

First Fifteen: June 6-10

Monday: Philippians 2:12-16

Going Deeper: These words of Paul have held my attention throughout my life as a Christ follower. I am not sure when I stumbled upon them, I suspect I was in high school. As a younger person I was bothered by Paul's challenge to "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" (Phil. 2:12b- NRSV) Those words "with fear and trembling," sounded as if I needed to be afraid of God, they gave me the impression that my faith was going to make life harder, and quite possibly more painful! Now looking back over nearly 40 years in ministry I can honestly say my faith has made life harder and at times I have endured a greater sense of sorrow and pain due to my faith... and yet I say these words in deep gratitude realizing it was my faith in God and my trust in God's love that opened my eyes, heart and mind to what our faith asks of us, as well as help us see the needs of others more clearly. What I learned over the years was the importance of the next verse, "*for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.*" (Phil. 2:13 NRSV) We are never alone, and we never have to carry the burdens of our lives by ourselves. God is always near, God's Spirit is always within, stirring, moving, pushing, and expanding us, helping us become who we are... God's beloved who shine like stars in our world! (If you have the Message, I encourage you to read these words from that version before you end your day.)

Prayer: Our amazing God, whose love binds our lives together, open my eyes this day, expand my heart and broaden my mind. Help me through my faith in You share the light and wonder of your love and grace in all I do. Amen.

Tuesday: James 1:22-27

Going Deeper: I don't really know who taught me this, but I have a deep inner compulsion that drives much of what I do... "If you are going to do something, then do it well." This was not something I always practiced growing up, although even then I was aware when I was not giving something my full attention or effort. I am also driven by a desire to create fairness and justice and equality for all. Nothing burns my biscuits more than seeing others being devalued, looked over, or shut out for no other reason than they were not welcome, or disqualified by some random idea or rule. I think this is the essence of what James seeks to teach us about our faith. It does not mean we will always do it right, nor does it mean we must engage with everything and everyone. I think God's desire for me, you and us is that we make our faith the foundation of all we do, and what we decide not to do. Even though talking about faith has been what I have done most of my adult life, I know talk is cheap no matter where we are or what we are doing. This being true for all of us we must then allow our faith to become the foundation that shapes us, guiding our decisions, helping us discover those places where we have not been true to what we say we believe and in whom we trust. I believe this is the essence to what James means as he calls us to pay attention and remember who we say we are as we seek to create a faith that flows from our heart into the lives of those in need around us.

Prayer: You O Lord, hold our words and actions together. You O Lord call me to put my faith into action by using my choices, attitudes, reactions and even expressions as my witness more so than my words. Lord of my life may my life be a reflection of my faith and love for you.
Amen

Wednesday: Romans 12:1-2 (3-18)

Going Deeper: I have been drawn to Paul's challenge in Romans 12:2 most of my life, these few words remind me of God's call upon my life and my response... *"Do not be conformed to the world"* (NRSV) or as the Message renders it *"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without thinking. But be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* In college I was introduced to Reinhold Niebuhr's work Moral Man and Immoral Society where he wrestles with the struggle Paul alludes to in these verses. We feel the push pull every day between being conformed to our faith by following Christ and his teachings within a society that is not bound by the same ideas or ideals. I realize this hardly captures the magnitude of Niebuhr's work, but it might help us contextualize Paul's meaning. The quest of our journey of faith is the long term continually ever widening understanding of who we are, who God is and how we are called into community through our faith and relationship with God. There is no end game in our faith other than to be open to and ever allowing God's renewing regenerative Spirit to guide us throughout our lives helping us embody God's grace and as Paul challenges us in Romans 12:18 *"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* (NRSV)

Prayer: *"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."* When I come up against anger, help create calm, when I see violence being done in word or act help me to have the courage to use my strength to create safety. When I find myself in times of doubt, help me seek out others to share my life and questions knowing you will always lead us to the answers we need. Lord of hope, light and love you create healing through your children, guide me today. Amen.
(Adapted from the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi)

Thursday: Matthew 13:1-9

Going Deeper: *"What do you make of this? A farmer scattered the seed, some fell on the hard packed well-worn path... some fell amongst the rocks and gravel... some fell within the thorns while other fell in the rich earth."* (My paraphrase of Matthew 13:3-9) This is known by some as the "Parable of the Sower" while others refer to it as "The Parable of the soils." Like so many of Jesus' parables our familiarity with it may not be helpful, causing us to read over it too quickly while not listening for any new or unheard or unnoticed nuances we may now notice due to our ever-changing life experiences. I encourage you to use numerous translations or even paraphrases as you read and study these sacred texts, they may shake something loose that is the result of our familiarity. As you listen to this parable what do you hear, where is your attention drawn? Do you hear Jesus' focus on the Sower, or the soil? I don't believe there is only one way to hear or understand this parable, I believe the primary task is to do as Jesus said, *"Let anyone with ears listen!"* (Matt. 13:9 – NRSV) What I hear clearly at this point in my life within

these words is the extravagant and indiscriminate nature of God in the Sower who scatters the seeds everywhere and without limitation. God's desire it would seem is to simply scatter the seed, spread the message or share the love with as many people as possible. God appears to be unconcerned with a targeted or directed approach, otherwise the seed would only have been carefully placed in the good earth and even then, only in well-defined furrows to ensure the best harvest or result from God's labor. How do you feel about an extravagant God who does not discriminate and consider who might respond to God's invitation? God's extravagance does not in any way diminish God's love, if anything it makes it even sweeter, rich with meaning and hope for all.

Prayer: Our amazing, extravagant God of love and mercy! Help me know there will always be enough with you... love, grace, provision, for all the needs of my life. The well of your mercy never runs dry. The abundance of your love will fill every void, every place of emptiness and despair not merely for me, but for all your creation. Amen.

Friday: John 2:1-11

Going Deeper: There are so many layers in this story we know as "The wedding at Cana" which is only told by John. Some refer to this story in Jesus' life and ministry as "the miracle of water to wine" which makes sense because we are drawn to this miracle, and yet in my mind it is merely the vessel for the central message! Initially I am drawn to the dynamic between Jesus and his mother. The literal translation of John 2:4 is "*What to me and to you, woman.*" This phrase comes from a Hebrew idiom (Jewish New Testament Commentary – David H. Stern) and has a somewhat flexible meaning... "what do we have in common, or your concern is not mine, or why do you involve me." The NASB, which is one of the most literal word for word translation renders it as "*Woman, what have I to do with you?*" Jesus' response to his mother's request invites us to look beyond the miracle itself, it calls us to listen and consider what does this "sign" as it is called in John 2:11 point to, what does it want to us to see beyond the changing of the water to wine? Regardless of the meaning of Jesus' response to his mother he does what was asked of him. The servants, and his disciples are in on it, they know where this amazing wine had come from, and the fact that it was superior to the wine that had run out also tells us something. This story revealed to his disciples that God's kingdom has come, and this kingdom was unlike anything they or we have ever seen and experienced before! What do you hear in this story? As you consider the abundance of wine, and not merely it's abundance but its superior quality what does that spark in your mind as you connect this sign with the God's kingdom?

Prayer: Lord of life, may your wine of the kingdom continually flow within and around us. May you love ties our hearts together helping know we are never far from your presence... especially when we are open to being your kingdom people who now see our world through your eyes of who we are and who we are becoming. Amen.

The best is yet to come!