

First Fifteen: March 7-11
Focus Scripture: Psalm 27 (2nd Sunday of Lent)

Monday: Psalms 127:1-2

Going Deeper: These words from Psalm 127 are attributed to Solomon. They remind me of his musing from Ecclesiastes, specifically chapter 3:9-15. (I encourage to look at them.) They remind us to stay focused not on how much we produce, or how well or efficiently we do so, instead we are called to lift our focus higher and beyond our personal achievement to see our work, our lives, all we are and do as part of God's plan and work. These teachings encourage us to embrace life and its gifts as something to be shared as we allow life to flow through us. Psalm 127 encourages us to see the need for the balance of effort with humility trusting God's love and provision for us. They remind us to release our lives, what we hope to accomplish, and achieve into God's care, believing we never carry our burdens alone, trusting God knows our desires... and in doing so, rest will be given, and sleep will come easily.

Prayer: Lord of mercy, you see me, your child, through your eyes of love. Lord I acknowledge, you also see those places where I struggle, where my faith is not as strong as I want it to be, and yet you tell me to trust you, knowing you will use me, guide me, and provide for me and those I love. In your love I find peace, the calm within everything else in my life. Amen.

Tuesday: Romans 13:8-14

Going Deeper: We live in a transactional society. The idea of give and take is easily understood, but is that the message in these verses from Romans 13:8-12? *"Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love one another."* (Rom. 13:8 – CEB) What does obligation mean for you? An obligation refers to a course of action or conduct to which you are morally and sometimes legally bound to fulfill. Is that what you think Paul had in mind as he wrote these words. There is yet another way to understand his meaning or intent. Our obligation is grounded through our gratitude for what we have received. From this understanding it could be said we are obligated because of God's grace to learn to respond through the transformation of our behavior, choices, and interactions. I believe this is what Paul is asking us to consider. His words are meant to encourage and call us to discover obligation as a response to God's grace by allowing love to guide us. More than a decade ago someone introduced the idea of WWJD (what would Jesus do) as a guide for our lives. Based upon Paul's teaching in these verses, I wonder if we might amend this and bring it closer to home. As we begin our day, as we find ourselves in difficult conversations, or interactions with others, before we respond stop, take a deep breath, and reground yourself with this phrase... "This is how I love." Or if you are about to go over the edge, stop before you act and ask... "Is this how I show my obligation of love?"

Prayer: My God and Savior, it is much easier to receive your love and mercy than it is accepting and caring for others, especially those who I disagree and whose ideas deeply affect me. Help

me release my anger, or righteous indignation, or whatever it is that gets stirred up within me. Help me simply focus on your call to love others as you have loved and accepted me. Amen.

Wednesday: Luke 14:7-11

Going Deeper: As first glance this teaching from Jesus sounds like a lesson on humility. *“All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”* (Luke 14:11 – CEB). We are told Jesus made this comment when he was gathered in table fellowship with other teachers, referred to as Pharisees, as he observed their behavior... *“Noticing how each guest had tried to elbow into the place of honor.”* (Luke 14:7 – The Message) As I hear these words from Jesus, most especially as they are rendered in the Message I am reminded of numerous times I found myself maneuvering for a better position, most likely one where I would either have been in a better spot to be seen by others, or where I would be in the best position to both see and then report to others what was going on! As I have spent time with this teaching, I have begun to see Jesus’ intent was not merely a call to humility, but a challenge to see myself without comparing myself to or with others. I believe Jesus’ message was a call to see ourselves as God does, exactly as we are... but from a place of acceptance with no need to prove our value to ourselves or anyone else for that matter. This is grace in its deepest form... as we simply embrace, we are loved and accepted by God, not needing to prove we are worthy, and especially more worthy or important than someone else.

Prayer: Lord, you see me and cut through the shroud I use to hide my true motives from you, others and sometimes even myself. You see my true self, the one that you call me to live from not based upon my perceived status or value. Help me to trust you will use me and lead me to where I may best serve and represent you. Amen.

Thursday: Luke 14:15-24

Going Deeper: This exchange is a continuation from Jesus’ teaching about grace. All are invited, the banquet of God’s love is overflowing with abundance for all who will open their heart to receive it... *“Happy are those who will feast in God’s kingdom.”* (Luke 14:15 – CEB). Although Jesus’ response to this declaration appears to be off putting! He shares a parable about dinner guests who decline the invitation to a grand dinner party. We may be tempted to focus on the excuses that were used by those who had been invited in an attempt to understand why they did not accept the host’s invitation. But does the nature of, or reason for their excuse really matter? I want to encourage you to look more closely at what Jesus was trying to teach us in Luke 14:21-23. What is Jesus saying about the host of the banquet? What might be the host’s desire and motivation? To what lengths is the host willing to go to fill up the banquet hall? Jesus tells us the host asked the servants to urge and persuade everyone they could find to come and fill the house and to come as their host’s guests. No one was excluded, except those who refused to come. (Luke 14:24) Jesus does not force us to follow his path of discipleship, all are invited, but the key to fully understanding what we have been called to is found in our awareness of need for what God offers. If we see no need for what is being offered, we rarely accept.

Prayer: My God your mercy knows no end, the depth of your love for your children beyond my ability to fathom and yet I suspect you grow weary of how distracted we become, sometimes even resistant to your call and leading. Forgive me my Lord and help me become more grounded in my awareness for your mercy, and guidance in all matters of my life. Amen.

Friday: Luke 14:28-34

Going Deeper: 17th Century mathematician Blaise Pascal, sought to count the cost of following Jesus through what became known as Pascal's Wager.... His work in essence considered the rationality of belief. He proposed our belief and willingness to surrender to God's love is dependent on two factors: the value of what you stand to lose or gain by believing or not, and the probability that what Jesus revealed about himself, and God are true... which in turn determine the probability of experiencing these gains or losses. I am not sure if Pascal had this specific teaching of Jesus in mind when he came up with his theory, it none the less gets us into the heart of what Jesus was saying. To be his disciple requires us to take seriously his call to follow him and his teachings. Like so many other things in our lives, we must choose what is most important and if we are willing to make the necessary sacrifices that might be required by our commitment. Jesus' words in Luke 14:33... *"none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple"* (CEB) echo Jesus' comments from Luke 14:27... *Whoever doesn't carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*" (CEB). Does Jesus really mean we must give away all we possess? What do you hear Jesus asking you? His words are not a one size fits all. Each of us must open our heart, mind, and spirit to listen to what he is asking of us individually. His primary intent as I understand it, is calling us to put God before everything else, and then live our lives faithfully. This does not mean perfectly, it simply asks of us to allow God's love, and Jesus' teaching to open our mind and transform the way we see others and then respond to them in ways that reflect our love for God, ourselves and other.

Prayer: "Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me; place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for thee, ready my God thy will to see. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine." UMC Hymnal #454 (Open My Eyes, That I May See)