.

Action - Identify an individual or group that can support you in your faith journey--especially the part of your faith journey that involves working toward unity. Make plans to get together with that individual or group sometime within the next two weeks. Really. Make a plan and write it on your calendar. It doesn't exist unless it's on your calendar.

Prayer - Jesus, you lived and worked with a group of people who supported you and supported each other. Please help me to identify and build relationships with those who can help me--and whom I can help as well--as I move into the new life to which you have called me. Amen.

Sunday
April 4



Eternal God, Father of all people: we glorify your name for drawing us into the household of faith as one family. Your love is gracious, self-giving and far-reaching, and thus, the most potent force in the world for judgment when rejected.

In our souls we feel the darkness that covers the world, the same darkness which covered the world when your Son was crucified. We see Him crucified in the social relations of our day, and the earth shaken by our inhumanity to those of different race or sex, class, or nation. Father, forgive us.

Hope for justice is so bleak that we cannot believe a morning of change will ever dawn. The light of moral discernment, compassion, and justice, seems to be extinguished. The lives of women, minorities, and the poor seem to count for nothing. The stars have fallen from the sky to the earth, like a fig tree sheds its fruit when shaken in the gale.

Lord of the poor and oppressed, we still have hope, for we know that heaven is silent to listen to your Easter people. The tomb is empty, Christ is alive; so we will pray for those who oppress us. They do not know what they are doing. They reject the love of the One seated on the throne, the Lamb who was slain, yet lives.

Send forth your love in all its power. Help the oppressor to learn the love of the Lamb, and deliver us all from judgment. We pray in the name of the Lamb, who saves us. Amen.

--Lawrence W. Bottoms, 1908-1994

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