

Lent ... Life ... Love
Easter



(Mark 12:30)

Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength

Devotions and Reflections
By the People of Bethlehem Lutheran Church
April, 2018

Forward

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:13-31

When I was much younger, the Lent – Easter part of the church year told the story of God's love for the world in what seemed like a cosmic sporting event. Jesus and a rag tag band of followers were up against all the forces of evil. Jesus seems to attract a lot of fans, but as the final seconds of the contest wind down, it doesn't look good. The clock seems to just about run out as Jesus dies on the cross, and his fans are distraught and go into hiding.

It's sort of like a basketball game with the Jesus team down by a point with less than a second left on the clock – the buzzer to end the game will sound as soon as the ball is in-bounded. But, as soon as the ball is in-bounded, it is launched from three-quarters court in an amazing rainbow arc. The buzzer sounds, but the shot is on its way. And, unbelievably, it goes in – Jesus rises from the dead – and the forces of evil are defeated.

But what does it all mean? In those younger days, it meant my team won – yea!! I got to sing all those wonderful, powerful Easter hymns. The Alleluia was back.

But, as I got older, that childish analogy didn't do it any more. Yes, evil was defeated, and that is crucial and decisive. God is in control, and, without that, nothing else matters.

But what does that mean? How does it impact the broken world into which we are born? This year's Lenten journey brought us face to face with our brokenness, with the command to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength", and with God's covenantal promises fulfilled at the cross and empty tomb. The devotions and reflections that follow are some of the ways these powerful themes from our Lenten journey have blossomed in hearts, souls, and minds of our Bethlehem family. In these devotions you will find a deeper, richer, fuller understanding of Easter than my childish analogy – an understanding that we can live out in a world so desperately needing Easter. I pray you will be as richly blessed by these devotions as I know the authors have been in preparing them. I pray they might help you grow in new ways to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."

Paulette Costanza

Sunday, April 15, 2018

A New Creation

If anyone is in Christ, he is a New Creation. The old has passed away. Behold! The new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

I grew up as one of seven children in a very “Catholic” family. I went to Mass every Sunday, went to Confession once a month, attended Catholic grammar school, and tried to obey the Ten Commandments (which was not easy with six brothers and sisters). I was following all the rules but I always felt that something was missing.

It was more than fifty years later before I finally found what I had been missing – a real *relationship* with God.

One Sunday my son-in-law invited me to his church and that is where I “met” Jesus for the first time. Up to that point I had heard all the Bible stories and knew *about* him, but I never knew him *personally*. The song by Jason Gray, “More Like Falling In Love” really resonates with me because that is exactly how my relationship with Jesus changed from that day on.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rzOdXJu5UA>

From that day on I felt Jesus’ presence with me all the time. I could talk to him and knew that He was listening. He has offered guidance in difficult times and comfort in troubled times. He is my constant companion.

I realized how to love God with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Over the next few days I’d like to share with you what that means to me.

As Jesus rose from death to life, may we, who have died to our old lives in baptism, become a new creation, in Christ, to love you, our Lord, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Amen.

Paulette Costanza

Monday, April 16, 2018

Guard Your Heart

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Luke 12:34

Love the Lord your God with your whole heart.

I used to worry about money all the time. It seemed like I never had enough. I spent money on things I didn’t need, and, when an unexpected bill came up, I didn’t have anything set aside for it. Consequently, my credit cards were out of control.

One day I realized that money had become my “treasure” and that was where my heart was. I decided to change my focus and make Jesus the center of my life. The incredible thing was that when I started thinking about others instead of myself, all of my financial troubles disappeared. I wasn’t overspending on things I didn’t need, I paid off all my credit cards, and I started tithing on a regular basis.

A relationship with God begins from within – from the heart. When God lives in your heart you are forever changed. You share his love with others by helping a friend in need, praying for the sick, giving money to charitable causes, sharing your time with someone who is lonely, supporting the missions, sharing your talents, and being Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

Where is your treasure?

Lord, we confess our tendency to store treasures in so many places. Give to us new hearts that place all their treasure in you where we find wholeness and peace. Amen

Paulette Costanza

Tuesday, April 17, 2018

God's Masterpiece

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Jesus Christ, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Ephesians 2:10

Love the Lord your God with your whole soul.

Loving God with all our heart has to do with our affection, demonstrated in our relationship with others. Loving God with all our soul has to do with our inner being – who we are as a Christian, the way we live our lives, the words we choose, our attitude toward others, our values, our beliefs, and our inner strength. If we love God with our whole soul we will strive to build our character to be a reflection of Christ.

Ask yourself this question, “When people see you, do they see Jesus?”

When you love God with your whole soul – your entire being – it changes you. It permeates every aspect of your life. You think of others ahead of yourself. You share everything you have and everything you are. You touch the lives of everyone around you – your family, your friends, your coworkers, your church community, and even the people who pass through your life for just a short time.

You are God's masterpiece! There is no one else like you!! He has a plan for you. Are you living out God's plan for your life?

Forgive the confusion and brokenness, Lord, that hides all you created us to be. In our baptism, restore and renew and refresh the masterpiece within that you created and planned for us at the beginning of time. Amen

Paulette Costanza

Wednesday, April 18, 2018

A Penny for Your Thoughts

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

Love the Lord your God with your whole mind.

This verse from Philippians reminds us that the ideas, images, and information that we fill our minds with, are the things that will shape our thoughts and actions.

We are bombarded every day with stories and images that sensationalize our society's ills – war, corruption, greed, violence, extra-marital sex, bullying, man's inhumanity to man. Reality TV has sensationalized the worst human traits of our society. If this was all we saw we would question whether there is any good left in the world.

For each incident or tragedy or disaster there is always another side to the story – the girl in school who stands up for her friends who are being bullied, the organizations that help refugees displaced by war or natural disaster, the first responders who put their own well-being aside to help those in need.

It's important to surround yourself with good people, wholesome activities and media that portray good Christian values. Read the Bible. Listen to Christian music. Socialize with people who share your values. Go to church regularly. Help a friend. Help a stranger. Appreciate nature. Keep a positive outlook. Fill your mind with thoughts and images of the good you see around you every day. Pray without ceasing.

The world and times are not promising Lord – they can crush our hope. Fill our minds Lord with your gifts, with your love with your hope that we may believe and live your promises. Amen.

Paulette Costanza

Thursday, April 19, 2018

Inner Strength

God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you will be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

Love the Lord your God with your whole strength.

Do you remember the Chuck Mangione song, “Give It All You Got”? Well that pretty much sums up what it means to love God with your whole strength. Don’t hold back. Give him all you’ve got. Give him your time, talents, and treasures. Give him your hands, feet, eyes, ears, and voice. Give him your ambition, interests, actions, and enthusiasm. Give him your influence, encouragement, appreciation, and praise. Give him your ALL.

God has a purpose for each one of us and he has given us everything we need to carry out that purpose. You are the only person who can fulfill the purpose he has for you. Do you know what your purpose is? Make a list of your talents, your abilities, and your personal characteristics. How can you use these traits for God’s purpose?

Be a light in the world.

All that we are, Lord, is a gift from you. So often we feel “self made”, and we want to be in control. But it always leads to loss and isolation and brokenness and hopelessness. Our strength is in the Truth – we are your beloved children. Help us choose Truth, embrace life, and love you, our Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Amen.

Kathy Moragne

Friday, April 20, 2018

By Heart

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Deuteronomy 6:7

During our Lenten walk, we heard of several covenants God made with his people. In Baptism, we make a covenant with our children to do many things. Among them, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments ... so that they may learn to trust God.

As was noted in a Children’s Sermon, we know many things “by heart” starting from a very early age. And how does something become so well known to us that we know it by heart? Repetition. The verse from Deuteronomy reminds us of that. Recite them morning, noon, and night: In prayer, in Bible Study, in conversation, in actions.

I recently read a Native American prayer that mentioned sacred pollen. It has stuck with me. Pollen – that yellow dust that covers everything in the spring – and makes many of us sneeze. For us, Sacred Pollen is all we know by heart about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our lives need to be sacred pollen to spread God’s love to those we encounter each and every day.

Dear Lord, we thank you and praise you for your love for us. May what we know in our heart, be shown and shared with family, friends and strangers each and every day. Amen.

Ruth Gates

Saturday, April 21, 2018

Name Plates and Connections

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. Malachi 3:16

Family Camp closing worship had just ended and one of the younger campers came up to me all excited because the ELW she had been using had been placed at Camp Mount Luther by Andy and Ruth Gates in honor of the 1984 Camp Staff (of which Andy was a member). The girl recognized our names and just had to show me. A connection. Below is something I wrote soon after my father passed on and it too involves a name plate and connection.

(written March 12, 2017)

Very early last Sunday morning, the pastor of my hometown church came and sat with us in our sorrow. Hours later, I went to worship and was hugged by my childhood Sunday School teachers (...and I thought they were old back then?). **I sang from a hymnal placed by my mom's friend in memory of her own husband while that very same friend was at that very moment at the house comforting my mom.** After church, I talked with someone from my Youth Fellowship days who drove me crazy because he dressed and acted like the Fonz...all...the...time. Now we have both lost parents. This Sunday I will go to church again...for all these reasons and many, many more.

Read the bold sentence again carefully. At the end of worship before putting the hymnal back in rack, I just happened to glance at the name plate inside the front cover and that is what I saw. What I held in my hand was a connection of memories of the past and care in the moment.

Next time you are in church (or at Camp!), look at the name plate in the hymnal and remember we are all connected.

God of love and care, thank you for connecting us in our memories, in each moment and in our names. Amen

Katie Kreutter

Earth Day, Sunday, April 22, 2018

Creation, Beauty, Dominion and Stewardship

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. 1 Kings 19: 11-12

My mom and I have an Easter “tradition.” I put the word tradition in quotes because this is Western New York, and some years this tradition is just not possible. When the weather is pleasant on Easter Sunday, my mom and I will visit a nearby scenic park or trail for a hike. This year, we braved the cold to explore and take in some photography and birdwatching at the Big Woods Preserve in Webster. We encountered a number of beautiful bluebirds and spent most of the time in silence. Not an awkward, unpleasant, or stagnant silence, but rather a fulfilling and active one.

Often times, when I am out in nature, I feel most connected with God, with God’s presence palpable as I witness the beauty of Creation. I am reminded that nature can be deadly and dangerous, with strong wind, earthquakes, hurricanes, and natural predators. I am reminded also that humans can be deadly and dangerous to nature, causing wildfires and other human-made disasters, destroying wildlife habitats, and impacting sustainability with our culture of consumption.

However, I am also reminded of God’s still, small voice that glides over the streams and whispers through the gentle breezes and wispy clouds. I am reminded that God is present in the midst of chaos, perhaps in subtle yet steady and ultimately powerful ways, restoring our souls and “our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” guiding us towards good stewardship and relationships with God, one another, and the whole of Creation.

Dear God, thank you for the beauty of the Earth and your Creation. Help us to be good stewards of the Earth and care for one another as you care for us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Neighbor

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' Luke 10:25-37

A stranger turned up in church one Sunday morning. He was a little odd behaviorally and physically. And for some reason, he had it in his mind a "Ruth" was supposed to give him a ride back to the bus stop after worship. Being alone with two young children, I felt uncomfortable. So an older church member stepped up, and he took him. Driving home, I asked the kids what they learned in Sunday School to which Rachel answered with total dismay, "There was this man who got beat up and robbed and left by the side of the road, and no one would help him! No one! Everybody just walked on by until..." I was convicted. He was my neighbor.

Chris turned up at church over the years, mostly for Wednesday evening worship during Lent when we had a soup supper

(Continued on Tuesday, April 24, 2018)

Neighbor (Cont'd)

beforehand. We got used to his presence, his written communications (honestly, the man did not have ears) and occasional need for a ride. He was our neighbor.

Then, one day he got on the bus I was riding home from work. It was full and he looked around for a place to sit. All eyes on him would first think he was a bit odd and shy away. I patted the seat next me for him to sit down. We "communicated" the whole ride with written notes back and forth. He was on his way to a birthday party for a friend. We enjoyed the sunshine streaming into the bus window. We shared a bit about God's goodness. He got up to let me out at my stop. When I looked back he was standing on the seats, straddling the aisle and holding onto the handrail on either side. I motioned for him to sit back down with concern others might not understand his ways. Others might not see him as a neighbor.

Chris passed away a while ago. I did not know the other challenges he had in life and health. He will be missed by any who helped him along the way; by any who treated him like their neighbor.

Dear God, despite first impressions and what meets the eye, help us to see everyone as our neighbor. Amen

Ruth Gates

Wednesday, April 25, 2018

Saved from Distress - How Encouraging!

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Psalm 107:1-3,17-22

There was a time when it was thought illness was a judgment for sin. Jesus rejects this interpretation, but still, verses 17-22 of Psalm 107 reflect that ancient belief. Now, even though we no longer connect illness with personal sin, we can still learn from this Psalm that in times of trouble we can cry out to the LORD. How encouraging that is!

I recently visited a church where during Communion they were having a "Healing Service". Curious what this may look like, I watched closely. About a half dozen members stood along the side aisles to pray with those who stopped on their way back to their seats. Hands were held, eyes closed, words whispered, hugs shared. Over and over it happened and while I did not see any healing miracles on the outside, inside there was Love saving another from distress and it was very encouraging.

Turn to God and He will touch us with His healing and deliver us from our afflictions. Then we can rejoice and tell of His grace to others who may be ready to listen. How encouraging that would be!

Thank you for saving us from our distress by your love. Amen

Alli O'Malley

Thursday, April 26, 2018

It's Hard To Be A Fixer When We Shut God Out

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' Mark 12:30-31

This season of Lent has been particularly challenging. The pressures of life – work, family and an unsettled world – have weighed heavily on my heart. In response, I succumbed to “fix it mode”, and, looking back on my Lenten experience, I realize that I failed to fix anything. In fact, I’ve only managed to wear myself out.

When in “fix it mode”, I push God and self care away. As strong as my faith is, in my desperation to feel better, I throw myself into problems that are often much bigger than me and press with all my might to find solutions. It’s an old, familiar pattern, motivated by my need to feel safe in the world. One of my favorite authors, Robert Holden, calls it dysfunctional independence – a reliance on the self and devotion to the idea that the only answer to any problem is hard work.

Each Sunday in worship, the confession comforted me. As much as I told myself that my actions were motivated by the call to “love my neighbor as myself”, I knew that I was actually striving for worldly acceptance. It took writing this devotion to recognize that when I’m afraid or overwhelmed, what I need to do is to slow down and ‘*Love the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my mind and with all my strength*’. In God, I know that I am always safe and need not be afraid. This truth is humbling and comforting.

Jesus, you promise to be with me in the frustrations, the problems, and the dangers that surround me. Help me to let you in that I may know the peace and joy and love you give. Amen

Revenge or Redemption

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:6-9

Year after year, the lovely service of Holden Evening Prayer helps make Lent a powerful experience, and the heart of that experience, to me, is rehearsing the story of the angelic visit to Mary and, in the words of the Holden Evening Prayer, her response, "I am the servant of my God, I live to do your will." And the congregation immediately joins in Mary's joyous song known as the Magnificat – "My soul proclaims your greatness O God ...". We lift our voices; our spirits soar as we sing about God's love for the oppressed and about how God will humble the proud and lift up the lowly. And, as I've sung about this new age of God's justice, I've often had the feeling that everything would be turned on its head and a new order would prevail. But just what does that new order look like? Is it just that the privileged are cast down and despised while the lowly are exalted?

I began to wonder if that's really what Mary understood or meant by her powerful song of praise. If the exalted and the lowly just trade places in the existing social, cultural systems, nothing would really be changed – except for the names of those in power and those oppressed. But the fundamental flaws of this broken world would remain – some would be in power over others. Perhaps, there would be a fleeting sense of justified revenge, but where is the promised new order for all of God's creation promised in Isaiah's song above and yearned for by God's people?

Perhaps, Mary came to realize that the justice and salvation that the child she was bringing into the world was not about who would

(Continued on Saturday, April 28, 2018)

Revenge or Redemption (cont'd)

occupy the seats of power. Maybe, Mary's joy flowed from a faith that this Jesus in her womb would bring the kingdom of God, and there would no longer be a need for seats of power. Instead of social/cultural systems built on division and hate, a new age was dawning - without power and privilege, without hunger or hurting or hopelessness. Yes, the mighty would come down and the lowly be lifted up. But, instead of exchanging places at the top and bottom, they would come together to love and serve and respect each other as beloved children of God who creates and loves us all. A God whose creative, redeeming, endless love sent a savior, Jesus who told us over and over, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first", who announced the kingdom of God is at hand, who said "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength", and who said, "Love one another just as I have loved you" and walked into the night to face his betrayer. And then, this Jesus showed us what this kind of love looked like on the cross ... and at the tomb.

Are we ready to know we are loved like this? Are we ready to love like this? To be born again like this? To be an Easter people like this?

Lord, give me the heart of Mary to say with her, "I am the servant of my God, I live to do your will". Amen

Mary Osgood

Sunday, April 29, 2018

They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love

By this they will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:35

One of my pastimes, while recovering from total shoulder replacement surgery, has been to binge-watch 'Call the Midwife' - the stories of young midwives, living in a convent with several nuns who are also midwives and serving the women in East London during the 1950s.

Sister Julienne has become one of my favorite characters. The grace and tenderness and passion she shares with those she lives with and those she serves is profound.

In one scene she is counseling a young woman who is a former nun and has just learned she will never be able to bear a child; the young woman is struggling to understand God's presence in this hurtful announcement.

Sister Julienne tells her, "God isn't in the event; God is in the results after the event. He is in the love and concern and caring."

Wow! This statement REALLY speaks to me!! Twice in the last three years I have experienced God's presence in this way. First, after my husband, Bob, died in May 2015 (an event which we all struggled - and still struggle - to understand) and now, as I recover from major surgery.

The outpouring of 'love and concern and caring' after Bob's sudden death saved my life. No amount of railing or weeping or gnashing of teeth on my part could explain what happened or calm my hysteria or penetrate the numbness - but the constant stream of cards and letters, the phone calls, and the physical presence of dear family and friends reminded me that God was with me - even in the unbelievable results of that day, and in the weeks and months that followed.

And again, as I am regaining strength and mobility following a pretty violent surgery, Sister Julienne's words are reminding me of

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Mary Osgood

Monday, April 30, 2018

They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love (Cont'd)

how God is present in our lives. Constant care-givers, visitors, meals, rides to visit physicians and the physical therapist, and the ever-present cards and letters have been overwhelming examples of 'God with us' and God's love for me.

Even in the darkest, most desperate, most broken times in our lives we can rest assured of God's love and his presence in the 'love and concern and caring' that is lavished upon us in the aftermath. Christians show themselves to be Christians by their love for one another. Thanks be to God!

Lord, you never bring the hurt or the sorrow – the broken world already has more than we need. But you are always with us in our valleys of the shadow of death. Your people hold us, their prayers comfort us, your promises lift us. Make of us an Easter people whose love blossoms in our care for one another. Amen

Kathy Moragne

Tuesday, May 1, 2018

Playlist of your Heart

Be still and know that I am God! Psalm 46:10

There is a scientific phenomenon called earworms. Sounds awful, but they are songs that get stuck in our brain and repeat and repeat and repeat! For me, it is usually the anthem we sang at the previous worship service. For many, it can be a commercial jingle or a catch phrase from a song.

Many of us have playlists on our iPods or phones. Songs that mean something to us, that pump us up for that long run, or soothe us when we are down. But what is on the playlist of your heart? Is it a scripture verse? A Hymn? Perhaps even a painting of Jesus?

We need to be still and allow God to write on our hearts. Write about His unending love for us, His hopes for us, His faithfulness. We need to allow His words to be the playlist on our heart.

You are loved!

You are cherished!

You are needed!

Finding that quiet time to be still can be difficult. I pray or sing when I am out for my daily walk. I can't be still and listen while walking. Quiet time in my rocking chair in the sun or after devotions is when I can find the time to be quiet and listen. When is your time to listen?

May His words be the earworms we hear every day.

Dear Lord, we long to hear your loving words. Help us to clear our heads, hearts and ears to hear you above all the noise of life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

Kathy Moragne

Wednesday, May 2, 2018

By Heart Part 2

This is the brand new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them – write it on their hearts – and be their God. Jeremiah 31:33

To know something by heart usually means that we have memorized it. But what if it means more than that? Pastor Bradley Schmeling commented that to know something by heart is when “we know it deep in our bodies.” (Craft of Preaching Worship 2-17-18).

Have you ever felt the Lord deep in your body? That deep, deep feeling? Sometimes it is joy! Sometimes a feeling of thankfulness. Sometimes it's even a deep sorrow but with the sure knowledge of the love of God. The love of God for us sinners. Perhaps it was a rush of the Holy Spirit. I've felt that in worship.

Do you know the children's/camp song “Down in my Heart”?

I've got the love of Jesus, love of Jesus down in my heart!

Where?

Down in my heart, where?

Down in my heart!

Down in my heart to stay!

Is it an ear worm for you now? There are more verses.... Sing along!

And what could be our response to this deep love written on our hearts? One answer is Micah 6:8:

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Lord, help us each to know you deep in our hearts. And guide us as we share that love with others. Amen

Jim Berner

Thursday, May 3, 2018

It Might Not Be Easy, But It Can Be Simple

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here."

Matthew 28.5

One of the first signs in the annual change of scenery from Winter to Spring are the Crocus flowers popping up through the old growth, mulch and snow, giving us the hope that the drudgery of the post White Christmas precipitation and temps will be ending soon. March and April are the torture months in Western New York, toying with our dreams of consistent 60 degree plus days. Other signs like the first Robins and the sighting of hibernating animals are the indication that you just cannot keep Spring from coming. You cannot keep it down.

I think of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the same way. God, like the Crocus and the animals of Spring, cannot be kept down. At Baptism, God claims us, becomes part of us. At the Resurrection, Jesus and the Holy Spirit become part of every one of us.

So, then, if the triune God is a part of everyone of us, in us; and if God cannot be kept down, or inside, like the tomb and the signs of Spring, how then, can we possibly keep God in us, a secret, or captive?

Open your hearts and let God shine to the world around you. Share the beauty, Share the Love! I understand this can be a scary thought. Our imperfect minds and bodies perhaps, drift immediately to banging on doors, Bible in hand, or preaching salvation from a stump on the corner ... and we draw God back into ourselves, where we are comfortable.

I propose that it is much less intimidating and easier than that. Open your heart to others, show them the love that God has given to you, by doing the simple things.

(Continued on Friday, May 4, 2018)

Jim Berner

Friday, May 4 2018

It Might Not Be Easy, But It Can Be Simple (cont'd.)

Extend a hand, "Hi! My name is...".

Create relationships

Let God (OUT!!!) guide you to sharing the greatest gift ever given – Love one another, as I loved you.

Trust in God for – "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Amen

Romans 8.31

Bonus devotion- here are some Choir/folk group anthems that were inspirations for this devotion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCN893hzueQ>

This little light of mine Traditonal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHm2qlhkmwg>

Love One Another-Anne Krentz Organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JokA0V9z1Bc&t=24s>

If God is For Us - Alan Pote (sorry, I didn't find an English version - Jim)

Kathleen Forney

Saturday, May 5, 2018

Thankful Praise to the Lord

I will extol You my God, O King : And I will bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless You, And I will praise Your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised: And His greatness is unsearchable. Psalm 145: 1-3

So many things to be thankful for,

You have seen me through so many storms,

You have kept me strong in the face of sadness, death, sickness, and financial loss.

You have allowed me to experience an exuberant joy –

One that I remember from my childhood – swinging in our side yard, singing my heart out.

Joy that continues to enrich me in my adult life.

When I bowed my head and cried out to you in despair and fear,

I saw a stream of light in my mind's eye, as if from your Holy Grace.

In a flash of insight, observing the people coming back from Communion, I suddenly saw the connected stream of all humanity: a cherished, blended oneness in your Holy sight. The poor, the crippled, the well, the people from all walks, all faiths, all ethnic extractions, all skin colors.....all.

This too, I sensed in childhood, when I saw the many in the one, the familiar in the stranger on the sidewalk, my heart opened up: knowing that all are good, all are held in your light, all are worthy of love, in this sphere and in eternity.

I have felt the Spirit move me and work through me when assisting in Communion, when I felt as Blessed as those partaking.

I have been given a gift of participation in the Chancel Choir for 24 years, that has enriched my connections to Bethlehem through music and the spiritual treasure of our worship together.

(Continued on Sunday, May 6, 2018)

Kathleen Forney

Sunday, May 6, 2018

Thankful Praise to the Lord (cont'd.)

I am continually touched by the natural world and its exquisite perfection in the intricacy of a flower face found in the woods, the stalwartness of a tree, the birds who survive all that the weather patterns have to offer and still return to their Spring time homes.

Dear Lord, I thank you for the many ways you have touched my life in times of joy in times of sorrow, in times of hope, and in times of fear.

You have sustained me, you have helped me reach the other side of trouble, you have given me many blessings: a cherished family, a noble husband who is my friend and support system, and many, many dear and loving friends. Amen

Ruth Gates

Monday, May 7, 2018

The Potter's Wheel and Will

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. Jeremiah 18:1-11

When a Potter works clay on the wheel, from the very start he is forming the final product. Every move affects how the piece turns out. Sometimes along the way something goes wrong. The clay gets squashed back down to start over. But there is still hope it will turn out right the next time.

The Lord told Jeremiah to go to the potter's house. Jeremiah watched the potter working at his wheel. The vessel he was making was spoiled. He kept the wheel going and reworked the clay into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

We sing a hymn that speaks of the Lord as a potter and we ask to be molded after His will. There may be times when we feel we are spinning on a wheel but God's hand is always on us. There may be times when we feel squashed back down but there is always hope in His will

Mold me and make me, Lord, after your will. Amen

Kathy Moragne

Tuesday, May 8, 2018

Gestures of Love

While He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on His heads. Mark 14:3

Nard is a costly, fragrant oil that comes from the Himalayas of China. This woman was obviously saving it for something or someone special. She found that in Jesus. He understood the gesture and thanked her while rebuking others for her saying she was foolish. A gesture of love for one she must have recognized as the promised Savior. A gesture of love, perhaps knowing that difficult times were ahead.

A word....

A touch.....

A gift.....

A prayer.....

What gestures of love have you found meaningful in your life?

What gestures of love have you given to others?

Lord, our world is broken. Help us to recognize when someone needs a gesture of love from you that comes through us. Keep our eyes and ears attuned to those around us. As we have been given the best example of love in your son, Jesus Christ, help us to share that love. Amen

John Perry

Wednesday, May 9, 2018

Goals, Tasks, Work and Love

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:10-11

As I think about my life. I have gone about things working long hours. Whether it was in school or in the workplace, I have always spent a lot of time working to accomplish the tasks at hand. Sometimes, this was to make my parents happy. Sometimes, it was to provide for my family and maintain a lifestyle. Often, it was in an attempt to do things right. I was trying to meet the objective itself. I try to accomplish a task to create value or to be right. Even now, I want to make sure the people around me can count on me. I want to make sure that a customer, a colleague or a classmate had what they needed to meet their goal or conduct their business well. I am trying to justify that I have value. But I am imperfect, and the world is imperfect. Trying to make all of the connections, understand a problem or improve skills to meet expectations is difficult. I find that often, I just am not good enough. I, on my own, or even with a team cannot master the situations that life brings.

In the same way, in examining what it means to be one with God, it can be difficult. It becomes another effort, another list to manage. What does it mean to love God with my heart, soul, mind and strength? I can make a long list of areas that I fall short. I can and have tried to set a path, to make rules and set goals to love God. It can become its own industry. It has its own set of expectations that I need to work at to be right with God.

Somehow, I think, when Jesus spoke these words with the Pharisees, His purpose was different. Jesus was demonstrating and, in a sense, undoing the challenge. He is saying it is less about all of the commandments and laws. He simply said, love God and love others. Just love. He was taking the yoke away. Knowing that we are broken. Knowing that we will sin. I think He is saying

(Continued on Thursday, May 10, 2018)

John Perry

Thursday, May 10, 2018

Goals, Tasks, Work and Love (cont'd.)

work less at following rules or checking boxes. Just love God and love one another. Let go and love. Just as He loves us.

In the end it is not about our working to accomplish a status or approval from God. God already loves us. God has already demonstrated his love. It is for us to accept and love back. Love God, love one another. It is not a goal to be achieved or a task, but an attitude, an acceptance, a faith to live.

Lord, thank you for first loving us. Thank you for loving us so dearly that you died for us. Help us, change us to love one another and to love you. Amen

Sherry Cook

Friday, May 11, 2018

God's Immeasurable Love

We love because [God] first loved us. 1 John 4:19

I confess – I LOVE the focus image used for our Lenten worship this year! The pure, unbridled joy, expressed in the raised arms and uplifted head, make it dance with delight and happiness. Some may think it a rather unusual choice for the solemn season of Lent, but to me it so beautifully conveys the message from Mark 12:30 which has been at the core of our worship – *“Love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.”*

I do love my God, but there are times when doubts and fears creep in that cause me to question the depth of the *“with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength”* part and the feeling of joy and happiness is not what I want it to be. There are times - and we all have them - when our joy is muted by health issues, political turmoil, relationship problems, financial difficulties, social injustice, homelessness, unemployment, addiction, feelings of hopelessness, hurt, despair, and abandonment, and countless other things that test and stress us.

But the amazing thing is that despite our doubts and fears, God loves us anyway with a love that has no beginning and no end and cannot be measured. God does not just love, he is love. It is his being. As one of our former pastors would remind us over and over, nothing we do can make God love us more and nothing we do can make God love us less; he loves us infinitely more than the person who loves us the most. It is impossible to fully comprehend this through the lens of the conditional love and limitations of our humanness.

When our first granddaughter was born, I loved her with a passion from the moment I laid eyes on her. I was so taken by this beautiful little bundle of joy and my heart overflowed with love for her. When we were told we were to be grandparents for a second time, I was thrilled, but concerned. As the mother of an only child, I never had to answer the age-old question that siblings seem to ask:

(Continued on Saturday, May 12, 2018)

Sherry Cook

Saturday, May 12, 2018

God's Immeasurable Love (Cont'd.)

If there were an accident and you could save only one of us, which one would it be? I loved my daughter unconditionally. I had no experience raising multiple children so I wasn't quite sure how loving them equally worked. Foolishly, I thought my love was like a bucket that could contain only so much. If I gave it to one, would there be enough to give to another? I quickly learned that this is not the way it is with love! We now have three beautiful grandchildren, all very precious to us and very much loved. The bucket doesn't empty. There is always enough.

How much bigger must God's bucket be? Nothing can contain the love God has for each of us. It is impossible to be loved more or better. It is hard to wrap my head around these words. How can the creator of the universe love me that much when there are countless others that he loves so much more than the person who loves them the most? I don't know and I can't explain it, but I'm forever grateful he does. Maybe some things are not meant to be explained – maybe they are just meant to be.

Dear God, help me to love you with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Remind me that your love for me has no beginning and no end and cannot be measured, even though I can't comprehend this. I pray that I might be a reflection of your love to those that I meet in my daily life. Amen

Andy Gates

Sunday, May 13, 2018

Our Faith Leaders

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,

*'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?'*

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Though we are members of the same Church, there are many *churches* that have influenced our ever-growing faith...and within those churches, perhaps an uncountable number of Leaders as written in today's verses. In your life who helped form your faith and continues to do so today?

Are your faith leaders those teachers of your childhood who first read the popular and heroic Bible stories and sang those old hymn standards on Sundays and at Vacation Bible Schools? Are they the church camp counselors of your early teen years who mixed their faith stories with summer fun, campfires and late nights? Or perhaps the campus pastor who first challenged your child-like faith with new ways of considering the law and gospel?

(Continued on Monday, May 14, 2018)

Andy Gates

Monday, May 14, 2018

Our Faith Leaders (cont'd.)

And as an adult, who are your faith role models whose lives' outcome you can consider and imitate...to ensure you are connected to the Body of Christ, nurturing your faith and helping you to find ways to share the good news with those known and unknown to you? Share a prayer of thanksgiving for the impact they had on the person you have become.

Turn this thought around now. Through *your* words and deeds, think of the many people who probably look to you to be *their* leader in faith, who view your commitments and sacrifices...and are encouraged to do good deeds and to share with others. May you be inspired and supported by the Holy Spirit to quietly model your faith for all to see.

God of our faith, may the leaders who spoke your Word to us in the past inspire us to be faithful followers to do good and to share with others. Amen.

Roger Kolker

Tuesday, May 15, 2018

Seeing is believing, right?

And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20: 28-29

Lent was a bit more challenging for me this year. Lent is normally a time for self-discipline, a time for quietness, a time to look within oneself, a time to atone, a time to prepare for Christ's death and resurrection.. On top of all of that, we were challenged to think what it meant to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Hey, I've already got enough on my plate - I didn't need another assignment!

I'm sure the disciples loved the Lord with all of their might - twelve people who walked with him for three years and saw amazing things. But in Jesus' final hours, this bunch of rag tag people couldn't stay awake for him, couldn't vouch for him, couldn't protect him from those who wanted to cause him harm. Is this what love is all about?

Fast forward to Thomas. We all know him as "Doubting" Thomas, a moniker with a negative distinction. Unless Thomas saw and felt the nail marks and Jesus' pierced side for himself, only then would he believe. We act as if Thomas was the only one that doubted Jesus' resurrection.

Let's not forget that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene in the garden, and then to two disciples on the road, and finally to all the other disciples in a room where they were hiding. Let's not kid ourselves - they were doubters too, until they saw Jesus. To doubt and question is only human. It's healthy - in order for our faith to grow, we need our natural doubts and questions to dive in deeper.

I don't know if in my human life I will ever physically see the resurrected Jesus the same way as Mary or Thomas did. Instead, I look for the God-moments, the Jesus-moments, the Holy Spirit-

(Continued on Wednesday, May 16, 2018)

Roger Kolker

Wednesday, May 16, 2018

Seeing is believing, right? (Cont'd.)

moments. In this broken world I "see" them all around - a kind word, a gentle reassurance, a selfless act, a message at just the right time, an affirmation to serve, a thank you, an acceptance that none of us is any worthier than the next person, a standing up for justice, taking care of others a half a world away and next door, even a miracle.

Do you "see" what I "see"?

Jesus, we weren't there when you were on the Earth, but we declare that you are not just real, but alive and well! You are our unseen Savior, but we love to be in your Spirit's presence. Thank you for the blessing of faith, and our belief that is founded in a relationship rather than facts. Amen.

Daniel Juers

Thursday, May 17, 2018

The A-Maze-ing Love in the Labyrinth of Life

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Matthew 11:28-30

Each Wednesday during Lent, we brought home a symbol to remind us of one facet of loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The first such symbol was a labyrinth. While our labyrinth was printed on a piece of paper, original labyrinths were large enough to walk in and pray in and connect with God.

As I used my paper labyrinth, it struck me that, in so many ways, life often seems like a labyrinth. We enter this labyrinth of life drawn by a persistent inner urge to know the Truth. Now, a labyrinth is supposed to be a long, twisting path that can only lead to the center. But life feels more like a maze. There are so many turns, so many choices, so many ways to go wrong. So, much hurt. What if we make a wrong turn or make the wrong choice? Will we be lost ... forever? Will we ever find the Truth? Will we ever find Love that lasts? Will loneliness and hopelessness ever depart?

It is right here – where we feel the most lost, where we ARE the most lost, and we come to know we cannot find the way ourselves – that we discover how relentlessly God loves us and pursues us. We are the lost sheep the Good Shepherd comes to find and carry home no matter the cost, even when it is a cross. Amazingly, gracefully we discover that, even though we can never find the Truth, the Truth finds us, God finds us, Love finds us. This God, this Love, this Truth heals us and makes us whole.

Even when we were lost, Jesus was there in all the hard, questionable, complicated decisions, in all the tragedies and all the triumphs, in the good and in the bad. Jesus was turning the maze into a labyrinth that leads to the Truth – For God so loved the

(Continued on Friday, May 18,2018)

Daniel Juers

Friday, May 18, 2018

The A-Maze-ing Love in the Labyrinth of Life (Cont'd)

world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

How can we respond to such Love? That's what this Lent was all about – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Lord, lift us from our confusion and fear to come to know your relentless love for us so that we may love as you love. Amen.

Witnesses to the World

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8

It's been over three months since Ash Wednesday on February 14. For six weeks during Lent we wrestled with our brokenness, we've marveled at God's overwhelming love for us through the covenants and then, ultimately, at the cross and the empty tomb. We've reflected throughout the Lenten season what it means to Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Now, during the weeks of the Easter season, the pages of this book reveal how this Lenten experience touched the lives of many among us here at Bethlehem. We now stand on the precipice of Pentecost, the time when Christ's Spirit became manifest in the lives of God's people, and the Church was born. As Jesus left this world, he made those people, that Church, you and me witnesses to God's love made known in the cross and resurrection.

What will that look like? What happens now? We live in a world desperate to hear some Good News. The story is not over. We are part of it – we are the witnesses! Here is a blank piece of paper for you to bear witness to God's love. You can write it ... or, even better, you can live it.

BE A WITNESS

LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD
WITH ALL YOUR HEART
WITH ALL YOUR SOUL
WITH ALL YOUR MIND
AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH

[Jesus] is not here

...

but has risen.