

First Fifteen: May 23-27
Focus Scripture: John 13:31-35

Monday: John 16:25-33

Going Deeper: This exchange between Jesus and his unnamed disciples are guided by verse 31 where Jesus asks in what appears to be in a somewhat skeptical tone, “*Now you believe?*” (John 16:31-CEB) The central message of this exchange is a call to believe, to trust God’s love for us and to realize Jesus has revealed the meaning of faith. It is not merely about something that impacts us after our lives have ended, our faith is about living our lives in relationship with God, connected to God through our faith right now through prayer! The disciples seem to celebrate Jesus’ plain speech, and yet what I hear clearly is yes, we are loved by God, and yes, we have access to God’s guidance through prayer, but even with faith our lives will require us to endure times of struggle. Our faith does not remove the distractions or lives’ challenges, it may actually accentuate them; through faith our eyes are opened, and our hearts become uncluttered, which means we can now often clearly see the choices we have been called to make, and this is where our faith meets our struggle. This tension requires us to wrestle with the questions of how are we to navigate and move within communities, and against agendas, and the natural flow of the world around us that is not guided by faith in God. I have found a few simple questions that help me understand this struggle... Who does this benefit? Does it draw me closer to others, creating community and widespread opportunity, or will it only benefit a few, or even just me? As Jesus said... “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*” (John 16:33 – NIV)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, open my eyes, clear my mind, and enlarge my heart as I embrace the day ahead of me through my faith. I lift this prayer to you and trust your guidance within the decisions that will come before me. I ask that your peace will lead me. Amen.

Tuesday: Philippians 2:1-4

Going Deeper: These words in the opening verses of Philippians 2 provide us with the introduction to what is called the Christ Hymn. Philippians 2:6-11 were most likely a known piece of liturgical writings used in worship, possibly as a creed, or even sung by this worshipping community as a hymn or chant in Philippi. These verses are the earliest expression of the nature and understanding of the incarnation from these first disciples of Jesus. They also provide the underpinning for these opening words from Paul in verses 1-4 which call out to us to not merely understand the choices and sacrifices Jesus made, but also to understand and consider how they impact the practice of our faith. As you read these opening words of the 2nd chapter, what stand out for you? Are there specific phrases that reach out to you drawing you to seek a deeper understanding? I must admit I find the Message’s rendering of these verses to be most helpful. I suspect this is true because they lift them out of the formula that the more traditional translations use. Their rhythm and cadence catch my attention and

challenges me to listen to Paul as he reminds us our faith is not simply what say we believe but how we then translate what we believe into the practice of our faith.

Prayer: Our God whose action and desires are always one, help me as my actions and desire continue to grow and are shaped by my faith. I ask for the guidance of your ever-present spirit and the mercy of your tender grace as we, you and I work together on this life transforming journey. In the name of my beloved Savior, I pray. Amen.

Wednesday: Luke 13:18-30

Going Deeper: These kingdom parables reveal the so-called hidden nature of the kingdom of God, they reveal to us that the kingdom of God does not stand in opposition, but in contrast to the natural order or flow which dominates our lives. Jesus tells us in these two kingdom parables about the small but infectious nature of faith in practice, which reflects the kingdom through our lives for others to experience. Jesus also understands not all will embrace the life the kingdom of God calls us to and will opt instead to stand on the fringes. Many understand these words and teaching of Jesus as a warning of judgment and the condemnation of those who are unfaithful. I see this but I also think there is another way to look at this teaching based upon the dominant understanding and teaching within the Jewish faith from the first century. This 1st century teaching would have been the foundation from which Jesus taught, and the prevailing understanding for life after death was known as Sheol which was simply understood as the place of the dead. The modern concept of hell as we know it began to take shape in the 4th century through the writings and thought of Augustine. Sheol as we see in Jesus' teaching is the place where both the faithful and unfaithful reside. It is not a place of punishment as we understand hell, and yet it appears to a place where there is some distinction between the faithful and others. I think Jesus' defining statement is Luke 13:30 and this is where we need to focus... *"Look! Those who are last will be first and those who are first will be last."* (CEB) These words from Jesus remind us of what we read yesterday about how we are called to allow our faith to shape and form our choices and interactions with others. We must remember we are embraced by God not due to our perfect record, but through our faith and desire to live as Jesus' disciples.

Prayer: Our God of infinite mercy, whose love is the creative force throughout our world, refresh my faith, embolden my desire, and strengthen my resolve this day. May your grace and loving spirit season all I do, so others may see and sense your kingdom is among us. Amen.

Thursday: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Going Deeper: These words from the Hebrew Prophet Zephaniah help us see the connection between God the Father and God the Son. They reveal how Jesus mirrored God's love. Zephaniah shares that Yahweh, the Almighty One of Israel seeks to restore, heal, and gather his loved ones and bring them peace. We hear a similar desire in Jesus' teaching... to rescue the lame, to gather those who have strayed, to create calm and restore peace among the people of God. These words remind us of the connection

through to God's presence and healing love found through our faith. They invite us to join in the celebration and witness of the truth that God is in our midst which Zephaniah affirms in verse 15 and again in verse 17. This is significant because the typical reference in Hebrew thought at the time of Zephaniah was God's presence was located within the Temple and there is no reference to this in these verses. It certainly could be implied, although I wonder if these words could also be understood as an invitation to expand our belief and trust in God's presence and blessings without limiting what God can, might or won't do based our understanding and traditions. Zephaniah's vision shares with us an image of God that is vibrant, joyful, and present seeking to create calm. A few weeks ago, I was the officiant at a wedding on Pawley's Island. If you are on the Island, I encourage you to go the chapel, it is a simple yet beautiful place to gather for worship and prayer. If you go, go to the front of the chapel where you find a picture of Jesus in the front on the right, he is laughing, and his facial expression is filled with exuberant joy. That picture, which I have never seen before reflects God's joy and laughter as we are gathered by God's love and held within God's peace, bringing calm, healing, restoration, and joy to all through our faith in Jesus and all he has revealed to us about this one he taught us to call "Our Father."

Prayer: "Today, O Lord, I accept your acceptance of me. I confess that you are always with me and always for me. I receive into my spirit your grace, your mercy, your care. I rest in your love, O Lord. I rest in your love. Amen." (Richard Foster, Prayers from the Heart)

Friday: Acts 1:1-11

Going Deeper: How much time have we wasted by standing around star gazing? These messengers from God provide us with a startling realization... Jesus told them, as well as to get busy! Yes he did say wait for the Holy Spirit to come and energize us, to guide us, to empower us and to lead us... but when this happens (which it has and continues to) we are to begin where we are, right here in Winston Salem, or Clemmons, or Lewisville, or wherever else we find ourselves and then move outward as witnesses to what we know about God through our experience of Jesus' message, love and acceptance. I think Jesus' instructions to wait and begin where you are and move outward were not simply about these first disciple's locality... I believe Jesus was being intentional telling them and us to begin where you find yourself, don't become distracted by the mountains you see in the distance, or the challenges you are sure you will someday face... he was telling us focus on the now, what is right in front of you, the people you see and engage and work and live with in this moment, not someone or something we must overcome down the road. Notice he did not tell them to wait until they had all the right answers, or all the problems figured out, so no matter what question someone posed they would be ready with an answer. He said God's Spirit will come and will lead us... and to be honest Jesus didn't always respond to peoples questions the way they wanted; he didn't seem to feel any pressure to give them what they wanted when it was demanded... so why do we. It is Ok to respond to the hard questions by saying we don't have ready-made prepackaged answers, and instead of feeling pressure to fix or correct, I suspect what is really needed in those moments is just be real, kind, gracious and present.

Prayer: “God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” (Reinhold Niebuhr) Amen.

I will be preparing the First Fifteen devotions for two more weeks. My time writing them will come to an end on June 10. Beginning on June 12 we will launch our Summer in the Palms daily readings. More information will be forthcoming. Thank you for your faithfulness and my prayer as always is for God’s blessings and peace be upon you as you seek God’s presence with you daily.