



52

Weekly Readings for Your Journey

By Krin Van Tatenhove

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FOR YOUR JOURNEY

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*Dedicated to Donna, who has quietly and unfailingly offered me
and so many others the gift of unconditional love.*

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the
renewing of your mind. – Romans 12:2a*

PREFACE

On my nightstand are devotionals from various viewpoints. I devour them on a daily basis. Not each of them nourishes me that instant, but over time I find morsels of wisdom in all of them.

The same will be true with the entries in this book. If even a few add value to your journey, I have served the common good. I thank you in advance for reading.

I have one disclaimer. These thoughts arise from my evolving Christian perspective. This is not always explicit but remains there in the background.

So please know this: I value the sanctity of *all* spiritual paths that lead to love. To better understand what I mean, please jump ahead and read **Week 32: Relationships, Not Religion**. If not all my language resonates for you, if Christian symbols and seasons don't spark your heart, I hope the underlying message still shines. I believe it has universal appeal, as do the deeper truths of great faiths everywhere.

Most mornings, just before dawn, I nestle into the old couch on our front decking. We live in the country, removed from light pollution, so I clearly see the stars. I hear birds stirring for a new day. The breeze brings smells of grass and the nearby ocean.

With a cup of java in one hand and a devotional in the other, I begin my daily reflections. At the center of this quiet time is a profound and inescapable truth: the 24 hours that lie ahead of me will never return. How can I use them to grow as a human being connected to God and others? How can I evolve more fully into the unique individual God created me to be? How can I be a citizen of the world, not just my own skin and culture?

Friends, I'm with you on this sojourn.

WEEK 1 - JANUARY: DEGREES OF SEPARATION FOR A NEW YEAR

Have you heard the term *six degrees of separation*? It's the notion that each one of us is only six intros away from any other person on the planet. Also called *the small earth theory*, it has generated lots of controversy. Some claim they've tested the hypothesis and proved it true. Others scoff, saying it's a myth. Some have used it as a platform for social change, like Kevin Bacon and his charitable website sixdegrees.org.

As we enter a new year, I invite you to think of six degrees in another way.

Imagine two people standing side by side, facing due north. Take one of them and adjust her angle a mere six degrees. Now imagine the two setting out, walking steadily. Eventually they arrive at vastly different places, the distance between them growing more noticeable over time.

Here's my point. Crossing the threshold into a new year, we love to talk about change. Even if we don't make resolutions, we all have areas of our lives that need remodeling. What is your desire? Breaking through in a relationship? Achieving better health through weight loss, diet, and exercise? Advancing or changing your career? Getting new education? Overcoming an addiction that has plagued you? Sticking to a regular regimen of prayer and meditation?

I admire possibility thinkers, those who believe that with God's help all things are achievable. Considering the negative media that bombards us, no wonder someone like Joel Osteen attracts crowds with his unrelenting message of slaying giants, moving mountains, enjoying extreme makeovers. People are desperately thirsty for hope.

But here's the reality. Sometimes our colossal dreams seem impossibly distant. The obstacles in our way are precipitous. We have heavy mental baggage based on past failures.

Look at the roadside of a New Year. See the wreckage of abandoned resolve. See the well-meaning starts bogged down in mud because we tried too much, too hard, too fast. For some of us, just the thought of how far we have to go drives us back to the couch with a remote-control clicker in our hand.

I have a different suggestion. Join me on a simpler journey. Over the first weeks of this new year, we will focus on small adjustments to our lives that will gradually take us to exciting new locales. These are not sudden, radical rebirths. This is not an ad shouting, "I lost 80 pounds in 30 days!" These are changes implemented one degree at a time that, nonetheless, can still chart miracles.

John Wooden, one of history's most successful college basketball coaches, shared the key of his winning philosophy. "When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur. Not tomorrow, not the next day, but eventually you make a big gain. Don't look for huge, quick improvements. See the small improvements one day at a time. That's the only way it happens. And when it happens, it lasts."

Let's travel together into this New Year. Let's believe in lasting change that happens one day at a time, one week at a time, one step at a time, degree by degree.

WEEK 2 - JANUARY: DEGREES OF UNPACKING

Many of us entered this year with extra weight. I don't mean holiday rolls on our waists. I mean emotional baggage, attitudes of heart and mind that encumber us. How can we put this luggage away so we don't trip over it? Even small degrees of unpacking can change our courses. Consider laying down these burdens for a freer new year.

Regrets over Past Mistakes

We are not our past failures. Even if last year was full of stumbles, our futures are clean, fresh, and wide open to possibility. We are what we begin choosing this moment. When regret enters our minds, we can redirect our thinking with strong words like these: *the past is gone; I can let it go, and with God's unlimited help I can forge a brighter future!*

Katherine Mansfield once said, "Make it a rule of life to never regret and never look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can't build on it; it's only for wallowing."

False Self Images

It's amazing how we cling to crippling self-images. We may have internalized them from family, friends, ex-spouses, or a culture that worships the best and brightest. These images become fatalistic; we predict our future based on past performance. We buy into thoughts such as *I've always* or *I've never been able to*. These are lies! One of the most remarkable qualities of being human is our capacity to change. When limited opinions of ourselves arise, we can redirect our thinking with powerful words like these: *I was created for a unique purpose, and with God's help, I can discover new aspects of this purpose day by day.*

In the 12 Step Program which helped saved my life, we talk about *stinking thinking*, thought patterns wired into our minds through years of habit. Detecting these deceits as they arise is the beginning of wisdom.

Resentments

I believe there's been an error in traditional Christian teaching. Churches lecture us that forgiveness is a moral imperative. We are obliged to forgive because God commands it. OK, but here's a truth we often miss. God says to forgive because it liberates us. We set a prisoner free and realize that prisoner was us.

ALWAYS forgive and move on, even if the other person doesn't seek your mercy. Do it for you. When resentment arises, redirect your thinking with vital words like these: *I forgive because time is short and I want to be free!*

Letting go of regrets, false self-images, and resentments - even one degree a day - can chart new courses to peace and joy.

In one of my devotionals, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, are these words:

“You are made to carry only the weight of twenty-four hours, no more. If you weigh yourself down with the years behind and the days ahead, your back breaks. God has promised to help you with the burdens of THIS day. Don't be foolish enough to gather burdens from the past and carry them. Forget what lies behind you and breathe in the blessings of each new day.”

WEEK 3 - JANUARY: DEGREES OF RE-CREATION

What do you do for recreation? Golf, hike, fish, travel, dance some Zumba, dine at your favorite eatery?

Now, what do you do for re-creation? Do you set time apart to reboot, cleanse your vision, receive a balanced perspective on life? How do you fill the cup of your spirit?

If you're fortunate, your answers to these questions may be identical. Perhaps you're a golfer who lets the rustic serenity of a course restore your peace of mind. Perhaps you're like a fisherman friend of mine. When he's wading in the surf, casting over sunlit water, the catch is less important than the moment. Smelling the brine, watching sea birds wheel and dive, makes time stand still. His soul renews.

But let's be honest. How many golfers do you know who spend the entire round cursing, muttering, berating their poor play? How many fishermen grow quickly impatient, second-guessing their bait or tackle, always pushing to a new spot? How many travelers try to see everything, so obsessed with their itineraries they never truly unwind?

I love to hike America's tallest mountains. For me, high country trekking is a pathway to God. Yet I've been with mountaineers whose main focus was *bagging the summit*. They pushed relentlessly, bypassing panoramic views until they signed the register at the top. Wham, bam, thank you peak!

We have a genetic need to slow down and re-create. It happens when we intentionally schedule activities that increase our conscious contact with God.

Consider King David who spent his early years as a shepherd in pastoral settings. It sounds idyllic, a chance for

ongoing renewal. But even then, David realized he could tend to his sheep without tending to his soul. So God got David's attention. We hear this in the immortal words of Psalm 23: "He MAKES me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul."

Friends, too many of us are stressed and harried by multiple demands. We neglect re-creation at risk to our spiritual and physical health. I implore you to make the time. There are so many activities that can rejuvenate us, as varied as our personalities. Here are a few I've witnessed.

- Spending an intimate evening with your spouse.
- Conversing vulnerably with a friend who loves you.
- Walking a country road at dawn.
- Reading scripture and praying in a quiet place.
- Sleeping under the stars.
- Listening to your favorite music.
- Riding your horse in the country, or your motorcycle on a sunlit highway.
- Sitting along the shoreline and breathing ocean air.
- Creating a poem, a garden, a new photograph.

The possibilities are endless. Choose your own activity, but measure its success by how recharged you feel in facing the day ahead of you.

Re-creative time gives benefits that are priceless. The crescendo of Psalm 23 highlights them beautifully: "My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Whoever is reading this, I pray you will find a way to fill your cup!

WEEK 4 - JANUARY: DEGREES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

There's a story told that prior to meeting Yoko Ono, John Lennon attended a showing of her experimental art. Lying on a table was a kaleidoscope. Lennon lifted it to his eye. Emblazoned across billowing white clouds was the single word YES! Lennon said that Yoko was like that as a partner - a constant source of encouragement.

Are you an encourager, a fountain of faith? Are you on the lookout for ways to bolster the confidence of your family, friends, and coworkers? I hope so! Even small degrees of change in this area can alter our life courses dramatically. The following practices help us create environments conducive to healing. We literally shape our realities, suffusing them with the oxygen of hope and joy.

Begin with you. Many people, me included, find it helpful to write down personal affirmations. These can be descriptions of our praiseworthy qualities, beginning with "you are..." They can be predictions of personal triumph, beginning with "you can..." or "you will..."

This is not egotistical. Jesus exhorted us to love others as we love ourselves. Healthy esteem is the foundation of abundant life. As one author says, "You can explore the universe looking for somebody more deserving of your love and affection than you, but you will not find that person anywhere." I have three affirmations for this year and I have vowed to read them every morning. They are already rewiring my brain for success.

Begin with self then pour out encouragement to others in a number of ways.

First, as James Taylor sang, shower the people you love with love. Just say *I love you*. Too many husbands and

wives long for these three sweet words. Too many children don't hear them enough. Too many parents get taken for granted. Too many friends don't know how much we treasure their loyalty and influence. *I love you* says so much!

Second, use words that praise. Look deep into the lives of others, past their flaws, and find their best qualities. Let them know you see these gems. People often forget how uniquely God has created them; our focus gives them perspective.

Third, use words that give courage. This very day, people will cross your path who are struggling with weighty problems. Let them know that both you and God believe in them; that you will do everything possible to help them overcome.

Finally, back up all these words with actions. Be generous with your time, talent, and treasure as you go the extra mile. Walking alongside someone during their trials is a vital display of support.

For Christians, Jesus can be our greatest source of encouragement. His love shows us how precious we are to our God. His grace picks us up and restores us when we stumble. His example of sacrifice spurs us on to serve others.

Remember that kaleidoscope? Imagine lifting it to your eye and reading these words from II Corinthians 1:20. "No matter how many promises God has made, they are "YES in Christ!" Be encouraged, my friends!

WEEK 5 - JANUARY: DEGREES OF PASSION

Here's an unlikely source for a quote: rapper and entrepreneur Sean Combs (aka P. Diddy). Launching a brand of perfume in 2005, he used the tag line, *Life without passion is unforgivable.*

That may be bad theology, but it should get our attention. Let me ask some questions.

Do you know an older couple still visibly in love despite weathering tough seasons of change, even tragedy?

Have you met people whose careers are callings, daily enterprises that make them delighted to go to work?

Do you know individuals inspired by a cause? When they speak of helping others or the environment, do their spirits flare with purpose?

Have you met someone who goes beyond the rituals of religion to discover vibrant faith, a spiritual fervor that touches everyone around them?

When we hear such questions, we may adopt a common defense, saying, "Sure, I've met - *or at least seen* - people like that. But with the demands and limitations of my life, there's not much room for passion. I'm doing all I can just to get by!" Or, "Honey, if you were my age, you'd be happy to get out of bed!"

Say it again, P. Diddy: *Life without passion is unforgivable.*

This is our final look at degrees of separation for a new year. These are my prayers for you, which I hope will echo throughout the months to come.

If you have a partner who shares your life, I pray you will do everything possible to kindle new intimacy. Let this closeness become the genesis of passion.

No matter what kind of work you do to survive, I pray you will see it in a fresh light. I have a friend who is a school janitor. He decided that in his daily interactions with staff and students, he would become a constant source of encouragement. His positive approach has made him a living legend on campus.

Beyond your vocation, I pray you will find an avocation for the common good. Let God give you eyes and ears to see and hear the suffering of people around you. Discover a conviction to serve them.

If you attend a local church, supporting its ministry and participating in its sacraments, here is my prayer. Dig deeper. Find relationship in the midst of religion, a burning encounter with the Spirit that ignites your faith.

We call the final moments of Jesus' life his Passion. Why? Because he believed so deeply in his message of love and grace that he was willing to sacrifice his life for it. Each of us is already pouring out our life for something. Does it have an element of passion? Is it worthy of our best efforts? Will it stand the test of time?

Life without passion may not be unforgivable, but it is surely lamentable. Don't look back in regret. Discover your zeal now, degree by degree. And please know this: even if we've never met, God loves you and so do I. I'm praying for the spark of your enthusiasm to ignite as we journey together over the months ahead.

WEEK 6 - FEBRUARY: LEARNING THE LANGUAGES OF LOVE

Our ancient bus was climbing into the Peruvian Andes when we stopped at a mountain village. A woman dressed in bright traditional garb got on board, holding her young daughters' hands. They settled on the seat behind us. My own daughter, Hanna, and I had been enjoying the sights of our adventure, talking about life, relationships, spirituality. Suddenly Hanna switched to Spanish, turned around, and engaged our new passengers in dialogue. Ten minutes later, she and the girls were laughing and learning each other's songs in two tongues.

Being multilingual is a blessing. It creates bridges to new people, new cultures, and new ways of thinking. This is equally true for the idioms of love. As Valentine's Day approaches, here's a question: Do you speak the love language of your significant other?

Many of you are familiar with this notion. It comes from *The Five Love Languages*, a landmark book by Dr. Gary Chapman. His premise is simple. Each of us has a distinct way we experience love most fully. Knowing our own love language helps us ask for what we need. Learning our mates' allows us to serve them and connect more intimately.

Chapman says each of us has a *love tank* that needs regular filling. If both tanks in a relationship run low, there is dissatisfaction and misunderstanding. This can happen even when partners feel they are adequately expressing their love. The problem is they are not speaking each other's language.

Here's a hypothetical example. Imagine a man who has the love language called *acts of service*. He shows love by doing things for others, assisting them in practical ways. He labors hard at his job, brings home the spoils, then works

around the house. He doesn't need thanks. When people help him in the same manner, it fills his tank. He doesn't understand why his wife is often moody and distant. Can't she see how much he does for her? What he hasn't realized is that her love language is *words of affirmation*. He needs to learn how to compliment her, bolstering her with words of encouragement and praise.

I speak from experience. My own love language is *physical touch*, so I felt that being affectionate with my wife, Donna, was an adequate expression of my feelings. However, Donna's love language is *quality time*. This takes a variety of forms - day trips, dinners out, shopping together, sitting and talking. The activity is less important to Donna than the fact that I want to spend time with her. Learning to speak Donna has made all the difference in our marriage.

The five love languages are *words of affirmation*, *quality time*, *gifts*, *acts of service*, and *physical touch*. Take an online quiz to discover your own at 5lovelanguages.com. Consider reading the book. I prescribe it to couples of all ages, and I continue to practice what I preach. Each year, I take Donna on a romantic Valentine adventure: just the two of us, quality time.

Happy Valentine's Day!

WEEK 7 - FEBRUARY: MEMENTO MORI

Thomas Gray, English poet of the 18th century, found inspiration for his masterpiece, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, while walking through a cemetery. The headstones were of the humble poor, people this world never honored. Yet he reminded all of us—rich or poor, famous or obscure—to consider life's brevity. Everyone awaits *the inevitable hour*, for *the paths of glory lead but to the grave*.

I thought of Gray as I wandered the windswept vistas of Old San Juan Cemetery in Puerto Rico. I have never seen a more stunning burial site. Above it towers El Morro Fort, the oldest Spanish fortification in the western hemisphere. Below it is the crashing Atlantic, battering rocks as it has for millennia. Seagulls ride the wind currents.

Many famous Puerto Ricans rest there, including actors, politicians and artists. Some died centuries ago. Striking statues of Christ and angels rise from their marble tombs. In the center of the grounds is a circular chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalene, first person to see Jesus after his resurrection.

I was scanning the panorama when my eyes rested on one gravestone in particular: a man named Jesus Rodriquez. He died the exact year I was born. Thought I knew nothing about him, this random link with the past had a sudden, eerie effect on me.

I sat on the ground and closed my eyes.

Do you have moments when time stands still?
Moments when a lifetime's memories hover around you?
Moments when you realize clearly what Moses said in Psalm 90: "We are like grass that flourishes in the morning; by evening it is gone."

This coming week, many will begin their journey through Lent at an Ash Wednesday service. It's an ancient tradition with two purposes. First, it calls us to examine our hearts, to repent of anything that dishonors God or others. Second, it reminds us of our mortality. As we receive the ash cross on our foreheads, we hear: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return."

Monks during the Middle Ages often carried a reminder of death in their pocket called a *memento mori*. The Latin means, "Remember, you will die." The item might have been a bone or a small carving of a skull.

This may sound morbid, but let me tell you something. Many of us are so rushed and worried that we rarely pause to savor the preciousness of a given day.

Back to that moment in the San Juan Cemetery. It did not depress me or weigh me down. Instead, it was a tonic. I breathed the ocean air. I watched magnificent clouds sail overhead. I thanked God for the gift of life, and I vowed to live my own brief days as fully as possible.

I sensed movement in my peripheral vision. I turned and saw my wife, Donna, walking towards me. She smiled and waved. It was February 14, Valentine's Day. This Puerto Rican getaway was my gift to her. I thought, "Does she know how much I love her? Does she know that there is no one else I would rather travel through time with?"

She would before the day passed. I stood to join her.

**WEEK 8 - FEBRUARY:
FATHER, FORGIVE THEM**
(beginning a series on Jesus' final words)

Many Catholic sanctuaries feature the Stations of the Cross. Individually, each stop on Jesus' *Via Dolorosa* can be deeply moving. One of my favorite paintings is *Head of Christ* by Correggio. It hangs in the J. Paul Getty Museum. Jesus stares with haunting eyes from the veil Veronica reputedly rubbed across his brow, miraculously transferring his image. One of the stations commemorates that intimate moment.

Protestants do not affirm all the stations, since a few stem from church tradition, not scripture. But even though we have differences as we travel through Lent, we also have much in common. Together we can hear Jesus' final words from the cross - seven phrases echoing through eternity. In the coming weeks we will examine these words as a Lenten discipline, taking them chronologically from the Gospels. They teach us valuable lessons about God and ourselves.

The first recorded phrase Jesus spoke while being executed is a short prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What a startling petition! Think of it. At his moment of deepest suffering, Jesus did not focus on himself, but others: the religious leaders who condemned him, Pontius Pilate who collaborated, the soldiers who scourged him, the crowds who mocked him, the disciples who deserted him.

Sermons on selfless love often use these words as a centerpiece. Recently, I heard Pastor Charles Stanley's interpretation. "What right do we have," he asked, "to refuse forgiveness to another person when God has shown each of us such mercy?"

While filming *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson used his own hand to pound the nails into Jesus. Why? “Because it was me that put him on the cross,” said Gibson. “It was my sins.” The hymn, *Ah, Holy Jesus*, says it this way. *Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is I, Lord Jesus, who denied you. I crucified you.*

If you have never felt in need of forgiveness, this sounds like nonsense. But if you have clearly seen your character defects, you realize your complicity in Jesus’ death. Further, if you have experienced his overwhelming love and grace, you know the power of the cross. It reveals the heart of God to us!

Seen from this light, Stanley’s question is perfect to ponder during Lent. How can we hold on to an unforgiving attitude as we look upon Christ’s suffering?

What if Jesus had taken the cowardly route, giving in to rage or retaliation? We would have lost history’s greatest pattern for hope in this eye-for-an-eye world. We would not understand how to overcome the violence that still threatens to undo us so many centuries after Golgotha.

But we have seen his example. And he is telling us to pick up our own crosses and follow him. Will we be obedient?

Friends, to honor these first words Jesus spoke on the cross, please forgive every person who has wronged you. Do it now. Set yourself free through the power of God’s love. Let your actions give witness to the One who has showered us with mercy.

**WEEK 9 - FEBRUARY:
TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**

My family and I were strolling along the quaint streets of Virginia City, Nevada. After the discovery of the Comstock Silver Lode in 1858, this boomtown got the nickname *Richest City in America*. That glory is long gone, but its wooden sidewalks and mining museums lovingly recreate the past.

We paused in front of a general store. Plastered on its window was a poster for a biker church. Photos showed the leaders - road hogs inked with tattoos of crosses and Bible verses.

Bold letters proclaimed: *All outcasts welcome! All homeless, poor, sick, handicapped, blind, deaf, street people, widows, orphans, runaways, addicts, criminals, prostitutes, lonely people, old folks, kids of all ages, crazies, hardcore bikers, independents and anybody else!*

I smiled, remembering the night Jesus ate dinner with Zacchaeus, a despicable tax collector. The Pharisees immediately criticized him for associating with sinners. His response was, "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

I knew he would cheer these bikers. I laughed, pumped my fist in the air, and said "Praise the Lord!"

Today we come to the second phrase Jesus spoke in his final moments. It is fitting to find it in Luke's Gospel. Luke was a physician and Gentile, a unique combo. He had a healer's heart, and he was grateful that Jesus included him, a non-Jew, in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Luke filled his Gospel with a passion for underdogs: prostitutes, Samaritans, lost sheep, lepers, prodigal sons and daughters.

These final moments on the cross are no exception. Two criminals hang alongside Jesus. The Greek word Luke uses to describe these men means *armed and dangerous*, outlaws who undoubtedly took the lives of others.

One of them looks at Jesus and says sarcastically “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” The other, aware of his own guilt, says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” In Aramaic, the phrase *remember me* meant *deliver me!* Jesus doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t condemn the man for his past, lecture him about scripture, or withhold his love for even a second. He simply says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Let us learn from this. Too many of us judge others by their pasts, their social pedigrees, even their appearances. Can we welcome a death row criminal as readily as Jesus did? Do we embrace outcasts, the people Luke championed so many centuries ago?

Our churches are not country clubs for the comfortably saved. They are emergency rooms for the hurting, confused, and desperate. When they pass our portals, do they find the same welcome Jesus extended to that nameless criminal?

How wide is the circle of our grace? How hospitable are we to those deemed undesirable in the eyes of the world?

There could be no greater Lenten discipline than expanding the breadth of our love.

**WEEK 10 - MARCH:
WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON
...HERE IS YOUR MOTHER**

Behold one of the most poignant moments of scripture.

The crowds who followed Jesus now desert him. Only John the disciple and three women stand near his cross: mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the wife of Clopas.

Jesus looks at his mother, then to John. He says, “Woman, here is your son.” Then to John, “Here is your mother.”

It’s a brief moment, frozen in time, richly layered with meaning. In his book *Final Words from the Cross*, Adam Hamilton peels back those layers.

First, Jesus is obedient to the commandment, “Honor thy father and mother...” He puts concern for Mary ahead of his pain.

Second, we recall the vital role women played in Jesus’ ministry - traveling with him, financing his needs, keeping the vigil while others fled. In just hours, Mary Magdalene would lead a group of women to the empty tomb.

Third, we see a new kind of family emerging, one where the Spirit transcends natural descent. Truly, the church universal is a kinship united by the one blood of Christ.

But the most moving element of this scene is Mary herself. Those who have lost a child can begin to understand her agony. Here is her son, savagely beaten, just moments from his final breath. Surely she reached out to comfort him, but the Roman guards held her back.

There's a moment in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Jesus is carrying his cross towards Golgotha and crumples on the Jerusalem pavement. Mary is watching, and her memory flashes back to his childhood. He is playing in the dusty streets of Nazareth when he stumbles and falls. She ran to him then; she runs to him again.

Seated in the theater that night, many of us could not hold back our emotions. Tears streamed down our cheeks, an empathy with Mary's sorrow.

There are many symbolic terms for Mary. One is the Greek word *Theotokos*, meaning *God-bearer*, reminding us that no other human being has had a more intimate relationship with God this side of heaven. Another term for Mary is *Second Eve*. Through the first Eve, we lost Eden. But the fruit of Mary's womb, Jesus the Christ, opened the way to paradise for us again.

I once stood in St. Peter's Basilica viewing Michelangelo's timeless masterpiece, *The Pieta*. Mary is holding Jesus just moments after his death. She had rocked him as a baby and nurtured him throughout his life; now she cradles his limp body and mourns.

I have never prayed a *Hail Mary*. I have never crossed myself in reverence before a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe. I did not light a votive candle at the traveling exhibit of Our Lady of Fatima.

But with Christians all over this planet - past and present - I will say, "Blessed are you Mary, mother of God! It was not just your Son's passion that set us free. It was yours as well!"

**WEEK 11 - MARCH:
MY GOD, MY GOD,
WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?**

Mother Teresa, who died in 1997, is still a role model for me and countless millions. Her sacrificial service to the poor was miraculous. She gives perpetual hope that we can die to ourselves and follow the way of the cross.

So it was shocking when her personal letters came to light in 2007. They revealed a tormented soul. In her own words, "I have a deep longing for God, but I'm repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal. Saving souls holds no attraction. Heaven means nothing. Pray for me, please, that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything."

A friend asked me, "How do you feel now about your hero?" I said, "It makes me appreciate her even more."

Why? Because most of us have periodic doubts, seasons when God seems distant, when the supposed comforts of faith are lifeless. It's a shared human experience to struggle on our spiritual journeys.

So take comfort in the fourth phrase Jesus spoke from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This verse is controversial. Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human. How can God abandon God's self? Surely, as many say, Jesus was simply quoting the first line of Psalm 22 to gain comfort in the darkness.

Luke and John did not include these words in their Gospels; they seemed to diminish the majesty of Jesus. But many of us feel the opposite. As he shouted this cry of abandonment, Jesus identified fully with our condition. He became one with our frailty. It makes him even more of a sympathetic Savior.

In his mind, I'm sure Jesus knew that God had not

forsaken him. But in his heart, that's how he felt. And I'm eternally thankful that God empathizes with our feelings.

Think about it, friends. What kind of God would leave the dimension of heaven to step into human misery? What kind of God would suffer alongside us, enduring pain, doubt, even death? What kind of God would die on our behalf?

The answer is the greatest news this planet has ever heard. Our God is full of endless love. God went the distance, pursuing us all the way to the cross to prove this amazing grace. This is why Christ is called Immanuel, *God with us*, present this very second through the Spirit.

I have walked alongside brothers and sisters through brutal moments of loss and despair: suicides, stillborn children, tragic accidents, diagnoses of disease that ended lives in their prime. There are no easy answers at those times, no quick fixes. There are no shortcuts through grief.

But in all these circumstances, I ministered to others with a sublime truth at the core of my confidence - God is with us even in the shadows of death. God knows firsthand how we feel; our Creator's compassion is boundless.

This is what we see as Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

WEEK 12 -MARCH: I THIRST

I have a friend whose mother raised him with definite expectations. He used to smile and say, “She told me I could be whatever I want - a doctor or a lawyer.”

Many parents set high bars for their children. We can see this in the 20th chapter of Matthew as the mother of James and John corners Jesus with a request: “When you come into your Kingdom, let one of my sons sit at your right, the other at your left.”

She knows Jesus is facing death. She knows his Kingdom is eternal, and that soon he will go there to reign forever. Like a good Jewish mom, she wants her boys to have privileged positions in the new regime.

Jesus looks at his friends and says, “Do you know what you are asking? Can you drink the cup I will drink?”

What is this cup? It is Jesus’ suffering on our behalf. Remember that as he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane he cried, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours be done.”

It was the Father’s will that Jesus drink every drop.

In our series on Jesus’ final words, we come to the shortest phrase of all - “I thirst.” Simple yet profound! Just moments before his death, clear about what he is accomplishing, Jesus is saying, “I want it all! I will complete this task with every ounce of my being!”

Artists often depict Jesus as meek and mild, slightly effeminate, a bluebird perched on his shoulder as he welcomes little children into his arms. Even on the cross, he is a limp form, gazing wistfully into heaven.

Absolutely not!

Sure, the Nazarene knew gentleness. But I believe he was manly - a rough-handed carpenter with muscles hewed through plying his trade. No one with a weak constitution could have survived 40 Roman lashes and the shouldering of a cross.

When Jesus says, "I thirst," he is showing physical, emotional, and spiritual strength. He is staying the course, in essence shouting, "Bring it on!"

What does this mean for believers now and then?

For the original apostles it meant martyrdom. Every one of them suffered for their faith. They were burned, drawn-and-quartered, crucified, dismembered by swords. The only one who reached old age was John, and he was imprisoned in his later years. These men certainly drank the cup with Jesus.

But what about us? We, too, can drink in solidarity with the purposes of Jesus. There are many ways.

It happens when we die to self and let him perform surgery on our hearts. It happens when we don't shirk the long-term trials of caring for our loved ones. It happens when we sacrificially reach out and assist the poor. It happens when we devote ourselves to building up our local churches, schools, and community organizations as havens of love and grace.

Any time we go the distance in furthering Christ's presence - at home, at work, at church, or in our community - we are saying, "I thirst! I will drink this cup with you!"

**WEEK 13 - MARCH:
IT IS FINISHED...
INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT**

One of U2's most political songs is *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. It commemorates the Bogside Massacre on January 30, 1972, in which the British Army shot 26 unarmed civil rights activists in Derry, North Ireland. Seven got bullets in their backs.

Bono's lyrics punch straight to the truth: *The real battle's just begun, to claim the victory Jesus won.*

As we conclude this series on the final words of Jesus, we hear him cry out, "It is finished...into Your hands I commend my spirit."

This gives us much to celebrate. Jesus went the distance, drinking every drop of his Passion cup. He opened portals to eternity, not just in the afterlife, but here and now.

Many of us pray *The Lord's Prayer* on a regular basis, reciting "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." In a haunting way, *It is finished* should compel us to claim Christ's victory more fully in our families, community, and nation. By actions and attitudes - efforts of will and changes of heart - we are to help draw heaven to earth. What a calling!

I am a man of hope, but I don't flinch from reality. As I write this, my own community is blessed by an economic boom. There are new job opportunities as businesses flourish. Our restaurants and motels are packed; our cups run over. But unless we have our heads in the sand, we see the other side - drug addiction and alcoholism, domestic violence, a rise in gangs recruiting teenagers.

As we seek to claim Jesus' triumph in *any* community, the strongest weapon at our disposal is unity. In his letter to

the Philippians, Paul wrote these immortal words: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, any comfort from his love, any common sharing in the Spirit, any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in mind and spirit.”

Yes, we are people of many faiths. We have opposing political persuasions. We speak various languages and arise from vast varieties of families. We may have found our education in college or the hard-knock University of the Streets.

God bless our rich diversity! But in the end, if we can see it clearly, we are more alike than different. And we have a shared responsibility to work for the common good.

During Holy Week, Christians of many denominations in our city come together for a powerful display of unity. We gather for worship and fellowship. Different spiritual leaders offer messages. Different churches provide scrumptious lunches.

A recent theme for these services was “One God, One Passion, One Community.” This crystallizes my prayer for all of us as we seek to claim the victory Jesus won.

**WEEK 14 - MARCH:
HE IS RISEN! A EUCATASTROPHE!**

Eucatastrophe. Now that's a word you never had on a spelling test.

The legendary fantasy writer (and Christian), J.R.R. Tolkien coined the term, combining the Greek prefix *eu* (*good*) to *catastrophe*. It means something miraculous arising out of what appears to be a dire tragedy. Think of Frodo hurling the Ring into the lava of Mt. Doom, exploding Sauron's evil reign. Light and hope erupted once again in Middle Earth.

Tolkien believed that the resurrection of Jesus was the greatest eucatastrophe of all time.

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Understandably, we often focus on the eternal implications of the resurrection. Jesus defeated death and the forces of darkness, insuring our presence with him forever. Many a Gospel hymn speaks of that glorious day when we will meet him face-to-face.

But each of us has an earthly course to run before heaven's finish line. How does Easter impact us here and now?

Over the coming weeks, we will claim this miracle for our daily lives. We will see what it means to be Easter people, remembering these powerful words from the Apostle Paul in Romans: "When God lives and breathes in you... you are delivered from a dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!" (Romans 8:11, *The Message* version)

What trials are you facing? What grief or illness are you enduring? What thorny decisions confront you? What

dreams do you have for yourself and your family? What relationships in your life need God's healing touch?

These are the questions we'll examine, but not solely from a human perspective. Instead, we will view them through that light that burst from an empty tomb.

Recently I sat with a mother wracked by fear and sadness. Her adult daughter, an intelligent and beautiful woman, suffers from the baffling, cunning, and powerful disease called alcoholism. We spoke of the futility of trying to change another person. We admitted that some people never reach their bottom. We grieved that addiction claims too many unfulfilled lives.

But when we prayed at the end of our time together, we prayed in the power of the resurrection. We dared to believe that there could be a eucatastrophe in this family. We claimed the miracle of Easter in the midst of darkness.

Consider these quotes from some notable people of history. They are a foretaste of the adventure we're about to take.

"Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are Easter people and hallelujah is our song." - Pope John Paul II

"Let resurrection joy lift us from loneliness, weakness, and despair, to strength, beauty and happiness." - Floyd W. Tomkins

"The great gift of Easter is a hope which gives us a confidence in God and His ultimate triumph, His goodness and love, which nothing can shake. - Basil C. Hume

I wish you the most blessed Easter ever. I pray it will inaugurate a season of triumph in your life. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

WEEK 15 - APRIL: THE POWER OF INNER PEACE

Americans know a lot about energy. Our history bristles with boom or bust tales of the oil industry. But even as we reap benefits from new exploration, we realize an irrefutable fact: someday, the people of this planet will have to rely upon renewable fuel sources. Will it be better ways to harness wind and sunlight, or a breakthrough in fusion technology? The future is full of promise.

Meanwhile, what if you could plug into a personal, inexhaustible power generator? What if you could draw on an infinite well for vigor and joy in daily life? I'm not talking about an intravenous drip of *5 Hour Energy*. I mean the eternal presence of God living inside each of us.

After his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples, "Stay here in Jerusalem until you have been clothed with power from on high." In the Christian story, this power was the Spirit who came on Pentecost, transforming ordinary people into extraordinary instruments of God's purposes. By whatever name, this personal presence is available to all of us without exception.

But here's our problem. The word Spirit can seem so mysterious. How do we sort out what is real and what is imagined? We have seen the excesses of people who claim exclusive knowledge of spiritual secrets. What about the rest of us as we raise families, earn our pay, plan for our future?

For the sake of this series, I ask you to think of the Spirit's essence summed up in a single word: PEACE. From inner peace flows all the other attributes of faith Christians call *the fruit of the Spirit*. It gives birth to triumph.

According to the Bible, this inner peace has unique characteristics.

First, it is not simply an absence of conflict. Jesus said to his disciples, “My peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you.” In other words, Shalom stems from an eternal source; it has Godly, not human dimensions. It becomes impervious to circumstance. Plus, we can’t discover it solely on our own. It is a gift of our Creator.

Second, it is inexhaustible. In John 7:38, Jesus spoke of the inner Spirit in this way, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes...” (*Message* version)

Third, Paul tells us in Philippians that it guards our hearts and minds, protecting us from envy, strife, impatience, and lack of self-control.

How many times have you been encouraged to pray or meditate as a pathway to tranquility? If you’re like me, it’s hard to develop this habit. It is something we know we should do, but never get around to. Our busy schedules squeeze out conscious contact with God.

Here is my hope. In the coming weeks, as we discuss the abundant blessings of pursuing serenity, we will do whatever is necessary to possess it. We will see that this inner power can transform our self-images, heal our most troubled relationships, and turn our problems into possibilities.

Next week - peace and the prize of patience.

WEEK 16 - APRIL: PEACE AND PATIENCE

There's a Cherokee tale worth repeating.

A grandfather is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he says to the boy. "It's a war between two wolves. One is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, and arrogance. The other is good. He is joy, peace, love, humility, compassion and faith. The same fight is going on inside you and every other person."

The grandson thinks for a moment, then asks his grandpa, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee replies, "The one you feed."

In this series we are learning how to feed on the presence of God's peace. Let's look at this in relationship to patience.

We require patience in every season of life. We need it to pursue our goals. We need it to accept imperfections in ourselves and others. We need it to raise our children and accomplish daily tasks. We need it as we face the limitations of growing older and frailer.

But all of us struggle with losing our patience. When we come to that point, we may choose different behaviors. We can repress our anger; over time this causes bitterness, resentment, even physical problems. We can resort to sarcasm, projecting negative feelings onto others. We can give in to fits of rage, saying and doing things we regret. Every one of these impulses feeds the wolf of negativity within us.

How can we make choices that foster inner peace? Here are suggestions gleaned from many sources.

First, when impatience arises, instantly ask for God's help. This may seem obvious, but listen: though the Spirit's power is readily available, we often forget to connect. There

can be a sanctuary of peace within us, one that God helps us build through prayer and meditation. Take a deep breath, count to ten, then pass the portals to this inner sanctum of tranquility.

Second, remind ourselves of the grace that covers us. It's so easy to grow exasperated with others and forget the long-suffering forbearance God has shown to each of us since birth. We may feel superior to others, but the Bible teaches that in God's eyes we *all* fall short of the mark. Wise human patience is rooted in God's patience. The ground around the cross is level! No wonder the 12 Step Program reminds us, "There, but for the grace of God, go I..."

Third, check our expectations. Here's an adage worth memorizing: today's expectations are tomorrow's resentments. It's good to have goals and high standards, but we need to avoid attaching our happiness to the outcome. So often we expect things over which we have little control. We want other people to change according to our patterns. We want instant results to personal pursuits. We feel entitled to so much. Instead, what if we expect that no matter what happens God will give us peace in the midst of it? Now that's a desire that can always come true.

Patience is the Spirit-led reaction to all that is maddening. Peace be with you, my friends.

WEEK 17 - APRIL: INNER PEACE AND JOY

As we continue our musings on the power of inner peace, let me ask you a question. What is the difference between happiness and joy?

Most of us define happiness as contentment, but joy as a heightened state of pleasure.

Here's a better definition. Happiness is dependent on outward circumstances, while joy is internal, more constant. Let's look at this closely.

So many of us think we'll finally be happy if something changes in our lives. We'll be happy with a better job, more money, a new partner, a bigger house. We'll be happy when we retire with time to spend, or when a goal finally comes to fruition.

This future orientation places us in emotional limbo, unable to bask fully in the joy of our daily life. Countless people can testify that the grass is not always greener on the other side of our fantasies. Too often it ends up being Astroturf, soiled by another season of restlessness.

Joy is the antidote to this perpetual dissatisfaction. It can remain in us through all outward occurrences. Even further, it is a realization that trials can magnify our joy. This is the heart of Biblical faith. Think of these examples.

Nehemiah, beset by enemies and critics as he rebuilds Jerusalem's walls, says this to his co-workers: "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

Echoing this truth, David says in Psalm 28: "The LORD is my strength and my shield...my heart leaps for joy!"

At the Last Supper, his cross looming on the horizon, Jesus says to his disciples, “Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

Paul and Silas find themselves imprisoned in Philippi. At midnight, their limbs in shackles, they are singing hymns and praising God. Their joy is irrepressible!

No wonder the Apostle James wrote these immortal words in his epistle: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

What causes this unquenchable joy? Gratitude for God’s blessings of life, love, and relationships? The beauty of creation surrounding us? Yes, but even more than these: it is a deepening awareness that **EVERYTHING IS SETTLED**.

Your **IDENTITY** is settled. You are a precious child of God, unconditionally loved, so valuable that your Creator was willing to die for you. This worth is not contingent on your performance, looks, intelligence, or religiosity. It is ultimately immune to the opinions of other. It is the simple gift of God’s presence rooted in your innermost being. Let it bring you joy.

Your **FUTURE** is settled. No matter what happens from this day forward, God will take care of you, both now and forever. This glorious assurance can break through into each moment, filling our hearts with joy until our cups run over.

I leave you with a quote from American poet Maya Angelou. “When you wish someone joy, you wish them peace, love, prosperity, happiness... all the good things.”

With this in mind, I wish you joy!

WEEK 18 - APRIL: ETCHED ON OUR HEARTS

Recently, my brothers and sisters at a neighboring church brought the Vietnam Wall replica to our city. They honored the names etched on its surface and our hearts. They honored the families left behind. They honored our community.

Throughout that week, I thought about a particular piece of the wall - only 16 names. Let me explain.

I served as an Army chaplain during Desert Storm, posted stateside at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I often preached in a vintage, WWII chapel with white-washed siding and a country steeple. Its foyer housed the beginnings of a museum for Army chaplains, a collection of memorabilia dating back over two hundred years.

Standing in front of those displays, we remembered the chaplaincy's birth in the Revolutionary War. We traced its saga through the Civil War and the World Wars, including the "Immortal Chaplains" who gave their life vests to others aboard the USAT Dorchester. We learned how communists in Korea put bounties on chaplains' heads, believing that assassinating them would destroy a unit's morale.

We remembered hundreds of chaplains who served in Vietnam. Thanks to Huey helicopters, these brave men could visit far-flung reaches of their parishes, using portable field kits to conduct services. Ministry to our troops was their main concern. But they also aided the Vietnamese by mobilizing clothing, food and money for schools, orphanages, and hospitals.

16 chaplains paid the ultimate price in Vietnam. Their names stand alongside their fallen comrades. One of them,

Major Charlie Watters died during the Battle of Dak To. He received the Medal of Honor posthumously. Here is just a portion of his citation, a glimpse into the bravery shown by many of America's best.

“Chaplain Watters was with one of the companies when it engaged an enemy battalion. As the battle raged and casualties mounted, he rushed forward to the line of contact. Unarmed and completely exposed, he moved among the troops, giving aid to the wounded, assisting in evacuation, giving words of encouragement, and administering last rites. When a wounded paratrooper stood in shock in front of assaulting forces, Chaplain Watters ran forward, picked the man up on his shoulders and carried him to safety. Chaplain Watters was tending to the needs of his men when he himself was mortally wounded.”

Not every name on the wall elicits such drama. Many of our men died ingloriously, some with grave doubts about America's purposes in those Southeast Asian jungles.

However they died, we must learn from them. We must ask penetrating questions of our leaders when they consider military options. Is the cause clear and just? Is it absolutely essential to national security? Does it justify the spilling of precious American blood?

I hope you have visited the Wall or one of its replicas. In the often divisive climate of America, let's remember some words from Ronald Reagan: “The war in Vietnam threatened to tear our society apart, and the political and philosophical disagreements that separated each side continue. It's been said that these memories reflect a hunger for healing.”

Almighty God, heal our nation!

WEEK 19 - MAY: A VIEW FROM THE CENTER

On Easter Sunday a few years ago, ABC news interviewed well-known pastor, Rick Warren. When asked what disturbs him most about America, he didn't rail about our moral failings. He didn't pass out ammunition for the "culture war." He didn't focus on homosexuality, abortion, or creeping liberalism. What concerns him most is the coarseness of our dialogue. In our civilization, we are forgetting how to be civil.

Politicians are shameless - personally attacking an opponent's character, even personhood, because of his or her beliefs. But they're not the only ones aboard this bandwagon. Many of us start to see people as *types* rather than living, breathing human beings. Disagreeing is normal, even healthy; belittling the essence of others is cancerous.

I often cringe as I peruse the postings of my 3,000 Facebook friends. They represent a wide spectrum of opinions, and I'm sad to say, many are increasingly vitriolic.

Is there another way? Yes! And it begins with each of us. So when people seek to pigeonhole me by asking, "Where do you stand politically?" I answer, "I'm a radical moderate."

I don't mean moderate as in fence-sitter. I don't mean moderate as wishy-washy. I mean a willingness to respect people on both sides of a debate. I mean being a bridge builder, not a finger pointer.

Here's a case in point. My own denomination, like this country, feuded over gay rights for decades. Early in my career, something became abundantly clear: I had impassioned friends on both sides of the cause. These were people I loved, brothers and sisters in Christ, and they were letting a single issue divide them into warring camps. I

pledged to respect *all* my friends through every phase of the turmoil. I would vote my conscience and stay in the fold, believing God speaks through our democratic process.

It's sad, but it seems inevitable for human beings to split from each other, dividing into ever smaller ideological tribes. This is our greatest sin since the fall of Babel. We promote it in our children through the bipartisan paradigm of a rancorous two-party system.

Here are some verses from the Apostle Paul that always stun me. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

What if each of us looked at others this way, valuing them above ourselves? Paul isn't saying we should have low self-esteem. In fact, his writings help us claim our priceless identity as children of God. What he is saying is this: when we look down on others, we cease looking up to the Creator who gives life to all, the One who longs for us to unify in our care for each other and this planet.

The media bombards us with "views from the right" and "views from the left." What happened to "views from the center," voices reminding us that no matter our race, class, education, or politics, we are in this together?

If we put some humble civility back into our civilization, we just might have a chance.

**WEEK 20 - MAY:
PARENTS: PASS THE TORCH OF FAITH
TO YOUR CHILDREN!**

We all have favorite teachers who taught us more than subject material; they imparted lessons about life. Yet parents remain our earliest, most impactful tutors. Their words and actions mold our outlooks from infancy.

Clearly, this can be positive or negative. In decades of working with people, I have seen both kinds of parental legacies. Learning to claim the best (and leave the rest) from our families is a healing journey many of us have taken. Some of us still need to.

Approaching Mother's Day, I think of my Mom. Our relationship hasn't been easy. Thankfully, over time, we discovered the grace born of our faith in Jesus Christ. This faith has been my mother's greatest gift to me, a priceless heirloom. Let me share a memory that highlights this.

My childhood neighborhood swarmed with kids, evidence of the Baby Boom. Like typical children, we often took sides and fought with each other. One day the conflict moved from taunts and posturing to rock throwing and BB guns. On the other side, I could see one of my "enemies." His name was Gentry and he was a Goliath, heads taller than the rest of us. He was also mean as a snake, channeling anger from a troubled family.

Under a bright sun, we lined up in two gangs and advanced toward each other like fronts in a medieval battle. When fists started flying, Gentry singled me out. He had a board with rusted nails that he hurled like a lance. It struck my head, leaving a gash that gushed freely down my neck and onto my shirt.

The sight of so much blood drained the fight from us. We halted and scrambled back to our homes.

That night, my stitched head wrapped in Ace bandages, I lay under the sheets. My mother came to my bedside for prayer, a ritual she kept with all her children.

“We have something special to pray for tonight, don’t we?” she asked.

“We sure do,” I replied. “That God would take the pain from my head.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking,” she said. “We should pray for Gentry, that God would take the hatred from his heart.”

I felt resentful. Why pray for that jerk? He was the guilty one. He was my enemy.

But as I thought about the daily dysfunction he endured in his family - the lack of a love I took for granted - my resent morphed to compassion. My mother waited silently, hoping this would take root in my heart. Finally, I took her hand and we prayed for Gentry and his kin.

One of the core teachings of Jesus is to love our enemies. Do not return evil for evil, but pray for those who persecute you. That night my mother illustrated one of the greatest elements of the faith she was passing on to me. I carry that torch to this day.

Mothers and fathers, your influence is incalculable! Raise your children with love and encouragement. Most importantly, pass on your faith in God who calls us to a higher plain.

And Mom, if you read this, I can’t thank you enough!

WEEK 21 - MAY: CLAIMING OUR TRUE IDENTITY

Have you ever rehearsed something you wanted to say to someone but never got the chance?

A few years ago, I was the victim of identity theft. The mastermind behind it was a young criminal, a nefarious *Wunderkind* wanted by the FBI. They finally arrested him in Las Vegas and deported him back to Kentucky.

The FBI asked if I would be a witness for the prosecution. I agreed, but the offer never materialized. I hated to miss my day in court! I wanted to tell that man the following. "I feel sorry for you. What a pitiful pursuit, stripping identities from faceless people. I have spent decades enjoying something far more gratifying - helping people discover their TRUE identities. In your time behind bars, I hope God touches your heart and changes you. Either way, I forgive you."

Many communities in America are plagued by domestic violence. Those of us who stand against it have different specialties. We are social workers, nurses, administrators, chaplains, counselors, law enforcement officers. Though we differ in our expertise, we share a common purpose. We help people realize their true identity. We help them answer the question that blares from the beginning of CSI episodes: *who are you?*

Who are we? In all great faith traditions, the answer to this question is both simple yet incredibly profound. We are children of the living God, created in the divine image of love and light. Even more, we are unique one-of-a-kind beings, the likes of which this planet has never seen and will never see again. We are meant to shine!

I know an elementary school teacher who imbeds this message in her students. She takes an index fingerprint from each of them and gives it to them on paper. Then she displays gorgeous PowerPoint slides of recurring spiral patterns in creation - from galaxies to hurricanes, nautilus shells to tree knots. She has them look at the spirals of their personal prints and tells them, "There has never been another person like you!"

Does our culture normally teach us this? No! From the moment we gain consciousness, society rates us, grades us, and categorizes us. Who's smarter? Who's better looking? Who's the most athletic? Who's fat and who's thin? Who has the most toys?

These comparisons are harsh enough. Then think about the fact that far too many children grow up in homes where parents distort their self-images through judgment, abuse, and cold love.

What does this have to do with domestic violence? Everything!

When a woman stands in the dignity of her eternal worth, she learns to set boundaries. She rebuffs any treatment from another person that violates her precious, God-given identity. Instead of lowering her horizon of tolerance, she raises it to match God's opinion of her.

When a man knows his divine identity, he derives his masculinity from God, not the ridiculous *machismo* of our culture. He sees each relationship that enters his life as a treasure to protect and cherish.

I may have missed my chance to address that identity thief in Lexington, but I have chances to confront identity theft every day. So do you.

What a great calling.

**WEEK 22 - MAY:
THANK YOU ON BEHALF
OF A GRATEFUL NATION!**

As Memorial Day approaches each year, I treasure a moment I spent with a veteran named Bill who bared his soul to me.

I was serving as an Army Chaplain, Pastor of the Main Protestant Chapel at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. For our mission outreach, we adopted the nearby VA hospital in Columbia. Twice a month we visited and spent time with veterans who were there for treatment. Often it was the only human contact they had outside the staff.

One particular Sunday, we split up to cover as much ground as possible. I made my way down a long, antiseptic hallway to a room in the furthest reaches of the facility. That's where I met Bill, alone in his room under dim fluorescent light.

I introduced myself and asked about his circumstances. He said very little, almost suspicious, simply reciting his serious complications from diabetes. We sat in silence for a few moments. When I didn't leave, he looked at me differently, sizing me up. As I asked him where and how he had served, he focused on the chaplain's cross pinned to my lapel. I'll never know what prompted him to break the seal on his memories, but he did so with sudden intensity.

Bill was a survivor of Omaha Beach, part of our country's infamous D-Day invasion of Normandy. As a history buff, I had read accounts of that heroic onslaught, tens of thousands of our troops released from amphibious transports to face Nazi machine gun nests entrenched in the bluffs. I had seen the grainy black and white photos. Some years later, I watched Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*,

listening as others gasped in horror at how vivid the invasion seemed on the silver screen.

But even that cinematic realism would not compare to what I heard from Bill. He described the palpable fear in the landing boat, the friends standing next to him who were crossing themselves and mumbling prayers, the spatter of machine guns, the screams, the surf, the clanging metal of the ship's gates opening, and then that rush through the waves towards the sand and their destiny. He remembered being dug into a small dune at the rear of the beach, turning his head and scanning the shoreline, the utter devastation and bodies laid to waste, wondering just for a moment if God would truly use this suicide mission to turn the tide of evil in a country far from his homeland.

The memories came out in a torrent. We were suspended in history. I don't know if he had ever shared those haunting scenes before. When he was through with words, he looked over at me, eyes watering, face open and vulnerable. My own emotions welled up inside of me as I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"On behalf of a grateful nation, Bill, I can't thank you enough for your bravery and service."

He placed his hand over mine, two Americans, two human beings, connecting across a sea of time and experience.

"Chaplain Van," he said, "will you pray with me?"

I did.

**WEEK 23 - JUNE:
A PRAYER FOR AWAKENINGS**

It's an experience with many names: enlightenment, illumination, awakening. It's those moments when false thinking dissolves and we see our true identity. Self-imposed chains slip away and we taste new freedom. In the Christian tradition, we sing these familiar words, "I was blind, but now I see."

As you read this, please know that I am praying for awakenings this week: in you, in me, in those we love.

Here's a truth that describes many of us, myself included. Too often we limit our joy by clinging to thoughts that imprison us.

- We know that on our death beds, the minutia we worried about will mean nothing, gone like vapor in the wind. Yet still we fuel our anxiety.
- We know that impatience with others causes stress and anger. Yet still we persist in our demands, forgetting God's infinite patience with us.
- We know that refusing to forgive holds our own hearts hostage. Yet still we nurse our resentment.
- We know that judgment clouds our access to grace. Yet still we look down on others, rather than up to our Creator.
- We know that our efforts to be noticed feed our self-centeredness and stunt our knowledge of love. Yet still we crave recognition.

Have you ever heard someone talk of being *born again*? In my experience, rebirth is a process. It happens over and over as we allow God to shape us. It's like shedding

skins, a gradual maturing, letting go of the old and embracing the new.

This week, recognize a futile worry and replace it with trust. As impatience starts to grow, calm yourself. Pray for the person you find hard to forgive. If you are tempted to pass judgment, remember that the ground around the cross is level. When you find yourself angling for praise, try complimenting someone else. Each of these small awakenings can help set you free.

I leave you with two things. The first is my prayer for all of us at the beginning of summer.

Free us, O God! Awaken us! Help us live in the center of your love, trusting in your constant care for us. Show us those thoughts that bind us, those illusions that prevent us from savoring you, this gorgeous earth, and the loved ones you've placed in our lives. Give us Spirit power to release these chains and rise up in liberty.

The second is an image.

Imagine walking through a dense rainforest. Sunlight barely penetrates the foliage. As you gasp humid air in the semi-darkness, roots and vines tug at your feet. Finally, you've had enough. You go to a nearby tree and begin climbing, higher and higher, your heart pounding, until your head pushes through the canopy. Whoa! A panoramic, 360 degree view opens up before you, catching your breath with its beauty. Butterflies and tropical birds cavort over the tree tops, and in the distance you see a mountain from which spills a spectacular waterfall.

You breathe deeply, thinking, "What a joy! And all I had to do was climb!"

**WEEK 24 – JUNE:
SING THEIR PRAISES TODAY!**

If you've never read the poem *Those Winter Sundays* by Robert Hayden, find it online. A boy awakens early to hear his father stoking the fire, a chore performed seven days a week. No one ever thanked him. The boy rises to get dressed, and though his father has also polished his shoes for him, he speaks indifferently to the man. The verses end with these poignant words, *What did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?*

Hayden reminds us that devotion takes various forms, and it often goes uncelebrated. Many of us can witness to this. We serve others faithfully behind the scenes, not expecting recognition. Sure, it is our duty. But we choose this duty out of love.

Is there an unsung hero in your life? Perhaps it's a parent, a teacher, pastor or friend. On this Father's Day I will not be indifferent. I will honor my Dad, whose untiring dedication to his family is something I often ignored in my youth.

Here's a man who rose before dawn and returned after sunset, commuting for hours through smoggy, traffic-infested freeways. He provided handsomely for our family and planned ahead financially. He loved my mother through every trial of raising three rowdy boys. The house he designed, built and maintained will always be the homestead in my mind.

But his legacy is more than a work ethic; it's his character. In his faith life, he walked the walk, furthering the mission of our local church. This same commitment marked his career. As a boy I visited his corporate offices. One staff member after another commended my father as a man of

sterling integrity, a Christian executive who cared for his employees like family. With our recent history of disloyal Wall Street greed, we need more men like him.

I don't mean to over-idealize my Dad. Like any father and son, we had our issues. I resented his workaholic schedule. He objected to my long hair and questionable friends. Given our interests in life - business on his side, humanities on mine - we saw the world through vastly different eyes.

But here is the beauty of memory. As we temper it with love and forgiveness, we use it to intentionally recall the best. It's an art that transforms our relationships. As Anne Sexton once said, "It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was."

This Father's Day, don't let heroes in your life remain unsung, especially dads. Sing their praises today! Call or visit them. Enumerate the ways they've made a positive impact on your life.

When grateful words ring through the lonely stations of love, they make a huge difference. I speak from experience. On my office walls hang the artifacts of my life and career: plaques, pictures, diplomas that tie me to people and places I cherish.

One small one is from my daughter, scrawled in colored script and framed in cheap plastic. It's a poem she wrote to tell me how much she loves and appreciates my influence in her life.

I read it every day. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

WEEK 25 - JUNE: POWER SPOTS OF LOVE

All religious traditions revere their sacred sites. New Age devotees call them *power spots*, points on the planet where they believe you can absorb mystical energy. The Celtic name is *thin places*, where the veil between heaven and earth is said to be nearly transparent. Search the annals of history. It may be a cathedral, a pyramid, a city, a healing spring or towering mountain: since we crawled out of caves we have longed for holy spaces. We visit them as pilgrims to restore our spirits.

Perhaps you know a setting where it is easy to feel close to God. For me it is above the timberline on America's highest peaks, lying in my sleeping bag with the Milky Way spilled across the night sky. I often recite Psalm 8 at those moments, "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have made your glory higher than the heavens!"

There are many exceedingly beautiful locales in our world. But as a Christian, I want to take a deeper look at this issue of *power spots*.

In the Old Testament, the Jews honored numerous locations. One was Mount Zion, where God spoke to Moses and gave him the law. But the most venerated was that inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies, first inside a travelling tent, then later in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant resided there like a throne. The Israelites believed that God's living presence hovered above the Ark's Cherubim and Seraphim.

Now, do you remember this from scripture? When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from mere mortals ripped in half. God abolished the manmade line between secular and sacred, redeeming every

square foot of earth as potentially holy. Through love, we can stand on hallowed ground even in the lowliest settings. Here are a few I've experienced.

- Holding the hand of a Salvadoran refugee in a crowded inner-city hospital of Los Angeles. We prayed because she had lost her son to gang violence.
- Reciting *The Lord's Prayer* with a friend in the dingy bedroom of his mobile home, just hours before he died from alcoholism.
- Worshipping in a shanty town shack of Munnar, India, singing by candlelight with the poorest of the poor, the Spirit strong in our midst.
- Sitting in a piss-stained alley, sipping Styrofoam cups of coffee with a homeless veteran.
- Blessing a newborn girl on a stained sofa in a barrio of Reynosa, Mexico.
- Serving communion as an Army Chaplain to a platoon of men in the field, rain pelting our ponchos, mud covering our boots.

What lifted these moments above their circumstances? LOVE. Love given, received, and shared; God's love that still works to redeem creation!

I understand the desire to get away to splendid natural surroundings. I hope to do so this summer. No noise, no bustle, no sordid reminders of this world's problems. But I also hope each of us will turn the other way as well, seeking out the lowliest, dirtiest, humblest places to know God's presence. Let our Creator use us to create power spots of love.

WEEK 26 - JUNE: BLOW YOUR MIND!

A glittering photo filled my computer screen, taken by the Hubble Telescope, whose orbit allows it to absorb spectrums from the deepest reaches of space. This image came from focusing on a spot about the size of a grain of salt.

What did scientists discover in this distant pinpoint? Not just new solar systems, but dozens of unknown galaxies, some larger than our Milky Way. Listen again: *some grander than our own configuration of 400 billion stars that span 120 light years!*

Forgive my use of a hippie phrase from the 60's, but it blew my mind! For moments I just stared, overwhelmed by the realization of how little we human beings truly know.

It would do us all some good to have our minds blown on a regular basis. Why? Because our certainties cement us. We sit in church pews and listen to preachers who act like they have hotlines to God's Oval Office. They know all the facts: exactly how God created the world, how old this planet is, who is right, who is wrong, who will get into heaven, who won't, which politicians we should vote for, even how and when *end times* will unfold.

Let's be real. Our finite minds grasp a mere piece of infinity. We use words to describe God, then fall so in love with our images that we forget the *mysterium tremendum*, the overwhelming mystery surrounding us. As Paul says in I Corinthians, "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom..." Even Einstein at the height of his brilliance only touched the floorboards of God's estate.

I'm not saying we can never be certain. We know we are meant to love and show mercy. We know life is short. We know that unless we learn to share this planet with other human beings, it will come to an inglorious end.

Yet dogmatic certainties still separate us, erect boundaries, and contribute to spiritual disease. We need our minds blown. We need humility born of a God whose presence and purposes transcend our mortal conceits.

Rob Bell once said, “The moment we figure out God with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God. We are dealing with somebody we made up.” We put God in boxes of our own creation.

I have joyfully witnessed what happens when God blows our minds and busts our preconceptions. We embrace people we once considered alien. We see the beauty in multiple pathways to truth. We actually listen to our opponents’ viewpoints. Each day is not a closed book, but a chance to add another page of wonder.

In the movie *Grand Canyon*, circumstances link a group of people normally divided by race and class. On a shared vacation at the end, they stand at the edge of the canyon, facing its sheer cliffs chiseled over eons. The mystery of life engulfs them in mutual awe. All their manmade differences, all their trials and tribulations, all their hopes and aspirations, dwarf against a backdrop of eternity.

Friends, all of us stand against that backdrop every day. Let it blow your mind!

WEEK 27 - JULY: GO THE DISTANCE

Perseverant people inspire us. Heroes who save the day. Athletes who beat the buzzer. Soldiers who brave hostile fire, dragging wounded comrades to safety. Husbands and wives loving each other through sickness or health, riches or poverty. Teachers who tirelessly serve troubled students.

In the fifth chapter of Mark, we witness a woman who goes the extra mile. She has suffered from bleeding for twelve years, and though she's consulted numerous doctors, depleting her finances, the sickness remains. When she hears that Jesus is passing nearby, she goes to him hoping for a miracle.

The crowds surrounding him make it nearly impossible. Still, she persists. Imagine her pushing through the throng, jostled about, elbowed aside, her eyes catching glimpses of the Nazarene. Finally, she stretches out those last few inches and touches his healing presence.

Her example begs a question. Have we done everything we can to insure our own wellness - physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Do we take full responsibility for ourselves, determined to be healthy influences on our environment?

In our relationships with others, we too often magnify their faults and minimize ours. This is what Jesus meant by "seeing the speck in someone else's eye, but ignoring the plank in our own." Here's an alternative. Use what I call the 20/100 rule. Even if you think you are only 20% to blame for a problem at home or work, take 100% responsibility for changing that aspect of your character. You will become healthier, and the positive energy will spread to others.

Let's apply this to marriage. The cliché is true: it takes two to tango. Resolving conflict requires work on both sides of the equation. So what are we going to do? Wait for our husband or wife to change? Continue to blame them as the primary reason for our discord? Or will we be like that woman who never gave up, seeking every avenue to experience personal growth?

There are so many resources to help us if we have the desire. There are counselors, pastors, and friends who will listen and offer wise advice. There are books and seminars to motivate us with powerful techniques. Most importantly, there is our God, who will show us the path to fullness if we only ask.

Despite popular opinion, the Bible never explicitly says, "God helps those who help themselves." In fact, a central message of the Christian faith is that God shepherds us even when we are helpless or undeserving. But Mark's tale of this tenacious woman shows the value of going the distance on our own behalf. Jesus tells her, "Your faith has made you whole." He could just as easily have said, "Your persistence has healed you!"

Hear again this famous quote from Calvin Coolidge. "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Friends, let's go the distance in our own personal growth, then witness how it changes our worlds!

WEEK 28 - JULY: NO CONDEMNATION

The young man sits across from me and bares his testimony: drug use, trafficking, involuntary manslaughter, an ankle bracelet making sure he doesn't flee before trial. Lots of darkness, lots of reasons to hold him in contempt.

But if you do, you might miss a miracle; these are the details - at least for now - that he is rising above like a phoenix. Recommitted to his faith, serving in his church, he shares his rebirth as a touchstone of hope. The chains of his past, present, and future are no longer what define him. He looks at me and says, "Whatever happens from this moment forward, I have found new life in Christ."

Are you skeptical of such claims? That's understandable. Too many addicts and criminals have jailhouse conversions designed to impress families or parole boards. Wolves in sheep's clothing abound in our prisons and streets. No one knows another person's heart but God, and I have no certainty of this man's sincerity. As Jesus once said, we need to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" in our dealings with others.

But right now I believe him, and as we share these moments, I recall the first verse of Romans 8, one of the most sublime chapters in the Bible. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

No condemnation. No shame. Through the cross, God has shown us love and grace that have no limits. Our God is the champion not just of second chances, but of infinite chances!

This is not the way of the world. It shouldn't be. Accountability is necessary; doing time for one's actions is central to an ordered society.

The ways of God's Kingdom, however, are radically different. God's love, shown so beautifully in Jesus, speaks of continued forgiveness for even our most grievous sins. Further, the ongoing message of the living Christ is that no matter how far we stray into the darkness, he is still reaching out in compassion through the Spirit. Lost sheep are his specialty.

And here is where the miracle begins. If we open our hearts and receive this living grace, it sets us free – even as we make amends for our actions in the world.

I once ministered to a man serving in prison without possibility of parole. His fate in this life was sealed, but so was his fate in the parallel dimension of paradise. He had adopted a faith in Christ that the prison guards scoffed at. When I visited, they smiled sarcastically and said things like, "Hey Chaplain, coming to punch his Jesus card again?"

One week a fight broke out in the activity yard. Though my friend said he was only defending himself, the warden held no quarter. He sent numerous men to solitary confinement.

I came to visit my friend on the day of his release. As we embraced in the visitation room, I could smell the mold of that dank rat hole still clinging to his clothes. We sat and I asked him, "What was it like?"

A slow smile dawned on his face. "The whole time, I couldn't keep from thinking how free I've become."

Ahhhh, there it was: **NO CONDEMNATION!**

WEEK 29 - JULY: THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

On November 22, 1963, gunshots rang out from Dallas, Texas. They quickly echoed around the globe. John F. Kennedy had died, and the cloud of grief that enveloped the free world obscured the fact that two other deaths occurred that same day. One was Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*. The other was Clive Staples Lewis, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of this past century.

C.S. Lewis' writings still have an enormous impact. At age 32, returning to the Anglican faith of his youth, Lewis found a relationship with Jesus Christ that is out of synch with current American sentiment. Recently I posted a quote of his on Facebook. "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Veracious words that should burst a billion spiritual bubbles! How many times have you heard this at church or on T.V. - God wants to give you victory and abundance. It's your birthright as a believer. Just reach up and pluck that luscious Fruit of the Spirit from the perennial Tree of Life!

What we don't hear is this: for every good gift of God, there is a price to pay. Jesus modeled this through his own sacrifice, then clearly said to his followers, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Lose yourself for my sake and you will find yourself."

Dying to ourselves is painful. Every instinct in us wants to wring as much personal gain and pleasure from this short life. We insist on our own ways; we inflate our sense of importance. We nurse our notions of entitlement.

To this folderol, Jesus says *pick up your cross*. His wisdom is undeniable. Look back over your life. Think of the most enduring lessons you've learned. Weren't most of them prefaced by seasons of pain, fear, or suffering? When you broke through those barriers, you became freer, wiser, more fully human. Why? Because you died to a piece of self and learned to rely more fully on God.

This absolute trust in our Creator was the deepest source of Christ's ministry. Even at his most pivotal moment, praying in Gethsemane, he cried out, "Father, not my will but yours be done."

Friends, it is often painful to follow Jesus' example. He calls us to forgive when we resist. He says to fix our own flaws. He summons us to go an extra mile in serving the downtrodden. He wants us to eradicate anger, prejudice, self-righteousness. He insists that we extinguish worry, trusting God during times of uncertainty due to illness, ailing relationships, or financial insecurity. When we go willingly through these trials - no detours, no avoidance - we find our deeper selves.

Yes, Christianity promises victory; an empty tomb awaits us. But between us and that triumph stands a cross that is not just atop Golgotha. It is ours as well. He says, "Pick it up and follow me. I will give you true life."

WEEK 30- JULY: GOD'S HOLY ECOSYSTEM

Study any ecosystem and you will agree with King David, "Only fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."

Everything has its place, its purpose, its niche. Termites demolish logs to enrich the soil. Forest fires crack the hulls of Sequoia seeds. Tiny krill fill the gullets of Blue Whales, earth's largest creature. Snow that melts on the mountain top wends its way to the heart of the sea.

Our Creator orchestrates it all with breathtaking precision. And one truth is crystal clear: nothing goes to waste!

In our personal lives, this is especially true with hardship. Have you stumbled, made mistakes, gotten off track? Have you squandered relationships, nursed bad habits, or worried needlessly? Do you regret missed opportunities? Did you fail to love because of selfishness? Have you suffered through tragedy, heartache, or illness?

Surely there is pain in this wreckage, but God can employ every piece to expand our spirits. Even more, when we open these wounds to others - unafraid to share our humanity - it releases great healing.

Consider the local church. On any given Sunday, it's a rich repository of wisdom. So many living sermons sitting in the pews!

Parents who have struggled to raise children. Couples who resurrected troubled marriages. Divorcees who found new love. Survivors of cancer, heart attacks, and strokes. People who are overcoming addiction. Adult children caring for ailing parents. Those who resolved their grief after losing a precious loved one.

I could go on, but you get my drift. The church is a holy ecosystem where nothing need go to waste. As a pastor, it makes me want to shout from the rooftops. “This is what we have to offer! Authentic human beings who have grown from the hard knocks of life. People who can be God’s ambassadors of grace, walking alongside you in your journey. We are not here for religion; we are here for relationships!”

But this only happens, my friends, when we reveal ourselves, when we put our experience at God’s disposal. It happens when we risk vulnerability, allowing our stories to intersect with others.

I think of Marlene, sexually abused by her father throughout childhood. Bitterness and rage consumed her adult life. In our sessions, she finally said to me, “I have to find a way to let go. If I don’t, I’ll be a prisoner ‘til the day I die.”

One winter morning at a windswept Michigan cemetery, Marlene stood before her father’s headstone. She read a letter to him that she had crafted for months: words of resolution, words of hard-won forgiveness only God could give her. As light snowfall began, she shredded the paper, spread it on the grave, turned and walked away.

Months later a young woman joined our congregation. I discovered that abuse had twisted her life as well, so I introduced her to Marlene. On a Sunday morning after Spirit-filled worship, I saw them sitting beneath an oak tree. Marlene had a hand on her new friend’s shoulder. They were praying together, seeking the balm of God’s presence.

In God’s holy ecosystem, even our worst pain can serve the power of redemption. Alleluia!

WEEK 31 - JULY: FEAR NOT

Most of us know the 10 Commandments, delivered to Moses in a cloud of glory atop Mt. Sinai. There are dozens of other directives in scripture, details on cleanliness, sacrifice, priestly ritual.

But the most frequent Biblical command is far simpler. In various forms, God repeats these same words: *Do not be afraid!* He spoke them to:

- Abram, braving the wilderness to inherit a covenant.
- Joseph, enduring abuse and imprisonment in Egypt.
- Moses, watching the Red Sea part for safe passage.
- Joshua, crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land.
- Gideon, facing 10,000 Midianites with only 600 men.

At the Last Supper, his cross on the horizon, Jesus looked around the table at his best friends. He said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” The two truths contained in this verse are vital for all of us.

First, do not let your hearts be troubled. The Bible describes our hearts as the source of emotion and motivation. When they are in turmoil, it affects every other area of our lives. And the feelings that disturb us the most are resentment and fear.

Try this simple experiment. When you are unsettled, pause and trace its origin. So often it stems from worry, doesn't it? Stress about our finances, our health, our families. Concerns about what others think of us. Fear of failure.

The term worry comes from an Old English word meaning *to strangle*. Anxiety literally chokes away our joy. No wonder Jesus taught, “Which one of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to your life?”

Still, we persist. What is the antidote to this insane state of being? Jesus said it clearly, **“Trust in God; trust also in me.”**

Here is the child-like key to being a spiritual genius. When you have done everything in your power to make things right, turn the final result over to God, relying on God's power and compassion. Abandon yourself to God as if your life depends on it.

We all know the wisdom of trusting our Maker completely, but practicing this discipline on a daily basis is what sets us free. Too often we hand over a worrisome situation to our Creator then snatch it back, addicted to our obsessions.

Do you believe God is capable of securing your future? Are you certain that no problem is too big for God to solve? Do you realize God's plans for you include wholeness, peace, and strength?

If we answer yes to these lifesaving questions, the proof will be the condition of our hearts. Throughout the day, as we learn to let go, does it settle us, restore our serenity, give us new faith in the One who loves us beyond measure? If not, try again. Break on through to the other side!

Let Proverbs 3:5 be your North Star this week: “Trust in God with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to God and God will make your paths straight.”

When we're in fear, we are out of faith. So fear not, my friends. God loves you and so do I!

WEEK 32 - AUGUST: RELATIONSHIPS, NOT RELIGION

History reeks of atrocities committed in God's name: crusades, jihads, racial prejudice, oppression of women. John Mayer nails it when he sings, "Belief is a beautiful armor, but makes for the heaviest sword."

Jesus practiced elements of Judaism. He attended synagogues, studied scripture, prayed the Psalms. But his loudest message – the supposed heresy that got him killed – was that his native religion had failed miserably.

Instead of freedom, he found legalism; instead of love, judgment; instead of open arms, exclusivity.

His rage at this farce reached a crescendo, recorded in Matthew 23. He rails at the Pharisees, a self-righteous sect, "You hypocrites! You are careful to tithe the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice, mercy, and faith. You are like whitewashed tombs - beautiful on the outside but filled with dead men's bones!"

Consider this question carefully: Did Jesus intend to establish a new religion? Personally, I don't think so. In the first century, his followers were known as People of the Way rather than Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant.

What was the Way? Not an institution. Not a set of doctrines and creeds. Not buildings of brick and mortar. Not clerical castes or sacraments.

The Way was a revolution of love, a groundswell of grace. It was people sacrificing themselves for each other, reaching out to embrace the hurting, the lost and unlovely. It was a new way of being human.

Think of how religion still divides us. Think of the walls it builds, separating us not only from individuals, but

whole cultures. Think of how we cling to its forms instead of enhance its function.

To his own people, bogged down in a swamp of regulations, Jesus made a powerful statement. You can sum it all up, he said, in two great commandments: love God and love others.

Do you hear it? Relationships, not religion! In every church I've served, I lift up a simple truth. All our prayers and liturgies, all our stained glass and pews, all our organs, guitars and projection screens are meant for one purpose only – to draw people closer to God and their fellow human beings. Any other focus is idolatry.

Over the years I've had the privilege of ministering to refugees from fundamentalism. They grew up in faith traditions that fueled their shame, taught them to judge others, emphasized rules over grace. They are shocked when they hear me say, "I dislike religion."

"What do you mean?" they exclaim. "You're a pastor!"

"I don't like how we let it substitute for the real thing. How we get our attendance tickets punched on Sunday without changing our weekday lives. How we mumble *The Lord's Prayer* but refuse to forgive others. How we give praise to a homeless first-century Galilean, then ignore the poor. How we settle for a Good Housekeeping Seal of Spiritual Approval on our otherwise secular lives.

"But I love Jesus. I owe my life and purpose to him. Why? Because he shows me a Way to love God and others with sacrificial passion.

"That's about as much religion as I need."

How about you?

**WEEK 33 - AUGUST:
CHECK YOUR VISION, THEN KEEP GOING!**

Contemplate the miracle of sight. Our retinas receive images that course through the optic nerve to the brain. There the data explodes in 3-D color no manmade device will ever duplicate. And it happens instantaneously!

Vision is just as miraculous in our spiritual lives. Too often we applaud blind faith, groping forward in darkness with no assurance. But this is not God's way. Our Creator gives us a vision, a picture of our destiny, a goal to motivate us onward.

Take a walk down the hallway of Hebrews, chapter 11. It's a gallery of Biblical heroes - among them Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. These giants of faith had one thing in common: God gave them a vision of their future.

What are you hoping for? Greater financial security or healing in a relationship? Fruitful retirement or better health? Maybe it's a chance to transform your art into a career. Perhaps it's a birthday celebration of sobriety, or the joy of witnessing your grandchildren reach milestones.

If your goal holds the seeds of blessing others, God will make it tangible in your mind's eye. You will see it in details rich with promise and hope. And God asks only one thing in return: Keep going! Every day - beginning now - take concrete steps toward your dream. This is true even when you face challenges, or suffer through seasons of heartache.

Author Joseph Marshall says, "The weakest step towards the top of the hill, toward sunrise, toward hope, is stronger than the fiercest storm." This truth has amazing power.

My friend Joe had his life shattered as a drunk driver hurtled through a stoplight and broadsided his vehicle. Paramedics released him with *Jaws of Life* and rushed him to the hospital. The prognosis was dim: a double cerebral hematoma with significant brain damage. Doctors predicted he would never walk or talk again.

I believe Joe heard that prophecy as he lay in a coma. His response? No way! In his ailing mind, God constructed an alternate vision. It included not only walking and talking, but finishing his degree in early childhood education.

Words can't convey the painstaking effort Joe made in rehab - countless hours of physical, speech, and emotional therapy. One day I witnessed his first faltering steps between parallel bars. He lifted his head and with a slurred voice said, "Krin! How are you?" Then he slowly gave me a thumbs-up.

Fast forward two years, the day Joe graduated with his Master's Degree. As I congratulated him, he slowly said, "Krin, meet me at the university track for a run today."

A run? Sure enough. Under bright sunlight we met at the fifty yard line and began four laps. Joe's gait was lopsided, but his pace was amazing, fueled by fierce resolve burning in his eyes. When we finished I told him how much I admired him. I'll never forget his response.

"Don't be amazed, Krin. God helped me picture this moment years ago. Just remind people of Hebrews 11:1 - *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for*. Be blessed, my friend."

Then he gave me his trademark thumbs-up.

**WEEK 34 - AUGUST:
OUR FATHER...**

(Beginning of a series on The Lord's Prayer)

Whose Father? *Our Father...*

So begins the prayer Jesus taught us, words that echo far beyond the Christian faith. He gave this simple model as a contrast to the long-winded petitions of his time. When you pray, he said, pray like this. Then he outlined a pattern of living for all of us.

And it couldn't start with more powerful words: *Our Father...*

No matter your politics, race, class or religion, don't you agree that our world needs more unity? Togetherness begins in recognizing God as the source of ALL our lives. Equal at birth, we only learn to hate because of the twisted cultures in which we exist.

I love what Paul says in Ephesians: "I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." Bob Marley put it another way: "One Love! One Heart! Let's get together and feel all right."

I don't discount legitimate differences of opinion. I don't deny the enemies we face in this life. But I won't give up a hope that is central to my humanity: we CAN grow in our love for ALL human beings. It's our obligation to do so before we die.

Have you ventured outside your comfort zone? Have you visited a foreign land, worshipped with people of another tradition, or welcomed strangers with experience vastly different than yours? If so, I hope your spirit expanded to embrace our world's splendid diversity.

I'll never forget an evening I spent in a neighborhood of Munnar, India. This was an enclave of the poor, men and

women who labored in the tea plantations for one dollar a day. Others carried baskets of rocks on their heads to patch roads damaged by yearly monsoons.

We met for conversation and prayer in a humble home, sitting on mats on the floor. There was no electricity, but warm candles illuminated a crowd of men, women, and children. They had come to greet the pastor visiting from America.

An older woman, her face lined by hard labor, asked me in Malayalam if I had witnessed any miracles. When my translator relayed the question, I told them my journey in parenting a special needs child. Kristoffer's original diagnosis said he might never speak intelligible phrases. Then I described the day our local church laid hands on my family, praying that the Great Physician would heal our boy. Today Kristoffer communicates freely with us.

The group erupted with emotion, standing and praying loudly in their native tongue. When they settled back down, I asked my translator what they'd said.

"It's simple," he replied. "They were thanking God for healing your son, and for your journey to share love with them halfway across the planet."

Silence ensued. I looked around the room at my new friends. Our common humanity shone in the dark luster of their eyes. It sprang from their smiles that transcended language. The same older woman reached out her hand and grasped my arm.

"Will you remember us when you return to America?"

The tears on my face gave the answer.

Whose Father? *Our Father...*

**WEEK 35 - AUGUST:
...WHO ART IN HEAVEN...**

Study how people picture heaven: it's fascinating!

To the Vikings it was Valhalla, a great banquet hall where men drank mead and reveled in war stories. To the Romans it was Elysium, verdant fields with shade trees and rest. To Muslims it is Jannah, a garden oasis overflowing with water and food. To Hindus it isn't a place, but that moment when one's eternal essence, *Atman*, dissolves in the ocean of Spirit.

If you ask Christians to describe heaven, we might adopt John's vision in Revelation, a shimmering New Jerusalem with golden streets. Or we might share Dante's poetic dream of souls encircling God, singing praises forevermore.

All these conceptions share a common quality. They are somewhere else. They exist in a distant realm, places we can access only after death.

But this is a mere portion of what Jesus meant in these words of *The Lord's Prayer*. Heaven not only beckons from the future; it's unfolding now. God is omnipresent, everywhere all the time, and wants us to enjoy some of this future bliss while still on earth.

My friends, this has life-changing power. I heard a man put it simply the other day. "For many years, running on self-will, I cried out, 'Lord, where are you?' One day, I got the answer. God said, "Just turn around, man. I'm right here!"

Jesus longed for heaven to break into our daily lives, not just to comfort us, but to spur us to action. In Luke chapter 17 he tells us, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you." Divinity dwells inside us, giving peace, strength and

conviction. This is not just an experience of God; it's a foretaste of paradise.

There are many ways to savor this reality. Moments of joy and peace that transcend circumstance. Times when the beauty of creation overwhelms us. Sudden Godly insights into thorny problems. Love that embraces others beyond our family and tribe. That epiphany when a second seems a lifetime.

These are glimmers of eternity, right here, right now. But we rush past them. Our western minds, so enamored with logic and control, fail to unfold. It is wise to listen to people of other faith traditions. An eastern mystic once said this about heaven: "You are already there - you have never been away. Maybe you have forgotten, that's all. Maybe you have fallen asleep, that's all."

With his permission, I close with a poem by Anthony Silvestri entitled "Heaven Unfolding."

*Heaven is here unfolding,
Where starlight and wonder mingle,
Where sky and earth collide
In the vast expanses of the universe
And in the smallest interstitial spaces of cell and atom.
In quiet moments, in soaring songs of light,
In unexpected beauty, in a smile,
In laughter and in love, in harmony (and hope),
In the depths of solitude
As in the joy of fellowship;
In the burnished golden light of Autumn,
In Death, and in sweet partings;
Just as in the quickening fire of newfound love,
Is Heaven here unfolding.
Drink deeply! For widely flows the fountain,
And deep is Heaven here on earth.*

**WEEK 36 - SEPTEMBER:
HALLOWED BE THY NAME...**

Human cleverness and willpower: what if these were the only resources we had for shaping our future?

Hold that thought as we ponder these next words from *The Lord's Prayer*. More than any other in this short petition, we must understand them from Jesus' perspective.

The word *hallowed* in English means *holy*. We use it to describe shrines, cathedrals, or saints who more purely model God's purposes. These places and individuals seem sacred, set apart from the mundane.

Now take this meaning and expand it. To a first century Jew, holy meant *radically different* from human life. So different that when Isaiah observed the holiness of God, he was afraid he would die. So different that when Moses descended Sinai after encountering God, he veiled his face. He feared that if the Israelites glimpsed the radiance lingering on his countenance, it would overwhelm them.

What does this mean? Look around you at our world. See our political squabbles, our racism, our greed and self-centeredness. Think of how much money we spend on armaments when there is scarcity of food and clean water. Even after millennia of recorded history, we repeat the same tragic errors. What if human ways were our final standard? *Kyrie eleison!*

Instead - Alleluia! - we can seek God's presence. We can connect with a wisdom that is uniquely superior to our own.

This is why Jesus said, "hallowed be thy name." To a first century Jew, a name was far more than a title. It meant the embodiment of one's character, the essence of one's being. Jesus is asking us to pray, "In our lives, O God, enable us to give you the unique place that your character deserves

and demands! Let your strength and divine perspective pour into us!"

In the 12 Step Program worked by countless people, there is a phrase that captures this truth: "We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." This not only applies to addiction, but to any repeated behavior that plagues us: worry, stress, lack of forgiveness, crippling fear or doubt. It covers the divisiveness and hatred that too often rule our domestic and foreign relations.

We don't have to live this way. Jesus is telling us that a force greater than us, unfolding in this heavenly moment, can transform us. Many claim to speak in the name of this power, but we know them by their fruit. Do they demonstrate love, peace, and humility? Do they act with mercy and justice? These are the traits that flow from the nature of God.

Here's my own testimony. There are defects in my character, longstanding flaws I tried in vain to change by self-will. It was only when I surrendered to God that I experienced the deeper miracles of faith. We are imperfect vessels, but God can accomplish things in our lives that we could never do for ourselves. If we learn to rely on this daily, we can overcome every trial.

Hallowed be thy name, O God.

**WEEK 37 - SEPTEMBER:
THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE,
ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN**

Let's begin our look at this explosive phrase with some questions.

Imagine I take an officer's oath in the U.S. military, swearing to defend our nation against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Then, when a conflict arises, I go and hide. What would you think of me?

Imagine I get married using traditional vows, promising to cherish my wife for better or worse, in sickness and in health. A few years later she contracts multiple sclerosis, so I kick her to the curb and get divorced. What would you think of me?

Imagine I'm a doctor who takes the Hippocratic Oath, swearing to practice ethical medicine. Then I order procedures I know aren't necessary, simply to make more money. What would you think of me?

Now, imagine I know a basic fact: Jesus' primary way of changing our world is through his disciples. Every Sunday, I pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." I know this means ME doing his will, but I never change a thing; I never become intentional about his mission. What would you think of me?

Friends, this section of *The Lord's Prayer* couldn't be clearer. When placed in the context of Jesus' other teachings and his surrender on the cross, it means that EACH of us to be an instrument for carrying out God's will. And though we feud over the particulars of God's purposes, Jesus summed it up clearly on the night of his betrayal: "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

Jesus once said the following, presented here in *The Message* version. “Knowing the correct password - saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance - isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What’s required is serious obedience - *doing* what my Father wills.”

These words come near the end of what we call *The Sermon on the Mount*, a message filled with clues about God’s will, about living a life of love and freedom. Here are some of them.

Stay humble. Hunger and thirst for God. Don’t worry. Trust your Creator completely. Forget about accumulating earthly goods; focus instead on the life of the Spirit. Go the extra mile when someone asks for your help. Do not return evil for evil, but try to love even those who persecute you. Don’t practice showy religion, but have a private faith that is between you and your Maker. Above all, check your heart, seeking sincerity and purer motives. Ask yourself what is going on inside you with things like anger and lust. In short, be God’s light in this world!

Rick Warren once said there are six ways God answers prayers: yes, no, not yet, **YOU BE THE ANSWER**, trust me, are you kidding me?

If we dare to pray this portion of Jesus’ prayer, we are saying “I know I must strive to be God’s answer to the prayers of this world. I know I am called to help bring God’s Kingdom to earth.”

**WEEK 38 - SEPTEMBER:
GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of a successful farmer. The man's fields produce an abundance that outstrips his storage space. He decides to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. He believes that when his surplus is safe, all will be well. He says, "***Then*** I will rest, eat, drink, and be merry!"

There's just one problem with this scenario. Unbeknown to the man, he will die that very night. Intent on his future, he doesn't relish the final moments of his life.

This is the simple yet profound meaning of *Give us this day our daily bread*. Jesus tied it to one of his core teachings: *Which one of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to your span of life?*

We may not have a windfall like that wealthy landowner, but we still fret over our financial security. Despite its beautiful freedoms, America is too often shackled by the sin of materialism. With only 5% of the planet's population, we consume 25% of its energy. Our nation suffers from an obesity epidemic; yet according to the United Nations, 18,000 children will die today of starvation around the globe. It's easy to point fingers at Wall Street, but the desire to leverage beyond our means, to accumulate wasteful quantities, sits enthroned in our national psyche.

A question screams at us: *How much is enough?* When consumption consumes us, we miss God's glorious gift of today. We forget, as Jesus says, that the Creator who provides for lilies and sparrows will also take care of us. Trusting gratefully in God's love unwraps the *present* of our daily lives, helping us treasure every moment.

One of my spiritual disciplines is to spend time in the company of the poor, people who work, live and love in circumstances that might crush many of us.

There is a dusty village outside Reynosa, Mexico. No running water or electricity. Its residents moved there from Mexico's interior states, seeking employment at *maquiladoras* that blanket the border. On small patches of land they erected shacks made of cardboard, corrugated tin, throwaway lumber.

I went there to partner with *Habitat Para la Humanidad* in building some *dream homes*: 500 square foot, cement block houses smaller than most U.S. garages.

Like an Amish barn-raising, we joined hands to erect a home for the Maldonados, a young couple with five children who lived in a squalid hut with dirt floors. On Friday we put the finishing touches on their roof. Then we partied! First the village children decimated a huge piñata. Next, like a scene out of *Stone Soup*, neighbors converged with bits of food: rice, tortillas, beans, meat, and salsa. They laid it on rickety tables for our feast.

At the end, one woman brought out a huge cake she could ill afford. Written in frosting across it was a simple word: *Gracias!* We each got the tiniest sliver.

Never mind the dust, the flies, the mangy dogs roaming the streets. As I savored my minuscule slice and scanned the faces of my new *companeros*, I had never felt so satisfied.

**WEEK 39 - SEPTEMBER:
FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US**

If we practice an established faith, we may spend a lifetime immersed in its rituals, prayers, and dogmas. This can be a fruitful path to experiencing God. Yet the world resounds with *many* beautiful truths! When we embrace the wisdom of other traditions, we find our journeys enriched beyond measure.

Consider the eastern concept of karma. It's the notion that for every action, there's a reaction; for every choice a consequence; every cause an effect. Hindus believe that the cumulative weight of our behavior in this life determines our quality of reincarnation in the next.

But karma also happens here and now. The Bible affirms this in Galatians 6:7 – "Do not be deceived...you will reap whatever you sow." John Lennon put it another way: *Instant karma's gonna get you, gonna look you right in the face. Better get yourself together darlin', join the human race.*

It's easy to see this in everyday life. If we sow negativity, we quickly experience the same in return. But if we spread love and tolerance, it comes back to us a hundredfold.

What does this have to do with this phrase of *The Lord's Prayer*? Everything! Let me explain.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke some hard words, among them, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Does this mean that if we die with judgment on our hearts, God will condemn us? No! That is not the core

message of the Christian faith! The cross of Jesus speaks of a God whose love and mercy know no bounds. We will *all* die as works in progress, imperfect beings in need of grace.

But this doesn't erase the consequences - *the instant karma* - of our actions in this life, and this brings us to the essence of what Jesus means when he says, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

It's actually very simple: as we learn to forgive others - no matter how much we resent them, no matter how grievously they've hurt us - we experience the freedom and joy of our *own* forgiveness, our **ACCEPTANCE**, before God.

Here are two powerful quotes from Lewis Smedes. I paraphrased one earlier in the year. The other is just as notable.

- *To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.*
- *Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.*

Friends, this is what Jesus teaches us in this section of his model prayer. He says, "I want you to be free. I want you to have a future based on the healing of your heart. I want you to see that when you sow forgiveness, love, grace, and peace, I will flood your own life with these very qualities."

**WEEK 40 - SEPTEMBER:
LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION,
BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL**

Imbedded in these final words of Jesus' prayer is the image of God as Deliverer, the One who rescues us from physical, mental, and spiritual bondage. Many people who reached their bitter bottom, who came to their knees and cried out for help, can testify to God's saving might. They will recount the miracles that happened when they surrendered to a power greater than themselves.

But today I want to talk about a different form of deliverance. It hinges on a particular understanding of the word *evil*.

I'm not referring to evil as a supernatural force, personified as an entity called Satan. I'm not talking about demons, or even the mystery of why bad things happen to good people. These discussions are deep, intense, and can be found in countless theological tomes at seminary libraries.

Instead, I want to focus on the evil - *the troubles* - that result from our personal choices. If we want God to rescue us from mistakes that undermine our lives and the lives of others, let's look backward through *The Lord's Prayer*. In its concise phrases, we have learned these life-giving, life-guarding principles:

- God (our Father) is the origin of *all* human life, begging us to overcome distinctions based on race, creed and class.
- Heaven is not just a distant, otherworldly destination; it is unfolding right now in our midst.
- God's holy name means that God's character is more powerful than human cleverness, giving us an endless source of wisdom we can turn to in our daily lives.

- *We* are the hands and feet that put God's will into action, helping his Kingdom come to earth. In essential ways, *we* are the answer to this world's prayers.
- By trusting that God will provide for all our needs, we stop worrying and live in the peace of God's presence.
- As we sow seeds of forgiveness, love, and grace, these very qualities become manifest in our own lives.

Stop! Read each of these bullet points again!

Can you see that if each us lived by these prayerful principles, we would be protected from many of the spiritual ills that assail us? Jesus gave us this petition not just as a way to pray, but as a model for how to live in all areas of our daily existence - at home, at work, at play.

I know a man who moved from agnosticism to nascent belief. He wrestled with the notion of prayer, speaking to an unseen entity. He said to me: "The words just won't come, Krin. Is it OK if I just say *The Lord's Prayer*?"

"Of course!" I answered. "There is no better prayer!" Then I thought of this wonderful quote from Henry Ward Beecher.

"I used to think the Lord's Prayer was a short prayer; but as I live longer, and see more of life, I begin to believe there is no such thing as getting through it. If a man, in praying that prayer, were to be stopped by every word until he had thoroughly prayed it, it would take him a lifetime."

WEEK 41 - OCTOBER: EVERY STORY MATTERS

For years, CBS ran a program called "Everybody Has a Story." Host Steve Hartman threw a dart at a U.S. map, flew to that city, opened a phone book, put his finger down and called that household. If the individuals were willing, Hartman highlighted their life stories. Before leaving, he asked them to throw a dart for his next destination.

What a marvelous illustration! It shows two things. First: the struggles of being human are something we all share, no matter our age, race, or background. Second: our stories matter, especially when someone really listens.

But listening is a dying art. We fixate on our TVs, computers, or smart phones. With *sound bite* mentalities, we wish people would just get to the point. We formulate responses before others finish, cutting our attentiveness to zero.

Paul Tillich once said, "The first duty of love is to listen." People long for someone to hear them. In our raucous world, open ears and hearts provide an oasis of acceptance. And the benefit to us can be astonishing. Our worlds expand! Here's an example.

One day a short African-American man with a warm, toothless smile came to our church. He was homeless, sleeping in his car, and wondered if I could help with lodging and food. When I agreed, he said, "Thank you, sir!"

That's when I saw the military bearing in his shoulders; I heard the respect in his voice.

"Are you a Vet?"

"Yes, sir. I served in Desert Storm with the First Mechanized Infantry."

What followed was an amazing story, a page of American history, and it was my privilege to hear every word.

Raised in New Jersey, William Milburn inherited his family's tradition to join the military. He enlisted in the Army National Guard after high school. When he got laid off from a factory job, he decided to go active duty. Eventually he was transferred to Fort Bliss, assigned to the First Armored Division.

In August of 1990, William was a frontline tank gunner when the U.S. invaded Iraq. As he spoke, I could hear the roaring jets, the deep booms as William locked onto distant Iraqi targets and destroyed them. Those traumatic memories still open fresh wounds.

“We saw trucks, jeeps and tanks with mangled, blackened bodies. The smell of death is horrible, pastor. I was a soldier, but as a Christian, any loss of life is terrible. I remember looking at one body draped from a jeep and thinking 'man, that guy had a family.' It was war. I did my duty. But it was still so sad.”

William received bronze stars for his valor. I told him I couldn't thank him enough for his selfless service to our country. I'm happy to tell you he is back on his feet, working hard, enjoying life with a new girlfriend.

So think of this as you shop, work, and travel. Every person you see has a story. And sometimes the people we pass over the quickest have the most mind-blowing tales of all. A homeless veteran taught me this lesson.

All I had to do was listen.

WEEK 42 - OCTOBER: FROM GANGS TO GRACE

Hanging in my office are mementos of ministry, artifacts of people and places I've served. One is a black T-shirt. Emblazoned across it are the words, "From gangs to grace, thanks to Jesus Christ!"

It instantly reminds me of Dan Rodriguez, a friend and ally, a compatriot in the Kingdom of God. Our relationship has stood the test of time and distance.

I first met Dan during a hot, smoggy summer in Pomona, a city in east Los Angeles County. With the heat and polluted air, a host of urban ills surrounded us: drug trafficking, prostitution, violence. The church I served sat on a fault line between warring gangs - 12th Street and Cherryville - both influenced by *La eMe*, the Mexican mafia.

Dan knew the tragedy of gang life firsthand. Raised in Pomona, he became a *vato loco* in sixth grade, recruited by his father and uncles. He delved into sex and substance abuse, dealing drugs for his 12th Street clan.

All of that changed on December 17, 1978, two months after Dan's 18th birthday. Rival gang members pulled alongside his car and blasted him twice with a shotgun. He suffered wounds to his shoulder and face, barely escaping death.

What others intended for ill, God used for good. Relatives who had rejected gang life took Dan under their wings. They moved him to a neutral neighborhood, helped him recuperate, and began to mentor him. They encouraged his education. They spoke to him of a world far beyond the *barrio* he and his homeboys had defended.

Then another miracle occurred: Dan got involved with a church and dedicated his life to Jesus Christ. He discovered his true self. After all the poor choices he had

made, he realized that God not only loved him unconditionally, but had a purpose for him to heal rather than destroy.

Dan went on to get a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership. He began a career with community nonprofits and faith-based ministries. He used his education, coupled with experience and passion, to help youth choose life, not death.

For a season, Dan and I worked side-by-side in Pomona. We opened a remedial school for young offenders that the local district had permanently expelled. We hired teachers through AmeriCorps. We enlisted ex-gangbangers as mentors, men and women whose lives, like Dan's, had risen as phoenixes from the mean streets. We saw changes in those students that still bring tears to my eyes.

I asked Dan what he would say to young people considering gang life or already immersed in it.

"The choices you make today will follow you the rest of your life. Get close to those who genuinely love you. Many people will say they do, but you know who *really* does. Seek them out. Let them speak life, not violence, into your heart. Let them guide you to a future that is greater than you ever imagined."

Today, Dan is the Chief Professional Officer for a Boy's and Girl's Club in California, continuing to help young people realize their full potential.

So...when I see that black T-shirt on my wall, it means many things: from gangs to grace, addiction to recovery, depression to hope, violence to peace, self-centeredness to service.

Why? Because with God, all things are possible!

**WEEK 43 - OCTOBER:
BE THE CHANGE!**

Mahatma Gandhi said something that sparkles with wisdom: "Be the change you want to see." Words are cheap; actions declare the allegiance of our hearts and will. Show us, don't tell us!

Gandhi followed this motto faithfully. Determined to eject the British from India using non-violent protests, he persuaded his followers to lay down their arms. Years later, his most passionate student - Martin Luther King, Jr. - did the same thing. While extremists like Malcolm X called for revolution by *any means necessary*, King held fast to the peaceful teachings of Gandhi and Jesus Christ. He died as a witness to advance these truths.

Think about our own lives. At home, work, school or church, we can easily find people whose actions disappoint and anger us. We are all critics at times, quick to point out the faults in others. Many of our evaluations have merit. There are certainly societal issues that need changing. There are friends and family members with self-destructive behaviors. There are people who mismanage businesses; others who lie, cheat, and steal. Some folks are just plain lazy.

What can we do about all this? What is the sharpest tool we have for real transformation? OURSELVES! We have no real power to change others, but we can surely alter our own lives. As Michael Jackson once sang: *I'm startin' with the man in the mirror. If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, then make a change.*

Right now, each of us can think of how we might practice this spiritual principle in your own lives.

I'm a fan of dramatic examples. They can spur us to action. One of my favorites comes from the life of Mother Teresa.

On September 10, 1946, Teresa experienced her *call within a call*. She was traveling by train across the Indian countryside. At many stops, the eyes of India's untouchables gazed up at her through the window. The poverty of those dear souls touched her heart. Back in Calcutta, she asked for permission to begin an order of sisters to serve the poorest of the poor. She left her comfortable convent and took to the streets with only the sari on her back.

Her first year was bitterly difficult. With no income, she resorted to begging for food and supplies. She experienced doubt, loneliness and the temptation to quit. She wrote in her diary: "Today I learned a good lesson. The poverty of the poor must be so hard for them. While looking for a home, I walked and walked 'til my arms and legs ached. I thought how much the poor must ache in body and soul, looking for shelter, food and health."

Today, Teresa's Missionaries of Charity are serving the suffering in 120 countries. **BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE!**

Let me close with a poem I recently found on Facebook.

*"Build a better world," said God.
And I answered, "How?
The world is such a vast place,
and so complicated now.
And I am small and useless.
There's nothing I can do."
But God in all his wisdom said,
"Build a better YOU."*

**WEEK 44 - OCTOBER:
CELEBRATING ALL SAINTS GRACIOUSLY!**

Are you a saint? Have you known one? Hold those questions in mind.

I once led a bereavement group, a refuge for people traumatized by loss. Grief is the most painful and powerful set of human emotions, but this diverse group of folks discovered a sublime truth: sharing our stories helps us triumph on our difficult journeys.

We began those weekly gatherings by reciting these words, “When someone we love becomes a memory, that memory becomes a treasure.”

All Saints Day and *Día de los Muertos* are approaching. It’s a perfect time to pause and reflect on those we have lost, to cherish their legacies.

As we do, let’s remember the definition of *saint* in the Christian faith. Not many of us would claim this title. We reserve it for those who show moral purity, passionate love, or superhuman sacrifice. They are people of legends and icons. Their examples seem so removed from our mundane lives. We struggle with doubts and cravings, pride and prejudice. We cling to material things. No, we are not saints.

But this is the world’s viewpoint, not Heaven’s. God’s overriding value, still radiating through Christ, is GRACE. It’s a gift of loving acceptance that none of us deserve and none of us can earn. When we receive its life-changing power, we become one of the Communion of Saints.

There are no perfect people; we are ALL unfinished works of human art. This is true with even the most saintly in history. A careful scrutiny of their lives shows that they, too, wrestled with personal demons like the rest of us.

This is why grace offers a healing way to view those we've lost. It helps us embrace the totality of their heritage. We learn from their admirable traits and accept their faults with compassion. We gain wisdom from their failures as well as successes.

1555 miles from my office is a quiet cul-de-sac at Forest Lawn Cemetery, Glendale, California. Many times I have parked at the curb, then walked across an expanse of mown grass to stand before two headstones placed side by side. They belong to my paternal grandparents. Three words, a final epitaph, are chiseled in granite across them: "Ambassadors for Christ."

In many ways this describes my grandparents perfectly. Their faith directed their actions in visible ways. After the Watts Riots, a racial explosion in 1965, they walked with a multiethnic group through inner city Los Angeles, braving potential violence to witness for unity. They were quick to help underdogs throughout their lives. They modeled prayer and devotion to Biblical principles.

But their flaws were also apparent. My grandfather rarely showed physical warmth. My grandmother held on to bitterness towards people who wronged her. She was also a hypochondriac. You hesitated to get her started by asking, "How are you?"

Like all of us, my grandparents were a mix of goodness and error. But seen through the eyes of grace, they were saints. When I celebrate them this way, I feel God's love more strongly.

So let's remember all our saints, past and present. Let's do so graciously.

WEEK 45 - NOVEMBER: WHEN DID WE SEE YOU?

In Matthew 25, Jesus thanks some people for serving him when he was hungry, naked, and imprisoned. Surprised, they ask, “*WHEN* did we see you?”

He replies that when they noticed and cared for the needy, they were seeing him in disguise.

Jesus still asks us, “Can you recognize the Divine in others? Do you look into their eyes and discover a child of God?” I recently pondered this question on a drive to Corpus Christi.

Along the road near Agua Dulce, a young woman pushed a baby cart with one hand, her other leading a toddler. Her slender arms blazed with tattoos. As I slowed at the town limits, she heard my truck and lifted her gaze. Our eyes locked and we smiled.

At the city park, an old man sat beneath a weathered gazebo. He was bald, his face covered with gray stubble. He took a drag off his cigarette and looked up. We saw each other and nodded.

In Banquete I stopped for a taco at *Pena's Grocery and Deli*. Mr. Pena himself waited on me, a chore he's performed for decades.

A slight man with smiling eyes, he said, “You can sit at one of the tables. There's salsa in the jar.” Then I saw a change in his gaze; he was peering into the past.

“I remember Mrs. W.,” he said. “She was part of a ranching family in the area. When her husband died, she would come here every morning, buy a taco, sit right over there.” He pointed. “She also brought her make-up. She would pour a little salsa on the taco, take a bite, put it down. Then she'd pick up her makeup and apply a bit of it carefully.

Salsa, taco, makeup. Every morning the same routine. We missed her when she passed away.”

I turned and sat at the same spot where Mrs. W. performed her morning ritual. I lifted my taco, poured some salsa, took a bite. Mr. Pena smiled at me, his eyes more fluid, as if he could still see her. We tilted our heads in understanding.

In Corpus Christi, I came to a stoplight. A homeless man intersected my path that exact moment. He pushed his shopping cart to the corner and paused. I examined its contents, the entirety of his earthly treasures: newspapers, cans, clothing, a greasy blanket. At the bottom was a pink teddy bear peering through the slats.

The man turned slowly, unaware of my scrutiny. He was wearing stained jeans and a faded black T-Shirt across his sunken chest. On it were two words: *Got Hope?* I smiled at the incongruity, at this flower in the dustbin. I looked up and he saw me. He watched my eyes stray back to the message, then joined me in the divine comedy, giving me a *thumbs up*. I lifted my hand and did the same.

And suddenly it was just our gazes, fixed on each other, two children of God frozen in a second of eternity.

I see you, said his eyes. *I see you*, said my own.

WEEK 46 - NOVEMBER: IN A MOMENT: LIVING A GRATEFUL LIFE

We all love slogans, whether they're plastered on T-shirts, coffee mugs, or roadside billboards. But when it comes to self-help slogans, I find them frustrating. They seem glib: easy to say, hard to practice. There are times when I'm obsessing on a problem and pull up behind a car whose bumper sticker proclaims *Let Go and Let God*. I feel like shouting out the window, "Easy for you to say!"

Wayne Dyer once coined a catchy slogan: *Have an attitude of gratitude*. Christians have their own version, penned by the Apostle Paul as he sat in a Roman prison: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice!"

That's good counsel, but not easy to follow. Normal life stressors are hard enough, and then we have seasons with a deluge of difficulties. A friend of mine once said: "People say God will never give you more than you can handle. Lately, I've wanted to scream at God, 'You flatter me!'"

How can we learn to be more grateful? For the next few weeks I will share a practice that has helped me immensely. It all hinges on three words: *in a moment*. We will explore each moment in three ways - ***entering, accepting, praising***.

Entering the Moment

Clearly, one of the arts of existence is to savor every second. So many of us live in two eternities over which we have no control - the past and the future. Meanwhile, the streaming beauty of the present slips past unexplored and unappreciated.

Jesus spoke to this in his *Sermon on the Mount*. "Which

one of you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?" Having tended to countless individuals at their deathbeds, I can say this with certainty. In the end, we will not remember the daily worries that drained our vitality. Only two things will matter at that juncture: our relationships with God and the people who graced our lives.

These relationships begin right now, so entering each moment is crucial. In his book entitled *Spontaneous Happiness*, Andrew Weil calls this *mindfulness training*, his primary tip on how to find more joy.

We don't need to be masters of meditation to do this. Consider Brother Lawrence, an illiterate, barefooted monk from the 1600s. He was the cook at a monastery in Paris, constantly serving his superiors. But in that kitchen he endeavored to experience God. Over time, the simple power of his faith drew people of all walks of life to his side. He once said, "For me, the time of business does not differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, with several persons simultaneously calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees."

How will you fill the moments of this week? Driving your vehicle; sitting at a desk; working in the fields; tending to spouses, children, or animals; cooking, cleaning, shopping? Whatever your task, enter the moment as fully as possible. Every day is a chance to practice mindfulness, to increase our conscious contact with God. Enter the moment, expecting to meet our Creator, and you will!

WEEK 47 - NOVEMBER: IN A MOMENT, PART TWO

As we learn to enter each moment, all is not joy. We become acutely aware of both our personal baggage and the painful circumstances of our lives. This is when there is no substitute for the power of acceptance. Specifically, I pray that each of us will learn to accept our present lives in the following ways.

First, accept the mistakes of our past. Which one of us wouldn't make different choices in retrospect? If we regret our lack of wisdom, we leave the present and dwell in futility. We need to reiterate a simple truth until it burns into our consciousness: there is absolutely nothing we can do to change the past! Regret is a vampire on our life's blood. We can choose not to let it drain us.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a list of promises that resonate with beauty for everyone. One of them is, "We will not regret the past, nor wish to shut the door on it." Why? Because God can use everything that has happened to us, even brutal failures, for our benefit. Romans 8:28 says, "We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God." Every piece of our past is a potential learning experience. When we accept the wisdom it offers, we experience spiritual growth that leads to hope.

Second, accept the people in our lives. Some of us drive ourselves insane trying to change others! It might be a spouse, child, co-worker, or neighbor. We disapprove of their behavior. We sit in judgment. We think that by confronting or lecturing them, we will get what we want. This only undermines our own serenity. We have absolutely no real control over other people. Only the power of God - if they choose to receive it - can alter the course of their lives. That

choice is theirs. Live and let live; see how much freer you feel!

Finally, accept ourselves as God accepts us.

Remember how Jesus condensed over 600 Jewish laws into two basic commandments. First, “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, mind, and strength.” Second, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s those words, *as yourself* that often trip us. We can be so hard on ourselves! No matter how many admirable attributes we possess, we focus too often on what we lack.

I pray you will forgive yourself as God has forgiven you. I pray you will be kind and gracious to yourself. I pray you will realize that when John says, “For God so loved the world...” it means, “for God so loved YOU!” Accept your precious identity as a child of God. There has never been, and never will be, a person on this planet exactly like you. Celebrate your awesomeness!

Enter the moment; then accept the moment.

Acceptance is not resignation. It is deeper and more powerful, a platform for lasting change. As a recovering brother says: “Until I accept life on life’s terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.”

**WEEK 48 - NOVEMBER:
IN A MOMENT, PART THREE**

I've been encouraging us to enter each moment and savor its beauty. This is the *art of mindfulness*. It takes practice, but the effort brings miraculous benefits. One of these miracles comes through the power of acceptance. We learn from past mistakes, recognize the futility of trying to change others, and come to value ourselves as awesome children of God.

Entering, accepting, and now, PRAISING!

The first step in praising is a piece of folk wisdom that almost goes without saying: *count our blessings*. At Thanksgiving we remind ourselves to spill our cornucopia of positives: food, shelter, freedoms, loved ones, vocation, faith in God. We cherish stories of gratitude, like the Pilgrims giving thanks after a bitter winter; the Ten-Boom's praising fleas in their death-camp barracks; Jesus pausing to bless bread even with his cross on the horizon.

Certainly, part of our training to live in the present is harvesting thanks for God's abundant gifts. But I want to close this series with an even more powerful reason to give praise in this moment.

We find it in the 17th chapter of Luke as Jesus heals ten lepers, releasing them from lives as hideous outcasts. Only one, a Samaritan, kneels and gives thanks. Jesus says, "Has no one else returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he says to him, "Rise and go; your faith (expressed in thankfulness) has made you well."

Do you hear that? The other nine were healed, but only one became truly well. What did Jesus mean? The key is to understand the Greek word used here. It is *sozo*, and it describes someone who has become whole in body, mind and

spirit, a person made right with God, humbly delighting in the gift of life.

Friends, please realize this. God lives within our praises. Our hallelujahs release divine power. Positive people experience greater physical health and endurance. They know peace of mind and spirit. They enjoy healthier relationships. They have an uncanny ability to overcome life's challenges.

Praise that flows from our hearts literally shapes our environments with supernatural joy. Why? Because the promises of God become our lifeblood. We see that our Creator wants only good for us. We realize God will help us shape a future that plumbs our deepest desires. We align ourselves with a mercy that can restore us on every level.

I don't know about you, but I want this kind of wellness in my life. I want my cup of praise to overflow. I want a life filled with contagious joy.

And it begins in a moment. This moment!

I have a simple Thanksgiving prayer for all of us:
Heavenly Father, all good things come from you. Open our eyes this moment to see your glory. Give us wisdom to know how everything that has happened to us can be used by you for our benefit. Stir our hearts with praise and lift us up with the healing power of your love!

Be well! Have a blessed Thanksgiving!

WEEK 49 - DECEMBER: GOD'S LAYAWAY PLAN

In the frenzied midst of Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday, CBS news made an *old school* announcement: layaway is back.

Born in the Great Depression when people had little money and no credit, layaway has been reborn. Walmart was first to resurrect the tradition; competitors followed. Some people think it's a gimmick, others a helpful way to buy on a limited budget. You put down a small amount, make regular payments, and defer your gratitude until the day that gift is yours.

In short, you wait to get what you want.

Not many of us like to wait in our culture of instant gratification. Though there are welcome signs we may be changing, for too long American sentiment reverberated in the lyrics of a classic song by Queen, *I want it all, and I want it now!*

Waiting is not our strong suit. Yet now we are entering Advent, a season of waiting and preparing our hearts for Christ. And it strikes me that on a deep spiritual level many of us have layaway hopes with God. We made the down payment, asking for something in prayer, laying a situation in God's hand with trust. Now we wait, hoping for the promises of scripture to materialize in our lives.

My daily experience as a pastor confirms this. I see the hopes we have as human beings. We long for healing in our marriages, for prodigal sons and daughters to return to their senses. We long for God to relieve our financial distress or bless a risk we've taken in a business venture. We hope for the right door to open. We hope for recovery from illness, or for grief to dissolve like mist in the sunlight. We

hope for sustainable retirement. We hope for changes in our nation.

At this moment, I, too, hope for healing in a painful situation. It helps me to remember these words from I Thessalonians: “We do not grieve as those who have no hope.” Let me encourage you with a similar Advent notion.

We do not wait as those who have no hope.

When we welcome the Spirit into our hearts, a wellspring of confidence grows within us. We see evidence of God’s faithfulness everywhere, both in our own lives and the lives of others. As Chisholm’s great hymn celebrates, *Morning by morning new mercies I see.*

Yes, it’s hard to wait. Yes, we can point to times when waiting seemed fruitless and prayers seemed unanswered. But as the presence of the Spirit takes hold, we realize we have already been given SO MUCH of what we hope for.

Advent is a season of *not yet* in the midst of *already*. God’s layaway plan is unique. It’s like God saying, “Yes, you must wait, but here’s a taste of what’s to come.” And that taste is like nothing we’ve ever experienced. It’s the sweet fruit of the Spirit!

As we walk together into Advent, hear these words of Paul from I Corinthians: “Through God you have been enriched in every way. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed in your life.”

WEEK 50 - DECEMBER: OCCUPY CHRISTMAS!

This time of year, I feel kinship with Bill Maher, famous for his rants. I get _____ed off! It starts with the treacle of ads like *Every kiss begins with Kay*. It mounts with incidents such as a woman pepper-spraying her opponents on Black Friday. Behind it all is a tortuous soundtrack of Christmas Muzak blaring in the stores.

God Almighty, how did we come this far? Founded by the Roman church in 336 A.D., Christmas was an alternative to the excesses of a holiday called Saturnalia. By remembering a decidedly humble night - *a Savior born in a feed trough* - people were to turn away from Roman hedonism. Christmas was radically counter culture.

Again, how did we come this far? The irony can't be lost on any of us. Jesus was the ultimate anti-materialistic prophet. He urged his followers to simplify their lives, drop their possessions, and follow him. His only earthly goods, his clothes, were gambled away by Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross. He once described himself as having no place to lay his head.

But Christmas is now burdened with a mountain of STUFF. Any hope that The Great Recession would curb our appetites dissolves with stats about Black Friday and Cyber Monday. We continue to commit credit card abuse, overeat, and produce tons of trash to celebrate the birthday of an itinerant, first century Jewish carpenter.

Hello? What would he say to us? Have we lost our capacity for introspection? For outrage?

Remember Occupy Wall Street? I urge every person with an appreciation for Jesus to Occupy Christmas! I call on us to change our behavior in such a way that people are

startled, asking, “Why would they do that?” And the answer will be obvious: because we are disciples of Christ, not the Christmas dollar!

I’m not saying this as a bitter Scrooge. I’m saying it out of love. Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus taught us where our real values should lie. One of his most pointed teachings is to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth where moths and rust destroy. This is not other-worldly, impractical advice; it is powerful for here and now. Jesus is saying, “Get free from the snares of materialism. Don’t wait until later to relish what really matters in life!”

How can we do this, especially during this time of year? I have listed a number of suggestions in a booklet I wrote called “Have an Authentic Christmas.” You can download it for free (yes, free) at Torchofffaith.com.

Here are just a few.

- For every dollar you spend on Christmas, put an equal amount in a collection box. Decide as a family how you want to spend that matching money on those in need.
- Start a family service tradition, taking time this season to volunteer at a charity.
- Adopt a struggling family or a lonely resident at a nursing home.
- Practice reconciliation. If you are at odds with anyone in your life, go to them and do everything possible to make amends.

Even if this limited rant helps change one behavior, it will be worth it. Will you help me Occupy Christmas?

WEEK 51 - DECEMBER: WHISPERS OF ETERNITY

A friend of mine, a man who believes in the continuity of Spirit, had a great loss recently. I awoke to find this Facebook message: "I buried my son yesterday. He is not dead. He's more alive now than he's ever been. He had cancer, but cancer did not have him. Make this Christmas your best. Surrender your life to God's love!"

I realize that people of diverse faiths read this column - even people who claim no faith. But whether we believe in God or not, death is inevitable. And holidays like Christmas can heighten our sense of loss, sharpening pain over loved ones now gone.

I want to share a testimony with you. In my years of ministry, I have presided at literally hundreds of memorial services. Early on, I vowed two things to myself.

First, I would avoid *pie-in-the-sky* words about heaven that bypass grief. I've been to services where the music and glib verbiage glossed over excruciating pain. It was *paint by number* comfort. That's not right! Death is perhaps the greatest test of faith. Our own mortality begs difficult questions. Let's explore them together.

Second, I vowed that if I ever lost my personal belief in eternity, I would excuse myself from the pulpit. If I had no Good News to share, I would shut up.

With God's help, I've kept these vows. Rather than diminish me, the privilege of sharing with others in their final moments has positively deepened my faith.

Along the way, I've encountered people like my friend who lost his son. People like Ruth Scott, who held my hand and said, "Pastor Krin, don't be sad. I'm going across the Jordan." People like Sheila, her bald head gleaming from a

final round of chemotherapy. She gathered family at her bedside, placed her hands on them, and blessed them with words of hope.

What gives people such powerful faith? Is it as simple as surrendering our lives to a power greater than ourselves? Each of us must discover this on our own. But from my personal perspective, the answer is a resounding YES!

This is what so many of us celebrate at Christmas. The giving of a love so powerful it permeates our lives with the certainty of things not seen. Though our minds help us grasp this gift, we cannot understand it solely through intellect. It is a grace received when we turn our will over to God. It is poured into us when we allow our human spirits to merge with God's Spirit.

If you are grieving this Christmas, my heart goes out to you. But because the Jesus I follow trusted God beyond the cross to an empty tomb, I pray you will hear him whisper to you and ALL your loved ones: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places..."

**WEEK 52 - DECEMBER:
MERRY CHRISTMAS!**

Keith blew in with a cold front, already seated on the front steps of our church as I got to work. His clothes were filthy and threadbare, and the face that peered out from beneath a hooded sweatshirt was reddened by more than wind. Body odor and booze fumes tore at my nostrils.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I was wondering if you could spare a few dollars,” he said.

“I don’t give out cash,” I answered. “I’m not judging you, but people drink up the money as soon as I give it to them.”

“Yeah, I do drink some beer,” he said with a smile.

I smiled back.

“How about I take you to get something to eat?”

“No thanks. I already had one of those breakfast burritos at McDonald’s.”

“How long have you been homeless?”

“Many, many years.”

“If you want,” I said, “I can get you a room at the Rescue Mission. They’re a great outfit, and I know the people in charge. They’ll help you get settled, find work, make a new start.”

“No thanks. I prefer to be on the road.”

“OK. Is there anything else I can do to help you?”

“Actually, I could use some new shoes and a coat.”

What an understatement. His black tennis shoes had no soles and his flimsy sweatshirt was no buffer to the cold.

“Tell you what,” I said, “Let me take you to the Trash and Treasure Resale store and we’ll see what we can do.”

Friends, never underestimate how the simplest of gifts can make a difference in someone else's life! Truly one man's trash can be another man's treasure. I took Keith to the store, an ecumenical ministry in our town, praying silently they would have what he needed. My prayers were answered. On the shoe shelf was a sturdy set of leather Skechers, his size, barely used. And there on the rack hung a beautiful wool coat with quilted lining and an oversized hood.

I held out the coat with a flourish, mimicking a sales clerk at Men's Wearhouse.

"Here you go, sir," I said. "This looks like *just* your style."

He laughed and slipped into it, playing his part. Perfect fit.

"I really appreciate your help," he said.

"No problem," I replied. "Are you sure you don't want me to get you a room at the Mission? They'll help you in ways that I'm not able to."

"I'm sure. I think I'll just head down to Kingsville. I once spent a Christmas there. Can't even remember what year."

"You're determined to do the Forest Gump thing, eh? Just keep walking and walking?"

"Guess so."

We exited to the back alley. You could feel the coming front in the cold, sharp wind. I shivered, imagining how Keith would fare during the night. He thanked me again as we shook hands. Then he strolled off down the alley, resplendent in his new shoes and coat.

Just before he rounded the corner, he stopped, lifted his arms and shouted "Merry Christmas, everyone!"