

**PRACTICING  
THE  
DISCIPLINES  
OF FAITH**

2024 Lent  
Devotional

Dear Church Families,

As we enter into the Lent season we are excited to offer this daily devotional written by over 30 different individuals from eight of our Wabash Free Methodist Churches. Each week there is a focus around a Biblical discipline to help us follow Jesus and deepen our relationship with Him.

During Lent we often will focus on something that we want to give up to instead spend that time and energy to deepen our relationship with Jesus. If Jesus is directing you in that way we encourage you to listen, but we also want to encourage you to spend time each week focusing on these disciplines, and seeing what God may say in the midst of them. If there is one that stands out to you during these weeks be willing to spend more time on it and use that discipline to spend time with Jesus.

During these six weeks we would love to hear any stories of how God has been speaking to you, or how this devotional has been beneficial during this Lent season. Please share those stories with your pastor, and you can also email them to [freemethodistdevotional@gmail.com](mailto:freemethodistdevotional@gmail.com).

Thank you to all who were a part of writing and praying over this devotional. May God use this for His will during the Lent season!

Blessings,

Pastors Luke, Jen, Wick, Jon, Jackson, Andy, Adam, and Kristen

**February 14th**  
**What is Ash Wednesday**  
**By Pastor Wick Anderson, Mattis Ave. Church**

I still remember the first time I prepared the ashes for “Ash Wednesday” as a pastor in 2010. I’d been in ministry about 7 years, and finally felt confident enough to invite the people I loved to participate in such a moment. I’d heard of “Ash Wednesday”, but it had always been something “those churches” do. Yet the more I studied, and regarded the benefits of such a practice, the more I recognized this was something all followers of Jesus could be blessed by.

So I saved the palm branches from palm Sunday, and waited as they dried until the following February. I wanted to document the moment, so I set up my camera to record. I had a small metal coffee can and a handheld lighter. I collapsed the dried palm branches into the can, and slowly lowered the flame into the can. It didn’t take long for the fire to start, and flames easily climbed over the edge of the can. In the video, you can see me looking up. Not looking into the sky, and not in a moment of inspired prayer. I was panicking, because I’d started this moment indoors, completely forgetting I wasn’t lighting candles on cake - I was starting a small bonfire.

I quickly moved my procedure outside where it was safe (and wouldn’t make the church smell like marijuana). It was a humbling moment, and I was reminded of the fragile nature of all things flammable. I was also reminded of my own short-sightedness, even when my heart is in the right place.

All of this became a great reminder for Ash Wednesday itself. As a practice, it didn’t officially begin until the 11th century or so. But God’s people throughout scripture have associated repentance with ashes. It brings a tangible expression to our confession of helplessness. We are unable to save ourselves. We are unable to even *earn* the salvation available. We come to Jesus, fully depending on His Love, His Lordship over death itself, and His Grace. As Lent is a season of preparation to fully celebrate His resurrection, it makes sense to begin it all by marking ourselves with a reminder: We are dust, and to dust we shall return. Or as some also declare: Repent, and believe the good news of Jesus.

Our world offers us a never-ending buffet of things to be proud of. We digitally curate our daily experiences for others to observe. We collect followers, titles, bank accounts or accomplishments. Yet as Christians, we hear the response of Paul in Philippians 3:8, “More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Today we remember prayerfully - all these things (including us) are passing away. Only what is in Jesus remains.

1. What title or accomplishment are you most tempted to be proud of in an unhealthy way?
2. If you died tonight, what of you would remain tomorrow?

*Lord, I turn away from attempting to be my own source. I confess I am nothing, not even living, without you. Bring me Your Life of the New Creation today. In the resurrected Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

**February 15th**  
**Why the Discipline Matter**  
**By Pastor Jon Stemerick, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

Buddhist monk and author, Bhante Gunaratana, writes, “We usually do not look into what is actually there in front of us. We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts... . We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness. We spend all of our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears, endlessly seeking security. Meanwhile, the world of real experience flows by untouched and untasted.”<sup>1</sup>

In Methodism, one of the many ways we describe God’s grace is as resistible grace. God doesn’t impose God’s grace upon us. I’ve also read theologians who describe God’s grace as participatory grace. God’s grace is given to us freely, but we can’t be passive. We must actively respond to the working of God’s grace. God gives us everything we need to continually draw nearer to Jesus Christ in love, to grow in our faith, and to do good work for God’s kingdom; but we must still do the challenging work that goes along with all of those things, and it is only by God’s grace that we do any of them well.

But what if Gunaratana is correct, and most of our life experiences flow by unnoticed? Do we live much of our lives on autopilot? Would that mean we live lives largely unaware of all the ways God’s grace is being poured into them? How can we respond to or participate in God’s grace if we don’t even notice it? That’s where the spiritual disciplines come in. The disciplines require us to slow down. They require us to be deliberate, to click off the autopilot, and to step out of the world of our busyness full of meetings to attend, tasks to complete, obligations to fulfill, hobbies to enjoy, and unpleasantness to avoid—even if it’s just for a few minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhante Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publication, 2011), 27.

The disciplines make space in our lives for God. They give God room to work. In this collection you'll read about six different spiritual disciplines, and you may find any or all of them to be useful for those purposes. Of course, there are more than six disciplines. Who's to say how many there actually are? Again, just about any of them entered into faithfully can help create space in your life for God's grace. Ask your pastor to point you to some resources on spiritual disciplines if you'd like to know more.

My Lenten prayer for you, the reader, is that you may discover, in the disciplines, a new conduit through which God's grace flows into your lives. You can pray for that too. Luke tells us that God gives good things to those who ask (Lk. 11:9-13). I'm confident that that is a prayer that will be answered.

For the disciplines to be effective, you must be intentional. They require, well, discipline. Forming new habits is rarely easy, so be realistic with your expectations. In fact, try not to have too many expectations. Instead, be open to how God is working in your life. Don't try to dictate how God should do so. In the same vein, give yourself permission to move on to another if you explore one discipline, but it isn't for you. You're an individual. Every discipline isn't for every person. A new and profound experience of God's grace is waiting for you. How exciting! Blessings to you.

**February 16th**  
**Why the Disciplines Matter**  
**By Pastor John Lane, The Arbor Church**

2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:13 : *When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*

Paul's second letter to Timothy was likely written by the Apostle Paul while in prison. This would have been during one of his final missionary journeys as he anticipated his own death. Paul uses this letter to encourage his young disciple Timothy to stand firm and encourages Timothy to come to him quickly.

We also have Paul's interesting request to *bring his cloak* (prison and age were getting to him) and his *scrolls, especially the parchments*. While this particular scripture probably doesn't make it to anyone's list of their favorite verses, it does give us a unique insight into Paul's "way of life"; a "way of life" that entailed the daily practice of spiritual disciplines even when (or especially when) faced with hardship.

In 2 Timothy 3:10, Paul reminded Timothy that he knew all about Paul's teaching and "my way of life". He then challenged Timothy to "*continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of* (his own way of life)... *how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*"

This phrase “way of life” is shorthand for the spiritual disciplines: practices that serve to support the gift of God’s grace in our lives. Actions that prepare our hearts to receive grace from the windows of heaven. This “way of life” has traditionally entailed: prayer, scripture reading, fasting, Christian community among other disciplines.

Every obedient follower of the Lord in scripture who made any type of difference practiced a “way of life”. In fact, you could argue that every single person has a “way of life”. The question then is does your “way of life” open your life up to the Lord’s grace or close off your life to the Lord’s grace?

Paul’s “scrolls, especially the parchments” were probably a combination of scriptural scrolls and blank parchments upon which he wrote his letters. So we have Paul setting us an example when during the darkest of times he continued practicing his “way of life” – reading scripture, meditating on it, journaling (writing) letters in response, connecting with fellow believers and praying.

Compare this “way of life” with your own “way of life”. When I compare my daily practices of my phone use, social media consumption, Netflix binges and general laziness with Paul’s practice of spiritual disciplines it makes me wonder how hungry I really am for the Lord’s presence, how open I am to the Lord’s grace.

Yet the windows of heaven are still open. God’s grace is still abundant. May we reflect on our own “way of life” and open our lives to the Lord’s grace by these daily practices.

*Father, we thank you for this day. A new day of grace. We pray that our own “way of life” will open our hearts to your grace. Keep us close to you. Erase the distractions from our lives and help us to live lives of hunger for your presence. See if there be any wicked ways in us and lead us into your grace.*

**February 17th**  
**Why the Disciplines Matter**  
**By Pastor Chet Martin, Avon Light and Life**

Einstein said, “If a person studies a subject for fifteen minutes a day, in a year he will be an expert. In five years he will be a national expert.” More recent studies of skill acquisition call Einstein’s statement into question; more than merely marking time at something is required to truly master it. Nonetheless, the world-renowned physicist has a point: the discipline of focusing a part of every day upon a given subject will inevitably increase one’s knowledge of and application of that subject.

We have seen this principle applied by anyone who is excellent at anything: good cooks create masterpieces in their kitchens because they have honed their craft over years of learning, and soccer stars attend practices and do the drills whether they feel like it or not. One time I was walking across the Wabash Park Campground will Dr. Gilbert Roller, one of the most accomplished pianists I have ever known. “I’m on my way to practice,” he said. “You have to practice every day to keep your skills.”

We understand this when we’re talking about piano. What about in the realm of faith, and in the challenge of being a day-by-day follower of Jesus?

Far too often, people who have a little faith in Jesus fail to see it grow, because they only exercise those muscles one hour a week, or maybe with a hurried prayer in a time of discomfort.

The spiritual disciplines (reading the Bible, memorizing scripture, prayer, meditation, worship, fellowship with other believers, reading Christian literature – the possibilities are not restricted to this list) must become a daily focus before we develop the spiritual muscle we need to represent the Lord Jesus Christ in an increasingly pagan culture.

It may surprise you to learn that the Bible itself does not command Christians to have a daily devotional time. Simple observation reveals, however, that committed Jesus-followers have one. And applying the same wisdom we bring to bear upon a desire to play an instrument or compete in a game tells us: fifteen minutes a day of devotional exercises, at least, will lead to spiritual muscles.

This is what I have been doing: I read one gospel each month, simply going through the rotation of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Thus, I am encountering the words of Jesus over and over. Over a longer period, maybe even as long as eighteen months, I make sure I read the rest of the Bible, too. I focus on prayers for my family in the morning and prayers for others in the evening. I read a daily devotional book as well as *Our Daily Bread*. I have a Christian book in my current stack most of the time. Last year, I read biographies of Watchman Nee, Corrie ten Boom and Billy Graham.

I’m not any more gifted at this than you would be. But somewhere along the line, I determined that I would make up for what I lacked by being consistent.

And now, when satan whispers “Did God really say...?” or “Does God really care?” in my ear – and he still does this – my answer is almost reflexive, and my answer is backed up by both the Lord Jesus Christ and by my own “expertise” and by the muscles I have developed: “God said!” I reply; or “Yes! God surely does care!” and I keep on walking.

**February 18th**  
**Bible Intake**  
**By Pastor Mara Veters, Columbus Free Methodist Church**

*<sup>14</sup> I rejoice in following your statutes  
as one rejoices in great riches.  
<sup>15</sup> I meditate on your precepts  
and consider your ways.  
<sup>16</sup> I delight in your decrees;  
I will not neglect your word.*

*Psalm 119:14-16*

Have you ever loved a book so much you felt like you couldn't put it down?

When I was in middle school, I absolutely loved to read. Any time I was left alone for more than five minutes, I would pull out a book and dive in. I read everything I could get my hands on, and during Sunday morning services, when my childhood self grew bored, the one book that I could always get my hands on was a Bible sitting in front of me in the pew.

I started out in the gospels, reading familiar stories with well-known characters. After that, I started flipping through my Bible for other familiar Sunday school stories. I had been hearing these stories my whole life, and yet, to my surprise, each tale revealed new details and layers that pulled me ever deeper. I knew the adventures of Jesus' disciples while he was with them, but Acts showed me the sequel as characters like Peter and John grew into bold leaders who engaged in breathtaking escapes. I knew little boy David who killed the giant, but the books of Samuel and books of Kings revealed not only his adult legacy, but also a long episodic story of family drama all around him.

These expanded stories were much more messy and raw at times than the tidy Sunday school version, but they also felt more powerful and more human. Here were real people wrestling with real problems. And each of them were wrestling with these problems in a world where God was also real and engaged with them and their stories that bled through the narrative on every page. My childhood self certainly didn't understand everything I read, but I understood enough to look at my picture of God in a new light. As I read I found myself falling in love not only with the individual stories, but with the larger narrative of sacrifice and redemption that they told together. Most of all, I fell in love with a larger, realer, and more personal version of God than I had ever known.



There are a thousand different ways to structure scripture intake. Read big chunks of text or small. Read, or listen, or write a passage out by hand. Study intently or sit back and savor. Reread a favorite passage, or challenge yourself with a chapter that is outside of your comfort zone. A healthy diet of scripture intake will include a decent amount of variety, and I have certainly seen my patterns change as I've grown.

No matter how I come to the Bible however, I always want to remember that feeling that started it all, the delight and discovery of getting to know the author of everything through the words of the Bible. Here is God's invitation for you to come and get to know him better. The only question is, are you going to take Him up on it?

*Prayer:*

*God, would you reveal yourself to me through your word? Would you help me to see you in these pages, not only to learn what you want to teach me, but also so that I can get to know you deeper and love you more? Please open my eyes and my ears, my mind and my heart, so that I would be open to what you want to say to me today.*

## **February 19th Bible Intake**

**By Pastor Luke Maggard, Columbus Free Methodist Church**

If I am being honest there are times when I struggle to read God's Word. It's not that I don't want to. I know I need to read God's Word to get to know Him, and more often than not I see the value in and want to.

There are times though when I catch myself not reading the Bible, usually for one of two key reasons, or both at the same time. Those reasons are: I don't create intentional time for it, and/or I don't see the instant gratification. My guess is I am not the only one who has struggled with these things.

Intentionality when reading God's Word is so important because the more we read the more we get to know who He who is, but that doesn't happen by accident. It takes us being willing to intentionally create time in God's Word and to spend time with it. I think of the words in Proverbs 6:20-23:

*"My son, keep your fathers command, and don't reject your mothers teaching. Always bind them to your heart; tie them around your neck. When you walk here and there they will guide you; when you lie down, they will talk to you. For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life."*

We need to be willing to keep the Word of God with us, because it will guide, direct, and even discipline us when needed. This doesn't happen though if we are not reading it, or "tying it around our neck" so it is always with us.

The other thing I have to keep in mind with God's Word is that I may not always get something out of it every time I read it, and that's ok. Our world has told us that we should get things the minute we want or need them, but that isn't always reality. We need to be willing to intentionally read God's Word, because we don't know when God will directly speak to us through it. It could be a passage we have read dozens of times, but that one Tuesday we pick up the Bible to read and it hits us different than ever before. We need to be willing to regularly read God's Word, waiting for Him to speak through it when we need to hear it.

Questions for reflection:

1. What are reasons you can struggle to read God's Word?
2. Where do you need to create intentional time to read God's Word this week?
3. How has God's Word spoken to you in the past?

*Lord, thank you for giving us your Word through the Bible so that we can get to know you more. Help us create intentional time to read it in this season of Lent, and be willing to wait on hearing from you during this season. In Jesus name, Amen.*

## **February 20th Bible Intake**

**By Bishop Gerald E. Bates, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

Lent? What is this? And why should I give attention to it?

First, Lent has a long history with many changes from its installation in the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, 47 days before and leading up to Easter. Over the centuries, churches have emphasized various prescriptions for abstinence, fasting and penance. Ash Wednesday is observed these days by many protestant denominations with the anointing of ashes and oil on the forehead in the form of a cross with the reminder of our mortal state by reciting the passage from Genesis, "You are dust and to dust you shall return."

It would be easy to get lost in these multiple practices and modifications across the centuries but I think what is essential is to capture the original intent which was amazingly consistent. That was for all Christians to tend to their connection with their God. Social media tell us unceasingly that we should worry about *this*, or worry about *that*. I suggest that we need to be more concerned about tending to the reality of God and His presence in our lives. This immediacy may come in various forms.

I cherish the Communion ritual which contains confession, requests for forgiveness, cleansing and mercy. I treasure the reality of God's response to those prayers and I believe He does respond, in that moment, at that place, and that we leave the communion table with accounts up to date, cleansed, refreshed and with a great sense of belonging to our God.

Years ago, I was sharing in serving communion in a little mountain church at a place called Twe on the Rwintare district in up-country Burundi. (It was really "up" because the altitude there was close to 7,000 feet.) As I circulated through my part of the congregation, I came to three little widows against the back wall. As I served them, I repeated in Kirundi the familiar words, "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ...broken for you," and with the cup, "Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for you and be thankful." In each case, as I served them, they responded quietly, "Iman' ishimwe" (Praise the Lord!). As I was with them in those moments, I was suddenly struck with a fresh appreciation of how far the gospel light reaches, and how they and I and the other communicants shared in this mystery of salvation.

One of my favorite Scripture portions is Hebrews 1:1-4. "...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." He spoke to me in that mountain church. And He speaks to us as we come to His table. Praise the Lord! May this Lenten season be characterized by the practice of the holy, the presence of God in our lives through what we call "the means of grace," as we walk the road to Easter and the resurrection.

## **February 21st**

### **Bible Intake**

#### **By Clint Stearns, Mattis Ave. Church**

"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'" Acts 17:22-23 (ESV).

As a Christian, do you know the God whom you worship? While our worship and our time in the Word are two distinct disciplines, neither exists in a vacuum apart from the other. Paul exhorts us in Romans 12 to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – [for] this is your spiritual act of worship." In Leviticus 11:44, God commands his people to "Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy for I am holy", a command Peter echoes in 1 Peter 2:16. How can we offer worship that is pleasing to God or live lives striving to be holy if we do not know who He is? And how can we know God?

God desires to know us and to be known by us. While creation proclaims His majesty, He has given us His Word as the clearest revelation of His character. In it we find everything we need to know about Him and what He requires of us. From the opening verses of Genesis to closing of Revelation, all of God's character is on full display across the entirety of scripture.

In the middle of it all, the Word made flesh, God the Son among us on Earth. What clearer revelation can there be? “If you really knew me [Jesus], you would know my Father as well...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:7;9b).

Our experiences can often speak to God’s character: His provision, grace and faithfulness; but our perception of those experiences can change with time, feelings and circumstances. God’s word and character remain constant. The truth of who God was thousands of years ago is the truth of who He is today and into eternity. For our worship to become more than something we do on a Sunday morning; we must be able to come before Him, falling to our knees in awe at the sheer majesty of who He is and what He has done. We must spend time in the Word getting to know the God whom we serve. As He reveals Himself to us, not only will our Sunday worship be transformed but our lives will become an offering and living sacrifice pleasing to Him.

1. Does your desire to know God drive you to study His word regularly?
2. As you spend time in the Bible, do you ask the Spirit to reveal something of God’s character in everything you read?
3. As you discover more about God and what He requires, do you let the Spirit use the word to transform your life into the image of Christ?

*Father, Thank you that in your desire to be known by us you have given us the gift of your word. As I spend time with you there, may your Spirit work in my heart revealing the truth of who you are. Let that knowledge transform my heart into the likeness of yours so that my life may be offered to you as a holy and pleasing act of worship. Amen.*

**February 22nd**  
**The Most Compelling Story**  
**By Daylon Welliver, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

When I sit down to read a good novel, I find myself engrossed. The minutes become hours as the story carries me along a tide of events. Interesting people, some noble and heroic despite their faults, some apathetic or fearful or greedy or violent, color the story with interest and tension. I wonder what will become of the characters I like as I become, at least for a time, invested in their imagined life. What will the impact be on their lives? How will the story turn out? Sometimes, with very good writers, as I ponder the story and how the characters grow, I come away with thoughts about my own life. Would I have made those choices?

Yet, often, when I turn to Scripture, I don’t approach it that way. Sometimes I think of it like my vitamins. I need to take in something to keep me spiritually healthy. Or I follow a routine, just like the way I always start my coffee before I get out my cereal.

Well-meaning Christians, some of them who have written books or lead big ministries, refer to the Bible as an instruction manual. And admittedly there is an element of that. We can certainly learn principles and wise rules that make life better-lived. But if that is our only view of the Bible, I ask – how many of us are excited to read an instruction manual? When I bought a new lawn mower, I only read what I thought was barely essential to learn how to operate it. If I thought I could figure it out on my own, I skipped over parts. I didn't pour over it, gleaning every word I could. I didn't get sad when it was over. No wonder many of us struggle reading the Bible.

Instead, view it as the compelling story it is. When reading history, imagine the grand sweep of events, the drama as the story unfolds. Trace the causes of the conflicts and how they were resolved. Look for the threads of God's work in it. When you read a Psalm, remember that it's poetry. Read the Epistles as personal letters from a real person concerned about people in a church he dearly loved.

Here's one suggestion – start watching *The Chosen*, a series about the life of Jesus and his followers. As you watch an episode, go into the Gospels and find the section dealing with that part of the story. *The Chosen* uses artistic license to fill in parts the Gospels don't record, so I won't urge you to accept those portions as Gospel truth. It is just a show. As the Bereans did, always examine the scriptures for yourself. However, the show presents the people as not just words on a page, but as real people with real stories. Don't miss that vibrant reality.

Put yourself in the story and see where Jesus takes you. The story of your life might just change on the journey.

*Prayer:*

*"Take away, O Lord, the veil of my heart while I read the scriptures. Blessed art thou, O Lord: O teach me thy statutes! Give me a word, O Word of the Father: touch my heart: enlighten the understandings of my heart: open my lips and fill them with thy praise."*

-Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, 1555-1626

**February 23rd**  
**Bible Intake**  
**By Pastor Michaela Moore, Mt Zion Free Methodist Church**

Matthew 13:31-33 MSG

*Another story. "God's kingdom is like an acorn that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge oak tree, and eagles build nests in it."*

*Another story. "God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread—and waits while the dough rises."*

On an afternoon like this, full of rain-turned-sleet and such dense clouds that not even one shard of sunshine can break through, my children and I make bread. Flour, salt, yeast, water— a simple resistance, a defiance, to the relentless shadow surging outside the kitchen window.

An artisan dough like this one is quite wet and heavy. It whirs like a shaggy blob in the mixer. Even with our hands floured, we struggle to get a handle on it, to transfer it to another bowl, toweled over, to rise.

As my little ones giggle and smear the sticky remnants in between their small fingers, I consider the dough hidden away under the light of the range hood, resting atop the stove. It will need several hours to rise today with the chill and lack of natural light. But it will rise. It will grow and ferment and produce something beautiful.

A small pinch of yeast—like a breath, like a seed—will lift it up and make something new.

As Matthew recalls the teachings of Jesus to the early believers, he reminds them that God's way is the *small but deep* work. Small graces given and received, worked in and through, produce transformed life. God uses little things coupled with time and patience to produce in us nourishing, beautiful life.

Small faith planted far beneath the ground can move a mountain. The childlike spirit, tender and unabashedly free, will enter the kingdom. The meek, with arms open cruciform love, will inherit the earth.

Early church mothers, with knuckles deep in the dough of ministry, echo this truth. Consider Saint Therese of Lisieux and Mother Theresea both calling to the Church to “do small things with great love,” pinches of mercy with the transforming power of God himself. This is the way of God.

And even as we come before God in prayer and scripture, this deems true. We call this *lectio divina*: the slow reading of a small passage several times over pondering, waiting, listening. As we read, we imagine the passage and allow words and phrases to rise up like bubbles in our hearts. We fight the urge to consume God, reading in mass and large quantities, but instead allow God to permeate us. The small selection of scripture sinks in deep: mixing with the contents of our soul, the Spirit kneading and pressing, and then finally resting in God's presence covered and still. God's good words are the yeast, the small pinch of grace, that transforms us utterly.

I peek inside the bowl and see the dough now doubled in size. Under the covering of the tea towel, there is life blooming up to the rim.

And so, too, it is with us. The divine work takes place when the yeast of the scriptures are invited into us, pondered, and then covered. There, in the depths of our hearts and even below our conscious awareness, new life rises up. As we humbly concede to God's words, we are transformed into Christlikeness and can then, in turn, offer our lives as nourishment to the world.

Questions:

1. Read Matthew 13:31-35 three times. If you are able, read aloud slowly, savoring the words. What words or phrases stand out to you? What part of your own life comes to mind as you read? What invitation is the Spirit offering to you?
2. After reading, is there anything you would like to say to God? Share with God what these words stir in your heart.
3. As you close, sit in silence with God's word before you. Allow the scriptures to sink below the surface into your soul. Breathe deeply. Ask if there is anything God would like to speak to you. Wait for several minutes, noticing any words, phrases, people, or images that come to mind. Before you continue with your day, close by thanking God for his word, his Spirit, and his transforming love.

## **February 24th Bible Intake**

**By Stephen Gladding, Sugar Grove Free Methodist Church**

You talk about stress-filled circumstances. Place yourself in the shoes of the disciples at the death of Jesus.

Matthew's writing tells us Jesus, at His death, "cried out again in a loud voice." At that moment darkness covered the land. An earthquake pummeled Israel. At His resurrection, a few days later, tombs opened. The bodies of "many holy people" marched out of the tombs. No matter who lived in this day, it was a stressful time.

The promises of God's Word may prove stressful in the near future, what with the rapture, the tribulation, and judgment yet to come. However, consider these events from another perspective. For the devout follower of Jesus (holy people), this stress may really mean hope. All of it suggests a future full of wonderful blessings!

God's Word abounds with helpful directives for avoiding stress in daily living:

-“Seek first the kingdom” (Matthew 6:33);

-“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.” (Isaiah 26:3);

-“Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.” (James 5:7).

Listen up! God offers help for all, destress in place of stress!

**February 25th**  
**House Of Prayer**  
**By Adam Conder, Washington Free Methodist Church**

I once read that prayer is door to heaven, but faith unlocks the door. We are invited to approach God's throne of grace with confidence - with boldness - so that we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). What a privilege and blessing prayer is to us. Sadly, many do not engage in the practice of prayer and they don't experience the power of prayer.

The prophet Isaiah spoke the words of God; "My house will be called a house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:7) and Jesus quoted this same phrase when he drove the money changers out of the temple (Matthew 21:13). We must highly honor prayer when we gather as The Church. But there's more.

The Apostle Paul wrote; "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). He further writes that we - The Church - together are God's building (1 Corinthians 3:9).

This means that we - individually and collectively- as The Church are The [sacred and holy] house - empowered by God's Holy Spirit - that must be God's house of prayer.

Let us - individually - embrace prayer.  
Let us - collectively - engage in prayer.  
Let us experience the power of prayer.  
Let us encourage one another to pray.

1. What is one step you can take to better honor and embrace the practice of prayer in your life today?
2. What is one thing you can do to help encourage others to engage in prayer to experience the power of God?

*Almighty God, thank you for the invitation to pray. Forgive me for not honoring prayer more.  
Holy Spirit, strengthen my prayer life. In Jesus, Amen.*

**February 26th**  
**Why Should We Pray**  
**By Chris Ramsey, Washington Free Methodist Church**

*If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)*



Over the last few years, the Lord has impressed 2 Chronicles 7:14 upon me through many methods and has compelled me to encourage The Church to become more intentional and more devoted to prayer.

Many times I've thought, if only those who are lost would pray and repent, if only the wicked would pray and repent then the chaos of our world might turn around. However, the more I study Scripture, the more I am convinced that we – His children, His followers, His people – are the primary ones called to pray, to repent, and to turn to the Lord with our whole hearts. Then we will see His hand of healing in our midst. God has both ordained and commanded that we, His people, should be those who are first and are constantly before His throne.

When I think about why we should pray, it begins with genesis 1:1; In the beginning God.... If I don't know, or don't accept that God is, has always been, and always will be, then I wouldn't have a reason to pray. This verse and those that follow describe the creation of the world and those things we may see or explore in the physical realm. But we must understand that God was there in eternity before any of the creation existed. Knowing that God created all things gives me a reason to go to Him. Would we not want to talk with the engineer who designed a new product, a programmer who wrote a new computer program, a chef who produced a unique delicacy?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1) Christ is The Word, and He was active in creation. He is fully God, and yet fully man. He chose to leave His heavenly home, to walk amongst us, taking on the form of mankind that we might know Him, and that He might offer up Himself for our redemption.

Prayer in action; 1 Kings 17-18, 1 Samuel 1:10-20, Esther 4:15-17

To Whom we pray; Isaiah 6:1-4, Revelation 4:1-11, Daniel 7:9-10

Promises about prayer; 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 29:11-13, 33:3, James 5:13-16

Instructions about prayer; Philippians 4:6, Mark 11:24-25, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Ephesians 6:18, 1 John 5:14-15

Expectations of prayer; Matthew 7:7-10, 18:18-20, 21:22, John 14:12-14

Dr. Tony Evans said; "Don't just talk about prayer, instead pray. Don't just agree on the importance of prayer, instead pray. Don't just preach about prayer, instead actually pray."

Questions for reflection:

- 1) What do you know and believe about prayer?
- 2) Is prayer a priority in your life?
- 3) When, where, and to whom will you pray?

**February 27th**

**Prayer**

**By Andy Wulf, West Morris St Free Methodist Church**

In today's busy life, it sometimes is easy to let time pass without prayer. With so many distractions, it is not unusual to look at the clock and discover that in our haste to get things done, hours have passed. And what for? What was that time spent in service to?

Recently, I decided that I wasn't praying like I should, only turning to God in times of need, and not stopping to just to praise the Lord and give thanks. In turn, I made the commitment to "pray the hours." Psalm 119 :164 says "Seven times a day I praise you." That sounded like a good goal. So several times a day, every few hours, I stop and read some psalms and other readings from the Word. It is a gentle reminder that the Lord is with me at all times, every day, and is always there, in good times, in bad times, and just any time. Reading for help, or just a quick conversation, or to accept some praise. It is also grounding, a reminder that I all I do, I really do for the Lord.

*PRAYER*

*Jesus, thank you for the gifts you have provided and thank you for being with me not only during troubled times but at all times.*

**February 28th**

**Prayer**

**By Brandon Richards Columbus Free Methodist Church**

What is prayer?

Prayer is a conversation with God the Father and Creator of all things.

We never get close or have a meaningful relationship with anyone we do not spend time with, getting to know them and they us. Ultimately God knows all about us, but he desires to hear from us and open the line of communication. God gives us free will and he will not force himself upon us, so it is important for us to reach out. As we share with God he listens and answers our prayers in His own way.

What did Jesus say about prayer?

Luke 11:9-10

“So, I tell you: Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened”.

This is an example of us taking the initiative, whether we are asking, seeking, or knocking it is an action that must be taken to receive a response.

Everyday I find quiet time where I can tell God thank you for waking me up and how I am grateful for all the blessings that I have. On days I am down and ungrateful in my humanness, I look around and am grateful I have sight, smell, hearing, and touch to witness his beautiful creation. Then I express that I am thankful to know that he is for me and not against me. The accuser wants nothing more than to remind us of the sins we have committed and that we should hide and not turn to the Lord. At that time, I am reminded to confess and ask for forgiveness for the sins I commit and struggle with and ask for help. I know that the Lord is omnipotent and ask him to watch over my loved ones throughout the day, placing them in his hands and relieving me of the worry by giving it to the One who is able.

As you start having conversations with God and are persistent you will find and realize He is working in every circumstance. This will create and multiply your faith. Do not get discouraged and always pray to the Father when you are angry and feel unattached because that is when we need him the most.

*Philippians 4:5-7*

*“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”.*

**February 29th**

**Prayer**

**By Shirley J. Ellis, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

Earnest believers know that God desires to hear and answer prayer, responding to words of praise from worshiping hearts. William Walford, in his poetic hymn wrote:

“In seasons of distress and grief  
My soul has often found relief.  
And oft escaped the tempter’s snare,  
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.”

And yet, and yet -

For many, life is squeezing their hours. For example, consider moms with several young children. Days are filled with their demands: feeding, cleaning, hugging, playing with, appointments to keep.

Many others have very few free hours. They must be at work by 8:00 a.m. Finally, home after the day's work, they must produce meals, care for the home, supervise family schedules, help with homework. Hours of prayer at scheduled times become minutes here and there.

On the other hand, I, an elderly woman in reasonably good health, have the luxury of time. Uninterrupted, I can have a sweet hour of prayer.

I have the great advantage of being a "morning person." It is natural for me to be in bed by 10 p.m. and up by 6:30 a.m. Still, certain disciplines safeguard and enrich my daily practice.

My self-disciplines are these:

1. I'm committed to avoid reading news headlines, listening to radio or TV before my "sweet hour of prayer." This keeps me ready to hear God speaking through Scripture.
2. I'm committed to keeping a journal. First, I read what I wrote on this date the year before. This reminds me of how God has worked. Next, I fill a new page with observations from Scripture I've just read. I write praises, confessions, and needs.
3. I'm committed to praying for others, using a prayer list. Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth wrote: "Pray for the persons with whom God has chosen to people your world." Some of them are in our weekly Ladies Bible Study. We exchange Accountability Sheets where we write praises, personal prayer requests and mini-goals. These help direct my written prayers and may prompt phone calls or notes to be mailed.

In conclusion, whether your present stage of life allows very little time or much, don't let your "little time" become "no time" and remember that Psalm 25:33 assures us, "No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame." God delights to show each of us how to pray.

*For Reflection:*

*Post Psalm 25:4-5 where you pray daily:*

*"Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths;  
guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long."*

**March 1st**  
**Prayer**  
**By Abby Tolar**

“Does any part of my life please You?” My anguished cry filled the air around me. It was my senior year of college, and I was alone in Beck Chapel, pouring out my heart to God and feeling broken. A recent round of clinical depression had brought me to my knees before the Lord, desperate to know that I was doing something, *anything*, right in His eyes. Why did everything seem to be going wrong? Had my faith failed? Had God failed me?

I don't remember hearing an answer from God as I prayed that day, but I now know this truth, from Isaiah 42:3a: **He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick (CSB)**. I was a bruised reed bowing before Him, and He would not break me. My faith may have been smoldering due to doubt, but He would not put it out.

Prayer, even while I doubt, pleases God. Prayers like, “I don't want to pray right now,” “God, I'm angry at You about this,” or “I can't feel anything right now” *are* prayers; any move from my heart to His is a prayer, with or without the usual accompanying feelings. When I pray, reaching out to the Lord with my whole heart, including the parts that I wish I could hide, and even if I don't feel His presence or if I carry doubts, I'm still in relationship with Him.

As our Father, God wants us to come to Him with our pain and not to hide from Him as we did in the garden (Genesis 3:8). As our Shepherd, Jesus comes to rescue us (John 10:27-28). As living water, the Holy Spirit reminds us we are God's children (Romans 8:16).

During this Lenten season, picture yourself as a bruised reed or a smoldering wick in the Lord's hand. He treats you with care, knowing you are fragile, and He welcomes you to come to Him with whatever you have, wherever you are, however you feel. Let the one who was bruised for our iniquities heal your bruises (Isaiah 53:5). He is stronger and more gentle than we can dare to hope.

- 1) Remember a time when you were weak or frail. How did you respond?
- 2) Think about a season in your life when you didn't feel close to God. What did you do to get through that time?
- 3) Why is it hard for us to show our weakness to God?

*Lord God, I praise You that You do not break us when we are bruised and that You do not snuff out our faith when it is weak. Help me not to hide my weakness from You, but instead to bring it to You in prayer as an act of obedience, trusting You to carry me through whatever comes.*

**March 2nd**  
**A Prayer Tune UP**  
**By Pastor Jon Stemerick, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

What is prayer? Surely there are a number of ways that we could answer that question. You are currently reading from a collection of devotionals for the season of Lent on the topic of spiritual disciplines, so there we have our answer. Prayer is a spiritual discipline. Yet, when I think of disciplines, I think of things that may not come naturally to us, but that we may force ourselves to do, or do out of obligation, because they are supposed to be good for us. I've heard it quipped that you never see a jogger who looks happy. If that's true, then I suppose people jog because they know it is good for them. I certainly wouldn't deny that regular prayer, like regular exercise, is good for us, but I don't like the idea of prayer being something we must force ourselves to do.

Author David Benner wonders what it would be like for us if prayer was like play is to a child. Nobody has to tell children to play, they do it naturally. It is only adults, caught up in all of the responsibilities that come with adulthood, who have to be told to play, and it would probably be good for most of us to spend more time playing.<sup>2</sup> How can prayer become something, for us, like play is for a child?

Returning to the question, what is prayer? We've already said it's a spiritual discipline. Likewise, maybe something like a dictionary definition of prayer comes to mind—something like, “prayer is an address to God in word or thought.” That is indeed prayer, but prayer almost has to be more than that. Otherwise, how could we possibly live up to Paul's entreaty to pray without ceasing (1 Th 5:17)? Perhaps the problem is that we usually think of prayer as something we do. Instead, knowing that God's Holy Spirit is within us, let's think of prayer as something *God* does in us.<sup>3</sup> By adjusting our thinking in that way, we can begin to see that prayer is more than a discipline or merely making petitions to God.

I love hiking in the forest alone. As I do so, the natural beauty I encounter makes me acutely aware of God's presence in and around me. This is a lovely, prayerful experience, though I almost never actually address God or direct well-formulated thoughts to God in those moments. Others may have a similar experience, for instance, when they hum the tune of their favorite hymn while doing the dishes and contemplatively allow the lyrics to run through their mind. There are countless other possibilities along those lines. If we can give our understanding of prayer just a bit of a tune up, and open ourselves to the many ways we can encounter God in our daily lives, we just might find ourselves praying without ceasing.

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<sup>2</sup> David Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life As Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Here are some thoughts for reflection and a suggestion for you to try:

What are some ways outside of the dictionary definition of prayer that you have encountered God, or that seemed prayerful to you? Do you think you could learn to recognize more of these moments throughout your daily life?

Try the prayer of *Examen*. Basically, spend some time at night recalling the events of the day and note when you seemed really aware of God's presence. Conversely, note moments when you weren't very aware of God's presence. The point is not to be ashamed of the latter, but to learn to recognize them so you can begin encountering God more throughout your daily life.

### **March 3rd**

### **Fasting**

**By Pastor Wick Anderson, Mattis Ave. Free Methodist Church**

With intermittent fasting hitting health trends in recent years, popular culture is holding up a challenging mirror to those of us who want to follow Jesus. Of course, scripture tells us of the most extreme "Fast" practiced by Jesus as He went into the wilderness. During this time, He was tempted to serve Himself or obey God. This was a time of preparation for a powerful season and life of ministry.

But there are signs that Jesus may have fasted in earnest prayer during other times as well. Throughout the Old Testament, we have examples of God's people fasting in repentance, in preparation, or in mourning. Jesus Himself taught His disciples in Matthew 6:16-18,

*“And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Throughout most of Christian history, regular fasting has been a foundational practice for those seeking to grow in their faith. Most of us probably hadn't gone a full 40 days, and it probably wouldn't be recommended to most of us for health reasons. But certainly we could each benefit from purposefully forgoing one meal as a devotional practice.

When we feel the hunger pangs rise up within us, and our mouth begins to water at the thought of satisfying that need - we touch on one of the many reasons this practice is good for us. How often does our world encourage us to say "No" to something pleasurable? The regular practice of denying ourselves for the sake of practicing self-control over our appetites, offers God a way to prepare us for those moments when a desire would lead us into choices against His will for our lives.

Personally, I've found that choosing one day a week to fast from sunrise to sunset has been a great way for me to adopt this practice. But as I said already - start where you are. Choose one meal a week if you're able, and be sure to notice your hunger (though as Jesus reminds us, don't advertise it). Allow the hunger to remind you - you're a physical being. You rely on a steady intake of substance that can be converted into energy. It can be especially meaningful to fast on Sunday mornings when you know communion will be served. It prepares you to approach the table hungry, and experiencing the reality - you are what you eat.

1. When was the last time you were truly hungry?
2. How could the practice of fasting join God's Work in your heart and life in this season?

*Lord, show me how the practice of fasting could be used by Your Holy Spirit in my life. Help me to strengthen my self-control, so that I can offer you even more of my "self". May my fasts go largely unnoticed by the world, even as they draw me near to an awareness of my hunger for Your presence. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

### **March 4th**

### **Fasting**

**By John Bahler, Mt Zion Free Methodist Church**

In many scriptures, Jesus warns his followers to be vigilant, to be ready, to keep awake (see Mark 13:32-37, Matthew 25:1-10, Luke 21: 25-38, etc.).

These verses are perhaps most relevant and timely to us as they relate to the little moments when Christ comes— or may come— into our lives, when the opportunity to be like Christ unfolds before us in a given situation.

Being like Christ often means denying yourself, and when times are tough and frustrations run high, that's not easy, but we know it's possible. Countless soldiers, policemen, and firemen have risked their own lives in the service of others. Sometimes their sacrifices are incomprehensible to ordinary people, but part of what makes it possible for them to make great sacrifices, to let go of their own lives, to deny themselves, is that they have trained for it. They have simulated it and acted it out in advance. They have prepared for difficult times, for high stress situations, for the ultimate test. When the bullets are flying or the fires are raging they



will, in a sense, stand before a spiritual judge: they will see whether or not they have what it takes. When they succeed, they often ascribe it to simply falling back on their training.

Spiritual disciplines are the Christian form of training for those moments that put us to the test. Fasting, in particular, trains us in self-denial. If we train by sacrificing our desire for food, then we are better equipped to sacrifice our time and attention when someone needs love. We are better equipped to sacrifice our other desires and resources when there is a great need.

The Bible's fullest treatment of fasting is Isaiah 58. It outlines the fast that God has chosen and gives a call to "share your bread with the hungry," "take away the yoke from your midst" (that is, stop using other people for your own gain), and "pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted." None of this seems to have anything to do with fasting, but it fits perfectly when we understand this: the purpose of fasting is to train yourself in self-denial so that you can do the kind of good for others that is only possible when you deny yourself.

There is coming a day when you will face a test, an opportunity to shift the focus off of yourself and love another with your resources or your time and attention. If you want to succeed, and if you want that kind of success to be the pattern of your life, then it will help to have some training you can fall back on.

And as you fast, remember that you are training for that future moment when you have the opportunity to set your own concerns aside and love your neighbor.

- What are things that frequently worry you, frustrate you, distract you, or consume your attention?
- What is your reason for focusing on these things?
- How do these stand in the way of loving others?
- What can you pursue or focus on instead?

*Lord, if there is anything that I am foolishly clinging to, or anything that I am chasing after that keeps me from loving you or from loving others, give me the strength to lay it down on the altar, that I may stand at your appearing. Amen.*

**March 5th**  
**Fasting**  
**By Iona Woodward, Sugar Grove Free Methodist Church**

In our day and age, it is so very hard to close out the demands of our world and to seek quietness and calm to nourish our personal relationship with the Lord.

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, wept with us and for us, because we did not recognize just where and what brought us real peace and joy (John 11:35, Luke 19:41-44, John 3:16).

The folk song says it best, "Just a closer walk with Thee." We are weak and find the toils and burdens of this life to overcome our daily walks with the Lord. We must eat, work, and tend to cars, houses, and family, and still make time to care for our personal relationship with our God.

Fasting can be a time of spiritual house cleaning. How will you save time for God? It may take the form of not eating or drinking our favorite foods, or avoiding certain activities or hobbies like television or music.

The Reverend of the Greek Orthodox Church in America defined lent as a "workshop" where the character of the faithful is spiritually uplifted and where "life is rededicated and love is transformed."

Remember that God's view of the Easter parade is our hearts.

**March 6th**  
**Fasting To Hear From Heaven?**  
**By Susan Spaulding Washington Free Methodist Church**

I have found the discipline of fasting an extreme growth tool physically, spiritually and mentally!

Through many seasons of fasting I look back to the realization that in the midst of a commitment to fast it was very hard at the time and seemingly fruitless but I somehow knew it would bring much good....and it always has! Every time!!

I've heard it said "fasting is not commanded of us, but is expected!" I believe it is a discipline we cannot go without as a faithful follower of Jesus as it gives us huge shots of heavenly adrenaline because of the clarity it brings, the understanding we receive and the spiritual strength it gives!

There are also many health professionals that write on the benefits of fasting such as: eating only between 10 a.m. through 6 p.m. then fasting between 6 p.m. until 10 a.m. They write of huge benefits against obesity and associated chronic diseases, reduction of inflammation, it is said to be beneficial for cancer patients, and cleanses toxins from our bodies to name a few.

In my experience with fasting (from food, for it is the only thing I've seen mentioned in the bible that was fasted) it seems to cause God to give "special favor" or that He especially gives His attention to our time of self-infliction as when Esther called for her people to fast with her and her maids for God to intercede because of the kings decree for the Jews destruction in Esther chapters 4 and 5...or when the Ninevites tore their clothes and fasted (even their animals!) so that God would not destroy them in 40 days as Jonah warned that brought about a huge revival to the whole city in Jonah 3:5-10...or when in Matthew 17:14-21 the disciples came to Jesus asking why they could not cast out certain demons and He told them "but this kind of demon does not go out except by prayer and fasting." With the many examples in the bible of the extreme benefits in fasting it should give us all much encouragement to partake in it!

1. Have you "heard from heaven" in seasons of fasting?
2. How would you describe the amazing benefits of fasting?
3. Will you commit to seasons of fasting for your own spiritual growth?

*Lord, may we apply the discipline of fasting in our lives as earnestly and often as possible.....may we also ingest Your word, pray fervently and effectually for the lost, confessing all our sins with humble hearts, seeking time alone with You as we faithfully serve others...in the beautiful name of Jesus we pray, Amen!*

### **March 7th Fasting**

**By Barbra Hedge, West Morris St. Free Methodist Church**

*"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up."  
James 4:10*

In the Old Testament, "humbling yourself before the Lord" referred to fasting, and was an annual practice; a physical act of mourning for one's sins. It was called the Annual Day of Atonement. After the Annual Day of Atonement there was the feast of Tabernacles, demonstrating thanksgiving to God for His forgiveness for one's sins. This practice assured people that they would not suffer God's wrath for their sins; rather, it brought them closer to God. (Lev 16:30). Another example of fasting is in Deut. 9:18 where Moses humbled himself before the Lord in penitence (or regret, sorrow) of the Israelites sin in making and worshipping

the golden calf. God was going to destroy Aaron and strike down the Israelites in His wrath. By fasting Moses appeased God and destruction was avoided.

The Old Testament has several instances in which Prophets fasted to avoid calamity and/or destruction because of people's sin against God. Our God is a jealous God; therefore, we must humble ourselves in repentance. Sinning against God brings His judgment; the longer it takes for us to repent the more we reap the consequences of our sin.

The New Testament refers to fasting similarly, but Jesus adds a warning in Matthew. We are not to make our fasting public like the Jewish leaders, who really only wanted approval from the people. Jesus says one must "appear unto your Father which is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matt 6:16-18). In Luke, Jesus is asked why the apostles did not fast. His response was why would they? Only after I am gone will they fast in sorrow.

Today, fasting can be seen as stopping a behavior, either physical or relational, that you know is not right according to the bible, or not right for you. For example, a child of an alcoholic dysfunctional family grows up and becomes an alcoholic. The bible says not to alter your mind with anything that will cause you to miss what God is doing for them, or has for us as a people. In the case of the alcoholic above, the addiction is generational, so having even one drink is not only mind altering, but life altering. For that person even one drink is not "right" for them. Quitting altogether is the only answer, and quitting is the only way to avoid God's judgment for doing what they know is not right.

God yearns for us to fast, or humble ourselves before Him, so He can "lift us up." All God has ever wanted to do is love us with a love that surpasses all understanding. Now that Jesus has sacrificed for us once for all, we do have Him as an advocate. Jesus will plead our case. But in the end, as the bible says, "we reap what we sow." If we continue to sin we will live out the consequences in denial of the truth.

#### *Prayer*

*Father God, precious Jesus, we praise You for who You are, and Your love sacrifice for all so that we can draw near to You. Please help us, as You have promised, to come out of our denial of our sins into Your truth. We love you, and anxiously await Your voice to instruct us on the way to go. We need your love and guidance in our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.*

**March 8th**  
**What Can We Learn From Fasting?**  
**By Paul Frye, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

Fasting is mentioned several times throughout the Bible. Many Christians still find it to be a meaningful spiritual discipline. But why is it so important for us to observe this tradition today?

I have experienced fasting at least twice in my life. Each time it reminded me how many things we must give thanks to God for. They include little things in life which don't normally mean much, unless you are struggling to make ends meet. We usually just brush these things aside and think nothing of them.

The first time I experienced fasting was not by choice, but was my fault. While I was in the Navy, during the Vietnam conflict, I was stationed at a temporary training base. We were housed in an old barracks left over from World War II. There was a problem, the mess hall was located on the opposite side of the base, about four miles away. The Navy decided to just give us extra pay so we could get food on our own. We had several options for how we could do this, but we were only paid twice a month. It had to last no matter how we chose to get food.

We were all young, and for most of us this was the first time being placed in this type of situation, so the first time we got paid we went out for steak dinners. For the first several days it was fine, but then the money ran out, so many of us only had water to drink until payday. After a few days of this, one of the guy's girlfriends brought over some loaves of bread and a jar of peanut butter. She made sandwiches for whomever wanted one. This was the best meal I had ever had! It made me appreciate the simple things in life. To this day, peanut butter sandwiches are one of my favorites.

The next time I experienced fasting was when I had a severe diverticulitis flare up. Over a period of fifteen months I endured three surgeries to remove nine inches of my colon and reconnect what was left. Up to and for a few weeks after the first surgery, I could not have anything through the mouth. My mouth was bone dry until eventually I was given a swab with a tiny bit of liquid medicine. Over the course of about forty-five days I would graduate from the swab to ice chips, and then to clear liquids. One positive was that I lost over 45 pounds, but I wouldn't recommend this for weight loss. Finally, after those forty-five days, I was put on a full liquid diet, which included cream soups and hot cereal—it felt like I was having a five-course meal!

These episodes in my life may seem minor, but they've taught me to thank God for even the smallest things. I don't usually practice Lenten fasting, but I can appreciate those that do. If you've never fasted, consider giving up something that you think you can't live without for a period. Connect with God through prayer, and follow the Spirit's lead.

May God Bless

Reflection questions:

1. Spend some of your regular prayer time to ask God what it might look like to integrate the discipline of fasting into your faith journey. How is God leading you on this?
2. Fasting is usually associated with abstaining from food, but you can fast from other things. What is something else you could give up for a period that might create space in your life for spiritual growth?
3. Note how important ministry moments in the book of Acts are often accompanied with fasting (e.g., Acts 13:2 and 14:23). Whether you're a layperson or clergy, could the practice of fasting open doors for new ministry opportunities?

**March 9th**

**Fasting**

**By Pastor Mel Nead, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

Fasting has been a part of godly behavior through both the Old and New Testaments. Moses, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Esther are just a few examples of people who fasted, seeking God's direction. For example, Daniel 9:3 instructs us "to seek by prayer and supplications with fasting."

Fasting results in a more Christlike holy love. It's never an attempt to force or convince Jesus to think like we think, or act like we act. It's always done with the intent that we will become more like Him. Fasting is withholding from ourselves certain things to attain a higher prize in drawing closer to God.

There are multiple ways to fast. We may go without certain foods or certain meals. We may abstain from certain entertainments. We may leave off certain character traits. All of this is done in order to become different people. For instance, we may leave off criticism to become more positive and loving people. We leave off certain beloved activities because the ONE most important to us will be honored and His grace demonstrated.

Fasting reflects our desire to become more like Him. Fasting and prayer are opportunities to adjust who we are to become more like Him. His heart becomes our heart. His motives become our motives. His decisions become our decisions. We want to be a people God can bless. So, we seek Him by abstaining and going without in order to demonstrate that He's the most important One. We follow the example He set for us in "fasting forty days and forty nights" (Matthew 4:2). And as we do, He becomes the focus of our lives.

We have the opportunity to fast during this season of Lent as we prepare to receive the greatest news, that Jesus is alive! And He invites us to be fully alive in Him.

So we can start practicing the discipline of fasting. Plan on a regular fast, leaving something off to become something more.

*Prayer: Father, as we practice the discipline of fasting during this season, may our focus be set on You. May we hear Your voice to guide us, leading us deeper into Your grace. May we become more fully alive in You. Amen.*

**March 10th  
Confession**

**By Pastor Jackson Moore, Mt. Zion Free Methodist Church**

I was once traveling with some good friends and needed a place to spend the night. Being poor college students, we chose the cheapest option we could find: a dilapidated hotel on the outskirts of town for \$35 dollars a night.

After pooling our cash together and sending our biggest friend through the barbed wired front office doors to pay for our lodgings, we got our keys and headed to the room.

The room was dark and musty and smelled like it surely had not been cleaned. We would not sleep comfortably that night, nor would we sleep alone: as the lamps flicked on, the light exposed all kinds of cockroaches and creepy crawlers high tailing for cover.

These unwanted creatures love to hide in the covering of darkness. There they nest and multiply and make themselves at home.

Jesus said in John 3, **whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.**

Confession is the spiritual practice of turning on the lights.

When we confess our sins and our secrets, we expose them to the truth, forcing them to flee.

Like cockroaches, the things of darkness love to hide unexposed. Shame, fear, jealousy, or bitterness all thrive in the dark. However, when we tell the truth about ourselves, our actions, or our motivations, we are turning on the lights and forcing the presence of darkness to flee. **“For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

All of us are invited to walk in the light of Christ and enjoy the many pleasures that come from life with God. To enjoy this light and life, it is necessary to habitually “turn the lights on.”

One of the great gifts of the past five years has been a group of pastor friends that I meet with bi-monthly to “turn on the lights.” Together we examine our lives, share our successes and struggles, our sins and secrets, and all of the ways the Spirit is stirring in us. We then speak forgiveness and restoration over one another on behalf of Christ.

Many times I have come to the group burdened by sin or secrets only to be refreshed by the grace and forgiveness of Jesus spoken through these brothers in Christ. It was as if someone turned on the lights of my darkened soul and flooded my heart with the love of God.

To live in secrecy is to live in darkness. To confess our sins to one another is to come into the light and live by the truth. And the truth shall set us free.

For reflection:

1. Are there any sins or secrets that the Spirit is impressing upon me to share with someone that I trust?
2. What could it look like to regularly “turn on the lights” and confess my sins and secrets to a fellow believer?

### **March 11th Confession**

**By Hector Hernandez, Mattis Ave. Free Methodist Church**

*"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Proverbs 28:13*

Many Christians would agree that the act of confession is one of those practices that is important and necessary in our walk with the Lord. It is so foundational to our faith, that we cannot become a Christian unless we confess our sin and also accept Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as an atonement for that sin.

All believers, no matter how spiritual we are or how long we've walked with Jesus, will at some point fall into sin. It's the unfortunate side-effect of living in a fallen world, in a fleshly body, amidst a real spiritual battleground. Despite being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:11), we are still capable of sinning (Rom 7:18-19).

David's story is a prime example in the Bible of a believer who commits sin (adultery), makes it worse with more sin (murder), and is unrepentant about it. Fortunately for David, Nathan the prophet confronted him directly and David was convicted by God to confess his sin and seek forgiveness (2 Sam 12:1-13). David's heart-felt confession is recorded in Psalm 51.



In my own walk with Jesus, I have also fallen into sin and concealed it. In my case, like the unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable (Matt 18:21-35), I was unwilling to extend forgiveness to others even though I was forgiven by my master. For many years, I held onto unforgiveness towards my father for abandoning my family after my parents divorced over 20 years ago. And I was also unforgiving towards my wife for things she had said or done over 10 years ago. Confession and repentance were instrumental in breaking strongholds and leading me into the freedom of living a life in the Spirit of Christ.

How to confess sin: Thankfully, the Bible gives us many guides for confession. See Psalm 32:5, Psalm 51:1-4, Psalm 139:23-24, James 5:16, or 1 John 1:9 for examples.

1. Acknowledge the sin to God. You must have a repentant heart to do this; (Psalm 51:1-4)
2. Clearly state your sin verbally or silently in prayer. Accept responsibility for your own sin, regardless of other people's words or actions; (Psalm 32:5)
3. Lay the sin on the cross of Jesus and ask Him for forgiveness; (1 John 1:9)
4. Receive forgiveness from Jesus through his shed blood; (Heb 9:14)
5. Leave the sin on the cross with your old self, and do not pull that dead body out of the grave; (Rom 6:6-7)
6. Live in the freedom of Christ without condemnation. (Rom 8:1-2)

Questions for Reflection:

1. Are you willing to pray the words of Psalm 139:23-24? "Search me O God and know my heart... See if there is any offensive way in me."
2. Where are you holding onto unrepentant sin? Are you concealing it? Have you justified your sin by blaming others?

*"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." (Psalm 51:1-4)*

**March 12th  
Confession**

**By Pastor Luke Maggard, Columbus Free Methodist Church**

*James 5:16 CSB*

*"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect."*

John Wesley once said the famous words, “There is no holiness apart from social holiness.” The value of these words is immense in a culture that tries to get us to isolate ourselves more and more. In essence what Wesley is saying is that we can’t do life and achieve holiness without doing life together.

We are meant to live social lives, and do life together with one another. The church isn’t a building, it is a group of people who do life together, serving Jesus and striving for holiness to be like Him.

The thing about doing life together is that sometimes it gets messy. Sometimes we have to be willing to face hardships with each other. At times we have to be willing to be honest with each other and confess our sins to one another.

For the last five plus years I have been a part of a discipleship band with three other pastors. During our time together every other week, and at off times when needed, we take time to share where our soul is, what has gone well and not so well, what are the sins we need to confess, and if there are any secrets we are keeping. We took this framework from John Wesley’s original bands.

This time to share and confess is so powerful, and truly helps me navigate my own walk with Jesus. One of my favorite parts of this time is after each of us have shared that person prays, and then collectively we say, “(Name) in the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Go and sin no more.” Every time this happens for me I feel the love from my brothers of faith and from Jesus, and when I do this for them I feel empowered to love them like Jesus loves me.

Confessing our sins is a Biblical thing, and it is an important thing for our walk with Jesus and our social holiness.

Questions for reflection:

1. When was the last time you confessed your sins?
2. Who in your life are you able to practice confessing each other's sins with?
3. If you don't have someone right now that you can do that with, pray that Jesus would bring that person into your life.

*Lord, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. Thank you for your forgiveness on the cross, and give me the strength to continue to follow you. Thank you for my brothers and sisters of faith that I can walk through life with and confess my sins with. In Jesus name, Amen.*

**March 13th**  
**Confession**  
**By Magdalene Mastin, Mt Zion Free Methodist Church**

*And, yes, I thank you [God] for my darkness  
(the unwanted companion I shun and avoid)  
because this pushy intruder comes with truth  
and reveals my hidden treasures.\**

*Joyce Rupp*

Few of us like admitting our faults and wrongs; we tend to default to what John Gottman calls The Four Horsemen of relationships: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. Revealing our most vulnerable, broken, hurting, and hurtful selves is rarely our default, preferring to always present publicly perfect selves. Yet, when we allow ourselves to look honestly at our faults, taking time for reflection and admission of wrongs, welcoming God and others into our pursuit of wholeness, holiness, and redemption—a little practice we in the Church like to call Confession—this offering of our darkest moments invites in the healing and transforming Light of Christ.

When we confess where we have fallen short in the Way of Love, to ourselves, our community, or to God, we are telling the truth about the choices we made, bringing light to the darkness we've allowed to win in our shame, guilt, or conceit. In John's first letter, he writes "if we confess our sins, God is faithful to us and forgives us and cleanse us" (1:9). Confession is an act of trust in God's reconciling work in us and in the world. Daily we can offer ourselves to God through acknowledging where we have failed to love through prayer and reflection; weekly we gather in our church communities for acts of confession and reminders of redemption; yearly we enter into rhythms of admission and renewal during Lent and Holy Week.

At the start of the Easter Vigil service in the Catholic Church on Saturday of Holy Week before Easter, all lights are off; the community enters in silence and darkness, and early in the service confesses together in the Penitential act "my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault". As the Words of forgiveness and songs of glory and praise erupt from the priest and the ministers, the lights flip on, filling the sanctuary with bright and beautiful goodness, drastically changing the experience. So too does God, following our acts of confession and truth telling, when we're alone or surrounded by others, fill us with light and love, changing and transforming us little by little, moment by moment. Our hidden treasures, our truest beings, our redeemed selves, buried away, are revealed.

Questions for further consideration:

1. What areas of darkness in you or your life do you need God's light to illuminate? List 1-3 things.
2. What hidden treasures are buried in you that, through confession, could be revealed?

3. With whom can you share your confession, inviting them into your transformation and God's work of redemption?

*God, I pray, give me the grace to look at my own darkness, revealing my hidden treasures for the work of your Loving Light. May I learn to speak the truth of myself, welcoming the Truth of You. Surround me with your people to enter my darkness with care, bearing the Light of Christ and the glory of God's goodness to reconcile even my most secret and shameful choices. I wait for your Easter Song, your glory, and your proclamation that Light has, continues to, and will always win. In the name of Christ I pray, Amen.*

\*This prayer is taken from *Little Pieces of Light*, Joyce Rupp (Paulist Press.)

### **March 14th Confession**

**By Monte Vincent, Sugar Grove Free Methodist Church**

As a follower of Christ, our desire is to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18). A consistent increase of our sense of sin, along with a growing faith in the power of the graces which the Holy Spirit pours in a believer's heart is a true mark of “growing in grace.” The practice of spiritual disciplines is a means to move toward maturing in the likeness of Jesus.

It may be that the least practiced of the disciplines is the discipline of confession. It requires us to be open and honest with another about our deepest weaknesses and failures. Through our complete transparency, we become vulnerable, and that is a scary and risky place to be.

The truth remains, however, that confession can be a vital part of our spiritual growth. It's a practice that can aid us in avoiding and forsaking sin. We read in Proverbs 28:13, “No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who professes and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

Open confession to others was a prominent practice in the early church. In the letter of James, we are told, “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another...” (James 5:16). The discipline of confession isn't just for those who don't mind admitting their failures, but James promotes the practice as a command given to every Christian. His counsel is to not only confess before God, but also to fellow-Christians.

God has gifted us with brothers and sisters in Christ to stand with us to make His presence and forgiving love real to our own hearts. Because of our common faith in Christ, we are able to be vulnerable with each other and depend on God and others to help us in overcoming our sin and struggles.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer offered some wise counsel when he wrote, "As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins, everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother, the sin has to be brought into the light." Bonhoeffer's belief in the importance of this discipline was strong, "When I go to my brother to confess," he says, "I am going to God."

I would want to make sure that the person I choose to confide in is an individual that possesses a sound faith in God's power to forgive. I would also want them to be a person sufficient empathy, understanding, and one to keep a confidence.

It is very important to take the necessary time to prayerfully reflect on how confessing a sinful act, habit, or an unpleasing disposition to a brother or sister in Christ can be spiritually beneficial. Examine closely your motive to confess to another and make sure it's of God.

Your intended outcome of this spiritual discipline must lead to a conduct of faith, submission, and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **March 15th Confession**

**By David Hooten, Washington Free Methodist Church**

It was on a Sunday evening, around 8:30, a young teenage girl came to her parents and said she needed to talk to another girl in which they had a strained relationship. Her parents were concerned at such a request at such a late hour. She became upset that her parents wouldn't agree to it because she felt she had to talk to the other girl that night. Arrangements were made and the girl came in her car and the two talked for just a short time. The daughter talked to her parents and she said both girls confessed to each other they did each other wrong and would try to do better.

This story reminds me of what Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24. If you bring a gift to the altar and remember your grievance with your brother or sister, Jesus says, leave your gift at the altar but first be reconciled to he or she, then come offer your gift. God is faithful. 1st John 1:9 says, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

#### Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you struggle with the need of confession?
2. Do you think it is important to confess?
3. How can we quickly confess when it is necessary?

*God, thank you for loving us, thank you for being faithful to forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness. Help us in our weakness to confess our sins quickly and without delay, we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.*

**March 16th**  
**Importance of Confession**  
**By Blake Henson, West Morris St. Free Methodist Church**

Admitting sin can initially be intimidating as we, rather I, like to convince myself of why whatever I did wrong wasn't actually "that bad." Throughout the Bible, however, the practice of admitting one's guilt was a regular practice in obedience to God. In James 5:16 he tells us to confess our sins to each other and pray for one another so that we may be healed. Likewise in 1 John 1:9 we see that if we confess our sins to God, he is faithful to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

By themselves, these stand-alone verses seem simple enough. However, these verses build upon a larger theme than simply confession. Leviticus 4:22,27 and 5:2, talk about sin offerings, but only after that person realizes their guilt. The people, when they unintentionally sinned, were expected to present an offering only *after* realizing their own guilt, not when someone else realized it for them. Too often when the Bible says, "for all have sinned," we think it's our job to point that out. Whether it is a difference in how someone behaves, dresses, or an occupation they choose, we occasionally are quick to admit that *they* fell short of God's glory but neglect the fact that we have too. Thus, the importance of confession is found in the self-recognition that we are undeserving and utterly incapable of saving ourselves from our own sin.

When we confess our sins to God, though he already knows them, we admit that we not only have fallen short, but that we actually need him. Jesus has made us holy, and he alone carries the weight of the transgression we couldn't possibly hold ourselves. By confessing, we present our baggage to the only one who is truly able to take it away, but why would he take it away unless we express our need for him to. Therefore, I urge you to make confession a regular practice and study its meaning in more depth. Let God take away your chains, even if they're ones you created. Accept Jesus and believe that when he says it is finished, you really *don't* carry the weight of your sins any longer.

Reflection:

- When is the last time you have read something in the Bible that convicted you, and then changed your life because of it?
- How often do you confess to God? To others?
- Is there something you need to give to him right now?

Prayer

*God thank you for all the ways you allow me to draw near to you, despite the ways I have messed up. Let me not hesitate to bring everything to you, knowing that I'm still loved by you and made in your image. Allow me to help others to come to believe this as well and that they may see you in me. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

**March 17th**  
**Solitude: A Solution**  
**By Pastor Kristen Marble, West Morris St. Free Methodist Church**

I love to collect Christmas nativity sets. And this year, my collection exploded in size! Between a few special gifts from loved ones, and some excellent thrift store finds, I found myself scouring the house for every available, flat surface to display my newest sets. It didn't take long before I had to admit there was no space available. I was maxed out. My house's nativity-set-capacity had not only been reached, but exceeded.

While reaching full capacity in our house for displaying nativity sets is only a temporary and minor problem, many of us live lives that have long ago reached full capacity for busyness, loneliness, exhaustion and emptiness. And it's hardly a temporary and minor problem. In fact, no matter how many new spiritual disciplines we might embrace, no matter how many healthy holy habits we build – failing to address the beyond-capacity nature of our lives will ultimately wreck serious harm.

But there is a solution. It's a solution we see practiced by Elijah and Paul, Peter and David, Moses and Jesus. It's a solution that seems counterintuitive, requires practice, demands vulnerability, and most challenges the most-driven. It's a solution that accomplishes a lot by achieving nothing, creates space to listen by eliminating noise, and carves out space for God in an already-too-full calendar.

The solution is solitude.

Solitude creates space for God (Sacred Rhythms, R.H. Barton) and provides rest for our constant striving and hard work. Solitude recognizes God wants to be with us, far more than God wants us to accomplish for him. Solitude counters the "shoulds" and "oughts" that plague our valiant desires to be a disciple. Solitude - aloneness with God - is the only effective counter to our ever-increasing aloneness in the world.

And solitude must precede, accompany and follow every aspect of our lives in Christ. Before beginning ministry, Jesus (Lk 4.1), Peter (Acts 10.9) and Paul (Gal 1.15-17) spent time in solitude. God's people have sought out solitude before ministry decisions (Lk 6.12-13) and in the midst of serving (Ps 23.1-3), after ministry successes (Lk 5.15-16) and following failures (1 Kgs 19.9,12), in times of rejoicing (Lk 9.10) and pain (Mt 14.13). And we are invited to enter that same holy, quiet, private space ourselves.

Solitude involves turning off the world's distractions and turning on God's declarations; closing our technology and opening our hearts. Jesus is waiting for us to meet with him, to sit with him, to be with him – without an agenda or a to-do list. But, sitting quietly in silence, without a phone or music or even God's Word, can be awkward at first. It can feel like a waste of time. It can challenge our (mis)perceptions that we're only as valuable as our latest accomplishments. It requires intentional practice.

But solitude can also create space. It can heal our weariness. It can reconnect us to the One who calls us his treasured possession. The only catch is that we have to pause and stop. To turn off and shut down. Isaiah 30.15 offers us a beautiful invitation into solitude:

*Therefore, the Lord God,  
the holy one of Israel, says:  
In return and rest you will be saved;  
quietness and trust will be your strength—*

Isaiah's final line sadly reveals, "But you refused." Will we also refuse? Or will this season finally be the time for us to recognize we're beyond capacity, and that doing more - even healthy, holy spiritual disciplines - isn't going to fix anything, until we stop, and practice solitude?

**Questions:**

How have you experienced the life-giving practice of solitude? How can you make it a (more) regular practice in your life? What keeps you from being silent and quiet before the Lord? Have you brought that hesitation and fear to the Lord?

**Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, I hear your beautiful invitation to come away with you in quiet solitude. Teach me to withdraw to deserted places (Lk 5.16). Show me how to be silent before you (Hab 2.20). Renew my heart with your presence and help me create space for you.*

**March 18th  
Solitude**

**By Sheila Richerson, Columbus Free Methodist Church**

In the Oxford dictionary, the meaning of solitude is "state or situation of being alone." How are you with being alone? Do you have to always have people around you?

Spending time alone is not a bad thing, in fact, that is the time we should have our one-on-one time with The Father without any other distractions. We are reminded of this in Matthew 6:6. Jesus also spent the night alone in prayer before he chose the twelve apostles. (Luke 6:12-16)



When we talk about solitude, we are intentionally setting aside time to be alone to chat with God without all the noise and distractions. This is where we have conversations with God, and he hears our cries, and he speaks to us. We just have to listen.

Make this a priority to set aside a time of day to get away from it all and have that one-on-one time with the Man upstairs. You will notice the change and how much you need it. We all need to take time to slow down in our busy lives. Then it will become a habit, a good one, of course. This will strengthen your spiritual journey.

*Prayer:*

*Father, thank you for showing me solitude and the importance of it. Thank you for allowing me to rest and get away from it all and be in your presence and you show me the direction I should go. In Jesus name, Amen.*

**March 19th**

**Solitude**

**By Julie D. Innes, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

“We define solitude as healthy personal discipline that allows you to engage in meaningful self-reflections. Loneliness, however, is a state of ‘sadness because one has not friends or company’. While you can be lonely in a crowd you cannot have solitude there (*Understanding the Difference Between Solitude and Loneliness in the Workplace*, 2023).”

The experience of solitude is in the Bible from the beginning. Adam was in solitude until Eve was created (Genesis 2). A simple review of many significant God encounters occurred when a person was in solitude. There was Noah (Genesis 6), Abraham (Genesis 12), Moses (Exodus 3), Hagar (Genesis 16), and Mary (Luke 1) to name a few.

Jesus needed solitude. He sought it often. It was vital to His ministry. It was what enabled Him to renew His strength after spending His days ministering, healing, teaching, preaching.

We are not commanded to pursue solitude. But we are given a living example in the habit of solitude Jesus demonstrated for us.

Author Lucille Zimmerman wrote, “Solitude is essential for our spiritual experience – It is where we hear the still small voice (of God).” We know God can talk to us anytime, anywhere. But we can discern His voice more easily in moments of solitude.

The first time I heard God speak to me was at a camp meeting when I was 12. I went forward to commit myself to Him. I never expected to hear Him in any such way again.

Yet, the second time God spoke directly to me I was alone in solitude. I was on a beach at dusk. The lapping lake waves, the lighthouse foghorn and the wisps of fog have created a memorable, picturesque spot for the encounter. God gave me words of assurance. They have carried me forth into my adult life. *"I will never leave or forsake you. I will be with you. It will be OK."*

If you can't find 15 minutes in a 24-hour day for the gift of solitude to renew your soul, you are too busy. If 15 minutes is too difficult to find, start with 5 minutes. If you can't find time daily, try every other day or at least weekly.

Jeremiah 29:13 says, "When you seek Me you will find Me when you seek Me with all your heart," is a favorite Bible verse. Seeking God is harder to do in the cacophony of a busy life.

Make a concerted effort to carve out time. Find a spot. Turn off or shut out the distractions. Pray, listen, be available. It's a habit and discipline that can become an invaluable treasure.

*Prayer:*

*Father God, I am seeking You. Help me treasure this moment as the gift you intend it to be for me. Refresh me to do Your work with a joyful heart. Amen.*

**March 20th**  
**Solitude**  
**By Genevieve Kirk, Mattis Ave. Free Methodist Church**

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35)

Throughout the gospels, the Bible shows us Jesus' pattern of going into solitude and silence to be with the Father in a special way, praying and listening to him. Jesus called his disciples to join him in solitude and silence, saying, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place." (Mark 6:31-32)

As followers of Jesus, we can model his habits by practicing time alone with God. Solitude and silence are an opportunity to focus on intimacy with Jesus, to unhook from daily responsibilities and the people we interact with in order to spend time with our Papa. As Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

But have you tried “being still” recently? It can be a challenge! I live with my spouse, 2 teenage children, 2 cats, and 1 anxious dog. It’s rare for me to be alone. When I’m away from the house, I’m generally at work, in the company of coworkers where my mind is occupied by endless tasks and deadlines. In those rare moments when I do find myself alone, it’s so easy to fill my thoughts with lists and to-dos. Or I can by default spend alone time zoning out on music, listening to podcasts or scrolling on my phone.

None of these things are bad, but they miss out on the heart of what solitude offers: time alone with God. It can be a time of knowing our Father more deeply, a time of strengthening, a time of refreshment, and a time of sharing our deepest concerns. Importantly, it’s a time to *do nothing!* Yes, that’s right – *nothing!* Don’t try to be productive – even in Bible study. Although reading the Word of God can be an excellent gateway into solitude, as can worship, journaling or a number of other practices.

Practicing solitude requires being intentional. It does not happen on its own. Like fasting, solitude requires purposefully abstaining – not from food or drink - but from interaction with other human beings, for a time, so that we can commune with our Maker.

This past year, we had a renovation done in our home that provides a dedicated space for solitude. To get into this space, you exit our home and enter a door from the outside. This has become my favorite space at our house. It’s a haven from the world and a place where I go expecting to commune with God. For me, having a physical space for solitude at home makes this practice happen on a regular basis now. For others, leaving your house might be a better option. Wherever you go, the important thing is to make time and space to be with the One who knows us and loves us more than we can ask or imagine.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where do you go to spend time with God?
2. What gets in the way of practicing solitude with the Lord? What do you think can change that?

*Abba Father, thank you for the gentle reminder that you want to draw near to me. I long for your peace. Please lead me by your hand to a solitary place to spend time with you. Give me opportunities to step away from others and the will to eliminate distractions so that I can join you in solitude and silence. Plant in me a desire to know you more intimately. I pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

**March 21st**  
**Wasted Time With God**  
**By Jeannie Neese, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

*Mark 1:35 NIV: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”*

As far back as I can remember, there have been times when I would isolate myself and pray. For many years I thought praying was synonymous with solitude with God. I didn't realize I was not only praying but listening and quieting myself in God's presence. I took for granted what those times did for my soul.

Then one day, after many years of struggling with life issues, I was about to implement what I thought was a well thought out plan to fix my life. I shared my decision with a close friend who strongly, and wisely, insisted I needed to spend alone time with God and ask God what the best course of action for my life was. She took my children for the weekend, and I locked myself in a motel.

I remember sitting on the floor of the bathroom that first night with the door shut, in the dark, blocking out every distraction I could. In the pitch black I could exist with no expectations, no responsibilities. I felt God's closeness and love in a way I hadn't understood before. There was no teaching, no scolding, no praise, no work to be done, no fevered prayers for God to fix my life—nothing. Just love in the here and now. I cried, sobbed, calmed down, and breathed for a long time.

I spent that weekend praying, reflecting, planning and organizing. I got the perspective I needed, and it was nothing like I thought it would be. If I hadn't devoted that time to God, I would have made what undoubtedly would have been the worst decision of my life. "Wasted time with God," as Henri Nouwen puts it, taught me that I don't always have to be doing, planning, giving, working, and fixing things in my life to be of value to my Father.<sup>4</sup>

I now crave solitude. I have spent as little as a couple of minutes to ten days alone with God. There is something to be said for finding that place where there is not another human being around. I don't always go to a motel for solitude. I have found solitude in a closet, when the house was empty, a walk in the park, even when I fall asleep or am waking up in the morning. Most important of all I have discovered I don't have to do, say, or think anything, but just *be* in God's presence. I can be my authentic self. And when I realized that God was comfortable with that, I became comfortable with me, and I am growing to become more of who I want to be.

*Prayer: "Father, today I choose to spend wasted time with you. Time when I don't have to share you with anyone. Time spent just being completely accepted by you, to experience your love of me just the way I am."*

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010),

**March 22nd**  
**Solitude**  
**By Jeff Mastin, Mt Zion Free Methodist Church**

*Seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut. 4:29)*

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30, cf. Deut. 6:5)*

What does it mean to seek and love God with all of your soul?

We can understand the soul is one's very essence, the seed of your being, your "you-ness." Jesus reemphasizes the core calling of Israel to love God with your soul, making a distinction from heart, mind, and strength. These cannot completely be separated, but the soul that is the core of your being exists whether your heart (will), mind, and strength are intact or not.

But how do we dig down to this level of the soul to be able to seek and love God from this core place? Parker Palmer suggest:

*"The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek." (A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life)*

In this Lenten season we are invited to follow Christ into the solitude of the wilderness. Jesus had an extremely thorough sense of who he truly was, and it's no coincidence that his life was marked by routinely stepping away from the chaos around him into solitude, into prayerful extended times away from others before reengaging. In places of silence, where our breath can be slow and deep, where there is time for our thoughts to drift and recenter, where we can share the joys and longings of our heart with God and we can stop to listen... There we can attune to the Living Christ who calls our souls to emerge. In learning who we are, how God created us and sees us, that more-true you can emerge to seek and love God and neighbors in due time.

Consider:

What is a realistic and attainable way you can step away into further solitude today, whether for 5 minutes or 2 hours? Don't worry if you find yourself distracted, just breath and re-invite God to speak into whatever is going through you and reveal what He wants to share.

How could you continue to further practice solitude in the future?

*God, creator and pursuer of my soul, draw me into intimate solitude with you. Speak, for I am listening. Lovingly and patiently call my soul out of hiding that I would know who I truly am and whose I truly am, and to live from that firm foundation in you.*

**March 23rd**

**The Making of a Disciple: The Spiritual Discipline of Solitude  
By Marshall Parks, Sugar Grove Free Methodist Church**

*Seeking solitude with God is biblical. Jesus sought solitude. Jesus found strength in solitude. From wilderness settings to local gardens, Jesus found the time and the place to be alone with God. Example: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5:16)*

Engaging in solitude and other spiritual disciplines was an expected practice in the early church. The Apostle Paul admonished young Timothy to live sacrificially and to "...train yourself to be godly" (I Timothy 4:7), and to "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (I Corinthians 11:1)

Church history reveals that solitude was a habit of Christians throughout the ages. Thomas A. Kempis called all Christians to solitude. In the venerated Monk's view, "silence\* and solitude are the hallowed doors through which one must pass to arrive at a serene state of holy contemplation." (Amazon Review of Silence and Solitude)

In our Wesleyan tradition, there is a clear precedence for the practice of spiritual disciplines. The early Methodists considered 'methodical godly exercise' as the sure route to spiritual maturity. (Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines). (Willard also relates the lack of practicing the disciplines to the decline of spirituality in Methodism.) John Wesley and his spiritual protégé, Francis Asbury, were famously methodical in practicing and promoting spiritual exercise. Wesley's charge to rise at 4:00 AM, no doubt, provided time for Francis Asbury and his fellow Methodist Circuit Riders to engage in solitude in their daily walk or ride across Frontier America. (Wesley L. Duewel, Heroes of the Holy Life)

Synopsis.

1. Jesus lived an inward "heart solitude." He also experienced outward solitude. Solitude is not so much time and place, but a state of mind and heart.
2. Suggestion: Engage in progressive steps in your personal quest for solitude. Take "little solitudes" over that cup of coffee or while waiting at that train crossing. Identify quiet places in your home or in your local community for "bigger solitudes," Or, for even "bigger 'desert/wilderness' solitudes," retreat for a period of time to a special location. (Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline) (Hint: the oft expressed and published mantra for our own Wabash Park Camp and Retreat Center is "Hear the Whisper of God.")

3. Practicing solitude is personal, liberating, experiential, and experimental, and spiritually transforming. However, engaging in solitude is particularly challenging as this discipline involves a radical measure of self-denial and self-discipline. (Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines) (Blaise Pascal, Pensees) And beware of legalism. We are to become holy, not “holier than thou.”
4. As we grow spiritually, we must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we are to live in obedience. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together)
5. “Be still and know that I am God...” (Psalm 46:10)

\*Silence is considered an integral component of solitude.

**March 24th**  
**Service**  
**By Pastor Jen Finley, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

“The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.” (John 13:2-5)

It's the last night before Jesus' death, before the world would change forever. He's spending this evening with a group of diverse men who had become like brothers. He knew that the time of His death was approaching. He knew the pain, the sorrow, the grief, that would soon be upon Him. And He could have taken this last night preparing *Himself* for what was coming. Instead, in love, He prepared His disciples.

In love, He stood up from their meal together, took a towel, and washed the feet of the disciples. Washing the dirt from their feet, even as His death a few hours later would wash the sin from their lives. He spent this last evening before His death, before He would make the ultimate sacrifice, expressing love to His disciples by taking the towel of servanthood.

In our mission to be like Jesus, we too are called to reflect His love through servanthood. Jesus explained, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:14-15)

This is the example by which we, as followers of Christ, are to live. When we show compassion to someone who's grieving. When we set aside our own schedules to provide encouragement to another in a time of need. When we use resources that we've been given to provide for someone who is without. When we turn our eyes away from ourselves to see the needs of others, and respond in the love of Christ, we take the towel of servanthood.

And in doing so, we become more like Christ, who took the very nature of a servant and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. With the towel of servanthood, we imitate His mercy, His humility, and His love.

Upon my graduation from college many years ago, we were given a gift in addition to our diplomas. We received a small towel, a reminder that we were being sent into the world as servants of Christ, to be an example of all that He's done for us. As we prepare our hearts during this season of Lent, may we carry our towels into the world, to reflect the love and humility of Christ, as we serve others.

Question for Reflection: What can you do today to serve others, and reflect the love of Christ?

*Prayer: Lord, thank you for Your great love for us. Thank you for humbling Yourself. Open our eyes to opportunities that You give us to reflect Your love and service to a hurting world. Amen.*

**March 25th**  
**Serving Self As Well As Others**  
**By Steve Sacksteder, Washington Free Methodist Church**

Proverbs 11:24-25 tells us that those of us who give freely and generously find that they are happier and experience more blessings in life. Though contrary to worldly inclinations, this applies not only financially, but also in regard to all of the other various ways we can be of service to those in need. In reflecting on the experience of charitable works, particularly those that serve the Lord through serving the needy, it becomes clear that to be a blessing is, in itself, an immense blessing. Indeed, who is happier and more fulfilled than an uncompensated volunteer, one who is helping, giving, serving...proactively loving? Matthew 23:11-12.

When you think that you personally have nothing to gain by your service, that there is nothing in it for you, then is when you surely have so much to gain through that seemingly selfless service, and there is great joy and satisfaction in it for you. God has made us this way, in our hearts and souls, but we are so often misled by the world. False worldly motivations deceive and rob us of this deep gratification, and so many of us never experience the elation of living on the basis of this realization. The giving that is more blessed than receiving, Acts 20:35, is genuinely a lasting spiritual exhilaration. Even if unrequited or unappreciated, no matter how much you offer of yourself, you find that you get more than you give. Engaging in God's service to others should not just be considered unselfish charitable behavior, but understood as truly a God given pathway to a fulfilling life.

Think of a time when you were unexpectedly disappointed by a lack of gratification in an activity or accomplishment. Might this reflect a difference between worldly motivation and true Godly service?



Think of a person you consider to be spiritually happy. What do you perceive to be his or her motivations and satisfactions?

Think of a time when you have been encouraged and elevated by an act of service. Enjoy and replicate!

**March 26th  
Service**

**By Lillia Marble & Ethan Hartsfield West Morris St Free Methodist Church  
Matthew 25:35-40, 1 Peter 4:10-11, James 2:26, 1 Corinthians 3:13**

In college, Ethan and I were both involved in a band service fraternity in which we did various service activities for the band programs. We performed this service with gladness and out of a shared love of music and band, knowing that what we did would make a difference in the lives of the directors and students. As Christians, we are called to serve and while the acts of service may look different than the ones we did to help the band programs, we are still called to serve through love.

We, like so many others, use service to others as an integral part of the Christian faith, yet often find this call to action daunting. As Christians (and as members of humanity writ large), we are surrounded by so many exemplary acts of service - Mother Teresa's work with orphans in Calcutta; Florence's Nightingale and her work which led to the formation of the American Red Cross; Oskar Schindler and his assistance to thousands of Jews who would have certainly faced death; Harold Moody who used his medical education to bridge the financial gap for thousands of people who would not have otherwise been able to afford medical treatment while also campaigning for Civil Rights. These are just a handful of examples, but of course the greatest example of service was Jesus' ultimate sacrifice to secure our salvation.

As Christians, we're called to lives of service (James 2:26), but being surrounded by all of these stories of humble heroism, service can sometimes feel as though it's an insurmountable challenge. But put simply as possible, service is an action, not completed for the betterment of oneself, but for the betterment of another. Service doesn't have to be a large-scale operation in which the lives of thousands of people are altered dramatically; service can be as simple as making the life easier of someone close to you.

However, serving others is not simply performing the act of service, it also needs to come from a place of love and humility (1 Corinthians 13:3). Jesus was a great example of the way we're called to serve; through his love and humility, he helped people from different backgrounds, socioeconomic standings, and even those publicly exiled from society. Our service should reflect the way Christ served others; humble, selfless, and out of love. God calls us to use the gifts he's given us to serve others (1 Peter 4:10-11).

The diverse set of spiritual gifts from God allow us to serve others in a unique way that allows us to reach a greater number of people. If everyone's spiritual gift was to take out the trash, then there wouldn't be anyone to replace the trash bag. The people we think about doing exemplary service used their own unique gifts to serve others. Despite having different gifts and professions (nun, nurse, businessman, doctor), they all made a difference in thousands of lives because they used their spiritual gifts to serve others.

Serving through love can look different for everyone based on their individual spiritual gifts. While Ethan and I did service projects through our shared love of music and helping the band programs, as Christians we can serve and show the love that is freely given to us through Jesus. What is your motivation for serving others? Is it to show the humble and bountiful love of Christ? How can you use your unique spiritual gifts to serve others?

*O Heavenly Father, give me a heart like the heart of Jesus, a heart more ready to serve than be served, a heart moved by compassion towards the weak and oppressed, a heart set upon the coming of your kingdom in the world of men and women. Amen. - John Baillie*

**March 27th  
Service  
By Pastor Barb Tuttle, Columbus Free Methodist Church**

*John 13:1-17 (NIV)*

*<sup>12</sup> When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. <sup>13</sup> "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

Have you ever talked about washing someone else's feet with kids or youth? It doesn't always get a positive response, but it's a great place to begin teaching humility for sure! Humble service is the model Jesus is teaching us. It's not about what we want to do, but rather the need, and what we are called to do.

It's not always easy – but it is always a blessing when we serve others. Oftentimes, our greatest moments of growth are found in our most challenging experiences. Especially when we are willing to look beyond our own comfort to say, "Yes, Lord... I will go where you send me, and I will do what you have asked me to do."

Are you willing? To go where Christ may send you? To do whatever the task may be? Knowing, whatever it is – He will provide all you need to complete it.

Christlike service grows in our hearts as we draw nearer to Him. It grows out of our genuine love for Jesus and our love and concern for others. As we grow in our personal relationship with Christ - He provides us with amazing opportunities to share that love through serving others. Whether we journey far, or next door – our eyes are opened to see the needs of others and our hearts are filled with a desire to meet those needs.

*John 12:26 (NIV)*

*<sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.*

*Dear Lord, Help me to grow and become more like you every day. Lord, help me to follow your example and serve others through love, mercy, and grace. Amen*

### **March 28th Service**

**By Pastor Beth Goodberry, John Wesley Free Methodist Church**

"We serve others first." This is something you can hear us, as parents, say to our kids quite often in my home. It usually relates to food. Sometimes it's about letting someone go before you through a door or into the car.

The ministry of service is a big deal to me as a parent. I want my kids to grow up putting others first because I don't want them to be egotistical or arrogant people. I want my kids to be loving and kind. I want them to be the kids that other kids go to for advice and friendships. I want them to be leaders, which means that they need to recognize the needs of others and put those before their own. But in order to help my kids do that out in the world, they have to first do it in our home with their siblings.

The first step in serving others first is *noticing*. Being attuned to what is happening in the world around you will help you see where God wants you to serve.

Next, ask God to show you how He wants you to *respond* to what you notice. Allow God to speak to you about how you can serve Him through serving others.

And finally, *follow through*. Do what God nudges you to do. And do it in His Name.

In Matthew 25:35-40, Jesus says, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

When you leave your house today, make a point to notice. Notice the people who need your help. When you do, perhaps God will nudge you to serve others first.

*Lord, give me eyes today to see the world the way You see it. Show me where I can be of service to You, and help me to be obedient to that calling. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

**March 29th  
Service  
By Jennifer L. Goran, Mattis Ave. Free Methodist Church**

*“But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.” Luke 10:33-34*

As Christians, one of the common prayers we pray is “Lord, shape in me the character of Christ.” It’s an easy prayer to pray, especially if we keep our vision of its fulfillment within the parameters of our own comfort zones.

Jesus continually identified Himself as a servant. In Luke 22:27, He said, “I am among you as one who serves.”

What can make the “discipline” of service so difficult at times? Instead of forcing ourselves to do another good deed, how can we allow it to seamlessly flow through our good intentions and into hands that become eager to wash the feet of another?

Compassion.

*“Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. “I am willing.” He said, “Be clean.” Mark 1:41*

How can we put this discipline into our everyday lives? By practicing awareness. Like the Good Samaritan, pay attention to your surroundings. It’s that simple. There’s always someone who needs physical help, a kind word of encouragement or a sense that they are valued. By being aware of and responding to those in our immediate surroundings, we are given ample opportunities to develop compassion and respond in service to our fellow man. Be willing.

The Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.

- 1) What motivates you to serve?
- 2) Can you identify the role compassion plays in your service to others?
- 3) Is service without compassion merely volunteerism?

*Lord, create in me a willingness to identify with the suffering and vulnerability of others, and in so doing, offer myself in service to those who need your love and care. Amen.*

**March 30th  
Service  
By Pastor Jon Stemerick, Mooresville Free Methodist Church**

During my seminary years I was married (still am), and for most of those years I was a full-time student and had two part-time jobs. Needless to say, I remained pretty busy. In fact, during the semesters I only slept about five hours a night, and probably twenty during breaks. Still, when a couple of opportunities to serve regularly at local, faith-based charitable organizations arose, I made time for them. Maybe I felt convicted by the words of James (Ja 2:14-18). Maybe time spent in classrooms, reading books, and writing papers nurtured certain aspects of my faith but left others atrophied, and I felt the need to work those muscles.

I've since graduated seminary and now pastor a church in the Wabash Conference. Volunteering my time outside of the church I serve is still a discipline that is a regular part of my faith journey. When family obligations pulled me away from my regular volunteer hours at the local food pantry, I requested a spot on the board of directors for that organization. Serving means that much to me.

Michael Frost writes, "Whereas we often see our faith being exhibited in action, there's also a strong case to be made for suggesting it can flow in the other direction, too. That is, our actions can shape our faith."<sup>5</sup> I've found this to be a profound truth. Serving regularly has been one of, perhaps even *the* biggest catalyst for spiritual growth in my faith journey. I'm reminded of Jesus when he reads from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set free those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19 NRSV)

I have a deep love for all of the spiritual disciplines, but when I'm inspired by Jesus's own ministry, and I actually roll up my sleeves and get to work, the Good News of Jesus Christ comes alive to me in a major way! Nothing else leads me to an experience of God's grace as profoundly as does service to my neighbors.

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<sup>5</sup>Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2016), 18, Kindle Edition.

Let me offer a couple of final thoughts, and extend an invitation, or two, to you.

1. Do you currently volunteer your time to serve regularly? What's stopping you? Maybe you don't know how best to do so? Ask yourself, "what is something I do well enough that I could teach it to others?" Is there a way you can help others based on your answer?
2. Small group ministries are a common thing in contemporary, western Christianity. A challenge small groups face is in cultivating the type of intimate relationships needed for those types of ministries to succeed. If you are part of a small group, and are faced with that challenge, consider serving together. It is a great way to nurture close bonds and deep friendship.

*Prayer*  
*Make us worthy, Lord,*  
*To serve our fellow-men*  
*Throughout the world who live and die*  
*In poverty or hunger.*  
*Give them, through our hands*  
*This day their daily bread,*  
*And by our understanding love,*  
*Give peace and joy.*

**March 31st**  
**Resurrection Sunday**  
**By Andy Fishback, Sugar Grove Free Methodist Church**

He is risen! He is risen, indeed! What excitement fills our hearts when we hear these words. Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. With this one action, Jesus defeated Satan, sin, and death, once and for all. Forever vindicated, this work of Jesus makes possible the renewal of everything.

This beautiful truth is proclaimed in Revelation 21:5. "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" Because of the resurrection of Jesus, a way has been made for us to get in on an entirely new way of living.

I particularly like the way the poet, Wendell Berry, words it in one of his works. He says that we are to, "practice resurrection." In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is something that we are supposed to live out in our daily lives. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has the power to change absolutely every aspect of human living.

Imagine that! As we live out the resurrection of Jesus in our own lives, we can get a sneak peek at the life God has in store for us in eternity. Eugene Peterson refers to this as,

“spiritual formation by resurrection.” This means that, since Jesus was raised from the dead, defeating all the powers of death and Hell, we can be raised to new life as we trust in Him to lead us in holy living.

In other words, eternal life isn't just something we have to wait to experience after we die. We can have an eternal kind of life that begins the moment we decide to trust in Jesus as our Savior. Eternal life refers not only to the quantity, but also to the quality of life we live.

This is where it gets really good, y'all. Drug addicts in recovery. Broken marriages healed. Relationships restored. Alcoholics living sober and sharing with others. Prodigals returned home. Hungry and hurting people fed and cared for. The outcast has a place to belong. Greed gives way to radical generosity. Hate is abandoned. Forgiveness is embraced. God is in the business of transforming all of creation, and he wants to do His transformative work in you! Will you open your heart this Easter Sunday, and allow the Resurrection power to bring you new life?

*Gracious Lord, we give you our praise on this Resurrection Sunday. Thank you for conquering the grave, so that we may be free from everything that binds us. We want to always live in your resurrection power. Amen.*