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# A Holy Nation: Bible Study

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The Fifth Episcopal District of the  
African Methodist Episcopal Church



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# Introduction to A Holy Nation: Bible Study

Greetings to each of you in the holy name of Jesus!

We have developed this Bible Study curriculum to undergird Bishop Clement W. Fugh's vision for the work of the Fifth Episcopal District for this first year of the quadrennial. Most of our local churches have some sort of weekly Bible Study gathering. It is our hope that the lessons provided here will be used by each local church.

For this first quadrennial year, we have been asked to focus on Lent. This is a season of purification and penance. In accordance with this focus, we have been asked to give our attention to Advent, Lent, Be-Attitudes, Decalogue, Forgiveness, Resurrection. Each of these aspects of our year focus on Lent are referenced throughout this study. The central scripture of the call to be a "Holy Nation" issued at the watergate continues to be our primary scriptural focus (Nehemiah 8:1-10; I Peter 2:1-10). However, this Bible Study Guide engages each of the lectionary texts assigned in the Revised Common Lectionary for Lent and Resurrection for *this* year (Year A) and many for Years B and C. Thus, while the studies are, in some ways, dated, they will still be of use throughout every coming Lenten season.

Each contributor was asked to observe the following format for the Bible Studies, consistent with the framework used in the *Commission for World Mission*. It is as follows:

1. **Title**
2. **Date**
3. **Opening Prayer**
4. **Scripture**
5. **Contemporary Context:** A descriptive engagement of the context which will serve as the interpretative lens through which *you* will read the text. The following questions provide a guide:
  - a. How do you connect with the text?
  - b. Where are you coming from?
  - c. What about *your* context connects with the text and why?
6. **Exegesis:** An exegetical engagement of the selected text, locating it in its *original* context. These are as precise as possible with respect to addressing the text/s we assigned because many of the texts are closely connected. The following questions provide a guide:
  - a. What is important or helpful to know about the *original* context of the text (i.e., What was the world like when the text was written? What were people like when the text was written? What other things did people believe when the text was written)?
  - b. What strikes you about the words used in the text? Do these words have other meanings in their original languages or contexts?
7. **Conversation:** Putting the text (as you understand it) in conversation with the contemporary context and exegesis provided. Here, we consider: what does this mean for our lives, and our life as a community?
8. **Questions:** A set of discussion questions relevant to our community consciousness. These should enable study participants to engage *their* contexts, dig deeper into the text, and extrapolate from the text such meanings as may emerge for their specific contexts.
9. **Media:** Engagement with art or other forms of symbolic representation in a manner which could lead to deeper engagement or study.

Using this format not only connects us to a global ecumenical community, but it also strengthens the conversational aspect of our Bible Study times — privileging the experiential knowledge and wisdom of our congregants as a way of engaging and opening the scriptures. You may find that you are led to do further study in order to supplement these lessons; you may wish to add more media; you may find that there are new questions to be asked. However, you utilize this text, may it be a helpful way to connect us to one another as a District, throughout the globe, and within our local congregations.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the vision and leadership of Bishop Clement W. Fugh to whom we are grateful and with whom we look forward to continuing to work and develop materials that will cause *all* of our souls to prosper — along with our bodies, minds, churches, and communities.

## Contributors

We are grateful for each of the contributors who prepared Bible Studies for this collection. Please review the Table of Contents that reflects the scope of this project and the breadth of participation throughout the District. In addition to each of the Bible Study authors, we thank Sis. Cynthia Oten (Campbell Chapel AME Church, Denver, CO) for her editorial work on this project and the Bible Study classes of Campbell Chapel AME Church (Denver, CO), Beth-El AME Church (Fontana, CO), and other churches in the Fifth District that have begun to use these studies and have provided useful feedback for revisions included here and revisions that will be made in the next edition.

Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.

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# A Time to Weep (Penance)

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1 January 2017

## Prayer

*God as we study Your word, open our hearts, minds and mouths to feel, understand and speak about what you reveal to us as we dedicate ourselves to study. Grant to each one of us a heart of repentance and a desire to return to you from the places we have strayed or never met Thee, in Jesus name. Amen.*

## Scripture

Joel 2:1-2; 12-17; Nehemiah 8:1-10

## Context

Our Bishop was sent to us with a vision from God that the 5<sup>th</sup> District should begin calling itself ‘A Holy Nation.’ Each of us, and all of us together, should recommit ourselves to holy living, thinking and speaking. We should identify and repent for personal sins (things that we do or fail to do that separate us from God), and corporate sin. What makes ‘the church’ unholy? Are there things we do or fail to do as an institution which would make it difficult to refer to us as a Holy Nation without being hypocritical? This is our present context as we begin this year-long study with a focus on LENT, penance, turning back, being still and empty enough to hear and be filled by the wisdom and direction of the Holy Spirit. This is where we begin together the process of becoming a Holy Nation.

## Exegesis

In the three short chapters of Joel (whose name means “My God is the Lord”) we are told the story of a God who is fed up and who unleashes destruction on those whom God loves. We are not told the details of their unfaithfulness. God sends an army (of locusts) that destroys everything. The people are left with no food or drink or hope. Like an unfaithful lover the people come running back to God sorry for what they have done because they realize that without God there is nothing. God lovingly instructs them to repent and return their devotion to God with promises of a glorious future together, if they/we will repent and remain faithful.

## Questions

1. In our portion of the text God tells the prophet to sound the alarm and let the people know that the “*day of the Lord is coming, it is near – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains...* Joel 2:1c-2b. When you think of ‘the day of the Lord’ or ‘the judgment day’ what images and feelings come to your mind? What do you think ‘it’ will be like?
2. Read 2:2-11. How does that make you feel?
3. What things do you think we should do to prepare for the ‘day of the Lord’?
4. What is penance? Penance is, according to the Roman Catholic Church, the sacrament of reconciliation that "reestablishes a right relationship between God and a wayward Catholic."<sup>1</sup> It is something the person does. Penance is "always, by its very nature, a liturgical action, and

therefore an ecclesiastical and public action," (Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 1482) and consists of a greeting from the priest, the reading of the Bible, "an exhortation to repentance," confession to a priest, the "acceptance of penance," absolution from the priest, and a "prayer of thanksgiving," (CCC, 1480).

5. Verse 12 says 'Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.' How does it feel to be given a way out when you thought all was lost? Are there areas in our lives, families, churches, communities, country or nation where it seems like everything is destroyed? What would it feel like to hear God say 'Yet even now...' there is a way back to life abundantly?
6. God tells the people to return with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend their hearts not their clothing.
  - a. Are YOU willing to fast, weep and mourn over the ways you have participated in sin?
  - b. Would your church COMMUNITY be willing to come together to identify and repent from its collective sin?
  - c. In the culture of the day, people tore their clothing as an outward sign of an inward lament. The text makes clear that God is not interested in the outward signs, God wants to see the contrite heart. What keeps people from true repentance? Are we truly sorry for our misdoings?
7. Verse 17 instructs the priests and ministers to intercede for the people with weeping. The space between the vestibule and the altar would have covered the entire temple.
  - a. Can you imagine the clergy filling the aisle ways of our gathering place earnestly crying out to the Lord on behalf of the people? Have you cried out to God in intercession for the suffering of others?
8. Read Nehemiah 8:1-10. After hearing and understanding the law, the people begin to weep. The Priests tell them it is not time for weeping yet, today they should just rejoice with food and drink and sharing because the day is holy to the Lord.
  - a. When is the last time you had a really good cry?
  - b. Have you ever cried because you felt convicted by the Holy Spirit of your sin?
  - c. What things do you think make God cry?
  - d. For what things do you think 'the church' should repent?

# What We Have Waited For (Purification/Be-Attitudes)

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Campbell Chapel AME Church (Denver, CO)*

8 January 2017

## Prayer

*Gracious God, waiting is so hard to do. Time and time again, we have sinned against You, ourselves, and one another because we have failed to wait for you. Our spirits have grown faint, hungering and thirsting for you, feasting on vanities because your kingdom and salvation feel so far away. Please, forgive us. Thank you, God, that time and time again you still show up in our lives and remind us that You are with us – You are what we have waited for and You satisfy us with nourishing, delicious, and satisfying food, You cover us with the joy of salvation, and You make Your kin-dom ours. Strengthen us to receive these gifts of purification and resurrection! In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

Isaiah 25.6-9; Matthew 5.3

## Context

Even though the Advent and Christmas seasons have reached their zenith in Epiphany (the “manifestation” of God, marked by the remembrance of the Magi who came to worship baby Jesus, the baptism of Jesus, and the miracle Jesus performed at the wedding in Cana), there still seem to be some loose ends to be tied. For some of us, there are the loosened belts that reveal our holiday gluttonies – belts that may need tightening. For others of us, there are the gifts unpurchased or paid for with credit that need to be finalized. For some of us, there are those family and friends we could not bear to see over the holidays because of broken relationships. For others of us, there are the memories of those we can no longer see in the flesh because death seems to have swallowed too many of our beloved family members and friends. Such conditions can dampen our spirits, causing us to forget that God is not only with us, but gives us gifts of salvation – tastes of God’s kin-dom on earth and foretastes of God’s promise to us of a heavenly kin-dom.

## Exegesis

Likely written after 538 BCE when the people of Israel had been given permission to return to their land from a long period of exile, the third written segment of Isaiah, Isaiah 25 reflects the cautious optimism of people (and their prophets) too long oppressed. The prophet writing in Isaiah 25 lays out a resurrection promise: a feast of food and drink – even though there has been famine, drought, and bodily neglect; an end to death, tears, and disgrace erased – even though *these* have been the order of the day; a God who is real, present, saving, and giving – even though the people have waited to the point beyond their measure of patience. Considering Isaiah alongside the first of the beatitudes – beatitudes being a word that comes from the Latin “*beatitudo*,” which means “happiness” and the term uses to identify the eight blessing reflected in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount recorded in the Gospel According to Matthew – is helpful because Isaiah reveals the irony of the “both/and” lives of believers.

### Conversation

There is both hope and struggle; there is both difficulty and promise; ease and complexity are constant companions. Thus, the *poor in spirit* can be blessed, even happy, and confident in the promise of God's kingdom. Even when put down, beat down, and run down in our spirit – still we experience God's promise of salvation, the hope of the kingdom, and a very peculiar purification that comes when we are tried in the fire.

### Questions

1. What are the hardest parts of waiting for you?
2. Describe times when you have waited for God. What has that felt like? What did you learn through waiting for God?
3. Describe times when God has shown up after you have waited. What has that felt like? What did you learn when God showed up?
4. What are the areas of your life covered in death, tears, and/or disgrace? What would it look like for God to *save* you with respect to these areas of your life?
5. What are some “both/and” aspects of your life – areas in which you are struggling and *yet* have hope?
6. When have you been “poor in spirit”?
7. How do you experience the promises of God in terms of bodily nourishment, soul salvation, and the promise of God's kin-dom?

# Relevant Religion (Be-Attitudes)

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15 January 2017

## **Prayer**

*Lord, in Your mercy, come and teach us today so that we understand what the Spirit is saying to the church right now. Use each one of us to draw all of us closer to You and to one another in Jesus's name. Amen.*

## **Scriptures**

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:4

## **Context**

Remember how we felt when inauguration day was coming and so many of us were concerned for the safety of the poor, the non-white, and women in the new administration. Since the election of Donald Trump there have been over 1000 reported incidents of hate crimes done in his name. In many cases there is ill-will between the people who supported him and those who did not. Studies have shown that the post-election grief related to this election and inauguration has been dramatic. People are in grieving. People are mourning the loss of an ideal, and fearing what is to come. People of faith must offer some sort of reasonable and relevant response. What is God asking us to do? Who is God asking us to be as a faith community? Today's texts offer a glance into God's response(s) to our grief.

## **Exegesis**

In our verse (Matt. 5:4) of Jesus's first sermon in his adult ministry we are told that those who mourn are blessed for we shall be comforted. While some think 'mourning' refers to bereavement (and many can testify that God does comfort us in the loss of our loved ones), the instruction likely has another focus. Blessed are those who mourn the present condition of the world and long for the coming of the new age, for they shall be comforted when Jesus returns and makes all things new.

In Isaiah 58 the people are angry at God because they believe they are doing the right thing by fasting, and they are not getting the desired response from God. Fasting was seen as an aid or enhancement to prayer. The prophet clarifies that fasting that serves self-interest and contributes to the oppression of the weak does not move God to respond favorably. The people wanted deliverance from oppression but they were participating in it! Wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes so that others could see them while ignoring their own participation in suffering did not please God. The fast that God wants involves saving other people from oppression and satisfying their needs.

## **Conversation**

People of faith must provide a relevant response to the suffering around us. We must examine the ways that we participate and enable systems of injustice and seek to rid ourselves of those practices. Prayer

and fasting are powerful tools in the fight against injustice but they must lead us to actions that alleviate suffering and provide comfort for those who mourn. Empty rituals do not please God, they are self-serving. If our hearts are not right with God, then our worship will not be acceptable. God expects us to care and act to help others, not just ourselves and those we love.

### Questions

1. When was the last time you participated in a fast? What did it involve? Were you seeking anything in particular from the Lord? Did you receive the response you hoped for?
2. Are you participating in the 5<sup>th</sup> District fast from negative speaking about any other human being, even if it is true? Why or why not? If yes, discuss how it's going. Do you think this fast is pleasing to the Lord? Why or why not?
3. Do you think 'the church' does enough to alleviate injustice in the world? What about your local church? Why or why not?
4. When we found out that Donald Trump made comments boasting about sexual assault, many church folk spoke out about terrible it was. Do you speak out when people in the church make derogatory statements about women?
5. God places a priority on: loosing the bonds of injustice, sharing our resources, bringing the homeless into our homes, covering the naked, and taking care of our families. If you were to name the top values of the church based on what you have witnessed and experienced, what would you say are our top priorities? Discuss.
6. What promises from God are included in the text when we fast the way God wants us to fast?

# Create in Me (Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D., Pastor,  
Campbell Chapel AME Church (Denver, CO)*

22 January 2017

## Prayer

*God, have mercy on us. Amen.*

## Scripture

Psalm 51:1-17; Matthew 5:5

## Context

Remember the last time you did something you *knew* was wrong and got caught? What was that like? How did you correct yourself or make yourself available for accountability in community and the correction of the Holy Spirit? When we read the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm, hearing the heart of David, and are reminded of the call to meekness with the beatitudes, we cannot help but ask ourselves these questions. When sin – the stuff that separates us from God – becomes our norm and/or the norm of the people around us, sometimes we conveniently, voluntarily forget that we are (still) sinning. When we can find those who will sin with us, we become even more numb to the soul-pricking of the Holy Spirit that reminds us of the difference between right and wrong and the importance of choosing what is right. Yet, we envy, we lie, we cheat, we commit adultery, we steal, we put others before God, we fail to love our neighbors, we fail to love ourselves, we murder, we fail to honor our parents, we refuse to keep Sabbath.

## Exegesis

Though the authorship of Psalm 51 is debatable, this psalm is doubtless a plea and prayer for cleansing and pardon. Specifically, commentators associate this psalm with David on the occasion of the prophet Nathan holding David accountable for having a sexual affair with Bathsheba, who was married to one of David military officers. A fuller account of this story may be found in 2 Samuel 12.1-15. The psalmist, whether David or in David's voice, prays for "mercy" and a manifestation of God's "steadfast love" in the face of his transgressions.

This psalm wrestles with the ways that we sin against God (v. 4) when we sin against one another (v. 3). The psalm highlights the ways that we actively sin (v. 4) and the ways that we are inclined to sin according to our human nature (v. 5). The psalm underscores the ways that we stand in need of cleansing through the sacred materials of the earth (v. 7) and through the divinely creative touch of God (v. 10). In the midst of the wrestling, the psalmist also reveals what God can do in the midst of our sins, transgressions, and impurities: create (v. 10), not cast away (v. 11), maintain holy spirit presence (v. 11), restore joy of salvation (v. 12), sustain a willing spirit in us (v. 12), deliver (v. 14), open our lips for praise (v. 15), not despise our "broken spirit" and "contrite heart" (v. 17).

In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, one of the descriptions Jesus offers for good kin-dom of God citizenship is articulated in the assertion that "the meek . . . will inherit the earth." We do not know how

the meek become so – remembering that the meek are those who “exemplify gentleness and self-control” (c.f. Matthew 11:29), those who are mild in disposition. On one hand, the inheritance of the meek is may seem strange when contemplate the finitude of the earth: we must wait for the point of inheritance to receive a good gift created by God – but a gift that will not last. On the other hand, the inheritance of the meek is arable and inheritable land, land we can work with, the land of the “here and now,” not the “hereafter.”

### Conversation

Some have become meek through life’s experiences, some through cultivated virtue, and some, perhaps, have always had such temperament. However, meekness has come, it is the stuff of which humility is made, the stuff that keeps the Davids within from defiling Bathshebas and dishonoring Uriahs, the stuff that turns our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls toward the commitment and gentleness of repentance when we have done wrong.

### Questions

1. What has God done to maintain relationship with you in the midst of your sins, transgressions, and impurities?
2. What has God created in you . . . and for what purposes?
3. What do you pray God *will* create in you . . . and for what purposes?
4. Identify various places in which you interact with others (i.e., home, church, school, work, gym, where you shop, on the road, other social spaces). How do you reflect meekness in these places? In what ways might you reflect meekness better (be specific)?
5. How do you define the earth? What is the *earth* to you? What makes up the earth in your mind? What does inheriting the earth mean to you in material and spiritual senses? What *would* you do – and/or what *do* you do – with the earth you inherit?

# The Cost of Ministry (Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Francine A. Brookins, J.D., M.Div.,  
Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Fontana, CA)*

29 January 2017

## **Prayer**

*God of the resurrection, help us to acknowledge our weaknesses so that your strength and power can be glorified. Develop our witness through the adversity we face. Teach us to encourage one another instead of tearing each other down. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

## **Context**

Coming into ministry we were repeatedly told that we must be willing to sacrifice. We were reminded that this ministry is not about ‘wearing a robe and being called Reverend’ but about serving the least, lost and left out. This is as true for Clergy as it is for any disciple of Jesus. This ministry is not for wimps and not for people who need to be liked. We can’t do this work if we are worried about all the negative things people say about us. We can’t serve God well if we expect everyone to understand us or respect our work. Often we can determine how much someone values something by how much they are willing to pay for it. How much are we willing to sacrifice (of our time, talent, treasure, ego, life-plans, personal agendas) for the gospel? Our true motives are revealed in the struggle.

## **Exegesis**

In this part of the letter to the church at Corinth Paul is defending his ministry. His commission had been questioned, his motives disparaged, and his conduct impugned. Worse than that people whom he had led to Christ had believed all the charges against him were true. He argues that the trials he’s endured give witness to the genuineness of his ministry.

Adversity and virtue were closely linked in antiquity, so that the nine hardships given in vss. 4-5 function not only to magnify Paul’s great endurance but also to prove that he is virtuous; the list of virtues in vss. 6-7 underscores the point. We should look carefully at what Paul says he endured and what spiritual qualities he says helped to develop his ministry and preaching.

## **Conversation**

In Matthew 5:6 Jesus tells those listening that we’re blessed when our real desire is for righteousness because we will be filled. Our motivation makes the difference in our ministry. When our egos and secular desires drive our work and witness, we are unwilling and unable to endure adversity for the sake of the gospel. As we discuss the text, think about your motivation.

## Questions

1. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ?
2. What does it mean to be reconciled to God?
3. What does Paul mean when he says 'we are putting no obstacle in anyone's way so that no fault may be found with our ministry' in vs. 3?
4. In your ministry as a Christian have you endured afflictions? Hardships? Calamities? Beatings? Imprisonments? Riots? Labors? Sleepless nights? Hunger? How did you/do you think you would handle it?
5. Paul names purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, the power of God, and weapons of righteousness as the spiritual qualities and tools that equipped him for ministry. When have these qualities and tools helped you overcome adversity in ministry?
6. In vss. 8-10 what is Paul's response to the treatment he received?
7. As leaders we set examples in our communities in dealing with conflict, fear, violence, and hostility. That conflict can come from within the community or it can come from conflict with our culture; but as we experience that conflict we often get in touch with the fear, hate, and violence in ourselves. How does our ability (or inability) to deal with adversity as ambassadors of Christ impact others?
8. What things make you want to quit following Jesus? Leave the church? Leave your assigned/appointed tasks in the church? What keeps you there?
9. What attitude most helps you deal with adversity in ministry?

# God Logic (Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D., Pastor,  
Campbell Chapel AME Church (Denver, CO)*

5 February 2017

## Prayer

*God, thank you that your logic is mercy. Forgive us for the times we have sought praise for the good that we have done and have judged others in the process. Strengthen us that we might be able to give as You give and love as You love.*

## Scripture

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Matthew 5:7

## Context

Hair did. Nails did. Everything did. Tithes did. Offerings did. Everything did. Prayer did. Fasting did. Everything did. How often do you sing the songs of all that you are and all that you have done? We live in a culture that feeds on publicity and advertisement. *Everything* is meant to be for the public eye, our Facebook culture would suggest. *Everything* we post and *everything* we share seem to be ways to grab attention or garner praise. When is the last time you did a good thing anonymously? When is the last time you showed mercy to someone else – and did so without the knowledge of that one to whom you showed mercy or anyone else?

Our public culture can be a true danger to us. *Time Magazine* reports: “A study of national trends in depression among adolescents and young adults published in the journal *Pediatrics* on November 14 found that the prevalence of teens who reported” a Major Depressive Episode “in the previous 12 months jumped from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.5% in 2014. That’s a 37 percent increase.” And some say that “they see evidence that technology and online bullying are affecting kids’ mental health as young as fifth grade, particularly girls.” Reports such as these not only remind us of the ways that our cyber-presence can reflect and expose us to bullying, but also that what we are often projecting in social media is but a vapid shadow and misplaced boast of who we are – even when we show smiles and successes.

## Exegesis

Matthew 6 challenges the logic by which many of us function. It demands that we critique our motivations for doing the right thing – and the *right* thing is the *giving* thing, the *merciful* thing. It is helpful to note, when verse 2 addresses almsgiving, that the Hebrew word transliterated as *tzedakah* is translated as both righteousness and almsgiving. Our righteousness is, thus, often expressed in forms of mercy through generosity of spirit and resources. In the teaching of this week’s scripture, Jesus addresses piety, alms, prayer, fasting, and treasure directly.

Each of these are expressions of acknowledgment of God that might easily be twisted and corrupted into opportunities for *us, humans*, to boast and assert a *self*-righteousness that is a far reach from godly righteousness. Yet, to *do* these things – live with a degree of piety, give alms freely, pray, fast, and honor true spiritual treasure – *can* be indicators of righteousness. The logical strain for many of us comes in the recognition that there is no space for bragging about these things in God’s logic. In God’s logic, any

boast – especially for our *own* glory – is an indicator that we may have done the “right” thing for the wrong reasons (and the “right” thing is, therefore, no longer right at all).

### Conversation

It is sometimes hard to see that mercy – showing grace, forgiveness, and patience to our neighbors – is a way of doing right before God. For many, the gift of mercy is not having to be exposed in vulnerability and weakness; the gift of mercy is saving face; the gift of mercy is not having to be ashamed because of what one is or is not, has or does not have. Discretion as part and parcel of mercy, therefore, becomes a true virtue of the kin-dom of God as it is expressed in this Beatitude. We are reminded that the “be-attitude” is mercy (i.e., *be* merciful!).

### Questions

1. What is your internet or phone presence like? What do you use the internet and phone to do?
2. When have you felt others show you mercy?
3. How might you use various technologies (i.e., phones, the internet, the television) to show mercy to others?
4. Where are you being stingy in your life? What are your highest and lowest giving priorities? What values inform the ways that you have prioritized the places to which you do and do not give your resources, time, and talents?
5. What are some of the “right” things you can do – and do anonymously *above* and *beyond* your tithing and offerings to your church?
6. Write the story of someone who has been an anonymous hero – defying what you expected and reflecting a godly logic of mercy – in your life and the prayer of blessing you pray now, anonymously, for that person’s life.

# Can You See God? Blessings From a Pure Heart (Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Dr. Charles Dorsey, Associate, COR AME Church, Irvine CA (Pastor Mark Whitlock)*

12 February 2017

## **Prayer**

*God, we long to see you. We long to be in your presence. We also long for you to deal with our calloused and impure hearts. Give us the heart of God. Break our hearts when they are impure. Challenge us to want to see you. Challenge us to deal with our hearts. Bring us closer to you. AMEN*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 5:8

## **Context**

Can you imagine how seeing God can change a person's life? What does the world look like if it is filled with believers that long to see God? Disciples and followers must be more committed to seeing God than being blessed. Disciples must also be concerned with the state of their heart. For seeing God is directly correlated with the purity of the heart. Too many people are trying to see God without purifying their heart. Therefore, the focus must start at the vessel that provides life to the rest of the body; the heart.

## **Exegesis**

The 6th Beatitude in a series of (9) nine. This is the first time that the Beatitudes mention God. This is the only beatitude to mention purity. There is ambiguity in the meaning seeing God. There is no reference to when or where "they" will see God. Consequently, this leaves room for exegetical speculation. Yet, it does imply a type of encounter with God as a consequence of a pure heart. The text suggests that the heart is tied to revelation and blessedness. Revelation of God seems to be contingent on the state of a person's heart.

## **Conversation**

There is room for conversation about the meaning of seeing God in the New Testament versus seeing God in the Old Testament. There is room for conversation about how to purify the heart. This conversation must be accompanied by the process of assessing a person's heart, how to identify an impure heart, and role that a person's heart plays in their ability to live a life God can be pleased with. More important are the possibilities surrounding where the pure in heart can see God. For example, will a pure heart help believers to see God in politics? In impoverished communities? In corrupt leadership structures?

## Questions

1. What is an impure heart?
2. How will a pure heart help you to see God in difficult situations?
3. How does an impure heart impact the way you see things?
4. What are some things you can do to make sure your heart is pure?
5. Where in your life don't you have a pure heart or the heart of Christ? How does this Beatitude move you to respond?

# Peace As A Pathway To Being Blessed (Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Dr. Charles Dorsey, Associate, COR AME Church, Irvine CA (Pastor Mark Whitlock)*

19 February 2017

## **Prayer**

*God, help us strive to deliver peace in everything we do. Help us to remember people will know God's children because they seek peace. May we be bridges to peace while seeking your blessedness evermore. AMEN.*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 5:9

## **Context**

In a time of chaos, confusion, and controversy it is comforting to know what pleases the heart of God. For what situation is not made better by peace. It is important to add to the definition of what it means to be blessed. It is also important to see the importance of serving as a vessel to deliver peace. One can only hope for a clear path to divine blessedness. Jesus seems to clearly communicate that one who is after blessedness is also after peace. It is these that others will designate children of God

## **Exegesis**

The 7<sup>th</sup> beatitude is a conversation about peace and those who will be “called” or labeled children of God. This is one in a series of beatitudes that initiates the Sermon on the Mount. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day God rested. Seven is also known as the number of perfection or completion. Could it be that Jesus was strategically communicating beatitudes? Could it be possible that the text is communicating a message about completion or perfection? Furthermore, peacemaker serves to deliberately communicate responsibility. Followers of Christ must work, make, or act to ensure/deliver/create peace. Hence the word, “peacemaker.” This word is used 2 times in the bible, the other being James 3:18. In the book of James the word peacemakers is followed by a promise to reap righteousness.

Exegetically, the end for the peacemaker is positive. Peace must be manifested in the being of a person. The word “they” suggests strength in a group of peacemakers working together. Furthermore, the text does not say God will call them children of God. It suggests that others will give them that label because of how they live. Others will see God in the actions of the peacemaker. Jesus, however, declares these peacemakers blessed.

## **Conversation**

The scripture does not provide an exact pathway or “how-to” to peace making. It also does not directly describe what peace looks like in any particular situation. This leads us to converse about the various

pathways to obtain peace and the creative ways to arrive at peace. This further leads to a conversation about the value of peace to the peacemaker and to the community in which that peacemaker exists. The work of the peacemaker will not go unnoticed by Jesus or the people. There is room for conversation about how Jesus and people would categorize those who are not peacemakers.

### **Questions**

1. What roles do peacemakers play in your home, your church, your community?
2. Name 2-3 peacemakers and why they qualify for that label
3. Why does Jesus call peacemakers blessed?
4. How important is it that followers of Christ and peacemakers are called children of God?
5. What happens when peacemakers are not present?

# Rejoicing For Justice (Penance/Be-Attitudes)

*Rev. Francine Brookins, J.D., M.Div. & Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D.*

26 February 2017

## Prayer

*Lord, help us not to harass or persecute others because they are righteous. Fill us with joy and gladness when others harass and persecute us for righteousness' sake. Help us to receive this lesson today as we study together. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

Matthew 5:10-12

## Context

Recently the President of the United States put a 'Muslim ban' in place. Imagine if things were reversed and the President of the United States put a "Christian ban" in place. Thankfully the court put a stop to this religious discrimination – for now. Everyday, Muslim women wearing the 'hijab' headdress are being harassed and assaulted by others. What if people who wore a cross around their necks were daily harassed and assaulted?

During the second week of February 2017 in North Carolina, a husband left his house to start a car, only to be handcuffed by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent. In Los Angeles, a man was arrested at the Walmart where he worked. In Garden City, Kansas, whole apartments of people were fingerprinted and taken into custody. These are just three of the more than 680 people that ICE agents around the country have arrested in this one week of February 2017 — from the Midwest to the Southeast, California to New York. There is now an organization called [#heretostay](#) that instantaneously got over 24,000 volunteers to sign up to physically show up when an immigrant is being targeted and put their body on the line to protect them.

## Exegesis

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century German Christian theologian who was martyred for his resistance to Nazi Germany, and whose scholarship opened our imaginations to "costly grace," maintains that verse ten of the Sermon of the Mount does

not speak about the righteousness of god, that is, about persecution for the sake of Jesus Christ; rather it calls those blessed who are persecuted for a just cause – and we may now add, for a cause that is true, good, humane. With this beatitude Jesus thoroughly rejects the false timidity of those Christians who evade any kind of suffering for a just, good, and true cause because they supposedly could have a clear conscience only if they were to suffer for the explicit confession of faith in Christ. Jesus cares for those who suffer for a just cause even if it is not exactly for the

confession of his name; he brings them under his protection, takes responsibility for them, and address them with his claim.<sup>1</sup>

Bonhoeffer reminds us as modern day Christians not to inadvertently forsake the *cause* of Christ in or for the *name* of Christ. In this final portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells those listening to REJOICE and be glad when other people revile, harass, or persecute us because of our faith – especially the just cause of our faith.

The joy to which the disciples are called is not in spite of persecution but because of it. Rejoicing because of persecution is not the expression of a martyr complex, but the joyful acceptance of the badge of belonging to the eschatological community of faith, the people of God who are out of step with the value system of this age.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the first cause for a “be-attitude” of rejoicing is that we who are persecuted are in the good company of – and in community with – others who have suffered and struggled for justice. We are part of a family, one blood in the stream that flows for justice. We also rejoice because this struggle has its own reward in both the ancestors of the past to whom we are connected and the promise of our future family in the reign (i.e., kin-dom of God or “heaven”) that is to come.

### Conversation

God asks us to do hard and strange things sometimes: going to jail, nursing someone with Alzheimer's or AIDS, accompanying people to court, harboring a refugee, opening our doors to the homeless, changing diapers, cooking meals, washing floors, speaking truth to power! There are blessings that are contained in these tasks including the transformation of suffering into joy.

### Questions

1. Describe a time when have you been harassed, insulted, or persecuted for doing (or trying to do) the right thing. What were your responses to this experience?
2. Describe a time when have you harassed, insulted, or persecuted someone else for no good reason or because that person was doing the right thing. What aspects of your character contributed to this behavior? Jealousy? Boredom? Anger? Self-hatred?
3. How might you transform the aspects of your character that cause you to mistreat others?
4. Describe a time when you have stood up for someone when they were being persecuted for righteousness sake? Was the person or people you stood up for similar to you in gender, color, class?
5. What causes you to rejoice? What does your rejoicing look like? How might you encourage a spirit of rejoicing within yourself when you are doing right but what you are doing is not appreciated?
6. Who are the prophets of the past, present, and future who stood, stand, and will stand for what is just? How might you be part of their good company through what you believe, say, and do?
7. Turn up for Lent by participating in the following NEW actions that filmmaker Michael Moore has suggested to help others:
  - a. **THE DAILY CALL:** You must call Congress every day. Yes - YOU! 202-225-3121. It will take just TWO MINUTES! It is impossible to overstate just how much power you have by making this simple, quick **DAILY CALL**. I know from firsthand experience the impact it has. Here's some great news: Someone has created an app to make this very easy: Go to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 346-347.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Harrelson, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha*, Revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

App Store and get “5 Calls.” The app will dial the phone for you and give you talking points for when you speak to your reps!

- b. **THE MONTHLY VISIT:** To add even more pressure, SHOW UP! Your member of Congress has a local office in your town or somewhere nearby. So do both of your U.S. Senators (often in the nearest federal building). Go there and ask to speak to their aide about the issues we’re facing (again, I will continually post them on my social media sites). Also, don’t forget to visit the local office (or the state capitol office) of your State Representative/Assemblyperson, and your State Senator.
- c. **YOUR OWN PERSONAL RAPID RESPONSE TEAM:** You and 5 to 20 friends and family members must become your personal RAPID RESPONSE TEAM. Sign everybody up so that when we need to leap into action (like we did at the airports the hour after Trump signed his Muslim Ban), you can email and text each other and make an instant plan.
- d. **JOIN! JOIN! JOIN!:** We all know it’s time for all of us to be part of a greater whole, so let’s actually physically sign up online and JOIN some of our great national groups. Planned Parenthood, ACLU, Black Lives Matter, NAACP, Democratic Socialists of America, and ERA Action.
- e. **PARTICIPATE IN A MARCH OR PROTEST:** Download the resistance calendar to stay up to date with events happening near you. <https://www.resistancecalendar.org/>
- f. **TAKE BACK THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.** Start attending your county Democratic meetings. If possible, organize your friends and others and take over your local Dem organization.
- g. **HELP FORM BLUE REGIONS OF RESISTANCE:** Important historical note: Before Roe v. Wade made abortion legal, California and New York passed their own state laws to make it legal. This greatly helped pave the way for CHOICE being the new normal — and the enactment of Row v. Wade.
- h. **YOU MUST RUN FOR OFFICE.** If you can’t run, find someone else to run who you can support. Here is one office every one of us can and SHOULD run for next year: **PRECINCT DELEGATE.** Every precinct, every neighborhood can elect x-number of Dems to the county Democratic Convention.
- i. **YOU MUST BECOME THE MEDIA.** Use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other social media sites to spread news and information.
- j. **JOIN THE ARMY OF COMEDY:** Trump’s Achilles heel is his massively thin skin. He can’t take mockery. So we all need to **MOCK HIM UP!**

# I Dare You....To Take A Faith Walk (Lent)

*Mrs. Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker, Director,  
AME Church Social Action Commission,  
Ward AME Church (Los Angeles, CA)*

5 March 2017

## **Prayer**

*God, our expectations of what is right, fair, just, and righteous is being tested right now. Yes, we know that You are in charge. We confidently proclaim that, especially to unbelievers. Yet, our actions and “safe” agendas belie our proclamations and instructions to be fearless in your name. In so many ways the universe is bigger than our reach and our understanding. When we think about you God, we realize how big you are – the creator of the Universe and beyond. It has been said, "Don't tell your God how big your problem is, tell your problem how big your God is." So in these moments, I give thanks that you continue to show you love for little 'ole me; that you have not given up, even when I “wimp out”. God, I hear you telling me to step out on faith. So, when tested, i will dare to give up my small view of You! God, You can count on me to pass the test! AMEN*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

## **Exegesis**

In the text Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The devil is trying to get him to abandon his calling. Jesus is able to resist the various temptations because he knows who he is and he recognizes the enemy. He is able to discern what is right and acceptable even after the enemy uses scripture to try to confuse him.

## **Context**

As the director of the commission of social action for the AME church I am engaged in justice work all the time. When I was growing up I didn't know what God was preparing me for. As the youngest in a family of 5 children, the odds always seemed to be against me – smaller, less clout, and often overlooked for those reasons. My salvation seemed to be tied to intellectual prowess, so I studied to become a winner. Over the years, the Bible and other books opened my eyes and challenged me to evolve in ways that were predicted in books like 1984, Brave New World, The Choice, and Black Empowerment. These authors, whose publications spanned a 40 year period, attempted to predict the future in ways that would prepare future generations for change of societal values, institutions, and lifestyles. As a student in high school and college, I read and dismissed some of the projections, especially those about the proliferation of technology, while embracing others that fit the future I wanted to experience. As years passed many of those predictions have become reality. Humanity is often reduced to robotical movements. It's almost as if human beings are not needed if the goal can be accomplished with a machine, an app, or a tool. In

fact, failure to embrace these new realities is defined by many as failure to be progressive. Does that justify opting out of the call to serve?

In my life's walk, God sent me into a community of activism – a maternal grandfather who dared to operate the only Black business in a segregated southern downtown; a father who was vocal and active against segregation daring to lead a bus boycott movement when it was life threatening; a church base whose founding symbolized rejection of racial discrimination; and a personal calling to protect all of those legacies. “No matter what” seems to plague me as I read Matthew 4:1– 11.

### **Questions**

1. We find ourselves being challenged to take risks, yet can rationalize that this scripture validates seemingly more passive approach (fasting and praying). How do we know WHAT the calling is in 2017?
2. How do we keep the flames of justice burning brightly? Is being invited to sit at the table more important than knocking at the door with a message on behalf of the voiceless and disenfranchised?
3. Can we protect the value of the human being while embracing new technology that helps to preserve our story, values, and faith walk?
4. God, in the personage of Jesus provided a model for standing, even if required to stand alone. In the book of James believers are admonished to meet trials with faith and wisdom, resulting in joy. In the context of African Methodism, we profess to be visible when justice is threatened, and in ways that send a clear message that this focus “is not an addendum to an already crowned agenda, but the very heart of the life and work of our church.”
5. So, today, do you take the dare.... to take the faith walk laid out just for you?

# Assured For The Journey: Abram And Sarai Did It – Will We? (Lent)

*Mrs. Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker, Director,  
AME Church Social Action Commission,  
Ward AME Church (Los Angeles, CA)*

12 March 2017

## Prayer:

*God, I thank You for Your direction in my life, where You have placed me, and who You have put in my path. Today, I await Your word – what would you do if you were walking the earth today? Now, give me a willingness to tarry to here. Bring forth my mustard seed faith to guide my actions. And stir up my spiritual gifts in ways that I've never experienced such an awakening. Amen.*

## Scripture

Genesis 12:1-4a

## Context

The message in this scripture almost sounds like prosperity gospel. It's all laid out. The road is paved for success. All enemies and obstacles will be handled. I've got an advance team - more powerful than the Secret Service or amour bearer – and blessings will abound. It does not matter that I am advanced in age – God's got this!

What a blessed assurance! We sing, “Blessed Assurance” which I call the AME Anthem. In fact the “back” story of that song informs this text. Its composer, a woman blinded as an infant had refused to let any negative circumstance define her life. While others pitied her, she used her talents to compose poems, then becoming famous while writing secular songs and finding an ally in Grove Cleveland who would later become President of the United States of America. Seeking more fulfillment, Fannie Crosby began to write religious tunes including “Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior”, “Near the Cross” and “Rescue the Perishing.” In this context, I lift up “Blessed Assurance” and share its words: “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! / O, what a foretaste of glory divine! / Heir of salvation, purchased of God / Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. *Refrain:* This is my story, this is my song / Praising my Savior all the day long / This is my story, this is my song / Praising my Savior all the day long.

## Exegesis

In Genesis 12 – 1 – 4a, the elder receives assurance that God has mapped out the plan; even sharing some details. Trusting is the starting point. Uprooting is required. Facing adversity is described with a rescue plan already prescribed. All that is left to ponder is saying “yes”!

### Conversation

“Are ye able,” said the Master, “to be crucified with me?” “Yeah,” the steady dreamer answered, “to the death I follow thee.” This inspiring hymn was a CHALLENGE. United Methodist Bishop Hardt confirms this: “Mere words cannot begin to recapture the power and abiding love which the familiar words ‘Are Ye Able’ brought to generations of Methodist young people. Perhaps young persons in generations yet to come may again find the eternal spirit of Christ speaking to them through these inspiring words.” So, this day, will you answer:

Yes: to loving the unlovable, homeless, criminals, skinheads, bigots?

Yes: to fight those whose selfish motives attempt to overtake the welfare of others?

Yes: to corrupt systems and business as unusual, even in the Church of Jesus Christ?

Yes: “walking the talk” no matter what?

### Questions

1. Today, I am a witness that the Genesis 12 promise is still available to us. Let’s test the limits, and ponder:
2. Is God still there for my generation, so many years after we have been unfaithful?
3. Is our/my journey a physical trek or a mental adjustment or both?
4. What do I do if no one else joins me on this journey?

# God Our Help In Ages Past, Our Hope For Years To Come (Lent)

*Mrs. Earnestine Henning, Episcopal  
Supervisor (Retired)*

19 March 2017

## Prayer

*God our creator, maker of heaven and earth. We thank you for enclosing us behind and before. We thank you for keeping your hand upon us, for being a God who is near and not far off. Lord we know that you are on the side of the righteous and we pray that our will is your will and that we are always in your grace and your mercy. This is our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Scripture

Psalm 121

## Context

As we are called to respond, to act, in face of the multiplicity of social, political and economic disparities besetting our communities, and, as we seek resources and solutions, as Believers, we are assured of one unfaltering appeal. *I will lift up my eyes unto the hill from whence cometh my help. My help comes from the Lord.* Psalm 121:1-2.

We can imagine that David, writing this text, looked back from the time of his youth when he slew Goliath, to the current state of affairs. Not unlike our own times of political and societal unrest, racism and injustice, the idolatrous Philistines remained the bane of Israel's existence. In spite of the progress made, the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, we are still plagued by the same inequities. In the same way, Goliath just kept rearing its ugly head.

As Black people and as the AME Church, we can look to the legacy of our founder, Richard Allen, who himself looked to God as he battled enslavement, and the powers of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodism, to obtain religious, social and economic liberation. Our help and our hope in the years to come will be in following his visionary and principled example of self- help and adhering to the Biblical charge, as he did, to *Be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage.* Galatians 5:1.

## Exegesis

The operative word in this text in the first verse, is *help*, meaning to aid, to assist in bringing about – not doing *for* you. David, Richard Allen, Harriet Tubman, etc. were not passive recipients of God's help. We must be actively engaged participants with God in bringing about our liberation and our salvation, wherein, also lies “our hope for years to come.” The future will be what we make of it in the present. As

engaged participants, we are to be mindful that though God is all powerful and beyond us, he also dwells within us; for we are created in his image imbued with a spark of divinity. To receive God's help our actions, our plan, must be within God's will. God will not help us to carry out Satan's will.

The subsequent verses of the scripture further attests to the constancy and omnipresence of God as an integral force in all aspects of our lives. Summarily (in paraphrase) we are assured that the Lord is our keeper, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, remains at our right hand and will not allow even our foot to be moved. We are protected, even from the elements of Creation. The sun will not strike us by day or the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve us from all evil. "He shall preserve your soul" In the words of a song from our tradition, "Where can I go, where can I go? / Needing a refuge for my soul, / Where can I go but to the Lord."

### **Conversation**

What a wondrous and glorious circumstance. What a privileged place for each of us, that the maker of heaven and earth, creator of the known and unknown universe would be so devoted and so attentive to each of us. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" Psalm 8:4. Finally, in the last verse, we have the assurance that "the Lord shall preserve our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even forever more" Psalm 121:8.

### **Questions**

1. How does the assurance of God's help inform our decisions for action?
2. Richard Allen was an advocate and practitioner of self-help and economic empowerment.
3. In what ways can the Church benefit from continuing that legacy?

### **Media**

With this study, sing the following song: "God our help in ages past our hope for years to come."

# A Pardoned People (Lent)

*Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, Pastor, Second AME Church (Los Angeles, CA), Fifth Episcopal District Women In Ministry, President*

26 March 2017

## Prayer

*Dear Lord, thank you for loving us and delivering us from the judgment of this world. You are a just God who looks beyond our inadequacies and accepts us as we are. Help us to develop patience with one another and understand we are all spiritual works in progress.*

*In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

Romans 4:1-5:13-17

## Context

The book of Romans presents a letter which informs the believer of the rules, responsibilities and rights of those who accept the invitation to “take up the cross and follow Jesus.” Every believer in Jesus Christ is offered forgiveness and deliverance from sins. Once an individual confesses her or his sin, God is just to forgive and cleanse from all unrighteousness. We are an imperfect people in need of pardon and forgiveness. As we engage in Holy Communion, we pray the General Confession to acknowledge that we are in need of God’s saving grace.

## Exegesis

This letter from the Apostle Paul addresses the Christian Church at Rome. The church was initiated by Jews who viewed salvation as an exclusive right only for the Jews. The Apostle addresses that justification is applicable for “whosoever confesses Jesus Christ,” whether Jew or Gentile. Everyone who confesses Jesus inherits the privileges of God’s plan of salvation. Paul writes to prepare the Roman Christians for his future visit to the region. Romans has been labeled as the “constitution” which contains doctrine and key concepts associated with believers of Jesus Christ.

## Conversation

One specific doctrine that is expressed is “justification by faith,” which was highlighted in the writings of 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Martin Luther, during the Reformation. Justification involves:

- 1) **Remission of Punishment:** A justified believer is declared to be free of the legalistic rituals since they have been satisfied by Christ. Therefore, that individual is no longer exposed to the penalties but her/his sins are pardoned (Romans 4:5).
- 2) **Restoration to Favor:** God’s plan of salvation offers acquittal, approval, pardon and promotion through a relationship with Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:6).

- 3) **Receiving the Righteousness of God:** the believer inherits the character of Christ's righteousness (Romans 3:22-26).
- 4) **Redemption by Grace:** The work of Christ is accepted through faith and the believer receives pardon from all sins (Romans 3:24, 28).

### **Questions**

1. Why is faith a significant part of the justification process?
2. Imagine a courtroom scene with God as judge and the world or even specifically the church on trial. Summarize the charges and the verdict.
3. During this Lenten Season, what are some personal goals to implement in our lives as God extends pardon to us?
4. What activities/associations will assist in accomplishing an individual's personal goals to live a Christ-like life?

### **Sources**

Douglas and Tenney. "Justification" in *Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1998.  
Layman, Douglas. "The Book of Romans" in *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

# A Spiritual Makeover (Lent)

*Rev. Carolyn Baskin-Bell, Pastor, Second AME Church (Los Angeles, CA), Fifth Episcopal District Women In Ministry, President*

2 April 2017

## Prayer

*Let us pray: Lord, we praise you for the gift of salvation. We are grateful to access eternal life by believing in the redeeming act of Jesus Christ. We open our hearts and invite the power of the Holy Spirit to cleanse us and remove the stony heart which interrupts a new work in us. Melt us, mold us and make us brand new on the inside. Thank you for a new attitude which reflects new worship, new work and a new witness. In Jesus's name. AMEN.*

## Scripture

John 3:1-17

## Context

Many television shows present the opportunity for contestants and participants to experience a fashion makeover involving a change in their physical appearance. John's narrative engaging Nicodemus with Jesus gives reference to a spiritual makeover. This spiritual makeover is possible by an individual's openness to the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ which is the Holy Spirit. In 2017, Jesus still desires access to enter our hearts. The believer's response is to exist as an available and willing vessel of the true and living God.

## Exegesis

The text places Nicodemus, a Pharisee, (Jewish teacher of the Law) approaching Jesus at night to get clarification in regard to the meaning of "being born again." Nicodemus asks the question, "How can one enter his mother's womb a second time?" Jesus gives the key, "One must be born of water and the spirit. Jesus explains that there is no restriction on salvation, "Whosoever believes will have eternal life." Nicodemus' inquisitive and radical move opened a platform for Jesus to offer a new life of walking in the light to everyone who believes.

## Conversation

This idea of "being born again" is closely related to "regeneration," which, in spiritual terms, is a change in the heart of individuals who once walked in their sinful nature (darkness), but after yielding to the Holy Spirit, now walk in the light of Jesus Christ. This act involves:

- 1) **Renewed Mindset:** Adopting Christ-like thoughts (John 3:5-7).
- 2) **Reconstruction:** Changing one's heart by allowing God's divine direction to prevail.
- 3) **Refreshment:** As a result of Holy Spirit controlled life, one experiences love, peace, joy of Christ

- 4) **Rebirth:** Voluntarily submitting to a new lifestyle. Like the physical makeover, one chooses to change by acquiring the new hair style or fashion trend.

### Questions

1. What inspires an individual to acquire new things?
2. How are the symbols of light, water and fire related to “Spiritual Makeover” (rebirth)? What do they mean?
3. How does this study speak to your personal walk with Christ?

### Sources

“Notes on John 3” in *Life Application Study Bible*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998.  
Shepherd, Massey. “Book of John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.

# Mindfulness (Penance)

*Mrs. Alexia B. Fugh, Episcopal Supervisor,  
Fifth Episcopal District*

9 April 2017

## Prayer

*Heavenly Father: as we prepare our hearts and minds for the Risen Savior, help us to become more mindful of his presence in our everyday lives. Teach us to wake up everyday with joy in knowing that we serve a Risen Savior, and live with the expectation and excitement of knowing that he is present in the "here and now" for us. This we ask in His name. Amen.*

## Scripture

Matthew 21:1-11

## Context

In the past few years we have heard much about mindfulness. What is mindfulness? It is a state of active, open attention on the present. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience. A few months ago I was sitting alone in our family room and I was overcome with a powerful feeling of thankfulness! It was like I suddenly recognized all the blessings that God had provided in my life! I wondered, "Why am I feeling this way at this moment?" As I asked myself this question, I immediately received an answer! You see, I had been stressed out about something else that was going on in my life, just prior to this "mindful" moment. I was tired and exhausted with dealing with my problems and I just wanted to not think anymore!!! At that moment of thankfulness, I felt God's presence! Sometimes we can get so bogged down with all the things going on in our lives that we forget and tune God out. It is at those times that we miss out on feeling the profound peace, joy and love that only God can provide.

## Conversation

The referenced scripture, Matthew 21:1-11, talks about the preparation of the royal welcome as Jesus makes his entrance into Jerusalem. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyday we woke up with the excitement of welcoming Jesus into our lives? Can we live 'in the moment' and reestablish a 'right' relationship with God through his son, Jesus Christ? The good news is we *can* because we have the gift of his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24). Let us be mindful in preparing our hearts and minds everyday to joyously welcome the risen Savior into our lives!

## Questions

1. How do you stay mindful of Christ in your everyday life?
2. Do you take time to reflect on God's blessings to you?
3. Do you acknowledge that you need to reestablish a right relationship with God?
4. Can being mindful of Christ's presence in our lives enlighten us to become a holy people?

# All Things Become New Day (Resurrection)

*Bishop Cornal Garnett Henning (Retired)*

16 April 2017

## Prayer

*Today we celebrate your resurrection! Teach us to embrace what it means for each of us to live your victorious life daily. Keep alive in us the strength of life you offer even when we are completely surrounded by the sounds and smell of death. Help us to always remember the sweet smell of your presence in us and make us know that in you we have life eternally. Amen!*

## Scripture

John 20: 1-18

## Context

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, I begin this bible study with profound humility. I do so greatly challenged by the need and desire to grasp the significance of The Resurrection and its implication for you and me – and all who seek its deepest meaning for life and faith in the *real time* and *true context* of today's living. Traditionally, Resurrection Sunday is the Day we remember and rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, an experience we define as his being put to death for our trespasses and his being raised for our justification. We rejoice because Jesus died for us and now our lives find Eternal Hope in Him. Because of the reality of Jesus's resurrection, we must never be locked up and imprisoned in earthly graves again. We have the assurance that someday all the earthly graves of those who live and hope in Him will be opened and those who live and die in Christ will live new lives in His Eternal Presence.

## Exegesis

John 20:1-18 is clear in its teachings about the resurrection. Jesus claims power over death. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus announces "I am the resurrection and the life." He not only raises the dead, but he acknowledges his resurrection power. Jesus is not talking about the resurrection in the end of time, but he is the resurrection today and in this life. While it is tempting to spend an enormous amount of time convincing people with physical and material evidence that Jesus raised Jarius daughter, and the young man of Nain from the dead. However, the Great Truth Jesus seeks to convey to Mary and Martha is Jesus's testimony about himself. "I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus not only raises the dead, but announces, he is the resurrection and the life. This experience is inseparable from Jesus's purpose and mission for coming to earth, not merely coming to earth. But coming to us. Jesus is not talking about resurrection in the end of time. He is the resurrection today. He is life now. Jesus wants all who believe in him to understand that his very presence is Life.

We know all too well the expression, "He may not come when you call him, but he is always on time." Martha's initial address to Jesus were words of disappointment. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. Jesus's response to Martha is, "This is not the end, your brother Lazarus will live

again.” The reality which Jesus spoke to Martha in the tragic circumstance of the moment caused her to miss the fact that time and eternity are both in God’s hand. Martha is looking far into the future and there at the end of time will be a general resurrection and then all people will rise: she knows that and believes it, but that won’t bring her brother back today. Then Jesus says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall not die eternally." With these words, Jesus put the resurrection “as close as his presence and their faith.” Jesus brings the resurrection home. He brings it to their house.

### **Conversation**

As we celebrate Resurrection Day, Jesus challenges us to see our future hope through Faith in Him. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life” by faith, in the future and in the here and now. Don’t force your HOPE into an unreachable future. Jesus says I give life today. Jesus raises people to a new life in the Spirit now, today. Jesus is the light and life of the world now. Don’t limit the power of the One who is The Resurrection and the Life.

John the Baptist once said to the Pharisees: "Do not say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our Father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

And that is exactly what the Lord has done for generations. He raises the dead and makes them alive in the spirit; they are the children of God. With Jesus nothing is impossible! He is the resurrection and the life!

### **Questions**

1. How do you stay encouraged in the face of difficulty?
2. What things encourage your faith when you are down?

# The Good News is for Everyone (Resurrection)

*Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D., Associate,  
Brookins AME Church (Oakland, CA)*

23 April 2017

## **Prayer**

*Jesus, we thank you for the message of salvation. Help us to remove any barriers that may be keeping us from sharing your love with others impartially. Amen*

## **Scripture**

Acts 10:34-43

## **Context**

This scripture speaks directly to our present day needs. We find that even Peter one of Jesus's leading disciples was called to let go of his prejudice against those of other races and faiths. God is calling us to do the same as we attempt to live out our faith in the midst of one of our country's most divisive periods. With so many voices calling for us to choose a side, how we as modern disciples understand Jesus's mission and command to share the good news with the world is critical. If we must choose a side, that decision should be Spirit led and lived out in a manner which still respects the dignity and worth of all persons as children of God.

## **Exegesis**

As a Jew, Peter believed that all non-Jewish persons were considered gentiles and unworthy of his time or respect. The Jews were the chosen people and all others were bound for judgment. There is no way Peter would have been caught dead in the home of Cornelius, a gentile and Roman Centurion whose armies were occupying Israelite lands unless he was totally convinced that Spirit was directing him to do so.

Peter's statement that, "*God shows no partiality*" (verse 34) is literally translated as, "*one who lifts faces*" in Greek, or "*to lift the face*" in Hebrew. This refers to the ancient practice of lowering one's head and not meeting the eyes of someone who was believed to be of higher class, or station. The person of higher rank would literally approach and lift the person's head or face as a sign of acknowledgment. Without Peter and the other apostles sharing Jesus message with others, the church could not have grown. But in order for growth to happen Peter and the others had to let go of their own prejudice and bigotry against those who were considered gentiles. In verses 36-43 Peter presents a summary of the Gospel message by telling Cornelius that Jesus went about "*doing good and healing all who were oppressed of the devil*" (verse 38). Peter then goes on to follow up with his own testimony about what he saw and experienced while he was traveling with Jesus.

### **Conversation**

Our current world seems to become more divided every day. These divisions are often based upon our own prejudices and desire to only share with, or take care of those who act or think just as we do. This attitude hinders the gospel from reaching those who need it most. Our faith should be a source of unity and connection between us and others of differing faiths, or political views...not another source of division. God is calling us to share our faith with others without judgment or bias. Our lesson text reminds us that God loves all equally and that Jesus's sacrifice was for all humankind, not just those who act, think, or believe as we do. We can't let social pressures or our own fear and bias keep us from reaching out to others who may need to hear our testimony.

### **Questions**

1. In what ways have you allowed your own prejudice against other groups or kinds of people keep you from sharing your faith in Christ?
2. How would you summarize Jesus's message in 2 minutes or less if someone asked you, "What is Jesus all about?"
3. Being impartial is not always easy to do. In what areas of your life could you work harder to let go of your bias and see the light of God within others?

# New & Enough (Resurrection)

*Rev. Damon Powell, Ph.D., Associate,  
Brookins AME Church (Oakland, CA)*

30 April 2017

## **Prayer**

*We thank you Jesus for your sacrifice and the hope we find in the resurrection. We eagerly look forward to the renewal of all things when we will be with you forever. Help us to maintain our hope while striving to make the world a better place here and now.*

## **Scripture**

Isaiah 65:17-25

## **Context**

We celebrate Easter because Jesus was resurrected, and as a reminder of our own hope in resurrection. Our faith in Jesus assures us that we too will inherit eternal life if we keep our trust in him and his sacrifice for us. Yet, it has been over 2,000 years and he has not yet returned. Many would say that we are crazy and are holding on to myths that have no basis in a science-based world. Yet, we still believe. We believe because our spirit confirms our hope even though no scientific instrument or theory can prove what our heart assures us to be true.

## **Exegesis**

The scriptural text for this lesson comes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final section of Isaiah (chapters 56-66) often referred to as Trito-Isaiah. This section was not written by Isaiah himself but is a final section weaved into the original text some time after the Israelites had returned from exile. Chapter 65 is a divine response to the complaints issued by Israelites (see chapter 64) who had returned from exile only to find themselves suffering hardship and despair. The writer pens these words as a message of hope for those who are now struggling to rebuild their lives and native land. They needed to hold on to the promise that their work would not be in vain, that God had not deserted them and there hopes for Israel's restoration would eventually be realized. The Israelites identified this new heaven and earth as a new Eden like the one found in Genesis. Historically, the book of Isaiah has been one of the most utilized Old Testament resources for describing Jesus and his connection to the early prophet's descriptions of the Messiah. The disciples who followed Jesus, and those who joined the early church expected Jesus to return for them soon. This particular text is often linked to the recreation of the earth as it is described in the book of Revelation (a "new heaven" and "new earth") and served as a source of assurance and inspiration for those who died before Jesus's return to earth. It was an assurance that they, and we too will one day be with Jesus in the physical reality.

## **Conversation**

We are told that there is never enough, that we must hold on to what we have so that it will not be taken by others, and that violence is a necessary evil. But in our text Isaiah offers us a new vision that reflects just the opposite of all that way see today. The violence and oppression that seems to be so deeply

ingrained within our society will be replaced with peace, and enough of everything for everyone. The yearning and emptiness many so often feel will be swallowed up by an intimate connection to Spirit.

Isaiah speaks about the creation of a new heavens and earth. This is not a refurbishing of the present reality, but the creation of an entirely new reality from nothing (ex nihilo). Isaiah speaks of a wholly new reality that will be so drastically different from what we have known previously, that we won't even recognize it (verse 17). This resurrection will alter all known relationships: there will be no more sorrow (verse 19), our new resurrected bodies will no longer age or decay in such a short time (verse 20), and there will be enough of everything for everyone (verses 22-23).

The result of this new creation will also bring about a new sense of intimacy with God. One that is so close, and so open that we will be one with the divine in spirit and truth. We will finally know Jesus as intimately as we are known by him (verse 24). The violence which is so deeply embedded within every aspect of this life, will no longer exist among humans or animals. All sentient beings will dwell together in fellowship and mutual regard (verse 25).

This idyllic vision depicts the peace and communion with God that humanity longs for. This vision is the peace that Jesus calls us toward, the resurrection that we hope and pray for, and the answer that the world is seeking.

### **Questions**

1. How does this text from Isaiah connect to Jesus and the resurrection for you?
2. In what ways does this vision assure you that your faith is not in vain?
3. What would you say to someone who may be struggling to maintain their faith as they look around at the world today?
4. The promise of a new heaven and earth still requires us to do all we can in the here and now to make the world a better place for all life on the planet. This means we must act locally but think globally. What issues could you help to address on the planet right now (recycling, animal rights, renewable energy...)?

# I've Got Reasons To Praise The Lord (Resurrection)

*Clyde W. Oden, Jr., OD, MPH, M.Div.,  
Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Oxnard, CA)*

7 May 2017

## Prayer

*Lord, if I had a thousand tongues, and a thousand days to use all of my tongues to praise you -- it would not be enough. From the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, you are so worthy of every praise that flows from my heart and comes out of my mouth. Amen.*

## Scripture

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

## Context

It is a religious cliché heard in almost every public pulpit. The speaker or preacher will start an antiphonal chant: “God is good all the time” and the congregational response is: “All the time God is good.” That is followed by a polite applause or “praise,” and then the speaker moves on another point totally unrelated to the “warmup expression.” Common expressions used in worship without some follow-up or explanation remain simply clichés.

It is important that worship services be more than familiar clichés. Praises to God and testimonies about God should speak to the authentic nature and character of God. When a speaker commands the pulpit and is extolling the virtues of God, somewhere buried in their expressions should be the testimonies of what the speaker knows or their personal experience. The writer of these psalms is clear about the fact that God has given him or the worshipping the community the strength and power for victories against the foes of life. Such testimonies in our public worship space has even more power when we share the “what” and “how” of our victories. Yes, “God is good all the time,” but there is someone in the audience or congregation who needs to hear more of the story-- so that they might also share in the celebration and be encouraged!

The Psalmist declares that God has answered prayers and God has taken the rejected stone and made it God's cornerstone. Not only does this declaration speak to individual victories, but it also ushers in our understanding of the Christ moment. Jesus is the cornerstone that was rejected by those who could not understand the moves of God. Our post resurrection celebration is about how death, and the grave could not keep Jesus down. We, as believers, have no greater reason to say how good God is than because of the risen Lord.

## Exegesis

The identity of the author of 118 psalms is lost to history. However, the psalm has always been part of religious celebrations of both Jews and Christians over the last two millennia. For the Jews this psalm is

the last of the Hallel group (Psalms 113 to 118), which is part of the litany of thanksgiving and praise, in Jewish worship. This psalm was chanted in the temple while the Passover lambs were being slain. It was chanted also on other festival occasions including at Pentecost, the feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of Dedication (*Interpreter's Bible, Volume 4*). This psalm was also a favorite of the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. He said: "This is the psalm that I love, for it has often served me well and has helped me out of grave troubles, when neither emperors, kings, wise men, clever men, nor saints could have helped me" (quoted by Kittel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 371).

Psalm 118 speaks to the nature and the character of God, and outlines why praises are so appropriate. Those who worship God testify to the "strong right hand of God," the strength of God, the victories won by those who worship God, and how God answers prayers. At any gathering of believers, this psalm and the others in the Hallel group are the appropriate songs of praise for God.

### Conversation

Call and response chants or antiphonal expressions are part of the character of African American worship. Psalm 118 begins with an antiphonal expression about God's faithfulness enduring forever, but then the writer begins to drill deep. The writer explains to all who hear or read this psalm *why* one needs to give thanks.

We don't need clichés to praise God. The Hymn Book of Israel - the Psalms - provides clear and concise and appropriate words to praise God. Read these words of the psalmist:

- The strong right arm of the LORD has done glorious things!
- I will not die; instead, I will live to tell what the LORD has done.
- I thank you for answering my prayer and giving me victory!

Now, listen to what passes today as "praise songs" on many Christian radio programs. Compare the words to the deep expressions found in the psalter. When in your spirit you feel a "praise coming on," open up the Psalms from 113 to 118 - and "get your praise on."

### Questions

1. When was the last time you looked at Psalms as a "book of songs" and not just as poetry?
2. Can you feel the joy and ecstasy in these psalms?
3. Have you written a poem extolling the blessings you have experienced from God? Try it, and then share it.

# The Promise of the Resurrection: New Life After Death (Resurrection)

*Clyde W. Oden, Jr., OD, MPH, M.Div.,  
Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Oxnard, CA)*

14 May 2017

## **Prayer**

*Dear God: Thank you for the resurrection of Jesus. Thank you for the victory over death, hell and the grave. Because of the reality of resurrection, we have the promise of a new life after dying to this world. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

## **Context**

They just don't understand! Have you been to many funerals lately? Young people, especially young people are seen crying and carrying on when the matriarch or the patriarch of the family has passed. There is grief that goes beyond just the death of their loved one. For some it seems that all hope is lost because the pillar of their existence is now dead. We, in ministry often see the contrast: the deceased family member was a good, regular church going soul, who loved the Lord. They attended Church every Sunday, gave generously to the Church, served on the Usher Board, or Steward or Trustee Board, or was an active member of the Lay Organization. And yet their children and/or grandchildren, the ones who are now physically draped over the casket would not go to church with them, when asked. And now the pillar of the family is gone, and the survivors are in emotional turmoil because death seems so final. They just don't understand.

The sainted grandparent/parent who passed on -- didn't fear death. Death came as a welcomed friend, because they had been on the "battlefield for a long time" and they were ready to go from "labor to reward." But the children and grandchildren saw death as some kind of defeat. "What are we going to do now" they shouted as they hung on the casket. They just don't understand. Granny or Papa understood the promise of the resurrection. They believed in the Resurrected Christ. They knew that life didn't end with death. They belonged to Christ. And as much as they tried to tell family members while they were alive - they too must get right with God so that there would be peace in their spirit.

The Church has work to do. There are so many members of the "Gen X" generation and the millennial generation who see church as a "take or leave it" proposition, and being a believer in Christ as a luxury and not a necessity. The text speaks to life after death: "But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ

was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back” (verse 23).

### **Exegesis**

Paul’s letter to the Church at Corinth was addressing some controversies in the church. The controversies go to the very heart of the Gospel. Is there life after death? Is there really a resurrection? Paul is writing with conviction as he begins this portion of his letter to this congregation. Paul was writing to those who had to defend the faith. There was a vocal opposition. Some believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but there are others who are arguing technicalities regarding who or what is being resurrected.

Paul is also introducing an understanding about the resurrection that has yet to become conventional wisdom in Corinth or other cities in the region. His theological construct about the First Adam and the Second Adam is advance thinking. He was fighting an uphill battle with those whose faith was not grounded in the resurrection. Then Paul shifts to some end of time visions. Deep stuff for the first generation of believers. He proclaims that there will be a time when the Kingdom of God will rule supreme and that the rulers of this world will surrender to the will of God and even death, the last enemy of humankind will be defeated. That is why, Paul can pronounce proudly that there is reason to hope, because there are dimensions beyond this life.

### **Conversation**

Many of us who read these words at this moment have children, grandchildren, neighbors and friends who must come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. There is the promise of New Life, and it’s available to all who believe. Death is not the final station in life.

### **Questions**

1. What is your understanding of the purpose of the services at the “Homegoing” or funeral?
2. Is it necessary to view the body of the deceased again at the end of the service? Does that bring closure or just reopen the emotional wounds of the survivors?
3. What do you say to those members of your family about death? How do you want them to remember you at your “Homegoing”? How do you explain to others the meaning of “life after death?”

# Can I get a witness? (Resurrection)

*Clyde W. Oden, Jr., OD, MPH, M.Div.,  
Pastor, Bethel AME Church (Oxnard, CA)*

21 May 2017

## **Prayer**

*Dear God -- we receive the good news. Jesus lives. We believe in the witness of his of resurrection. We thank for salvation grounded in our faith in Jesus and the power of forgiveness in His Name. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Acts 10:34-43

## **Context**

For too long there have been artificial barriers erected in communities of faith. There are barriers separating worshiping communities, based, in part, on a notion that one group has a more authentic relationship with God than other groups. There are the “in” groups and the “out” groups.

There are so many “hyphenated” Christians. Some called themselves “evangelical”: buried in their self-description is an assumption of purity or authenticity that sets them apart (in their own minds) from other believers. There are other believers who call themselves “conservative” Christians: they claim a truer reading and interpretation of Christianity’s Holy Writ, and they suggest the apostasy of other believers. And there are other believers who call themselves “progressive”

Progressive Christians, of course, see the errors in the ways “non-progressives” read and understand the gospels. There are others within the Christian community who claim their Pentecostal self-description of being “fire baptized, filled with the Holy Ghost” Christians makes them the most authentic followers of Jesus. Each group of believers declares, either in writing or in actions, that they are the “true believers” or “more faithful followers of Christ” than any other group of believers. We all “see through the glass darkly.”

## **Exegesis**

In this portion of Acts, the Lukan writer captures a very crucial moment in the life of the Jesus movement. The question looming large is this: Who can be a follower of Jesus. Must one become a Jew first? Is there an orthodoxy? Must one practice all of the requirement of the Jewish faith first? This text follows a mind-blowing episode in which Peter has received a vision from God that the distinctions with regard to clean versus unclear has been changed. The very notion of what is “kosher” with regard to dietary practices for a follower of Jesus Christ is being altered from the Jewish orthodoxy. The lines between Jew and Gentile - with respect to the cleanliness codes were being erased. Peter found himself in the personal living space and eating space of non-Jews and this was barrier breaking.

But the most important issues addressed in this text is the witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus. The followers of Jesus Christ were to focus on the main theme: telling the story of resurrection of Jesus, and that he is alive. Furthermore, according to Peter, Jesus had, “ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead.” This is the Gospel of Christ: the resurrection of Jesus and that he is the One in whom the prophets had foretold. Salvation and the forgiveness of sins comes in the name of Jesus. This “Good News” was to be shared with the world, and all humankind benefits from this understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

### **Conversation**

Such struggles of understanding “orthodoxy” is part of any community of faith, not just Christianity. Judaism and Islam, focusing only on the Abrahamic religions, all have groupings of believers. This was also true in the early Christian Church. Who were the “true believers?” Peter was wrestling with that question in the early church in the same way we still struggle with it today. He said, and we must support this notion: “There is peace in knowing Jesus Christ. Yet, there is seemingly little peace in the Body of Christ. This instinct to be seen as being theologically “pure” or “more correct” seems to miss the vision Christ placed in the spirit of Peter. Peter declared: Everyone is the same in the sight of God.

The criteria for acceptance with God, according to Peter is not national origin, language, social class, or gender. The main criterion from God, according to Peter, is this: God accepts those who fear him and do what is right. Shouldn't this be enough?

### **Questions**

1. How conscious are you regarding applying some kind of “authenticity litmus test” when you are with other confessing Christians? Do they have to believe as you believe or “is the main thing, the main thing?”
2. How do you witness the resurrection of Jesus? Can persons meeting you see the resurrected Jesus in your life, and in your talk?
3. How comfortable are you in living out the statement found in the text when Peter declares: “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism” (verse 23)?

# We Will Rise (Resurrection)

*Rev. Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem, Pastor,  
Quinn Chapel AME Church (Independence,  
KS)*

28 May 2017

## Prayer

*Dear Lord, we are grateful for Your free gift of salvation. We give thanks for the sacrifice of your Son and for your promise of everlasting life. We humbly ask that you give us the courage to speak even when what we have to say is incredible. We humbly ask that you give us the courage to speak our truth even in the face of unbelief. We give you thanks and praise, in Jesus's name. Amen.*

## Scripture

Luke 24:1-12

## Context

Luke's Gospel has, in literary terms, a general chiasmic structure. This means that themes are repeated around the main point. The themes found in Luke's tale of Jesus's resurrection are themes echoed from previous chapters. Sometimes, the themes are referenced by specific people/beings repeating phrases. Sometimes, it's less overt. These twelve verses that describe the Resurrection of Christ focus on the theme of memory, and entice the reader to recall their own experiences with the 9th chapter of Luke.

## Exegesis

The women, in Luke 24:1, left their homes early to journey to the borrowed tomb where Jesus had been laid. They believed their job was to prepare Jesus's body for burial. The custom was to prepare a newly deceased body with oils and wrap it in cloth for it to decay. Once it had, a year or so later, the relatives of the decease would then "bury the dead" by gathering their bones up into an ossuary with those of other family members. The women's job was unfulfilled, though, because Jesus's body was no longer in the tomb (Luke 24:2-4). Read Luke 9:57-60

Luke writes that the women were confronted by two men in shining or dazzling clothes. In Luke 24:5, The men asked the women a question about their actions, and their motives before declaring Jesus risen. God breaks into the world into the midst of our traditions and dazzles us with the news of the Risen Christ! Read Luke 9:30

The two dazzling men reminded the women of Jesus's promises to them (Luke 24:6-8). The women hear the words and are confronted with their own memories of what Jesus said to them. When they recalled the promises of Jesus, they recognized the situation for what it was. Jesus had done what He said He'd do. Sharon Ringe notes that the women's ability to readily recall Jesus's words is a function of their

continuous presence with Jesus and the Disciples. “Their continuous presence, not only through these events, but through Jesus’s earlier ministry as well, makes them thoroughly qualified and reliable witnesses of what follows, even though their testimony is said to be dismissed by the apostles as an ‘idle tale.’” When we remember God’s promises, those unexpected events begin to make sense. Read Luke 9:21-27.

### **Conversation**

The women ran and told the news to the disciples – the eleven and the others. They were the first preachers, the first to proclaim the Good News of the Living Christ. The “eleven and the others,” however, were unable to remember what the women remembered. They dismissed the women’s words as an idle tale. Peter, then, ran back to the tomb, saw it was empty and failed to understand the significance of what he saw. “When they are said to dismiss the women’s words as “an idle tale” (24:11), they reveal that they are not yet able to cross the bridge of memory that can take them from their days with Jesus, through the events of the passion, into the future of the church’s mission.” We are all called to speak our truth – God’s Truth – even when we won’t be believed. Read Luke 9:1-6.

### **Questions**

1. The dazzling men – presumed to be angels – said to the women, “Remember.” What is the role of memory in your faith and evangelism practices? That is, what do you remember and how does remembering guide you in your faith walk?
2. Even as Luke presents the women – which included Joanna and Mary Magdalene - as present throughout Jesus’s ministry, the disciples refuse to believe the women’s words. What are some groups of people in our church whose words are considered “idle tales”? How might we remember to listen to them and serve them better?
3. We’ve seen and read the parallels between the 24th chapter and 9th chapter of Luke in order to understand Luke’s literary structure. Other than a writing technique, what purpose might it serve to repeat themes in the Gospel texts? That is, why do you think Luke chose to tell The Story in this manner?

# In The Box (Purification)

*Rev. Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem, Pastor,  
Quinn Chapel AME Church (Independence,  
KS)*

4 June 2017

## Prayer

*Dear God, thank You for adopting us into the family of the chosen. Thank you for your grace of God in Christ. We are grateful that you have drawn the boundaries of our faith and our identity. Help us to live out our faith in community. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

1 Corinthians 5:6b-8

## Context

Paul's letters to the church in Corinth sought to instruct the burgeoning group how to become a community. Corinth, itself, was a growing metropolis whose population was in perpetual flux. Nestled between two ports, Corinth "attracted a more cosmopolitan population" where "freed slaves of Greek, Syrian, Jewish, and Egyptian origin" made their home. The diverse cultures and economic backgrounds presented challenges for the emerging church. This new church had to contend with theological issues and the social issue of what it meant to be The Church.

## Exegesis

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul deals specifically with the idea of purity. Purity defined the edges of the community. Paul understood that sin was "a pollution threatening the pure group," a "life-threatening corruption." For Paul, the community was a body and corruption within the body would lead to infection and death. (5:6b).

Paul likens the solidification of the boundaries of the church to the preparation for Passover. Like the unleavened bread at the center of Passover and the Lord's Supper, the community of the church is consecrated to serving God. Thus, Paul's metaphor of yeast (5:7) describes the easy way the culture of a community can be altered. Like with a batch of bread which requires just a little bit of yeast to rise from unleavened, just a little bit of sin or dissension can corrupt the body of Christ. Paul's prescription for this is to reconstitute the dough – that is, to cleanse and rebuild the community. The community, like the sacrament, must have a foundation of truth and sincerity in order to maintain their purity (5:8).

## Questions

1. In the first verses of this chapter, Paul speaks of a specific sin (incest) that breaches the boundaries of the community. As African Methodists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how do we define the boundaries of our communal identity?
2. What are some sins/pollutants that contaminate our community and prevent us from being wholly consecrated to God? How might we be purge ourselves of them to be purified for service?

3. Paul uses the metaphor of the bread to describe the body of Christ as both sacrament and the church community. How might understanding our congregations in the same way we understand the Body of Christ we consume at the communion table change our approach to new disciples'/new members' classes?

# God For Us (Decalogue)

*Rev. Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem, Pastor,  
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KS)*

11 June 2017

## Prayer

*God, we are grateful for your acts and works in our life. We are grateful that you have and do choose to be God for us: God who delivers us, God who makes a way out of no way, God who leads us out of pain and distress. As we seek you, please help us to identify you within our experiences. In Jesus's Name, we pray.*

## Scripture

Exodus 20:1-3; Deuteronomy 5:4-7

## Context

The group of people who followed Moses out of Egypt were generations removed from the people who found relief from the famine with Joseph's brothers. The people in the Exodus knew of the power of God to deliver from the stories that were passed down to them. Their own experiences of God were marred by their social status as slaves. As they traveled through the wilderness, this naïveté of the nature of God led the people to question God's purpose for removing them from Egypt. It caused them to wonder if, perhaps, there were other gods who could serve them better. In the midst of this, God speaks.

## Exegesis

In the 20th chapter of Exodus and the 5th chapter of Deuteronomy, God identifies God's self to the people and begins to set forth the conditions of their burgeoning relationship. "I am" the God who delivered you. "I am." In Hebrew, this conjugation of this verb carries both the present, future, and conditional tenses: I am. I will be. You can expect me to be. In this phrase, then, God sets the standard for our relationship. "I am the God who delivered you." "I will be the God who delivers you." "You can expect me to be the God who delivers you." "I am" - and no other - this God for you. There is no other god, there is no other being, there is no other thing who can do for you what God does, will do, and can be expected to do.

God, thus, establishes a relationship of exclusivity with the people in the wilderness. God instructs the people that they should have no other gods in God's presence. This is not to suggest that there are powers that rival God's power or that there are other deities alongside God's own divinity. Instead, God admonished them - and admonishes us - to not attribute God's acts and work to other forces. Do not, God commands, claim that your freedom from Egypt was due to Pharaoh's kind nature. Do not, God commands, claim that it was your doctor that healed you. Do not, God commands, insist that it was a move of congress or the work of politicians that gave you freedom. Give credit where credit is due: to God, and God alone.

### **Conversation**

Transliterated, the Hebrew word for Egypt is Mitzraiem. Translated literally, the word that God uses to discuss what God has done for the people in the wilderness means “the causes of distress.” In these verses, then, God declares “I am/will be/can be expected to be the God who brought you from the causes of distress.” We, like these sojourners, tend to consider the wilderness as a place of distress. However, their deliverance from the place that caused them distress and pain - the place that enslaved and dehumanized them - found them in the wilderness, a place where their faith was stretched, where God declared God’s self in relationship to them. So too, God finds us in distress and wherever we may find ourselves.

### **Questions**

1. Deuteronomy 5:4-7 says that God spoke to the people face to face to establish the nature of their relationship to God, as a God that delivers. What is God in Christ saying to us today, within our church, about who God is for us?
2. Mitzraiem - the causes of distress - was a place where the people and their ancestor’s were caused to suffer. God brought them up from Mitzraiem, from the very place of their distress. What are some of the places and things that cause us distress? How is God working in our lives to deliver us?
3. The wilderness experience, for those who would become Israel, was one of fear and hardship because they were still learning to trust God. It took them 40 years. What can we do when we find ourselves in wilderness experiences to shorten our time there and begin to understand our own relationship with God?

# The Enduring Reality And Challenge Of Idolatry (Decalogue)

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph.D., Tri-City AME  
Church (Union City, CA)*

18 June 2017

## Prayer

*O God, open our eyes, that we may see and resist the idols in our midst. Help us to acknowledge and repent of the idols in our lives that continue to separate us from you and each other.*

## Scripture

Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10

## Context

Bluntly stated: idols are our creations and have the ability to separate us from God and each other when we hold those creations as ultimate. We are challenged daily with idols, both small and large. Don't believe me? Go read a Facebook post or a Twitter thread. The human creations of social media, computer chips, identity (nationality, race, etc.), and capitalism often congeal and explode on the screens of our smartphones and tablets. These devices not only have the ability to *become* idols; they also *possess the ability* to broadcast and coerce others into *our various idolatries*. Our technology can communicate to the world what we hold as ultimate, what we worship, what we ultimately trust in, hope for, and love. We may not bow down to golden statues, but are we entranced by HD Screens? Do we routinely tap "send," "post," or "tweet" and cannot function unless we continue to tap "send," "post," or "tweet"? If we are ready and willing to ostracize, kill, or maim those who do not agree with our perspectives; if we are ready to equate our ways of life with God; if we believe that our lives *only* make sense when we use the racial, national, economic, and even "religious" categories of identification *we* created—then we prove ourselves to be idolaters, worshippers of our creations.

## Exegesis

The Decalogue is a reminder of our infinite struggle and charge to live lives of holiness and wholeness in relationship to God and each other. It sets the basic and most fundamental aspects of spiritual and communal living. And in the second commandment, God warns the ancient Israelites (and all readers) of the enduring reality and challenge of idols.

God called the ancient Israelites—indeed, God calls all people to be holy—and fundamentally, holiness means to be set apart and different. The ancient Israelites lived in a religiously and culturally diverse environment and this commandment sought to keep them from doing what those around them did: worship their creations. For those who have read the Old Testament, it might be tempting to say that

Israel was unfaithful to this commandment and disparage their neighbors as idolatrous heathens—but to do so is to not take the challenge of this word seriously. Ultimately, this word is a warning and a reminder: our struggle with idolatry is infinite and God’s desire to be in unimpeded relationship with us never ends.

It is not my task to address the first commandment, but I will make this distinction. Idols are *literally* our creations while “gods” are not. What makes idolatry sinful is that we, *the creature*, lift up our *creations* to the status of *Creator* and sacrifice ourselves and others for the sake of our creations. Idolatry makes us sin in three different ways. First, we sin because we forget and/or act like these creations are not our creations. In other words, we submit ourselves to the work of our own hands and become slaves to our creations. Secondly, idolatry is sinful because we equate and worship our creations as if they are divine and end up rejecting God. This leads to the third and worst sin of all: we will harm and kill for the sake of our idols because rejecting God leads to the rejection of neighbor. Idols ultimately lead us to death and separation, while God leads us to life and love. We can always tell if there are idols in our midst because idols necessarily produce *victims*.

### Conversation

For some, the concept of idolatry conjures up pictures of folks worshipping golden calves, sculptures, and statues. We may think they are relics of the past. It may be tempting to think that in our contemporary world, Christians have very little issues keeping this Second Word of the Decalogue. However, if we examine ourselves and our world closely, we will find that idolatry is not a problem that has been solved or sealed away in the vaults of history. Quite the contrary, in our technological, economic, and identity-driven age, idols continue to assert themselves and distort and destroy holistic relationships between ourselves, our planet, and God. Idols are our creation and yet we treat them as if they are God, as if they can give us life and save us. Idols demand worship, and though they are the works of our own hands and minds, they take on a life of their own over time. Most importantly, idols seek to convince us that our lives only have value and meaning when/if we are beholden to them. Ultimately, idols pose as God and demand that we place our faith, hope, and love in them. White supremacists, for instance, have made an idol of whiteness (i.e. identity) and believe that whiteness defines them, gives them life, and secures their future. Therefore, racism is as much a result of idolatry as it is a political and social ill.

### Questions

1. Can you identify some idols within your own life and in our broader society?
2. While Scripture references the idols as the works of our hands, can you think of any idols that are also works of our minds and imagination?
3. Given the way our world has been shaped by materialism, (gun) violence, and identity worship (race/nationality), do you feel that Christians and churches have adequately responded to these issues as *idolatrous* and not simply *sinful*?

### Media

Though Bob Dylan may not be a part of normal Bible Studies, I suggest listening to one his songs called “Gotta Serve Somebody.” The song places in context something that runs underneath this reflection. *Something* is will be ultimate to us. We have no choice in that matter, but we do have a choice as to who/what we will serve.

# Put Some Respect On God's Name: Remembering The Holiness and Mystery of God (Decalogue)

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph.D., Tri-City AME Church (Union City, CA)*

25 June 2017

## **Prayer**

*Precious Lord, may we remember that you are holy, mysterious, loving, and close. May we live in the recognition of your holiness, mysteriousness, love, and closeness. Help us to meditate upon and take seriously the meaning of your name.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11

## **Context**

“Boy, don’t be sayin’ ‘I swear to God...’ ‘God don’t bless mess.’” I can still here both of my sagacious grandmothers reprimanding me with those words (with a certain added emphasis that cannot be repeated in a Bible study). Even at that young age, my grandmothers, Sunday School teachers, and members of my community were placing in me not so much a command as a warning. God and God’s name is serious business. Don’t use it lightly, and have some respect while using it.

Now that I’m older, a pastor, and have a doctorate in theology, I sometimes feel like I hear folk putting God and the sacred in and on everything. “I swear to God” is still around and it has a lot of siblings and cousins. I hear it in the phrase “God bless America.” I hear it when my homeboys say to me, “On everything I love,” “Real talk,” or “Keepin’ it 100 with you...” I heard it when one Donald Trump surrogate claimed that, “God was using Trump” to make America great. We have a way using God and the sacred to undergird our claims and further our agendas. But what does scripture say about this?

## **Exegesis**

The third commandment reminds us that God’s name is holy and deserves respect and thoughtful consideration.

In the ancient world, the name of a king or god carried much weight in the lives and social fabric of a people. Here in the third commandment, the ancient Israelites are told to not take the name of the LORD lightly. As commentary after commentary point out, and even as passages of Scripture attest, it

was routine for folks to make oaths and swear by the name of a god or of a king. Using God's name in this way proved the sincerity of the oath, which was made in court, in public affairs, and even in ordinary conversation. Since the name of God carries such weight, it should be used respectfully and with humility. Jesus even told his disciples that they should not swear/make oaths at all (Matthew 5:33-37). This commandment not only tells the hearer to not misuse God's name—but following directly after the prohibition of idolatry, we are also being told to not use any other “ultimate” things to swear by. In other words, one should only make an oath that involves God, and when we do, we must be very careful. The warning at the end makes the point: God will not “clear” someone who misuses the divine name.

But perhaps there is something deeper than oaths and swearing in this passage. God's name (which many of our Bibles translate as “LORD”) in Hebrew is [“YHWH”] which is nearly impossible to translate with absolute certainty. The roughest and best approximations of this name is “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be” (see Exodus 3). In other words, God's name reveals that God refuses to be named. We name a table a “table” and that “*is what the table is.*” To name is to exercise power and control over the thing named. But God refuses to be named—God will be what God will be. And so God refuses to be boxed in. Therefore, God's name is the very revelation of holiness—God is set apart and so radically different that we cannot name God. Many Jews and even Christians refuse to write, let alone utter such a holy name. God's name is inexhaustible Mystery yet also a loving Answer. God is beyond our comprehension yet somehow intimately known and felt. God's name reveals that God can be *both* within/ beside us *and* also beyond us. God is holy.

### Conversation

To misuse God's name is not just to make a false oath or to curse, at its deepest level, to misuse the name of God is to *try to put God in a box*. It is to make God synonymous with other things we have named. If idolatry *elevates* our creations to the status of God, then misusing God's name *pulls God down* to the level of our creations. That move makes God synonymous with our religion, our flag, our country, our ways, etc. In other words, when we try to domesticate a God who cannot be domesticated, we break the third commandment. When we try to put God in everything, or use God to explain the messes we create, or believe that God has a special relationship with our country or our church or our family then we have boxed God in. We must be holy, and to do that, we must remember that God is holy. So we must careful not to coopt God for our own purposes.

Holiness (on our end) includes but is not limited to morality or acting “right” or following the “right” rituals. While holiness includes morality and ritual—there is something else, something much more fundamental to holiness than our morals and rituals. Holiness begins with the recognition that there are certain things about God that are radically different than us. God's ways are not our ways. And that statement “God's ways are not our ways” should not become a cliché that we use whenever things don't go our way. “God's ways are not our ways” should be uttered *before the things hit the fan*. The statement is not an explanation of evil or of world events. It's a declaration that God is holy. That's what that statement is about. God's ways are not our ways. God does not do things the way we do things. God cannot be named or boxed in, so we should not misuse the name of God or misrepresent God.

To remix a phrase a rapper said a while back, we need to put some respect and some mystery on God's name.

### Questions

1. Do you find yourself swearing or making oaths and using God or sacred things to make add to your oath?
2. Can you find any examples of when we may use God and/or God's name in a way that negates God's holiness?

3. How do you feel about the use of God in the phrase of “God bless America”? Secondly, do you think that there are places where we “pull God down” to our level? Do we make equate certain symbols or things with God?
4. What are some daily spiritual practices that we can put in place to remind ourselves of God’s holiness and wonder?

# Chill Out With All That: The Sacredness Of The Sabbath and Rest (Decalogue)

*Rev. M. JoDavid Sales, Ph.D., Tri-City AME Church (Union City, CA)*

2 July 2017

## Prayer

*O Lord, give us the insight and wisdom to pursue rest. Allow us to see the holiness in rest so that we can have time to reconnect with you and with ourselves. Give us a spirit that pursues rest in the midst of an atmosphere of stress, overwork, and material demands.*

## Scripture

Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

## Context

One of my favorite shows on television was ESPN's *His and Hers* with Michael Smith and Jemele Hill. At the end of every show, they had the "Doin' Too Much Countdown," which hilariously lampooned celebrity and athletic figures going beyond the pale in ignorance, competitiveness, and disrespect. Essentially, they were highlighting the human tendency to go too far.

I must confess, this Bible Study gave me the most trouble because it hit too close to home. Perhaps you, too, are like me. Doing too much. I teach at a university; I pastor a church; and I routinely take care of my 3 and 1-year-old daughters throughout the week. As one friend commented in passing, "you're working, like, three jobs." Indeed. Doing too much. I suspect for many of us, our lives don't have much or don't make much time for leisure. Maybe you're like me and find yourself on the "Doing Too Much" countdown of life day in and day out. In a country that's as hustle and bustle as America, in a century where the statistics show that Americans are working longer and harder for less pay relative to the cost of living than 30 years ago—nearly one third of Americans work on the weekends. African Americans, in particular, are at a significantly higher health risk than others in terms of high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease. And when coupled with our unsustainable workload, we need to be reminded of the Sabbath more than ever.

## Exegesis

*Holy people REST. Rest is sacred and rooted in God's transcendence and immanence.*

The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) are found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. These two books, according to biblical scholars, are separated by about 350—400 years, with Deuteronomy being the later text. This is quite exceptional because it shows that even after such a long period of time, the Ten Words

still endured, resonated with, and challenged the ancient Israelites. Both versions of the Decalogue are nearly identical, except for the Sabbath Day commandments. Rather than smooth over their differences, I think the Bible can teach us something about the importance of diversity and differing angles. Just like four gospels paint four different pictures and allow us to have a deeper appreciation of Jesus, these two versions of the Sabbath Day Commandment should deepen our appreciation of the Sabbath.

In Exodus, the ancient Israelites are told to *remember the Sabbath* and keep it holy. It is a holy day that should be set apart from all other kinds of things normally reserved for the other six days. Everything and everyone—even the animals—should rest. The ancient Israelites are called to do this ultimately, *because God does this*. In this respect, they are to be holy just like God is holy. They are to remember that God rested and so they should rest. The Sabbath is therefore linked to the act of creation itself.

In Deuteronomy, the ancient Israelites are told to *observe the Sabbath* and keep it holy *because God commanded them to do so*. From Deuteronomy's perspective, this day is holy for two interconnected reasons. The first reason is because God is the one who delivered this group of people out of slavery, and so they should listen to God. Second, and no less important, the ancient Israelites *were former slaves*. If anyone understood what it meant to work without rest, slaves would. So, the Sabbath called them to remember not a story of creation, but the reality of slavery and overexertion and the deliverance from slavery that God brought about.

### Conversation

Biblically speaking, the word on the Sabbath Day is actually two words. The first word is transcendent; it comes from beyond us. We rest because the creator of the universe rests. We rest because rest is built into the fabric of the universe. The second word is immanent; it comes from around us and within history. We rest because to work with no day off is slavery. We rest because God desires for the slaves to be set free. As descendants of slaves, we must hear this word today. Our spirits and bodies need to feed off this word.

The Sabbath is sacred. Let's make sure our time is not completely colonized by work, domination, and unsustainability. We must stop and chill out and find God who moves within and beyond this rat race and madness. We have to rest. We need to recharge our bodies, our hearts, our minds and our spirit. Even Jesus withdrew to pray and to get away from it all.

To work and to never rest. There is a word for that: slavery. To work and to never rest. That's a recipe for the dish called "burn out." To work and to never chill is a recipe for stress, sickness, and injury—and deeper still, ungodliness. Our bodies were not made for continuous labor. In the words of my cousin, sometimes "we gotta chill out with all that" and *rest*.

### Questions

1. Do you and your loved ones rest on a weekly basis? When is the last time you took a vacation?
2. Do you connect rest with godliness and liberation?
3. Do you feel our places of worship, connection, and spiritual leaders and friends promote and value the spiritual wisdom behind the Sabbath Day?

# What Makes A Good Society? (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Karla J. Cooper, Pastor, Quinn Chapel AME Church (Lincoln, NE)*

9 July 2017

## Prayer

*Stretch us so that our minds might be open and our hearts malleable enough to care. God, have your way!*

## Scripture

Exodus 20:12/Deuteronomy 5:16

## Context

As a pastoral care practitioner for almost twenty years, I have seen much and heard even more. I am intrigued by sociology which I generically define as the science of studying social development, social structures, social interactions along with collective behaviors and multiple identities of people that make up a society.

The newly liberated society of Israelite God-worshippers were organizing and developing social structures to know how to live a new freedom identity as well as how to interact with others. Through the lens of sociology and religion as a pastoral care practitioner, I explore the Fifth Commandment.

## Exegesis

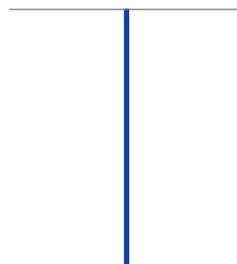
God calls Israel to become a society of priest, a social structure that is a priesthood of all believers as a holy people devoted to worship and to the service of a Holy God. The newly formed social identity of the Israelite community had a theocratic form of governance and most central was their interacting with YWH first and then, subsequently, with each other. Imagine that the relationship between God and the Israelites and the Israelites with each other as a “T” formation. The first four commandments are the vertical axis symbolic of the relationship between God, who delivered and is the scaffolding for establishing their identity as a God-worshipping community. The horizontal axis, then, are the relationships and interactions according to which the Israelites engage each other.

*YWH-Israelites (commands 1-4)*

s  
r  
a  
e  
l

*(commands 5-10)*

I



Within this newly formed society of Israelites, traditions were established with important rituals and narrative expressions were paramount. Never forgetting how each were dependent on the other especially in familial contexts became part of the narratives of Hebrew nation. Having progeny in the Hebrew tradition was seen as a direct blessing from God. As the circle of life would become complete, children were expected to never forget parents/elders, who are the caregivers and couriers of wisdom. The devotion to one's parents or elders became a covenantal agreement with a promise as shared in the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12/Deuteronomy 5:16 NRSV).

Ever wonder why this commandment never suggests for us to love our parents? Devotion to parents and elders was a sign of respect shown to one's culture and identity with the ultimate hope that succeeding generations would accept the wisdom and teaching from parents and elders. The respect for God is congruent to the respect/devotion or honor for parents.

In Hebrew the word for "honor," (transliterated "ka-bed") consists of the same letters as the Hebrew word for "heavy," (transliterated "ka-ved"). Within this context, honor means treating with the heaviness that parents/elders command in their position as parents or elders. In other words, do not treat the elderly, our parents, lightly or for granted. By virtue of their stature, parents/elderly are similarly situated as co-creators of the very life of society. By honoring the weighty of those who have carried life into community, the fifth commandment comes with promise.

The fifth commandment is the only commandment that has a reward if fulfilled. The reward is long life. When we stop showing honor toward parents or elderly, from a socio-theological context, the days of existence as a civilized society will be numbered. If God is viewed as parent, and we are to be obedient children, the promise is a good life on the land which God has granted.

### **Conversation**

We may be able to craft an argument around abusive parents or those who are like Hitler that we may find difficult to honor but that would take from the origins of the fifth commandment. When we neglect to care for our seniors who have done well to toward us, the law of reciprocity becomes lived out. What ultimately goes around, comes around. Succeeding generations are dependent upon each other. Our duty is to be devoted to our parents/elders, to care and respect. Most civilized societies have places of honor for parents/elders. In our culture, those who have risen to the ranks of seniors, receive discounts and other benefits. However, the greatest benefit is remembering the heaviness of the aged and bearing now that burden to lighten the load.

### **Questions**

1. Why would the Israelites have to be commanded to care for parents?
2. What are the moral and ethical imperatives to honor parents?
3. Can you think of an instance when a mother or father should not be respected?
4. Who would abuse elders?

# How Not to Get Away With Murder (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Karla J. Cooper, Pastor, Quinn Chapel AME Church (Lincoln, NE)*

16 July 2017

## **Prayer**

*Creator, Sustainer, Deliverer—we need you like never before. Help us to be honest with this truth.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17

## **Context**

As a pastoral care practitioner for almost twenty years, I have seen much and heard even more. I am intrigued by sociology which I generically define as the science of studying social development, social structures, social interactions along with collective behaviors and multiple identities of people that make up a society.

The newly liberated society of Israelite God-worshippers were organizing and developing social structures to know how to live a new freedom identity as well as how to interact with others. Through the lens of sociology and religion as a pastoral care practitioner, I explore the Sixth Commandment.

## **Exegesis**

The first murder in salvation history was between two brothers, Cain and Abel. Did Cain intend to murder Abel? Did Cain become remorseful by offering his life for this deed? (Genesis 4:14). The Sixth Commandment given to the newly liberated Israelites could merely be a recapitulation of the natural laws given to Noah as found in Genesis 9:5-6 which states: “For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”

The implication of this commandment is clear. A distinction between murder and killing was also clear to the Israelites because the intent behind the murder was important to understand. The intent was imbedded in the heart and mind. Malice, hate, and revenge are not life affirming attributes yet occupy much space in the heart and mind. The hurtful actions from malice, hate, and revenge are directed toward the body and soul. As indicated in 1 John 3:15: “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

## **Conversation**

The Sixth Commandment reminds that we should be careful with holding malice, hate, or revenge within our hearts because therein lies the trigger to murder our neighbors body or soul. We can cause more hurt

and harm with hate; by doing so, we murder our soul-self in the process. We don't ever get away with murder unless we are willing to kill our spirit. We must be careful to guard our hearts and mind to keep us from causing intentional harm with our thoughts, words or deeds. As the gospel song suggests, "I won't harm you with words from my mouth...I love you. I need you to survive!"

### **Questions**

1. Where does capital punishment fit? Or war?
2. Is there really justifiable homicide?

# Your Cheating Heart (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Charles Dorsey, Associate, COR  
AME Church, Irvine CA (Pastor Mark  
Whitlock)*

23 July 2017

## **Prayer**

*Gracious God, grant us wisdom to know how to look introspectively so we are able to walk circumspectly.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:14/Deuteronomy 5:18

## **Context**

As a pastoral care practitioner for almost twenty years, I have seen much and heard even more. I am intrigued by sociology which I generically define as the science of studying social development, social structures, social interactions along with collective behaviors and multiple identities of people that make up a society.

The newly liberated society of Israelite God-worshippers were organizing and developing social structures to know how to live a new freedom identity as well as how to interact with others. Through the lens of sociology and religion as a pastoral care practitioner, I explore the Seventh Commandment that deals with the nature of betrayal, infidelity, deceitfulness and faithlessness.

## **Exegesis**

The establishment of community and family were important to the Israelites. The breaking of the bonds would be equal to disrespecting life and honor to the disruption of community. Adulterers would break covenantal vows because of disloyalty which led to disruption in social order. Adulterers not only destroyed their own households but also the household of their neighbors.

Adultery was seen as an invasion of a household that would lead to the destruction of familial bonds which were part of the social order. The adulterous acts were deemed as unclean and uncleanness could infect, pollute and defile the soul. All guilty parties involved with committing the acts of adultery could be punished by death in antiquity.

## **Conversation**

Adultery is synonymous with infidelity, disloyalty, deceitful, betrayal and faithlessness all of which we do to each other and to God. What we do in the dark will come to light. As Job shares in chapter 24 verse 15 "The eye of the adulterer watches for dusk; he thinks, 'No eye will see me,' and he keeps his face concealed" (NIV). Our infidelity towards God and others are adulterous acts that also show up as a

betrayal of self. At some point each of us must ask ourselves, "What motivates me to do what I do?" As William Shakespeare wrote in Act 1, Scene III of the famous play, Hamlet, Polonius says, "This above all: to thine own self be true and it must follow, as the night the day. Thou canst not then be false to any man/Farewell, my blessing season this in thee?" To be true to God, to neighbor is to be true to self, lest the tie that binds us as one great humanity is forever breached when we betray, or are disloyal or are deceitful. Our hope is that the *Scarlet Letter* only remains as a great piece of literary work by Nathaniel Hawthorne, not a letter that we wear as a badge of identity.

### Questions

1. What does an adulterer look like, sound like, smell like or live like?
2. When was the last time you were disloyal?
3. Have you ever experienced faithlessness?

# “Thou Shall Not Steal” (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Cassandra Gould, Pastor, Quinn Chapel AME Church (Jefferson City, MO)*

30 July 2017

## **Prayer**

*Gracious God, we have been a stolen people ransomed by your love and grace. Teach us what it is to be faithful and true – people of integrity – with respect to all of the resources to which you give us access. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:15

## **Context**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the book of Exodus opens dramatically with Yahweh speaking, a God that is so intimidating and can't be seen but can be heard. This powerful life giving and taking force is on the mountain demonstrating the omnipotence of being the Supreme Ruler. GOD established GOD's authority to do so. GOD also reminds the hearers of the covenantal relationship with GOD, “I'm your GOD I brought you out of Egypt and therefore out of slavery.” This chapter occurs after the famous dry highway story when those who have been delivered find themselves forgetting the covenant they had with The Deliver. Yahweh comes with new tools for living designed around the theme of “law and order.”

## **Exegesis**

This lesson explores one of the commandments from “the second tablet,” the last six commandments. These commandments are concerned not just with personal our behavior but with our relationship with our neighbors. They are summed up in the second half of the summary of the Decalogue, “You should love your neighbor as you love yourself. The eighth commandment as stated in Exodus 20:15 says, “You shall not steal.” This, like the other commandments, is simple and, on the surface, it would seem that little interpretation is necessary.

## **Conversation**

Exodus is a story that resonates with African Americans particularly. Moses is a hero. Many sermons are preached about walking through the sea on dry land. Yet there seems to be less focus on the covenant and the Ten Commandments in teaching and preaching. While many African American households are steeped in the rudiments of religion if one considered the number of African Americans in jail and prison it would seem that somehow the commandments have not resonated with us. As we explore this commandment in particular: what does it mean to the descendants of those who were “stolen” from their land to then be commanded not to steal?

Biblical Scholar Dwight Allan Callahan suggests that African American's love affair with the Black Church is with the story of deliverance and Moses not the covenant or the laws that seem contrary to their lives. He states, "Exodus became an apologia for the commandment against stealing." The law was and is consistently broken by those who hold the law in their hands. Famed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, speaks of what it means to have a legacy of plunder versus a legacy of profit in his now famous article, 'The Case For Reparations'. It seems that the legacy of being stolen has plagued us. African Americans continue to live plundered lives. Land was stolen from many families in the South who worked land and had a "covenant" with land owners only to find themselves landless after years of labor. Yet there are still no reparations. Our wages are plundered as we work more and are often paid less. Our communities are laden with predatory lenders charging ungodly interest rates, yet the law remains, "do not steal." The Black Lives Matter Movement has reminded us that our bodies and lives continue to be plundered.

### **Questions**

1. How might we inform a new generation of Bible students who dare to interrogate the text in juxtaposition to their current situations and help them to be more faithful than the world has historically been to them?
2. Explore the ways in which the Bible seems to conflict with reality?
3. How can we be faithful to the Word of God and honest about that which impairs our ability to do so?
4. In addition to the physical stealing of property what other ways can we be mindful of this commandment?
5. The commandments seem punitive to some especially those who have broken them and been convicted in court; how can we demonstrate grace and embrace those returning citizens in our congregations, families and communities?

# Don't Lie on Your Neighbors (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Cassandra Gould, Pastor, Quinn  
Chapel AME Church (Jefferson City, MO)*

6 August 2017

## **Prayer**

*God of truth, help us to be people of truth for your honor and glory. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:16

## **Context**

I grew up in a household that we weren't allowed to use the word "lie." Certainly it was inferred that not only was the word off limits but the act of lying was unacceptable. We understood that the semantics was irrelevant. Whether it was called a story, a falsehood or even the new hash tag #alternativefacts, it was still a lie. It would seem that, according to the Hebrew texts, lying was just as serious in ancient Israel as it was in Demopolis, Alabama in the 1960's and 1970's. My parents and grandparents were clear about the consequences of telling in the words of my grandmother, "a tale."

## **Exegesis**

Ontologically, the ninth commandment as expressed in the Decalogue as found in Exodus, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,*" and similarly in Deuteronomy 5:20, "Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor, is related to the often misquoted commandment, "Thou shall not tell a lie." The Decalogue also know in Hebrew as "The Ten Words," or in Christianity as the Ten Commandments are a clear a concise set of rules that came directly from Yahweh.

Their use and validity in the church today is often the subject of vigorous debate. For some the grace that is granted through Jesus Christ negates the legalism of the Old Testament and these commandments. Yet, for others "The Law" as expressed in the Decalogue still provides a moral code of ethics. In Matthew 5:19 Jesus states, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*" He further points to the permanence of the law and the consequences of breaking the law as well as for not teaching the law (Matthew 5:19-21).

Despite one's theological views regarding the validity of the ancient laws of the Decalogue in post modernity it appears that the Church and good Christian families may not have gone far enough when teaching about this commandment. This commandment is not just a warning about being punished for telling a lie but the impending danger involved in conspiring against our neighbors. It implies that there is judgment and consequences for breaking this commandment.

Yahweh seemed to anticipate that due to the sinful nature of humanity colluding with other false witnesses was a high possibility. One of the deuteronomistic codes stated in Deuteronomy 19:15 says, *“One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”*

It appears that having more than one person testify against someone is designed to decrease the odds of having false testimony. False witness can also be used to conspire against one party for the gain of the other party. One such biblical narrative is that of Jacob stealing his brother’s birthright by tricking his father with the help of his mother, Rebecca.

Rebecca bore false witness when she conspired with Jacob to steal his brother’s birthright (Genesis 27:5-17). It didn’t cost Esau his life but his livelihood and meant he had to work harder to obtain less. Maybe we are called to follow the commandments not to keep ourselves from “Hell,” but to keep catastrophic circumstance from befalling our neighbors and to maintain or create equitable situations.

The story of Jacob, Rebecca, Esau and Isaac is a poignant reminder that even when there are multiple witnesses or multiple people on a jury it is not uncommon to receive false testimony. Sadly, for many there are consequences whose impact go much further than the victim’s financial situation. Bearing false witness can be deadly.

### **Conversation**

In 2015, 149 people were released from prison in America after being wrongfully convicted. According to the National Registry of Exonerations “they spent an average of 15 years in prison” before being released. Their lives were put on the line based on someone or a group of people breaking the ninth commandment and “bearing false witness” against them. Marginalized and oppressed people are often at a greater risk of being targeted by false witness. African Americans were told that we were not fully human. We were told we were three fifths human; this is a false witness that was co-signed by a nation of people for centuries. The emotional trauma, the financial and economic losses from policies that were crafted based on these falsehoods are innumerable and have been passed on from one generation to the next.

Emmett Till was an African-American teenager who was murdered in Mississippi at the age of 14 in 1955 after reportedly flirting with a white woman. The brutality of his murder drew attention to the mistreatment of African-Americans, and Till posthumously became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement. Recently it was brought to light that his accuser confessed that her witness was false. This is an egregious violation of this commandment.

### **Questions**

1. How many African Americans were hung, killed, and imprisoned based on false witness? These conditions still exist and in many ways are worse. This is a reminder that The Decalogue should be engaged beyond Sunday morning ritual.
2. What are ways in which you envision helping people to connect to The Decalogue?
3. What is at risk when we normalize a culture that celebrates bearing false witness?
4. How have you been impacted by false witness?
5. What is the role of the church in demystifying or helping people to connect to the Ten Commandments in impactful ways?
6. What are other biblical stories about the consequence of bearing false witness?
7. What are current social examples of accepting false witness as true?
8. Who is currently at risk from some of the false witnesses you have identified?

# Let's Practice What We Preach (Decalogue)

*Rev. Dr. Cassandra Gould, Pastor, Quinn  
Chapel AME Church (Jefferson City, MO)*

13 August 2017

## **Prayer**

*Reconciling God, thank you for bringing what we say and do into alignment. When we are tempted to covet that which belongs to others, stop us, please. Give us strength and courage to be in community with and for one another wherever you have called and planted us. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:17

## **Context**

One African American colloquialism is, "What GOD has for me is for me." It is meant remind people that you don't have to worry about others taking anything from you nor do should you be concerned or envious of the trappings or materials that others may own. This is inherently true but if only it were that simple.

## **Exegesis**

The tenth commandment of the Decalogue is a reminder of Yahweh's ability to provide for the people that are a part of the covenant. Yet there maybe conditions that preclude some of GOD's children from feeling the confidence and being able to exhibit the trust that is necessary to remain in a covenantal relationship.

There is an often overlooked or lesser-known story in the Bible about a man who coveted his neighbor's belongings. 1 Kings 21:2-3 records the story of King Ahab and Naboth. The chapter opens up with the following: Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth. But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors." The story ends in the death of Nahob. After the Jezebel, Ahab's wife found a couple of people who were willing to make false testimony against Nahob. Apparently Ahab's parents did not instill into him, "If it is not yours don't touch it!" Ironically Ahab had no scarcity of resources. He was the King. It seems his privilege assisted him in feeling entitled to his neighbor's land. This privilege and greed also cost him his life.

## **Conversation**

In the post civil war era of America many sharecroppers were promised land and stripped of it because of land owner's greed and privilege. What does it mean to have your future plundered because those who have more wealth than you want the little that you have? One would think that those who covet would be

those who were suffering or had less but the story of Ahab debunks that assumption. Another and more familiar story about coveting can be found in the story of David and Bathsheba as depicted in 1 Samuel 11. David had the power and the privilege in this case. He had more than one wife but desired or coveted that which he saw, Bathsheba and wanted her by any means necessary. The consequences were catastrophic for David and Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. While there may be poor people who will break the law because they desire the social and material trappings of others one could surmise that what they really want is equity and a chance to acquire their own basic provisions.

While many rich people want more could it be that poor and marginalized groups just want basic provisions. The Hebrew word used in Exodus 20:17 is *chamed*, to desire. Is it possible that what some have seen as coveting is merely a desire to have equal access to healthcare, quality education, low interest rate loans, a living wage and to live in a low violence neighborhood? This is not to negate the Law or to dismiss Yahweh's intent when introducing the law, but if the Church began to analyze and work to offset the inequities that exist for the people that they serve would that be a form of fulfilling the law?

### Questions

1. Is it possible that the role is not to pronounce punishment for those who break laws but to assist in dismantling the systems that cause or create conditions that tempt people to break laws?
2. While there will continue to be those who violate laws one hallmark of the culture of African Americans is to survive under enormous pressure and to create something out of nothing. The Church and church leadership have an enormous opportunity to foster environments of trust and to model behavior that is not covetous in nature. In an itinerant system, often a covetous spirit exists amongst clergy; after all, moving up requires someone else moving up or out. This commandment provides an exercise in practicing what you preach. What if all pastors viewed their current assignment as enough? What if all congregants view their current pastor as enough? What keeps us from seeing one another, ourselves, and our current circumstances as enough – even while making room for improvement?
3. What would it look like and what would need to change within us for the covenant with God to be sufficient and the desire to move up to a higher ranked church, to have a bigger budget, or to have an enormous sanctuary were not factors in the pursuit of ministry?
4. When clergy have coveted their neighbor's church, what kind of impact has that had on the laity?
5. How might The Church seek to model obedience not just to this commandment but also to each of the Ten Commandments?
6. Was there a time in your life that you coveted something that belonged to your neighbor? What were the consequences?
7. Can you name other ways in which churches or leaders exhibit covetous behavior or have been complicit in fostering such behavior?
8. In addition to materials and spouses what else have we individually or collectively coveted?

# Pray About It: The Individual and Collective Impact of Un-Forgiveness (Forgiveness)

*Rev. Dr. Charles Dorsey, Associate, COR AME Church, Irvine CA (Pastor Mark Whitlock)*

20 August 2017

## **Prayer**

*God deal with our hearts and center our commitment to forgive regardless. Move us to trust you to manage others as we manage ourselves and put your first. AMEN.*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 6:14-15

## **Context**

People will sin against you. To this, the scripture leaves no question. More important is how you respond. You are responsible for you, not others. Your management of your response carries consequences for your relationship with God. How important is being in right relationship with God? What are you willing to let go or get over? How much do we value God's forgiveness? The choice is yours.

## **Exegesis**

Jesus is in the middle of his sermon on the mount, distributing much of the integral and uninterrupted and foundational philosophy associated with the behavior of those who will follow him. This is the close of Jesus's teaching on prayer. There is a connection between prayer and forgiveness. Jesus clearly articulates how God responds to the follower who does not forgive.

## **Conversation**

This text seems to be a conversation with the individual. It implies that God has an expectation of the believer individually. This means God has and desires an individual relationship with every believer. This means you can't blame lack of forgiveness on anyone else. It also implies that you can't expect anyone to forgive on your behalf. You must be willing to confront lack of forgiveness within for yourself. It also implies that prayer is a safe place to have this confrontation with your lack of forgiveness. Seemingly, the un-forgiveness (and even sin) of others is not the topic of discussion. In conversation with God is the place where you can admit you have un-forgiveness and commit to forgive once again. You can also demonstrate how important it is to have God's forgiveness in your own life.

### **Questions**

1. What would the world/your community if people chose to deal with their own forgiveness?
2. How has the lack of forgiveness impacted our life personally? Your family?
3. Why does Jesus place the responsibility on the individual to forgive?
4. Why do you believe Jesus associated forgiveness with prayer?

# A Mandate to Forgive (Forgiveness)

*Roger Richardson, Pastor, Christ Our Redeemer (Blackjack, MO)*

27 August 2017

## **Prayer**

*May the strength of God pilot us, may the wisdom of God instruct us, may the hand of God protect us, may the word of God direct us. In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Colossians 3:13

## **Context**

One of my favorite foods to enjoy with family and friends is pizza. However, I find that in some instances it is difficult to satisfy everyone in the group. Each person has toppings that they like and some that they are not so fond of. Most of the times we are able to reach a consensus but there are some occasions when there is an individual who just will not budge. In many ways working in the church or in a family can be like ordering a pizza. We have to make allowances for others in order to preserve unity and enjoy the benefits of the group. Sometimes we may get just what we want and at other times we may have to endure anchovies and pineapples.

## **Exegesis**

Paul reminds the Colossians that as believers they were recipients of God's Grace. Because of the sacrifice of Christ and for his sake God completely and totally forgave them of their sins. Central to Paul's argument for forgiveness is the recognition of two things. First: we are all imperfect. The scripture teaches us that "everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23 NLT). Secondly: a tremendous debt was paid for us by Christ on the cross that we are unable to repay.

## **Conversation**

This knowledge should humble the believer in such a way that it enables them to have compassion and tolerance for others' shortcomings. It is important to note that forgiveness is throughout the scripture and is a mandate not a request.

## **Questions**

1. How do we prepare our hearts so that we can forgive others?
2. In what ways does forgiveness promote unity in the body of Christ?
3. When we forgive others how does it impact our relationship with Christ?

# Making Room (Forgiveness)

*Roger Richardson, Pastor, Christ Our Redeemer (Blackjack, MO)*

3 September 2017

## Prayer

*May the strength of God pilot us, may the wisdom of God instruct us, may the hand of God protect us, may the word of God direct us. In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

Ephesians 4:31-32

## Context

Traveling whether for work or leisure can be both exciting and stressful. One of the chores that often invokes dread is packing for the trip. Determining what to take and what to leave behind can be a long and tedious process. Frequent travelers understand that leaving something essential behind can be either inconvenient and/or costly. Attempting to take too many things can generate overweight luggage fees at the airport or a shortage of space in a vehicle. As we travel to new places in our spiritual journey with Christ we must determine what types of behaviors are essential and which ones would be better left behind.

## Exegesis

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, identifies several habits that the members of the church should avoid. In fact, he appeals to the members to search their hearts and, if necessary, purge themselves of these unproductive ways. The traits that he identifies primarily deal with interpersonal relationships and the way we treat one another. He also identifies several habits that we should develop and make a center piece of our relationship with one another.

## Conversation

These traits identified in Ephesians 4 are the essential traits necessary for work in the kingdom. However, it would seem that these traits are rare in our communities. How do we account for this?

## Questions

1. What additional behaviors do you believe are detrimental to the body of Christ?
2. How can we work to promote a Christ-like environment in our homes and in the church?
3. Can you think of an incident when you successfully resolved a conflict in or out of the church and how did it make you feel?

# Forgive and Forget (Forgiveness)

*Roger Richardson, Pastor, Christ Our Redeemer (Blackjack, MO)*

10 September 2017

## **Prayer**

*May the strength of God pilot us, may the wisdom of God instruct us, may the hand of God protect us, may the word of God direct us. In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Matthew 18:21-22

## **Context**

Parenting is one of the many joys of life. It is an opportunity to mentor and observe a young person as they mature. Parents spend an inordinate amount of their time trying to educate and teach their children about the world around them. However, as they are teaching their children they are also learning from them. Children often have a unique perspective and a fresh outlook on life. They see things through untarnished lenses and communicate in nontraditional ways. One of the many unique characteristics of children is their ability to transition from one emotional state to another seamlessly. A child can be crying one moment and laughing the next. Their ability to forgive enables them to maintain friendships and learn about life without carrying the baggage of yesterday's disappointments.

## **Exegesis**

Jesus's reply to Peter's question must have been startling. Who could keep count if we had to forgive someone up to 490 times? In fact, that is the whole point of Christ's answer. We should not place limits on our ability to reconcile with our neighbors. We should not keep a record of wrongdoings that will prevent us from reconciling one with another. Instead we should develop a pattern of forgiveness that enables us to have room in our lives for those who have offended us to reconnect.

## **Conversation**

As adults, if we could learn to forgive without limits or hesitation, how much better would our relationships be with each other and Christ?

## **Questions**

1. How can we reestablish relationships with individuals that have offended us?
2. How can forgiving others have a positive impact on our lives?

# One with Another! (Forgiveness)

*Rev. Dorisalene Hughes, Coordinator, Bishop Sarah Francis Davis Covenant Keepers and Intercessors, St. Paul AME Church (Berkeley, CA)*

17 September 2017

## Prayer

*Lord Jesus, We simply come! We come to spend time with You in prayer and study! Moreover, we recognize that we come with baggage. Some of us are hurting, depressed, confused and even angry. You said to come to You, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)!*

*You said, "I can make your burdens light" (vs. 30). In this Season, we give it all to You, Heavenly Father, You who are the author and finisher of our faith. We confess that we often we are unaware there is unforgiveness in our hearts. Search us NOW! Reckon with us NOW! Show us how we act; our bad attitudes and even envy and jealousy that almost swallows us up!*

*We repent NOW! We want a fresh and clean slate. As we begin this study, we feel Your refreshing! PUSH us into a deeper study of YOUR WORD! Mold us! Our desire is that Your Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven! Therefore, we now see with supernatural eyes our execution of love in ways we could not fathom. We reinstate, O God, all we do is for Your Glory, not our Glory. Thank You for cleansing us, refreshing us and renewing us. No more baggage or worries! In this study we already feel Your lifting those awful hurts and wounds off our backs! With joy, we close this prayer in Your Redeeming Name JESUS! JESUS! JESUS! We give YOU thanks and praise for the study of YOUR WORD!*

## Scripture

Matthew 5:23-24

## Context

As we delve into this Scripture, we must first take an in depth look at the word reconcile. This verb is defined in the Cambridge On-Line Dictionary: "to adjust the way you think about a fact or situation that is opposed to another fact or situation so that you can accept both" (i.e. "[i]f two people are reconciled, they become friendly again after having argued so seriously that they kept apart; [a]fter two years of not speaking to one another, the two brothers were finally reconciled; [t]o reconcile yourself to a situation is to accept it even if it is unpleasant or painful, because it cannot be changed: [h]e has reconciled himself to the loss of the election and is moving on").

## Exegesis

As we read this text in verse 24 it says, “leave your gift there before the altar and go your way.” According to *The Interpreter’s Bible Volume VII* (1957):

It is idle for a man to try to maintain right relations with God through worship if he is not at peace with his neighbor”. As the Misnah says, “The day of Atonement atones for offenses of man against God., but it does not atone for offenses against man’s neighbor, til he reconciles with his neighbor” (Yoma 8:9). It is better to leave the church at the most sacred moment of worship than to delay a reconciliation.

When we go to our sister or brother we become friendly again. Why? Because It pleases God and it removes the hook that person has hooked us with. It is so important to swallow pride and move in God’s love. God has forgiven us numerous times.

Furthermore, let us consider 1 Corinthian 11:27-31: “Therefore, whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep[are dead]. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.”

### **Conversation**

We must do with “One Another” as God has ordained us to do. Once we do so, we then can flow in God’s power! When, we, as God’s servant children go to Him with clean hands and a pure heart, we find there’s no more feeling unworthy, harboring hatred or guilty or fear. We realize His love, grace and mercy has made us one with another! Therefore, we as God’s servants must go – no, must run to that brother and sister with a heart of forgiveness and reconciliation. We must let go of pride; let go of anger; let go of revenge; let go of hate; fear, guilt and feeling inferior to others! Can we do this in times like these? God is waiting for us to come.

### **Questions**

Who is it we need to go to in order to reconcile? Is it a family member, a pastor, a Bishop, a trustee, a WMS sister or brother, a best friend, a lay person or even a misguided teenager who has no knowledge of agape love or proper conduct for lack of training (Proverbs 22:6)? Who is it? During these next two weeks, let us challenge ourselves to begin to look within asking God to show us who we need to go to and reconcile.

# Come up from Your Graves! My Spirit is in You! (Forgiveness)

*Rev. Dorisalene Hughes, Coordinator, Bishop Sarah Francis Davis Covenant Keepers and Intercessors, St. Paul AME Church (Berkeley, CA)*

24 September 2017

## Prayer

*Our Father, Hallowed Be Thy Name:*

*Thank YOU for revelation knowledge of Your WORD! We are about to engage in a study of Ezekiel, one of Your great prophets. Ezekiel 37:14 reveals, You will pour Your Spirit in us, and we shall live. Furthermore, You promise You will place us in our land. Then we will know that You, Heavenly Father have performed Your WORD. By FAITH, we give thanks already for performing YOUR WORD through us and in us. Help us retain Your promises found in the Book of Ezekiel. In addition, after much meditation of Ezekiel and II Corinthians, we desire a deeper understanding of Your Spirit. Release the Holy Spirit within us to enhance our understanding. Give us Your power and wisdom to say I shall live and not stay in the valley of dry bones; but declare the works of YOU!*

*Breathe on us right now, we pray! Prophecy over! You loved Ezekiel so much so that He was able to prophesy over the bones in the valley and they came alive. We want to do the same thing with You being our helper to prophecy over our friends and family. We fervently pray for them, "Come up from your graves of hurt, anger, hopelessness, criticism, backbiting, despair, legalism, offense and unforgiveness." We know Your Spirit has always been in us!" Use us JESUS now that we are free from such spirits to bring more people to You than we did in 2016. We declare by YOUR Spirit, we as Your mighty change agents have already overcome the spirit of offense right now! Allow us to let things go and LIVE by the power of Your Redeeming Name JESUS!*

## Scriptures

Ezekiel 37:1-14; II Corinthians 2:5-8

## Context

As we examine the Scripture text, let us ask, what, when, who, where, how and why? Why did Ezekiel prophesy over a valley of dry bones? Why did Paul say to the Church of Corinth in verse 5, "But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent ..." Then in verse 8, "Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him."

How do we spiritually understand and grasp the saving importance of why we are to love the unlovable? How and when do we prophesy over dead individuals when we feel dead within ourselves? We ask God to breathe on us so we don't become like the valley of dry bones; becoming DRY because we find ourselves in a state of offense, hurt or anger. In *Prison to Praise* by Merlin Carothers, the author states, His grandfather had offended him by wanting him to come to church. He went begrudgingly and something happened. Years later he was at his grandfather's bed side when it was his time to die. He looked up at me and smiled. "Merlin," he said, "I kept my promise to God not to smoke or chew tobacco if you gave your life to Christ." Merlin Carothers said, "That Sunday night I couldn't wait to get home and read the Bible. I wanted to know God and I read hungrily page after page. I had a wonderful feeling of excitement inside...That night God had reached down inside of me, and I was changed into a new being.

### **Exegesis**

The vision of the Valley of dry bones was given to Ezekiel to reassure the exiles that the promises of God are secure. The word "graves" (v. 12) represents the foreign nations into which the Israelites were exiled. After being away from their homeland for so long, they felt like all their hope was gone. Nevertheless, God affirmed that He would bring them back to their homeland from wherever they were (vv. 12-14). His Spirit will be placed within Israel (v. 14, cf. also see Ezekiel 36:22-38, the reign of the Messiah will begin (vv. 24-25), the confirmation of the new covenant will be given (v. 22, cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34). The Hebrew Greek Bible (NIV) 1996 AMG International, INC.

### **Conversation**

Merlin Carothers was no longer in a valley of dry bones. God had breathed the breath of life when his grandfather transitioned to Glory. Just as it was written in Ezekiel 37:4, 5 "Again He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" (5) Thus says the Lord God to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live."

### **Questions**

Let's ask ourselves are we in graves because of offense or rebellion? Allow the Holy Spirit within you to come up from within! For His Spirit is in *you* to live life and live it more abundantly (John 10:10)!

# Forgiveness – The Power Lying Within (Forgiveness)

*Mr. Simeon Rhoden, President, Fifth District Lay Organization, First AME Church (Seattle, WA)*

1 October 2017

## Prayer

*Dear God, please help us to tap into the power lying within us through the guidance of your word. Amen.*

## Scripture

Luke 6:37

## Context

June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Charleston, SC, AME parishioners invited a young man into the basement of Emanuel AME Church, to join in on their bible study. What appeared to be a joyous occasion had a tragic end. The young man came with ulterior motives, and during that bible study, he terrorized those attending and killed nine innocent people. After the gunman was detained, he appeared in court one Friday morning to face the loved ones of the victimized. The message survivors and the relatives of the slain delivered was captivating: “We Forgive You!”

Examples of forgiveness shared by the loved ones were not only captivating, but powerful as well:

*"You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you,"* said a family representative for Ethel Lance, the 70-year-old grandmother who died in the massacre.

Felicia Sanders, who survived the shooting by pretending to be dead, also spoke about losing her son in the attack. *"Tywanza was my hero...may God have mercy on you."*

Another family member, Bethane Middleton-Brown, whose sister was killed, told the gunman, *"For me, I'm a work in progress and I acknowledge that I'm very angry. We have no room for hate. We have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."*

Chris Singleton, the son of victim Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, made this statement to those who expressed gratitude to him during the loss of his mother, *"Love is always stronger than hate, so if we just love the way my mom would, then the hate won't be anywhere close to where love is. We have come together as a community to try to get past these things. A tragedy has happened, but life is going to go on and things are going to get better."*

The examples from Charleston are examples of reality and are only possible through forgiveness. The kind of forgiveness that manifests in one's heart and that only God can foster. What a powerful story of forgiveness.

### Exegesis

Is it difficult to imagine how someone could forgive another for murdering his/her family member? Could you have done that? Most of us could not have, but that is the power lying within FORGIVENESS. Mathew 6: 14-15 (NIV) states, "14, For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15, But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." The power to forgive transforms us, and it can change others. At this time, take a few moments to reflect on the Emanuel AME Church massacre and compare it to Mathew 6: 14-15, to see what we can learn about showing extreme forgiveness to others.

### Conversation

The Emmanuel AME massacre forces me to think about those in my life that I struggle with, and God's call for me to forgive them, and my reluctance to do so. Maybe you are in the same boat with me. Romans 8:6-11 (NIV), with emphasis more on 10 – 11, details another example of forgiveness...the kind that speaks to the exhibition of Jesus Christ being first in your life:

*6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. 7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life [a] because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of [b] his Spirit who lives in you. [my italics and bold]*

With this in mind, it is incumbent upon us to understand that our lives will only be changed if we offer the people who have wronged us, extreme, Christ-like forgiveness. If we do not, we are eaten up on the inside, like cancer within the body. However, if we offer forgiveness, we get our lives back, and sometimes, help others get their lives back too.

### Questions

1. Rank the loved one's forgiveness on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "very difficult to do" and 10 being "very easy to do."
2. How do you define forgiveness?
3. Felicia Sanders' statement, who lost her son in the massacre said, "Tywanza was my hero...may God have mercy on you." Some say it was a stretched statement of forgiveness, what do you think?
4. In what ways do you think the survived lives were changed by forgiving the gunman?
5. Describe an example of when you forgave someone whom you felt may have wronged you.
6. Is there someone you feel you need to forgive?
7. Following reports show that the gunman had no remorse; do you think God had mercy on his soul through the intercessory prayer and those forgiving him?

So, you were asked about forgiveness, specifically, if there was anybody in your life that needed it. Chances are good that all of us have somebody who could stand to be forgiven by us. Just imagine if we go to them this week and say, "Hey, although I feel what you did to me was wrong, or what you said was wrong, or

*you didn't keep your promise, but I forgive you because I've been forgiven by Jesus Christ. I know how powerful forgiveness can be, and I want you to experience my forgiveness. I forgive you."* Think about what will happen! Now, think about what will not happen if you don't. I challenge each one of you right now to have the courage and faith in what Luke 6: 37 (NIV) says about forgiveness and not judging others, *"37, Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."* Take this scripture and the others we studied above, go, and forgive others this week. Changed lives only come through extreme forgiveness.

# Casting Stones: Don't Get Trapped! (Forgiveness)

Mr. Simeon Rhoden, President, Fifth District Lay Organization, First AME Church (Seattle, WA)

8 October 2017

## Prayer

*Lord God, we know that in the book of Romans, the author reminds us that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him...who have been called according to his purpose; with that in mind, we yield not unto temptation and please deliver us from doing evil. We ask you heavenly father to strengthen our knowledge and give us the wisdom to dodge the bullet. Let us be the priests you've called us to be and be mindful to forgive and love one another on purpose! These things we ask in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.*

## Scripture

John 8:7

## Context

Research explains that during those times, Jesus was constantly being tested, challenged, confronted, and dared by the religious leaders of His day. Frequently those leaders appeared to be upset with Jesus or disturbed by Jesus's ministry. Often, they would purposefully pose a question to Jesus to try to trap Him into saying or doing something that would allow them to charge Him with breaking a religious law.

## Exegesis

To understand what's happening here one has to go back and start reading at John 8:3-6:

Now the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand in the center of the court, and they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women [to death]. So what do You say [to do with her—what is Your sentence]?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. (AMP)

The penalty for adultery under Jewish law was death (Leviticus 20:10) for both the man and the woman. We see here that the Jewish leaders brought only the woman to Jesus for judgment. Now isn't that funny? What's unfortunate about this story is that we do not know why they didn't bring the man also...when the Jewish law was clear. The text says that she was "caught in the act"; therefore, the identity of the man must have been known also. The Jewish leaders might have only brought the woman to further test Jesus's reaction, or His knowledge of the Law. Regardless, this was a trap; it was the type of trap that we ourselves sometime face in our walk with God as Clergy and Lay Leaders.

Why were they trying to trap Jesus? We are compelled to believe that they hoped to halt Jesus's growing influence and popularity with the people. They also hoped that Jesus would incriminate Himself in such a way that they could charge Him with a crime, so as to put a stop to His ministry.

### **Conversation**

Relative to your journey, does this story sound familiar? These religious leaders were no match for Jesus. Then, Jesus replied to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). With these words, Jesus forced these religious men to search their own hearts for sin.

I can imagine that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, every little iniquity these men had perpetrated was replayed in their minds. They had arrived as self-righteous, arrogant, executioners and now the convicting power of the Holy Spirit was humbling them and forcing them to see that they were no more innocent than the woman they had brought to Jesus.

### **Questions**

1. When you are tested and tried, how do you feel? Moreover, how do you handle it?
2. What are some examples of how you've avoided the test?
3. When we are tested, what are some scriptures that can help us get through the situation in a Godly manner?
4. After you've been tested and tried, are you able to forgive?

Only the Holy Spirit can truly convict someone of his or her sin. We may have all the clever arguments we can memorize, and knowing the evidence for our faith is a good thing, but without the Holy Spirit's convicting power, our efforts will prove fruitless.

This event is an excellent story of Jesus's saving grace. Jesus judged the situation and, instead of condemning the woman, He forgave her and instructed her to repent; and we can be certain that He forgave those who tested Him. We could all take a lesson from Jesus in the way He handled the religious leaders. Instead of losing His temper, as we are often prone to do, He calmly stated truth and let the truth do its work. Many times, we attempt to force feed our beliefs into those with whom we are witnessing. Instead, we should simply speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and let the Holy Spirit work that truth into their heart.

# Bearing Witness! (Forgiveness)

Rev. Sandra Smith Blair, Associate, St. Paul  
AME Church (Berkeley, CA), Former  
President of the Connectional Women In  
Ministry

15 October 2017

## Prayer

*Jesus our Lord, the author and finisher of our faith, You are our inspiration to hold fast to our faith knowing the sacrifice of love You made for our salvation. We seek your spiritual guidance and strength to resist influences that would compromise and challenge our faith, and we ask Your forgiveness for the times when we have failed to be faithful. Strengthen our commitment to be "A Holy Nation" living for You and giving witness to You in our words and actions. Amen!*

## Scripture

Acts 7:59-60

## Context

We live in country where the right to freely practice our religious faith is protected by the Constitution, but elsewhere in the world, Christians are persecuted for their beliefs. In his 1963 book, *Strength To Love*, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: "There are some things so dear...so precious...so eternally true, that they are worth dying for...if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." Does our faith mean this much to us?

## Exegesis

Stephen, a Spirit- and faith-filled man, was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist with feeding members of the early Church in Jerusalem. Falsely accused of blasphemy and angering members of the Sanhedrin Council with his theological interpretation of the Messiah, he was stoned to death by a lynch mob. Like Jesus, Stephen's death was unjust, and with compassion and concern he prayed for his murderers to be forgiven for their ignorance. However, unlike Jesus, Stephen defined their actions as sin though he prayed that God not hold their sin against them. Stephen is the first Christian martyr, a word translated from the Greek term for "witness" (Achtemeir, p. 657), signifying that in his death with power and grace he bore witness to his faith in the risen Christ. Stephen died triumphant and victorious for the cause of his risen Lord and Savior.

## Conversation

We do not face the threat of persecution and martyrdom like countless Christians who have died for their faith. However, our faith is often challenged by secular culture, political exigency and social influences; and our faithfulness compromised by our personal priorities, relationships, complacency and indifference.

As believers in Christ, we are all called to be faithful witnesses through the testimony of our words and actions, as well as through our commitment to embody God's love, justice and peace in redemptive ways. The Fifth Episcopal District's focus this year on a Season of Purification and Penance inspires us individually and collectively to examine our shortcomings and seek God's forgiveness, asking: "Lord, do not hold this sin against me".

### Questions

1. What sacrifices would you be prepared to make for your faith?
2. In what way(s) is our faith compromised or challenged?
3. How faithful are you in bearing witness to Jesus Christ?
4. What spiritual practices do we as individuals and congregations need to cultivate?
5. What do we as "A Holy Nation" need to do to bear witness to our faith?

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# Wiping the Slate Clean! (Forgiveness)

Rev. Sandra Smith Blair, Associate, St. Paul  
AME Church (Berkeley, CA), Former  
President of the Connectional Women In  
Ministry

22 October 2017

## Prayer

*Precious God of grace and mercy, we acknowledge our human limitations and shortcomings that keep us from fully opening ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. We seek to become more Christ-like in our faith and our relationship with You. As we follow the example of Your Son, our Savior Jesus, we desire to grow in love and grace and to release the bonds that keep us from forgiving. Wipe clean the slate of our souls, hearts and minds that we may be free to forgive as You desire us to and to extend mercy to all. Thank You for Your all-sufficient grace. Amen!*

## Scripture

Luke 23:33-34

## Context

Forgiving is one of the most difficult things for human beings to do. We oftentimes associate it with being at fault, and the other person being right. It takes wisdom, maturity and compassion to develop the awareness that people who hurt or wrong us may not really know how their actions or words affect us. It is hard enough to forgive those who do not intentionally mean to wound us, but it is challenging to forgive those who do so deliberately. It is said that to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner is you. Being able to free ourselves from the negative emotions of unforgiveness wipes the slate clean and enables us to experience healing.

## Exegesis

Although Luke's Gospel contains more references to forgiveness than the other Gospels, some early manuscripts do not include verse 34, and scholars believe this passage was inserted at a later date. It defies the prevailing social convention of reciprocity which demanded that forgiveness be limited to one's family and possibly to one's kin, but not be extended to one's enemies. The very reason for Jesus's incarnation was to reconcile a sinful humanity to God. Despite the opposition, rejection and abuse He faced in His earthly ministry, Jesus always demonstrated divine compassion, grace, mercy, and concern. In the throes of His Passion He prayed without condemnation for forgiveness of His enemies who did not really know or accept that He was the Messiah. He wiped the slate clean so He was free in spirit to complete His mission of redemption.

### Conversation

Jesus gave us a living example of what the nature of God in us requires of us. As challenging as it may be to live out, we must love unconditionally as He did, be as willing to forgive as He was, and be the instrument of peace and reconciliation that He was. He taught the importance of forgiving because we cannot expect to be forgiven if we are unwilling to forgive each other. God's Spirit enables us to wipe the slate clean so we can like Jesus repay evil with good, and overcome ignorance with mercy and grace.

### Questions

1. What is your personal testimony about forgiveness and mercy?
2. Do you need to reconcile a relationship and what steps are you willing to take to do so?
3. What is the importance of forgiveness and mercy in edifying the life of a congregation?
4. How can the principles forgiveness be integrated into the Christian Education ministry of your local church?
5. How do we as the members of "A Holy Nation" wipe our slates clean?

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# It's No Ghost Story, It's For Real (Lent/Resurrection (Culmination))

Rev. Sandra Smith Blair, Associate, St. Paul AME Church (Berkeley, CA), Former President of the Connectional Women In Ministry

29 October 2017

## Prayer

*Holy and living Redeemer, we celebrate Your presence that quells doubt and despair, restores faith and hope, and renews joy. We praise You for being very real in our lives and for opening our minds to new possibilities, our hearts to greater love, our spirits to God's power, and our souls to Your grace and salvation. Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to see You in all creation, emboldens us to be witnesses to the renewing power of Your resurrection, and inspires us to share the life-transforming message of Your love and grace. Amen!*

## Scripture

Luke 24:13-49

## Context

Belief in the supernatural has been part of human history but it is a challenge to understand mysteries beyond human knowledge and phenomena that cannot be explained scientifically or verified by our physical senses of sight, hearing, feeling, taste and smell. For some it is imaginative fiction while others accept it as very real.

## Exegesis

The Bible affirms the existence of a spiritual realm not visible to the human eye. The Biblical world believed in spirit beings, some angelic and some demonic, who appeared to or possessed people. The disciples knew the tomb was empty but not where Jesus's body was, and they were in disbelief when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them. He joined two of the disciples walking to Emmaus who did not recognize Him until they sat down to eat; then in Jerusalem He appeared first to Simon Peter and later to the group of disciples. Terrified and confused, they assumed they were seeing a ghost until Jesus showed them His hands and feet, let them touch Him, then ate a piece of fish demonstrate that He was really alive, not a disembodied ghost – dispelling their doubts and restoring their joy and hope. He reinforced what He had taught them in His earthly ministry: 1) the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah's passion and death, His rising on the third day, and His entering His glory; 2) the coming of God's kingdom of justice and peace; 3) the promise of divine power they would receive through the Holy Spirit;

and 4) their mission to evangelize all nations and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name.

### **Conversation**

Like the disciples, our rational minds don't easily accept supernatural phenomena and we may have difficulty understanding divine mysteries such as seeing someone we knew had died! Unlike us, they did not have the New Testament account of Jesus's resurrection and they had not yet fully comprehended His divinity or the reality and meaning of His resurrection. We profess belief in the Gospel record of Jesus's mission, ministry and teachings. But unless we live with the expectation of His presence in our midst, we will fail to recognize Jesus in the world around us – in the people we encounter – in situations that occur in life. As Christian disciples we must take seriously the commission of being witnesses to His saving grace and power.

### **Questions**

1. What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God?
2. How do we understand and explain the significance of Jesus's resurrection?
3. How does seeing Jesus in others shape our relationship and ministry with them?
4. How do we strengthen our commitment to sharing the Good News of a Risen Savior?
5. How can we as "A Holy Nation" participate in the realization of God's kingdom on earth?

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