

Week Four Devotionals

Monday, March 5

John 5: 1-18

At this point in time, we find Jesus visiting Jerusalem during a feast. He stops by a pool near the sheep Gate which was called Bethesda. Bethesda was called the house of Mercy or place of flowing water. Bethesda was surrounded by five covered colonnades that were built for protection. It was a beautiful place that served as a healing station, for the blind, lame and paralyzed.

In today's passage we find a paralyzed man lying by the pool waiting for someone to help him get into the pool. This man was paralyzed, he couldn't use his arms, legs or ankles to muster enough strength to pull himself into the pool for over thirty-eight years and no one would help him. Surely, thirty-eight years is a long time for someone to be waiting by the pool for a miracle to happen. He didn't realize that his miracle wasn't coming by way of the water of the pool; but his miracle was coming by the way of the living water through Jesus Christ.

When Jesus entered Bethesda, he immediately went to the man and asked him, "Do you want to get well"? The man didn't answer Jesus right away because his focus was not on Jesus. His focus was still on the pool. Here Jesus was giving him the perfect opportunity to be healed. Jesus then gave the man three commands, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk". So the man got up, picked up his mat, and walked. The man did not leave his mat behind because he wanted the mat to be a reminder that his circumstances had changed. The difference was now he carried the mat before the mat carried him.

We too must get up, pick up our mats and walk, especially when we are having a "lying by the pool experience." We must always remember that no matter what our circumstances are, God is going in and through the circumstance with us. We should not focus on the circumstance but we should focus on the source of our help and our help comes from the Lord. Jesus doesn't always change our outer circumstances, he always changes us. He calls us to a new way of seeing, acting, speaking and thinking. When we stand and rise to that new life, we discover that circumstances have changed. Now that doesn't mean we're not going to have circumstances in life; but it does mean that we will be able to manage them from a different place and position.

Meditation: Are you having a "lying by the pool" experience? Are you sitting on your mat?

Prayer: Father God right now in the Name of Jesus, regulate our hearts and minds this Lenten season so that we will stay focused on You. Lord help us to carry our mats as a reminder of your Grace and Mercy. In this and all things, we pray.

Amen

MIT Crispin Johnson

Tuesday, March 6

John 7:14-36

The Pharisees and chief priests did not believe that Jesus was the Christ in part because of where He came from and because He didn't go to the "right" schools. But, Jesus spoke the doctrine of God! Jesus spoke with authority and boldness, with His goal being only to glorify and magnify the One who sent Him, His Heavenly Father. His gifts and talents were evident and manifest. The miracles that He performed were well known among the people. And yet, Jesus was not believed by the powers that be to be the Messiah. Where He came from, His background and His social location is what the Pharisees and chief priests judged Him by. How could anything good come out of Nazareth? According to those who proclaimed themselves to be the experts of such things, Jesus didn't have the right credentials or the correct pedigree. Sound familiar? He didn't come from a respectable place like, say, Norway. They believed nothing good could come out of the inner city, urban areas and poor neighborhoods. The Messiah wouldn't come from a place like that! Jesus' responds to such bigotry by saying, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." Don't let anyone tell you that God has not called you to work in God's vineyard because of where you come from, the color or your skin, your gender, your sexual orientation, your socio-economic status, your past sins or any other such thing. God, and God alone, does the forgiving, the equipping and the calling.

Meditation: Are you not answering God's call to "move on up a little higher" because of what other's think about you and/or say about you? Have you allowed the world to beat you down and rob you of the gifts that the Lord has given you? Is there something about you that God doesn't know? The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves, and yet we are called to serve. Remember that she and he who the Lord sets free is free indeed.

Prayer: Dear Lord deliver us from all bigotry and hatred. Help us to keep our eyes stayed on thee and your light. Let us not focus on those who walk in darkness and unbelief. Let us not be distracted or dismayed by the naysayers who seek to discourage; but surround us with those who uplift, encourage and speak truth to power. In the precious name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Minister Upshaw

Wed March 7

Jeremiah 10:11-24

In this text, Jeremiah is receiving a very clear message from God. God wants Israel to know that judgment is coming regardless of the covenant. God has had enough of people worshiping and engaging in the practices of false idols and false gods. We must be careful not to worship things that aren't God. For example, money is one of the most obvious items that can easily become a false god will we become too attached and driven by it. Jeremiah tells the people that God has created the earth. God alone is wise, and his voice thunders through the heavens. Rain falls at God's command. God is the master of the universe. Jeremiah speaks these words because the

people have forgotten the beauty and power of worship, but instead follow practices that we'll leave them empty without God. Jeremiah explained that the wrath of God is near because the turning of their hearts hurt God. In essence, punishment will come unless they turn from their ways. Dear my weeks for the people on their behalf and asks God to have mercy. We must be like that Jeremiah, interceding for the world as we also live it. Remember we live in the world, but we are not of the world as Jesus taught us. Jeremiah reminds us that God should bring forth judgment and justice, but have mercy on the faithful.

Meditation:

How has the world turned from God? Is God right to bring forth judgment? How can we pray like Jeremiah, asking forged to spare our lives in the midst of the turmoil? Ho

Prayer:

Dear God. We know that you are the only one who can bring forth judgment and we yield to your will. However, while the world is in turmoil and has turned its face from you, please have mercy. Remember us who fight for justice and seek to do what is righteous. We intercede for those who have not done right in your sight. Forgive us all, God. In Jesus name. Amen

Rev. Porsha D. Williams

Thursday March 8th

Matthew 6:16-18

As we reach just about the middle portion of the fast, there is a slight temptation to pat ourselves on the back and say job well done. It is so easy when we embark on any journey to deepen our devotion to think too highly of ourselves for things that we really are supposed to do anyway. It's my prayer that as we go deeper, and connect more fully to Christ, that we not boast about who we are or what we do. If you haven't been tempted to brag to someone yet, it will most certainly come before this period is over. In our passage for today, Jesus makes sure that his disciples remember why they are following him in the first place. The purpose of fasting is not to show off to others nor is it to elicit sympathy. We do it unto our Lord "in secret" so that we will be rewarded with his grace and mercy. We are fasting as a body, so of course we can lean on each other for support but, it is even possible for us to begin to brag within the body, to look at those people who for a variety of reasons cannot participate and make them feel bad. As we begin this second half, let us be reminded that we are doing this for the Lord and NOT to feel better about ourselves.

Meditation: Have you been tempted to brag about your progress in this fast to other people? How can you be more "secretive" about your fast? Have you been able to keep your focus on the Lord in these first couple of days or have you been tempted to look at this fast as something that is routine?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, please help us continue to have a burning fire and passion for you throughout this journey. Please continue to humble us before you as we recognize that we are really just dust, dust that you were gracious enough to blow life into. Lord every time we are tempted to brag about what we're doing, please remind us of who we serve. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Friday, March 9th

Jeremiah 17: 19-27

In verse 22 we read, “Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy...” We all have busy lives. With social media, 24-hour news cycle, movies, Netflix, and constant communication with one another (e.g. cell phones, emails, etc.), life moves too quickly. I recently deactivated my Facebook account and my life has changed in ways I needed. Time has slowed down, I am not as cluttered with the daily timeline and updates on my news feed. Mind you I think it's a wonderful tool but there are times we need Sabbath time.

In our culture of greed, consumption, capitalism, and consumerism holds us hostage. We are constantly pushed to do more at a faster rate. We are oftentimes rewarded based on white noise—static fluff, rather than substance. Even leisure activities are high stakes and very stressful events. Our children have also received this message and they too expect bigger outings, more play-dates, and spectacular parties. They have multiple electronic games and computers to dazzle them. They learn early to move at a very fast pace. God forbid they just played in the mud or jump rope.

Rest and family time are sacred and holy. We need to turn off our technology, enjoy a meal together, read scripture, listen to the Holy Spirit, and just breath. God desires our attention. He promises that we won't lose out on the things that truly matter if we remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.

Meditation

When was the last time you spent a leisurely Sabbath afternoon in the park, on the porch or on the stoop? Are you afraid to sit in silence listening to God being mindful of our breath? What are the things keeping us from experiencing regular Sabbath?

Prayer

Dear Lord give us the faith to let go and spend time with you. Help us to find the time to rest. Thank you for loving us so much that you gave us Sabbath days and moments. Amen

Minister Antoinette Ellis-Williams, Ph.D.

Saturday, March 10th

Recently I became a parent to three incredible children.

It has been an experience of beautiful chaos, a conundrum of both exhaustion and joy. Our children have gifted me dark circles and laugh lines mitigated by an ineffable sparkle in my smile.

I wake from my far too precious few hours of slumber, with both exhaustion and joy. Our life together is ensconced in grace.

And, yet.

My love and care for our children regularly seems to cause an outside observer's pause.

It goes a little something like this:

Either I receive some sort of unusually high praise, as if my valiant meal planning, perpetual cuddling, constant laundering, incessant correcting, faux hide-and-seeking, and generalized lack of sleep on behalf of children who “are not mine” is worthy of a Nobel prize.

But far, far more often, it is the self-sanctified side-eye. The insecurity. The incredulity. At the presence of an-*other* mother?

Who is this person to lay such deep claim to kids not her own?

They already have a mother.

The other day I was relaying a conversation I had with one of our children to a confidant. I was sharing my dismay about a remark about always “choosing” their mother’s lasagne over mine even if mine was better.

As I got to this part—which, with more context, was hurtful to hear and hurtful for me to see had furrowed into our child’s mind—I was emphatically interrupted.

“Well, a child *should* choose their mother!! It’s what’s right.”

I sighed.

“No, actually.”

I began to explain the same thing I was sad I needed to explain to our child.

Love is not a competition, and love is not a comparison.

It’s not who our child *should* choose.

Rather, our child *shouldn’t* have to choose.

Ever.

Because there is enough love to go around.

Because they get to have all of us.

All of the love, all of the support, all of the care.

Because we abide in abundance.

My conversation partner, like so many, had assumed otherwise.

That competition was inevitable.
That love is a hierarchy.
That there isn't enough to go around.
That a choice has to be made.

In which case,
The subtext—
That I was a usurper.
That I was overstepping my bounds.
That I don't give their "real" mother their due.

"No, actually."

Children are not private property.
They belong to God.
As do we.

And the alliances of this world?
Be it our kinship, our race, our ethnicity, our block, our state, our religion, our friends, our foes.
Even our plates of lasagna.
Jesus came not to destroy these bonds.
Jesus came to expand them.
To show us a bigger picture of life that we are invited to be part of.

[Not to mention, skinfolk ain't always kinfolk *anyway*.
But that's a different devotional.]

In Mark 3, when Jesus's family shows up, a decision is at hand.
They are outside. Waiting. Calling.

And a choice of allegiance has to be made.
Except when it doesn't.

Look closer.
There is a difference between following someone around and sitting at their feet.
If you read earlier in Mark 3, you will realize that Jesus' family was not yet on board, that they were trying to restrain him and his ministry, that they remained uncertain of his words and deeds.

His family may have been at the foot of the cross, but here, in the thick of his ministry, his family was *not* in the crowd.
They weren't fans. They weren't followers. And they felt that being family would give them precedent.

And Jesus reminds them, that blood *is* as thick as water.
We are all baptized into his body.
We are all washed into his blood.

Tell me, what happens when we are too faithful to too few?
When we draw boundaries of belonging, are they shaped like our desires?
Because last I checked, God's love for us was indescribable, uncontainable, bursting at every seam.

Jesus draws a crowd that we are all welcomed into.
Where there is no guest count.
Where there is always a seat at the table.
Where there is ever enough lasagne to go around.

We are family.
Why are you still standing at the gate?

Meditation:

When is the last time you truly loved on your family member?
What is the last time you loved a friend, a colleague, someone sitting on the church pew, with the kind of the love you show your mother, your father, or your children?
What people in your life are you struggling to love?
What people in your life are you struggling to give to God?
Are you truly following Christ, or simply tracing his footsteps?
Who is God calling to be your chosen kin?

Prayer:

Lord, unsettle us.
Dissatisfy our hearts.
Disrupt our lives.

For,

... we watch but not see.
... we hear but not listen.
... we give in to scarcity, when You are a God of abundance.
... we settle for the comforts of culture instead of the call of Christ.
... we only tweak when you call to transform.
... we are too faithful over too few.

Draw us closer,

Please,

... that we may be kept in your crowd,
... nurtured in community
... created in your image,
... cleansed by your blood
... committed to your call.

Enmeshed in the covenant of your love.

Big enough for us all.

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