

Sacred Spaces

Daily Devotionals

Believers
FELLOWSHIP

SACRED SPACES

A photograph of a person standing in a stone archway, looking out over a landscape. The archway is made of dark, textured stone. The person is wearing a blue jacket and dark pants. The landscape outside is a mix of green fields and brown hills under a clear sky. The floor of the archway is made of stone tiles. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Introduction and Purpose

In preparing for this time of intentional devotion, I found that the part of me that is most ready to tackle a challenge head on, to swim against the current, and to conquer the terrain, was the part of me that needed to be the quietest. Instead of nurturing spiritual intimacy, we often try to work harder, do more, and be better.

If you're also inclined to charge in and take over, be prepared for some holy frustration. Spiritual disciplines are not so much feats of personal and internal strength, as they are an orientation towards God and away from ourselves.

It's been said that one of the most important things we do is to create space in our busy lives for God to act. We have to actively work to keep everything in life from piling up. Over the weeks to come, I hope that these devotions can be a chance to carve out space for God to interact with you. These aren't a challenge that you can fail or pass, just space for God to speak to you, to show you something beautiful, or even to just rest for a moment.

I've done my best to give bite-size reflections for you over the next few weeks which I hope will challenge you, but not overwhelm you. Each week will include a scripture passage to read and reflect on, and a devotional application to consider. I'll be praying daily for God to speak to you through God's word, and through your time spent with him.

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Pastoral Resident

God's Love for me

5/8/2017 (Monday)

We are God's beloved

We know that we're Christ's workmanship, but sometimes it's easy to forget that we are also God's creative work. You and I weren't just stamped into being, like a gear or a cog, we were lovingly, and carefully crafted in the hands of the ultimate craftsman. The same brilliance that wove a tapestry of color into the wings of a butterfly put you together.

The details that God packed into you, the care he took in creating you, are easy to forget in our day to day. In a life that often asks of us, "What can you do for me?" It's important to remember that God deliberately planned for you, created you, is delighted by you, and calls you beloved.

Romans 9:25 says, "As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" Today, apart from anything you have done or will do, know that you are beloved. God has called you his own.

Is it easier for you to think of yourself as a thing of function or a thing of beauty? How does that change your view of God?

Romans 9:25

5/9/2017 (Tuesday)

A relentless witness

Mark 14:36 finds Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night that he was betrayed. He's troubled and sorrowful, and asks his closest friends to stay with him while he prays. As he prays Jesus calls God, "Abba" an intimate term for father. He prays to "Papa" in the garden, as his friends fall asleep around him, unable to keep watch for even an hour.

He prays with the full knowledge of what God is capable of, maybe remembering Abraham and Isaac, and that last second sacrificial substitution. He might have thought back to creation as he prayed. To when he himself, the Word become flesh who was God, and was with God, and by whom all things were created, personally divided dark from light. This same Jesus, knew that he was about to suffer and die on this ball of dirt that he had spoken into being.

The audacity of such a death is only surpassed by his willingness to enter into it. He's fully capable of escaping the pain, but he has so much love for us that he wouldn't cheat even a little bit. He refused to be partially human, to avoid the pain of experiencing humanity.

It can be easy to dismiss the death of Jesus as the act of a far-off or unfeeling God, but scripture tells us that in his rescue mission to save us, Jesus truly became like us. Jesus' love for us is all the more terrible and wonderful because he knew what he was getting into and still chose to save us.

Reflect today on the places in your life that seem foreign to God. Ask for an understanding of how Jesus could truly know your frustrations, your pain, and your experiences.

Mark 14:62

5/10/2017 (Wednesday) An informed sacrifice

Mark 14:61 finds Jesus before the high priests. It's already been a long day for Jesus. He's been anointed with oil in Bethany, sat down for the last supper with his disciples, prayed a desperate prayer in Gethsemane, and experienced betrayal by a ministry partner from his inner circle. He may be feeling that dragging feeling in the tips of his toes. He needs some sleep. He's probably given a thought or two to his bed at home, despite the electric atmosphere surging around him. The Sanhedrin swirling around him like furious cloud of bees, all red faces and spit and accusation.

Jesus, who existed before the world, who saw its first sunrise, sits quietly as they accuse him, the Creator of all existence, of blasphemy. "Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus.

We know it isn't anger that prompts his response at this point, because God's anger is a consuming fire. Jesus speaks the phrase "I am" the name of God, which is his own name, out of love for his children. Even in the midst of what could otherwise be a comical case of missing of the point, our Creator King is patient, offering a relentless witness, and an unyielding invitation to his loved ones.

Despite the insult, despite the cost, despite our inability to see Him clearly, Jesus invites us then, today, and everyday into right relationship with the savior King who is the great "I am." Know today that God is patiently pursuing you, regardless whether you've gotten right in the past, regardless of anger, apathy, or pride.

Where is has God been patiently pursuing you?

Mark 14:36

5/11/2017 (Thursday)

God is our hiding place

One thing we all learn is how to find a safe place. We learn the quiet places, the warm places, and the sturdy places. It could be the table at a friend's house where we go for a cup of coffee, far out in the woods, or in a favorite chair. This can be a healthy thing to do, but it can turn negative too. We might also hide from responsibilities, from conflicts, or from disappointment. We might choose an escape instead of a safe place. We might escape in our work, in our hobbies, in our duties, or in our vices. Whether done in a positive or a negative way, we love our hiding places.

The trouble is, there is no place we can find that is remote enough, inaccessible enough, or exclusive enough to truly insulate us from the realities of the world. The vacation ends, the effects wear off, and the work comes to a close.

In Psalm 32:7 the psalmist says that it's God who is his hiding place. This is more than a repetition of truth with the hopes that it finally sticks this time, the Psalmist calls God his hiding place for a reason. Psalm chapter 32 walks us through the Psalmist's experience with the need to hide, with his confrontation of sin, with the forgiveness of sin, and finally, with his hiding place.

The reality of life is that there are things we want to hide from. We may temporarily succeed in healthy or unhealthy ways, but it's unnecessary as well as futile. We have deliverance, preservation, and an eternal home, far better than any place we could find, create, or run to.

As you pray today, ask God to show you places where you have been hiding, and ask God to show you how he can be your hiding place.

Psalm 32

5/12/2017 (Friday)

God of all places

Psalm 139:7-12 tells us that there's nowhere that God is not. From the loftiest cathedral to the darkest alley, in Hell and its grimmest details, in Heaven and its splendor, in the highest of highs, and in the lowest of lows, in the dark places, the seedy, the painful, the violent, and the seemingly long-forgotten; God is there. The pristine, the untouchable, the flawless, and the regimented; God is there. From the pounding depths of the deepest sea to the highest soaring and airless heights above; God is there.

For those of us who are in Christ, this is really good news. You'll never drift so far away that God's presence isn't already there. God is already in the place that seems too awful for anything good to be. God is there and has been waiting to receive you when you turn to him. There is no place so foul that God has not pursued us into it, and there is no place so exclusive that you are not welcomed there. Jesus has gone before you and prepared a place for you. In your entire life, you will never find a place where you are not preceded by God's love for you.

What places seem like places where God is near to you? Where are the places that it seems like God is far away or absent?

Psalm 139:7-12

5/13/2017 (Saturday)

God has called you his own

To be truly known is one of the scariest, and desirable states that a human can be in. On the one hand, there's a sense of cheap safety in anonymity, a measure of protection in being unassociated. If you're never truly known, you can never truly be rejected. On the other hand to be seen as we truly are and to be understood and accepted is incomparably good. Fortunately for us, God does not give us this option.

Isaiah 43:19 reads, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

This verse introduces us to the reality that God is aware of each of us individually. God knows your name, God sees you, and God understands you better than you understand yourself. No anonymity, no quiet absences. Even if you feel like you're lost in a crowd of faces, even if you feel like you'll forever go unnoticed, even if you're sure that you'll never be heard, God knows you by name. More than that, God claimed you as his own.

Somehow, in an undeserving, cosmically ridiculous and wonderful turn of events, the originator of reality knows us individually. Even more surprising, he not only knows us, but has personally claimed us as his own.

Know today that you are seen, you are known, and God has claimed you as his own.

Isaiah 43:1-2

God's Ongoing Creation

5/15/2017 (Monday)

The pulpy in-between

There's a place of in-between when a caterpillar resting in its cocoon is not quite a caterpillar anymore. It's still not quite a butterfly either, but something in the middle. The caterpillar gives up its wandering, and finally rests in a cocoon.

Life in the cocoon is a pulpy, vulnerable place. The structures that got that caterpillar around in life are broken down to the cellular level; liquefied. Legs might eventually be reformed into wings, the chewing mouth might become a drinking straw, and so on for the whole body. It's a process of destruction and re-creation. It's a messy, inconvenient, and seemingly inefficient middle place.

God's transformative work can feel like a tearing down of our essential structures. We can't live the way we've lived for our whole lives when God changes us into a new creation. We're no longer caterpillars, squirming around on our own strength, tearing out our own food. God has seen fit to change us.

Through Jesus' suffering on the cross on our behalf, we're new creations, constantly being reformed into the image and likeness of Christ. In Psalm 138:8 David mixes a proclamation of God's faithfulness with a prayer for God to be faithful. He writes "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands."

Whether you're currently praising God for his faithfulness, or petitioning God to remain faithful, spend time talking with God today about the pulpy, in-between places of your life.

5/16/2017 (Tuesday)

Works in progress

Philippians 1:6 reads, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

It’s true that we’re already new creations, but to be a follower of Jesus is also to be in a constant state of becoming. You and I are day-to-day being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ, by the creator who is faithful to complete the good work that he began in us.

On different days, this verse can speak to us in different ways. It’s a word of warning when we’ve become particularly impressed with ourselves and our own righteousness.

On the days when we start thinking about all the ways that we’re righteous on our own, this verse is a reminder that we’re not the author or the finisher of our own faith, and that we’re far from a completed work. God is still working on you and me, and will be for our entire lives.

On the days when we are all too aware of our “unfinishedness” this verse is a comforting reminder that the same love that formed us, will be faithful to complete us. When we see and feel (or are reminded by others) of the reality that we are still imperfect, it’s important to remember that God is not done with you yet. You are a painting in progress, a sculpture not fully formed, a song still being fine-tuned. We are not what we once were, not now what we will someday be, and love as much as we will ever be.

Reflect today on the reality that you are a work in progress.

Philippians 1:6

5/17/2017 (Wednesday) *Growth like trees*

Matthew 13:31 finds Jesus describing the Kingdom of Heaven with a parable. He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Great things often have small beginnings, and the Kingdom is no exception. Jesus’ ministry began with a group of twelve disciples, and will stretch to a kingdom that will never end, populated by people from every tribe and tongue, stretching out like a tree. There is a relentless efficiency to a tree’s growth that we could only hope to imitate, but at a pace that’s quite a bit different from ours.

In this parable, Jesus tells us the Kingdom’s growth is like that. It’s inevitable, organic, and unstoppable. But to us it can also feel incredibly slow. As the seasons change, even the slowest trees will give some indication of their growth. A bud here, fresh green shoots there, and sometimes it takes an eye that is familiar with the tree to see any growth at all.

Where have you seen new life in the Kingdom? Where have you seen small things growing into something new?

Matthew 13:31

5/18/2017 (Thursday) *Leaven in flour*

Matthew 13:33 again finds Jesus describing the Kingdom of Heaven with a parable, He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

The Kingdom of God described in this parable is not the outwardly established kingdom, as in the parable of Mustard Seed, instead, this is the slow, gradual change from within that the Kingdom of God works on the environment around it. Although proportionally the leaven, or yeast, that is worked into the flour is very small, it creates an all-encompassing change. The Kingdom of God is a potent agent of change that can infuse growth, life, and transformation into the context where it is placed.

Those of us who are in Christ are the means by which God has chosen to infuse bubbling, transformative, life into an otherwise passive and flat reality. We don't replace, rewrite, or compete with the world around us, because we are something entirely different. As the leaven, or yeast, we can't help but transform the world around us into something altogether new, better than it was before.

How has God equipped you to be a transformative element in your context today?

Matthew 13:33

5/19/2017 (Friday)

Continual Creation

Creation “ex nihilo” is the concept that God created everything there is out of nothing. Every atom found its being in the moment God spoke it into existence. Every animate and inanimate reality that we will ever observe, and those too big or too small for us to comprehend, exists through God’s intentional creative act. More than that, God maintains this creation.

Colossians 1:17 reads, “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The breath-taking, sprawling web of life that we live in is held together by the hands that formed it. The microscopic and unobserved processes that contribute to our most basic tasks, happen because God who began creation continues to hold them together. We are held together by the continually creating God.

The reason there is something and not nothing, the reason there continues to be something and not nothing, is the love of God at work. Today, take the time to thank God for the tiny, mundane, and easily overlooked things in your life.

What part of your day to day bears the mark of a creator? What part of your life is held together by that ongoing creation?

Colossians 1:17

5/20/2017 (Saturday)

All things new

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ (Revelation 21:5)

This verse is exciting, because God, who created even the concept of novelty that we enjoy, is making everything new. The word used is *kainos*, which can mean either recently made, fresh, unused, unworn, or it can mean unprecedented, novel, uncommon, or even unheard of. In this verse we see that God does not throw out broken things, he recreates what was broken, he fixes it up better than it was.

When sin entered the world, God didn’t scrap the project and start over, he mounted the most costly rescue and repair mission that reality will ever witness. As Christ added humanity to his divinity and joined us on the same earth that he spoke into existence, God demonstrated what love was.

While it’s true that God is all powerful, cosmic, unfathomable, and even terrifyingly awe-inspiring, God is also profoundly loving, and surprisingly sentimental. He collects our tears in bottles, he mourns with us, sings over us, he understands our loss, and more than a distant admirer, he cares enough to act. Whatever God’s continued unfolding of creation will be, we can be sure that it will include restoration and not a replacement. Whatever is broken will be ferociously redeemed.

Reflect today on God who makes all things new. What has been broken? Where can you ask God to make something new?

Revelation 21:5

Friendship with God

5/22/2017 (Monday)

Translated prayers

One of the foundations of the Christian life is prayer. Martin Luther once said, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” Oswald Chambers wrote “Prayer does not fit us for the greater work, it is the greater work.” We read throughout scripture the call to prayer without ceasing, to approach the throne of God with thanksgiving, and to constantly give God praise.

Sometimes it comes naturally, we can't help but pray. But sometimes prayer doesn't come so easily to us. It can be hard to think straight, to find the balance between reverence or honesty, or the right mix of gratitude and request. Prayers can end up as a roars of frustration, bubbling inexpressible gratitude, and sometimes we can choke on words too painful to get out. If we compare ourselves to others, our own attempts can seem weak or useless.

If you've ever felt the disconnect between what you'd like your prayer life to be and what it is, Romans 8:26 is a great encouragement. It reads, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

It's been said that “In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart.” Today, give yourself the freedom of a heartfelt prayer to God, safe in the knowledge that it's “translated” by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:26

5/23/2017 (Tuesday)

No longer servants

“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:15)

One of the differences between being a servant and being a friend, is that as a servant we sometimes assume a posture of unattached obedience. The master calls us to a task, and we respond. The master says “jump” and we say “how high?” We receive orders instead of invitations. There can be a noncommittal comfort in the role of the servant, but the relationship is lacking.

What Jesus is telling his disciples, and us, is that we are now no longer simply servants. All that the Father shared with Jesus has been shared with us. We understand the plan and purpose behind the task, and we understand the master in a new way. We no longer simply owe an oath of obedience to Jesus as a servant would, although we do still owe that, we are now invited to relate to Jesus as a friend would as well.

Do you know your friends well enough to anticipate their preferences? Do you know when something will match their humor just right, what music they'd like, or their favorite foods? Through Jesus we have full access to the Father, and we can come to know God as a friend. To be a servant in God's house would be better than a lifetime elsewhere, but Jesus has also called us friends.

Today reflect on the reality that Jesus has called you friend. What does it mean for you to be a servant of God and a friend of God?

John 15:15

5/24/2017 (Wednesday) Visiting with God

Genesis 18 describes an unexpected visit that God makes to his friend, Abraham. In the previous chapter, God has established a new covenant with Abraham, God has renamed Abraham, and the entirety of Abraham's house has been circumcised in response. Suffice to say, Abraham was having a pretty eventful season of life.

Most likely there were a lot of things being done in new ways, a lot of routines shaken up, and the majority of the males in Abraham's house would not have been fit for full duty. It's at this moment that God himself visits Abraham, in the flesh.

If you've ever hosted, you know this would have been a mess. Kid's toys would have been everywhere, the dogs were probably barking, people were dodging the heat of the hottest part of the day, and that's the moment God stopped by for lunch. What follows is a quick scramble for hospitality (Sarah, make those wonderful cakes you make, with the good flour!), and then a conversation between Abraham and God about the city of Sodom.

There is no food exquisite enough, no table elaborate enough, and no opulence decadent enough to properly receive the creator of the universe. But, when you have lunch with a friend, any meal can seem like a feast, and any time can be the best time.

Think of the friend or, if you're especially blessed, friends who have a permanent invite at your table. God wants that kind friendship with you. God doesn't want your fine china, elaborate meals, and the good candlesticks, God wants you.

What would that kind of friendship look like in your life?

5/25/2017 (Thursday)

We are family by God's act

Being a member of a family has its benefits and its drawbacks. You might have to put up with that one relative that talks too much, or the one who gets really into his sports team, or the one who insists on bringing up the most controversial subjects. However difficult family life can be, a healthy family will always be the place where there is belonging.

Peter 2:9 tells us, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

We've been wrapped up into the family of God, (even if we're the one who talks too much) and as a part of that we truly have belonging. The people of God aren't defined by heredity, geography, status, genetics, perceptions, education, or assumptions. The same qualifications that made Aaron a priest (showing up when God called) have made the people of God a royal priesthood to the world.

Because Jesus chose us, we will forever have belonging in the family of God. Take time today to reflect on the reality that you are God's royal priesthood to the world. Do you think of yourself as a royal priesthood, or your family as a royal priesthood?

1 Peter 2:9

5/26/2017 (Friday)

Taking time to pray

1 Chronicles 16:8 marks the beginning of a prayer of thanks that David offers to God. This prayer, and the prayers that follow in 1 Chronicles 17, happen before a major military engagement with the philistines in 1 Chronicles 18. Conventional wisdom would have been to rally the troops, prepare a strategy, and consult his generals. Instead David turns like a flower towards the sun, and commits himself to prayer.

Unfortunately, we're more often like a flower that has no time for the sun. We neglect our prayer life, and subscribe to conventional wisdom. More than a cursory "check in the box", a devoted prayer life is our opportunity to turn towards the sun and to be fed.

John Wesley once wrote, "I have so much to do, that I must spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it." Carve out time today to be with God, to be warmed by his presence.

1 Chronicles 16:8

5/27/2017 (Saturday)

Unshakable Friendship

One of the deepest hurts we can get are from the ones we love. The people who are past your initial defenses and have access to the sweet, tender, and unguarded parts of your heart. This is usually an appropriately small group of people, close family members, deep friends, a spouse. To be close shows a deep trust in them, and isn't done quickly or easily for most of us.

In Mark 14:32-42 we find Jesus praying in the garden, his soul crushed with grief as he anticipates his impending death on the cross. Peter, James, and John were asked to stay with him, to keep watch with him while he prayed. They didn't do so well.

Have you ever been let down by a friend? Have you been deeply hurt by someone inside your inner circle? Just before his execution, Jesus was let down by his friends three times. We know there are more failures of nerve later on as Jesus' friends fail to acknowledge him, or associate with him, but the pain of being let down in this moment would have been like having the wind knocked out of you. But Jesus didn't shy away from his disciples after they let him down. He didn't downplay their shortcomings, but he didn't remove them from his inner circle either.

Know that if you feel like you've let Jesus down, he does not reject you. Even if that's what we tend to do when hurt deeply, Jesus demonstrated his love for his disciples in that even after his closest friends on earth couldn't stay awake for one night, he went willingly to death on the cross for them. For those of us who are in Christ, we have a deep, abiding, and unshakable friendship with this Jesus, regardless of our ability or inability to "stay awake."

Mark 14:32-42

God's Invitation to Greater Freedom

5/29/2017 (Monday)

Freedom to rest in God's work

Psalm 132 is a Psalm of ascent, a song that was sung on the way either to Jerusalem or up to the steps of the Temple. In 132:9 the Psalmist encourages, “Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy.”

While we know at a gut level that we ought to shout for joy at the scandalous goodness of the gospel, it can sometimes be more easily said, or prescribed, than done. Even while we are the people of God, the recipients of reckless love, the forgiven, and the loved, it can be difficult to see that love clearly, let alone shout with joy. The kind of joy that makes you shout, that wild, I-don't-care-what-anyone-thinks joy isn't the sort of thing you can fake if you don't feel it.

The good news is, we don't have to be the ones who manifest joy. We are free to be the recipients. God responds to David in Psalm 132, saying that it is God who will clothe us, his priests, in righteousness. It is God who will make us able to shout for joy.

Today, think about the ways that you feel obligated to be your own source, your own strength, or even your own righteousness. Where have you tried to accomplish God's work on your own? Where, today, can you rest in the reality that you are free to let God accomplish what he has begun?

Psalm 132

5/30/2017 (Tuesday)

*Freedom to trust in God, not
branches*

Birds at rest on a branch never seems to worry about whether or not the branch will be enough to hold them up. No nights up late, terrified that the stick and leaf kingdom beneath it will come crashing down to earth. No questions as to whether or not the integrity of the branches will last through their career. Not because the bird doesn't care, but because the bird doesn't place its trust the branch. Instead, the bird's trust is rightly placed in its wings.

When our trusts are disordered, we can be like the bird who forgets its wings and trusts in the branch. We can forget that it is God who has promised to sustain us, to hold us, to walk beside us, and to love us like a parent. We can start thinking of the branch as our safety and strength.

The reality is, God is inviting you and me into an ever deeper trust in him as our source of safety and strength. Psalm 20:7 reminds us, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will trust in the name of the Lord."

What kingdom of sticks and leaves have you put your trust in?
Where is God inviting you to remember your wings?

Psalm 20:7

5/31/2017 (Wednesday) *Categorizing Sins*

Luke 7:36-50 finds Jesus dining in the house of some Pharisees, when he's approached by a woman who is known to be living a sinful life. The Pharisees were so convinced of this woman's ungodliness that they actually call into question Jesus' status as a prophet when Jesus does not reject the woman outright. They have apparently concluded that the woman's sin is so great, that she can't even be touched.

Such a blatant response would be rare in our context, we're thankfully too familiar with these verses to act on this impulse. But we will consider letting "those people" keep with others like them. Who "those people" are tends to be people who don't sin the same way we do. We might not go out of our way to insist they keep to themselves, but we can be just like the Pharisees in our passive rejection of people we see as "those people."

Where is God asking you to extend the same grace that you've been given? Where have you been invited into the greater freedom of loving instead of bearing the responsibility for judging?

Luke 7:36-50

6/1/2017 (Thursday)

No merit but God's merit

In a world where the message is often, “What have you done for me lately?” Jesus instead says, “It is finished.” Our attempts to prove our worthiness are finished. Our life-long ambitions towards personal merit are done. Our resumes are thrown out, our trophies are taken off the shelf, and our personal empires are all through.

Philippians 3:8 tells us that all of our personal righteousness is “skybalon”, which is a shockingly vulgar Greek word. So if all our personal righteousness is trash, where does that leave us? In a terrifyingly empty, but strangely free place, where we can live, and move, and have our being. We’re invited today to move unencumbered by our successes, and unhindered by our failures into the reality of “It is finished.” We’re freed from the obligation of performance, and freed to worship God as children already accepted, not as applicants hoping for acceptance.

Ask God to show you what you’re unnecessarily holding onto. How does it change your life if personal merit is truly off the table?

Philippians 3:8

6/2/2017 (Friday)

Hypocrisy 101

We all know what a hypocrite is, we just might have a hard time agreeing who the hypocrites are. Matthew 23:27 finds Jesus saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.”

This group had mastered the art of the “good person.” In our context, they would have worn just the right modest clothes (sustainably produced from a Christian manufacturer), they would have attended just the right prayer meetings (with the most holy of congregants but not a clique), they would have been publicly generous (and people would know it), and they would be very ready to speak on current theological issues. Outwardly, this group would be unassailable, models of virtue, and pillars of their community. But filled with death inside.

Jesus doesn't rebuke the Pharisees for their good deeds, he rebukes them because good deeds became their god. When our insistence on non-secular music supersedes a heart that seeks righteousness, we have become Pharisees. When our public affiliations are more important than showing love to the outsider, we have become Pharisees. When what we appear to be externally is more important than who Jesus is calling us to become, we have become Pharisees. The good news is that we're freed from the need to paint on a holy exterior. We are the recipients of Christ's righteousness through the work of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection.

Where is God inviting you to live in that freedom?

Matthew 23:27

6/3/2017 (Saturday)

Freedom to be quiet

Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

It can be hard to be still when it seems like God is under attack. John Calvin once wrote, “A dog barks when his master is attacked. I would be a coward if I saw that God's truth is attacked and yet would remain silent.” The desire to defend God is usually rooted in love of God, but it's a task that we're ultimately not responsible, or fully equipped, to undertake.

No amount of apologetics, no degrees, and no persuasive words will ever prepare us to contend for the name of God as thoroughly as God has. Psalm 2:4 tells us that God laughs at the nations that plot against him, and Isaiah 45:23 tells us that to God every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance to him, Exodus 14:14 tells us that it is the Lord that will fight, and we have only to be silent.

There is freedom in knowing that while you and I are invited to participate in the proclamation of the gospel, we are not responsible for its success. If you've felt the weight of solely contending for God's word, put that down. If you've believed that you are the only one who can possibly reach a person, or a people group, put that down. While God invites us to participate in his work, it is ultimately God's work.

What changes if you believe that God is ultimately responsible for the preservation of God's name? Do you feel more like John Calvin, defending the master, or the Psalmist, celebrating God's sovereignty?

Psalm 46:10

What Matters Most

6/5/2017 (Monday)

Maintenance, repair, and renovation

2 Corinthians 13:11 includes some of the final thoughts Paul has for the church in Corinth. He reminds them first, remember to keep rejoicing. The implication is that they've already been rejoicing, but also that it's not just a seasonal event. Our lives need to be saturated with the practice of rejoicing, as it consistently reminds us of what great things God has done, and who the source of every good and perfect gift is. In the same breath, Paul reminds them to fix what is broken.

Take a moment and consider what is broken right now. Encouragement, cooperation, and peace all follow close behind. Each of these speak to a collaborative, community that's in close relationship. It can become much simpler to gloss over differences than to cooperate with one another while acknowledging the diversity found in the body of Christ.

Finally, Paul rightly roots all of these things in the Author of love and Peace. This isn't a conditional statement, Paul isn't saying if you do these things then God will show up, Paul is saying that these things that would otherwise seem impossible are possible because the author of love and peace will remain with you.

Reflecting on this verse, where can you rejoice today? What relationship needs to be fixed, or is not what it was or should be? Where is God asking you to live in peace with a brother or sister in Christ?

2 Corinthians 13:11

6/6/2017 (Tuesday)

Holy Expectancy

Micah 7:7 reads, “Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.”

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wrote, “A striking feature of worship in the Bible is that people gathered in what we could only call a ‘holy expectancy.’ They believed they would actually hear the Kol Yahweh, the voice of God.” The worship of the people of God is rightly characterized by an expectation of encounter. Our worship will rightly cause us to look to God, to wait on God, and to truly believe that God will hear us.

Entering into worship that is characterized by “holy expectancy” does not mean that we conjure God through our worship. Instead, we know that God has promised to hear us. We know that God sees us. We know that God loves us deeply, whether in seasons of perceived closeness and in perceived distance. We know that we can enter into worship with holy expectancy, because God has promised to never leave us or forsake us, because he draws near to the brokenhearted, and because he delights in us.

Today, draw near to God with the holy expectancy that God will hear you.

Micah 7:7

6/7/2017 (Wednesday) *Love in action*

In his book *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis writes, “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

This can be a hard word for those of us who hold authenticity as our highest personal value. To never pretend, always speak our mind, and always give the unfiltered truth has become the pendulum response to inauthenticity. If you’ve suffered under the compulsion to “put on a good face”, or “fake it til you make it”, Lewis’ suggestion to “act as if you did” can feel repulsive.

Here’s the reality: We will often not feel love for one another, even when we ought to. We will be infuriated by our families. Our spouse will frustrate us. A boss will antagonize us seemingly on purpose. There will be people who are deeply enmeshed in our lives that are very unlovely towards us. The natural response is to reject those who we feel rejected by. This is the emotional equivalent of an eye for an eye.

In contrast, John 13:35 reads, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” This does not say, “As long as people are kind to you, show love to them.” Instead, this verse says, “This is how you’re going to be different, love people even when they are unlovely, then they’ll know you’ve got Jesus.”

Who are you being called to love today, even if they don’t deserve it?

John 13:35

6/8/2017 (Thursday)

Service-oriented greatness

Servanthood is a reorientation of how we think about greatness. It's a reorientation, because it takes us out of the spotlight. If you've ever been the best man, or the maid of honor in a wedding, you know that you've been entrusted with a set of important tasks. However, the one thing you should definitely do not do, is try to make the day about you. You don't try take the spot of the groom at the altar, because the wedding isn't about you. You don't try to give the best vows, because they aren't yours to give. You don't cut in during the first dance, because it's not about you. Becoming a servant is about serving the true groom, Jesus, and the true bride, the Church.

In Mark 9:35 Jesus has overheard his disciples trying to decide who's the best, and takes a moment to reorient their understanding, "he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

It's worth noting that nowhere in this redefinition does Jesus forbid the desire to be great, only the means by which we attain greatness. Jesus' reorientation means that to be truly great, we make a practice of putting others before ourselves. We give up the best seat, the position of honor, the starring role. We draw others up, instead of forcing our way to the front. We emulate our God who eternally holds the highest position of honor, and still became like us.

Where have you lived into greatness that fights its way to the top?
Where have you lived into a service oriented greatness?

Mark 9:35

6/9/2017 (Friday)

Alleluia from head to foot

Exodus 15:20 and 21 describes the response of Miriam after the Israelites crossed the red sea and were delivered from the armies of Pharaoh. It reads, “Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.’”

Picture Miriam with her back to the waters still churning behind her, throwing her head back to sing to God. Picture the people of God face to face with a miracle, delivered from a multi-generational oppression in Egypt. In the quiet that followed the waters crashing back into place, Miriam gives the only proper response; she worships.

Augustine once wrote, “A Christian should be an Alleluia from head to foot.” In response to the magnificence of creation, to the redemption of our lives, to the hope that we have in Christ, to the future that he has secured, and for the promises he has given, we should rightly join Miriam in worship of God. Where has God delivered you?

What does it mean to be an Alleluia from head to foot where you are today?

Exodus 15:20,21

6/10/2017 (Saturday)

Guard against idols

1 John 5:21 says, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” This is John’s last word to the church, his take-home point, and the summation of his message. You can imagine his voice, rich with years and full of love at this point, as he addresses his little children. “If you remember anything I’m saying, remember this last bit, its important: Guard yourself against idols.”

The Greek here is better rendered “guard” than “keep”, and it gives us an insight into the relationship we have with idolatry. We are constantly under the temptation to worship created things. We find ourselves even more vulnerable when we believe that idolatry only happens in the Old Testament. We worship idols when we replace the creator God with a created “god.”

Many good gifts from God can become idols over time. The career that was an answer to prayer may become the “god” of provision. The spouse prayed for since childhood may become the “god” of love, even the flag of the homeland can become the “god” of protection. All of these good things that we try to make “god” things will fail us, and what we once revered we will revile. Prayerfully considering what good things we have allowed to become “god” things is no small task. We fight to protect our idols, worried that the needs we perceive them as fulfilling will go unmet.

John’s warning to us is as powerful today as it was when written, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

Ask God to show you places where you’ve made good things “god” things.

1 John 5:21

God's Call

6/12/2017 (Monday)

Show up when God calls

Aaron was the forefather of the intercessors that served the people of God from the time they were in Egypt, to the day Jesus' full and complete priesthood was established. What were Aaron's qualifications? He obeyed when God called.

In Exodus 4, we see Moses explaining to God why God's plan won't work. He thinks that God's asking too much of him. He says that God must not realize that Moses just isn't a talker, or that the people are too hard headed to receive the message. Moses says to God, "Here's how we need to change your plan." It's often our first response to react, adjust, or try to tailor the world to our desires. Moses fills Exodus 4 with words that oppose what God has said, where he should rightly have sat and listened.

We don't know if Aaron said anything at all in response to God's call, but we do know that he listened and obeyed. Exodus 4:27 tells us that God called, " so he went." Where have you substituted your plan for God's plan?

Where in your life can you respond to God's invitation?

Exodus 4:27

6/13/2017 (Tuesday)

Let it shine

Matthew 23:27 Reads, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." In a dark room, a single match and a spotlight work towards the same task; bringing light to the darkness.

It can be difficult to feel like our contribution is meaningful when we compare instead of cooperate with others. Whether we've been entrusted with a meteoric fire, or a small steady flame, we are responsible to steward well what God has given us.

The minister Henry Van Dyke wrote, "Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best."

What song is God asking you to sing today? Where can you shine your light, large or small?

Matthew 5:16

6/14/2017 (Wednesday) *Shipbuilding and the Kingdom*

A.J. Cronin once wrote of shipbuilding, “One will weave the canvas; another will fell a tree by the light of his ax. Yet another will forge nails, and there will be others who observe the stars to learn how to navigate. And yet all will be as one. Building a boat isn’t about weaving canvas, forging nails, or reading the sky. It’s about giving a shared taste for the sea, by the light of which you will see nothing contradictory but rather a community of love.”

The kingdom of God shares a good deal in common with this vision of building a ship. We are first bound together by a shared love and in a common purpose through Christ. It’s then God’s pleasure to fill us with a diversity of abilities, and a mosaic of compatible skills, all empowered by Jesus’ perfect love, and set about the Father’s business.

Ephesians 2:10 tells us “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God has personally equipped you with a brilliant tapestry of talents, passions, and proclivities.

God has placed you in this time, and in this place, to join with the people of God, for the work of the gospel. Whether you chart the course, sew the sail, forge the nails, or sweep the deck, we are a community set about a common purpose.

What is your unique contribution to God’s kingdom?

Ephesians 2:10

6/15/2017 (Thursday)

The Word of God is sharp

God uses His people, creation, his Holy Spirit, and uncountable other means to pursue us, but the word of God can be one of the most persistent means of His presence in our lives.

Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

The word of God is a comfort, an instruction, and a testament to God's great love for us, but it is also unapologetic truth. When we dare to expose ourselves to it God's word, when we honestly engage with it as sacred scripture, it highlights hypocrisy, it convicts, and it separates our rationalizations from reality. God uses scripture to invite us into deeper relationship with him.

Martin Luther once said, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me." It is a dangerous and wonderful thing to read the word of God as scripture.

Today reflect on the reality that God's word is living and active. How has it affected you?

Hebrews 4:12,13

6/16/2017 (Friday)

Irrevocable call

Romans 11:29 tells us, "...the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." In context Paul is referring to the Jewish people, and God's love for them, but the implications of this passage include us as well. As a member of the body of Christ, God has lavishly gifted you, and decisively called you. Knit into your being are specific gifts that bless the body of Christ and honor God.

Whether its business savvy, a deep sense of empathy, a green thumb, or a parent's heart, God has given you a particular gift and calling. What we do with these irrevocable gifts and callings remain up to us. God is a God of relentless invitation, and deep patience. We can ignore our gifts, downplay them, disguise them, and try to refuse them, or even run off to Nineveh instead of embracing them. They remain irrevocably and lovingly, etched into our deepest self.

Know that delays in obeying God's call do not mean you missed your calling. Nothing is wasted in God's economy, and any delays in obedience are miraculously redeemed. The same gifts and callings that were written into you before you drew your first breath remain a part of you today.

What gifts has God entrusted you with? Where have you been called to exercise them?

Romans 11:29

6/17/2017 (Saturday)

Familiar Shadows

2 Corinthians 5:20 reads, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

The priesthood of Aaron is usually only painted in contrast to the greater priesthood of Jesus, but it too was a blessing during its utilization. Imagine a young child separated from their parent at the grocery store. As panic mounts, the child might turn a corner to see the familiar shadow of their parent, and finally begin to calm down. But how much more peace, how much more joy, when upon turning the corner, they see the real life parent that cast the shadow in the first place. This is the movement from the priesthood of Aaron, a shadow of the joy to come, to Jesus, that joy fulfilled.

In Aaron's ministry, lost children have been oriented towards the reality to come, and given hope to the greater experience of hope that is found in Jesus. Like Aaron, we have the opportunity to participate in Jesus' work of reconciliation to the world around us. As the family of God, we collectively called to demonstrate God's perfect love to one another and the world around us.

Ask yourself today, where is God calling you to cast a familiar shadow?

2 Corinthians 5:20

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