

**MARCH 1, 2017**

Ephesians 3:18-19

And I pray that you and all God's holy people will have the power to understand the greatness of Christ's love—how wide, how long, how high and how deep that love is. [God's] love is greater than anyone can ever know, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with everything God has for you.

Lady Gaga has taken up residence in my devotions, my sermons and my soul since the recent Super Bowl. Her talent on display in the half-time performance was certainly of the caliber of the great athletes. Beyond her raw singing and dancing talent, the spirituality of her songs carry profound spiritual rewards. I'm thinking particularly of, "Born This Way."

The song includes the lyrics: "No matter gay, straight or bi/lesbian, transgender life/I'm on the right track baby/I was born to survive." Referring to the messages her mother gave her about God, Lady Gaga sings,

*There's nothin' wrong with lovin' who you are  
She said, 'cause He made you perfect, babe  
I'm beautiful in my way  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way, born this way.*

As I savor the words of Jesus always read on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, I hear God lifting up prayer and other spiritual disciplines done not for your egocentric advancement but for the rewards God gives secretly in your heart and the hearts of others.

The first heart-level reward each of us needs is to know is that God made us just the way we are...God makes no mistakes. As Gaga sings, we are called to love ourselves. The purpose of all healthy spirituality and religion is to help us live love-based lives, not fear-based lives...to see everyone as beloved by God. Once I had the opportunity to say to a gay man on The Oprah Show that "being gay is a gift from God." That conviction came from my spiritual disciplines centered in praying in such a way that my prayer is not about my ego but about hearing God's message of love for absolutely everyone God has made.

My prayer for you this Lent is that you will practice your spiritual disciplines, especially your prayer life in such a way that you know deeply how loved you are and then you are set to not only live a love-based life, but to encourage others to live a life in which they love themselves as well as all their neighbors.

Rev. Dr. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
Rector Emeritus, All Saints Pasadena Church - Pasadena, CA

**MARCH 2, 2017**

This Lent I invite you to consider your Lenten blessings. No, that is not an oxymoron. Blessing, after all, is what God has been about at least since calling a particular people in Abraham and Sarah. "I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing," God promises Abraham.

Blessing is fundamentally about relationship. Blessing takes place between at least two parties who are in relationship. Blessing is experienced between those who are connected and therefore belong to one another. In the Bible the act of blessing is pretty evenly divided between God blessing us and creation, and human beings blessing God, other human beings and the many other objects of God's creation to which we relate. We bless and are blessed by that or those with whom we are in relationship.

In many traditions, we begin Lent by blessing ashes and then putting them on our foreheads. We do this, we say, to remind us of our connection with God's Earth. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Remember that what we essentially are – that what we really are in our essence is God's creation – God's beloved creation.

We belong to God. God made us from God's dust, and God will unmake us in to God's dust so that, as the Scripture says, whether we live, therefore, or die we are the Lord's. Remember that you are God's. You always have been, and you always will be.

Remember that you are God's and to God you shall return.

We begin Lent remembering and blessing – with claiming our relationship, our belonging to one another, to all creation and to God. God's blessing permeates creation. This is the gospel we preach –the good news we proclaim.

God's desire is to bless us, every single human being made of God's dust.

God bless us, like Abraham, so that we will be a blessing to one another. We and especially the church can no more withhold God's blessing than our bones not return back to God's dust. God is blessing, and if we are to be about God then we must be about blessing.

This Lent may God give us grace to bless and be blessings we truly are.

Rev. Ed Wills  
Priest, St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
Little Rock, Arkansas

**MARCH 3, 2017**

**1 PETER 2:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. <sup>10</sup> Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

**"FIRST CLASS PASSENGERS"**

It was a relatively short flight from Dallas to Colorado Springs where I attended a Pastors' Conference. As I sat in row eight directly behind the first class section, I looked on wistfully as those ahead of me were feted with soft drinks, cocktails, chocolates, and roasted almonds before takeoff. The flight attendant dispensed blankets and pillows to first class passengers, placed their coats on hangers and smiled at them unceasingly.

In the meantime, back in coach, just beyond the invisible boundary that separated the haves from the have-nots, I felt something akin to exclusion. I wasn't allowed to taste the riches my neighbors in rows one through seven enjoyed. Even after we were airborne and the flight attendant finally got around to delivering small packages of pretzels and cups of water to those of us in second class, I felt diminished. I was the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel begging for the scraps under the table. I was every homeless person I've passed on the street without so much as making eye contact—I was every woman, every person of color, every member of the LGBTQ community, every immigrant, every human being who has had to fight in order to be recognized as an equal in a nation that declared more than 200 years ago that "all men are created equal" yet sometimes struggles to live up to its creed.

But here's the good news! Through the gift of Jesus Christ—his life, death, resurrection and saving grace—we have all received blessing upon blessing. We are all one with no distinctions to separate us or make us better than anyone else. This is what inspires me, motivates me and draws me to the living Body of Christ!

Rev. Britt Skarda  
Senior Pastor, Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church  
Little Rock, AR

**MARCH 4, 2017**

**Romans 15:7**

<sup>7</sup> Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, to bring praise to God.

**“Accept One Another”**

We live in a world where everybody wants to be accepted. Some people join gangs, sororities, fraternities, churches etc. seeking to be loved and accepted by the group. What pain and emotional suffering we experience when things don't work out the way we wished they would have. However, we all have the responsibility to accept each other as Christ accepted us regardless of our different backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities, careers, countries and families. Paul tells the Romans we can accept differences and love each other as Christ loved us.

You may ask to what degree are we to accept one another. We are to do it as Christ accepted us. Some may think there are those who don't deserve it. If you think about it honestly, none of us deserves Christ accepting us, but he did. The Apostle Paul is encouraging us not to reject anyone who may have differences or struggles. We shouldn't condemn anyone, look down on anyone or be scornful of them. In other words, we should be praying to God to help us help others grow in the Lord. That should be our primary concern and motivation this Lenten Season.

Dear God, help us to love one another as you have loved us and gave yourself for us. Amen.

Accept His grace and love and let His view of YOU change your view of yourself. You are accepted!

Rev. Shelby Taylor  
Pastor, St. James CME, Conway  
Conway, AR

**MARCH 5, 2017**

**Undone**

During this holy season of Lent and as we regularly approach the Lord's Table, we ask God's forgiveness for the things we have done, and for the things we have left undone.

I am captured anew by the word - undone - in the midst of Lent. The word describes how we have felt in these post-election days.

We sing with the heart of God envisioned in Isaiah 5:4, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" (5:4)

Pressing toward God's vision for beloved community embracing all people, we have carried hope. The dismantling of protections is frightening and disillusioning and deeply painful. We observe and mourn the regression that is hurtful to LGBTQ persons and their allies.

So let us, in Lenten perseverance, pray.

In prayer, let us hold before God all that we called progress, now in danger of being undone. May good seed yet germinate in good soil. In prayer, let us hold before God all yet to be realized and pray, Thy will be done. In prayer, let us hold before God LGBTQI persons who are diminished, dismissed and othered. And, in Lenten observance, let us act.

Acting with courage, let us name God's call to inclusion of all LGBTQ persons in God's beloved community. Acting with conviction, let us live as Jesus lived among us, offering vigilant and expansive welcome in our homes and our churches and our judicatories. Acting with faithfulness, let us continue our efforts toward full inclusion, confident that the Holy Spirit is at work among us.

We have felt undone in these days. Lent is, for us, a time of weeping, of mourning all that is stalled, unfinished, resisted.

Therefore, we remember Psalm 126, praying for the present terrors to be overwhelmed with God's dream that is sure to come.

Do great things for us, Powerful and Loving God. Bring comfort and strength and peace to your people who seek to receive, live and share your dream. Help us live the way of Jesus, offering mercy and grace and love with humility and power. Fill this world with your Holy Spirit, bringing assurance to LGBTQ persons while invading closed spaces to change the hearts of the powerful.

Through the Triune God, we pray. Amen.

Bishop Hope Morgan Ward  
Bishop of the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church  
Raleigh, NC

**MARCH 6, 2017**

**Luke 15:1-2; NRSV**

15. <sup>1</sup> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

At a gay disco while serving in the Air Force, some friends and I were standing around having some drinks when we noticed a group of young men laughing, dancing and conversing in Spanish. "Taco Queens!" sneered someone in my group. The remark surprised me and when I said, "Hey, not cool, I'm Mexican," my friends laughed and assured me I was different; I didn't *act* Mexican. "You're American, Robert; you're one of us."

I marvel how oppressed people will oppress people, labeling them *other, unacceptable* even while we live in a world in which it is still dangerous to be openly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender.

Jesus must have marveled as well, that the Pharisees and the scribes attempted to fault Jesus with eating with the unacceptable other, as they, themselves, lived in the first century Roman Empire (Palestine) which had little regard for Jewish people and their culture.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus points out that all of us are valued equally and loved in the eyes of God...no matter what people think or say about us!

That night I looked at my friends, smiled and told them, "Oh, believe me, I AM a Taco Queen" and left them to join my people for a great night out.

***Querido God, thank you for loving us as we are— Taco Queens and all the Queens in this world—who dance the night away, rejoicing that Jesus Christ came to show us the way to You. Amen!***

Rev. Roberto Ochoa  
Pastor, Lakewood Congregational UCC  
Worcester, Ma

MARCH 7, 2017

**Matthew 5:13-20**

**Christian Without Contempt**

Did you know that the place where you get your news influences how you see the world? If you wonder how we can all live in the same nation and have such radically different understandings of what is going on around us, just try an experiment: watch Fox News for an hour and then watch MSNBC for an hour. It will seem like different universes are being described. *Personal disclosure – I am much more likely to find MSNBC factual than Fox News.* But I don't use just one source to listen to my world. I have a variety of news outlets I peruse just so my knowledge of an event is as whole as possible.

With that example in mind, if I were to ask you to describe a Pharisee, where would you get your information? For most American Christians, the only place they have heard an historical reference to Pharisees is in the Newer Testament, like our reading from Matthew. Have you ever noticed that the term Pharisee doesn't appear in the Older Testament? Neither does the term Sadducee. If I were to ask you whether Judaism today still includes Pharisees or Sadducees, would you know? If I were to ask your impression of a Pharisee, would it be positive or negative?

When I was pastor in Minneapolis I had the opportunity to take classes at United Theological Seminary, a seminary of the United Church of Christ. One class was a preaching course taught by Professor Marilyn Salmon, whose book, *Preaching Without Contempt* centered on the unintentional bias that Christian preachers preach against Judaism because of our readings from the Newer Testament. We, as Christians, understand the law, what makes someone clean/unclean, how the Pharisees and scribes operate and other vestiges of Judaism through the lens of the Newer Testament which often has an anti-Judaism bias. Is it any wonder that the term Pharisee is used in 21<sup>st</sup> century America to describe a religiously over-bearing hypocrite?

If you were to go over to Temple Emmanuel and walk through their office area, you would not find an office of Pharisee or scribe. Judaism, as it existed in first century Palestine has evolved tremendously – just as Christianity, as it existed in first century Palestine has evolved tremendously. And yet, our perception of – and mental pictures about – Judaism can still be stuck back there. Most of us would consider ourselves open-minded and inclusive. We wouldn't use racial slurs about Black people or LGBTQ people, but describing some offensive person as a Pharisee wouldn't even occur to us as being anti-Semitic. It is because we have been using the biblical equivalent of Fox News as our only source of reference.

Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees were the clergy of their day. They would be no different than looking at the clergy of our present day. There are some clergy who are insightful and learned and spiritually profound and there are some clergy who are lunatics. Whenever the Bible talks about these religious leaders opposing Jesus or being obstinate or malicious – make that translation in your head that what the biblical writers are challenging was religious abuse, not the particularity of a specific religion. Judaism was the dominant religious system at that time. It was the religious milieu from which Christianity would emerge. Hopefully, it is easy to see how the same dynamics can exist in any religious system, even our own.

***During this Lenten journey, O God, teach me how to let go of the ideas and prejudices that I didn't even know I still had. Allow your grace to make me new again. Amen.***

Rev. Paul Eknes-Tucker  
Senior Pastor, Pilgrim United Church of Christ  
Birmingham, AL

## MARCH 8, 2017

Acts 10 teaches us what it means to be the church—a confirmation of our calling to create inclusive community. It is a multi-layered story in which Peter, a Jew, learns to see that Cornelius, a Gentile, is part of the community of God.

At this time, Jews believed Gentiles to be unclean and “other”—keeping them completely separate. However, in these early formative years of the church, God is teaching the community how to embrace ALL people—a lesson we are called to continue today.

The story begins with Cornelius—deeply in tune with God—sending two men to find Peter. We meet Peter who is headed out to pray but quickly distracted by the thought of food. He begins to dream and God teaches him that what he once thought was “unclean” is in fact “clean.” God repeats this message THREE times before Peter (the one who is supposed to be devout) gets it. Meanwhile, Cornelius’ men show up at the door asking Peter to come and visit. Much to our surprise, Peter accepts the hospitality of Cornelius and enters the home of a Gentile, offering this great proclamation:

“It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as [God] says, the door is open. The Message [God] sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, [God is] doing it everywhere, among everyone.” (Acts 10:34-36 in *The Message*)

While we’ve been busy separating and dividing, God has been busy drawing the circle wider. The church is to be a place where God’s all embracing love—a love open and available to ALL people—is declared unceasingly. Peter gets it...so much so he is exploding with this good news!

The church is called to break down the barriers the world fabricates in our midst—one of the biggest today being against the LGBTQ community. When the church can see that we, like Peter, are called to be inclusive, we build a more rich and diverse community.

Perhaps the season of Lent is a time not only for us to turn individually inward but also reevaluate who we are as the church—to find the places where selfishness, greed, fear and hatred are holding us back from experiencing the fullness of God.

***May we celebrate our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and the ways they strengthen our faith communities. May we learn from the ways they teach us to love even when the world holds them back. May we proclaim the great truth that God plays no favorites! Amen.***

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Rev. Katie Gilbert

Director of Invitation and Outreach, Communications, First Church Birmingham  
Birmingham, AL



**MARCH 9, 2017**

***Redefined***

***Set my soul afire, Lord, for Thy holy Word. Burn it deep within me, let your voice be heard; Millions grope in darkness, in this day and hour. I will be Your witness, fill me with Thy power.***

Perhaps one of the best things about Lent is that it offers the gift of reflection. During this liturgical season, we commit ourselves to 46 days of fasting, prayer and self-denial. Many of us are applauded for our piety for observing Lent. People assume we spend our time thinking about all the wrong we've done, seeking forgiveness and bargaining with God for another chance to get things right.

That may very well be true for some people...but not for all of us. Rather than reflect on the changes that need to be made in our personal lives, some of us spend the season of Lent...and beyond...reflecting not on the need for changes in our lives but on the need for changes in our theology.

The bible supports this type of honest contemplation.

When we are honest with ourselves, we realize there are times in our lives in which we endure wilderness experiences. In the wilderness, we feel isolated and forgotten, lost and misunderstood, confused and full of sorrow.

The wilderness is painful.

Yet, it is in the wilderness that we find the strength to be authentic in our faith. It is in the wilderness that we are empowered to speak and live our truth because God is on our side.

It is in the wilderness that we are equipped to fight the real evils of this life—the evils of transphobia, racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, lack of access to healthcare, poverty, hunger and homelessness.

It is in the wilderness that we learn God is bigger than the bible, bigger than the church, bigger than religion and much, much bigger than politics. We also learn that that great big God loves us, lives in all of us and breathes through each of us.

Knowing this, we grow to appreciate the wilderness and learn to use it as fuel to continue the fight for total liberation for all God's children—Black, Latino, the incarcerated, those living with HIV, those who are unsheltered, receiving inadequate education, are denied financial stability, demonized because of their sexual orientation and dehumanized because of their gender identity.

It is during Lent that the wilderness becomes our friend.

***Set my soul afire, Lord, in my daily life. For too long I've wondered in this day of strife; Nothing else will matter but to live for Thee. I will be Your witness as You live in me.***  
**—Gene Bartlett (Greenwood, Arkansas)**

May our Lenten journey be one of discomfort and restlessness for our spirits as God rekindles a fire in our souls that compels us to get involved in the true work of God—offering unconditional love to all people, in all places, at all times as we dismantle the systems that enslave us. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Denise Donnell  
Senior Faith Organizer  
Human Rights Campaign Arkansas

**MARCH 10, 2017**

**Hebrews 12:14**

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

At 21, when I came out as a lesbian to my Baptist-minister parents and my community at my Baptist-in-heritage college, I never doubted if God still loved me. In fact, I only doubted whether God's people could still love me and respect my holiness as a child of God.

I floated untethered in this new reality---between churches and faiths---until I read the following passage from one of my most beloved spiritual guides - professor, writer, theologian and former Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor:

Whoever you are, you are human. Wherever you are, you live in the world which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it. So welcome to your own priesthood, practiced at the altar of your own life. The good news is that you have everything you need to begin.

Suddenly, I realized the responsibility of recognizing holiness was all mine, that the holiness of God and God's creation was all around me and within me.

In this liberation and awakening, I found that the act of coming out had placed me on the path to embracing my own sexuality and holiness, as well as to helping others do the same. In this reality, I knew my faith required me to act and to speak out for the holiness and dignity of all LGBTQ persons.

Former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskold, has written, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."

I encourage you today to let the road to holiness pass through the world of affirming your own story, your own holiness, in order that you might best find the path to action that turns others toward peace and respecting the dignity of all persons.

I live by the African proverb, "When you pray, move your feet."

I look forward to seeing you on the path.

Eva Kendrick, Manager  
Human Rights Campaign Alabama

**MARCH 11, 2017**

**Romans 8:28 (NIV)**

<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

This season of Lent, like others before it, causes us to pause, listen, pray, worship.

This verse - Romans 8:28 - has been a favorite of mine since childhood. Raised Southern Baptist, this one verse I have remembered my entire adult life.

Aren't we challenged all the time with things in life such as: Worry, Impatience, Disbelief, Fear, etc.? This verse encourages us to know that things in our life will be OK. As we communicate with God or our Higher Power, as we believe; we can rest assured that God knows what's in store for us, God's children.

We don't know what tomorrow brings, or next week, month, year or years; however, we do know that because we love God, life will work out.

I'm sure like me, you might not understand what's happening in our lives at the present moment. Still, we are able to replay things and know "in all things God works for the good of those who love him..."

Love God and trust that God's got you.

Suzanne Pepper  
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Jackson MS

MARCH 12, 2017

**Cantar de los Cantares 8:6-7** (Reina Valera 1960)

8.<sup>6</sup> Ponme como un sello sobre tu corazón, como una marca sobre tu brazo;  
Porque fuerte es como la muerte el amor;  
Duros como el Seol los celos;  
Sus brasas, brasas de fuego, fuerte llama.  
7 Las muchas aguas no podrán apagar el amor,  
Ni lo ahogarán los ríos.  
Si diese el hombre todos los bienes de su casa por este amor,  
De cierto lo menospreciarían.

**Con todos mis sentidos**

Recuerdo cantar en la escuela bíblica dominical un corito muy popular. La letra del mismo dice: “*Cuidado tus ojitos lo que miran / Cuidado tus ojitos lo que miran / Que en cielo está el Señor / Que nos mira con amor / Cuidado tus ojitos lo que miran.*” Cantaba este corito cuando que niño en mi congregación de las Iglesias Bautistas de Puerto Rico en las montañas cafetaleras de mi pueblo. El corito sigue mencionando, uno por uno, todos los sentidos humanos. La idea de cantarlo era hacer que la niñez no se apartara del camino al dejar que lo sentidos experimentaran aquello que “el Señor” considerara pecado.

Por décadas esta canción estuvo plasmada en mi mente. Por décadas, pensé que estar en contacto con mis sentidos era un pecado. Todo lo que es bueno, todo lo que es puro, todo lo que es digno del Señor, en esto es en lo que hay que pensar. La carne, por otra parte, era echado hacia al lado. La sensualidad – esa necesidad humana básica de disfrutar, expresar y buscar placer a través de los sentidos – estaba prohibida.

El Cantar de los Cantares provee un escape para este dualismo. Cuando adolescente y con un poco de vergüenza, descubrí el Cantar de los Cantares. Leí los versos apasionados y entendí cómo una joven pareja – tratando de esconderse a plena vista – disfruta de su sensualidad, trayendo cada uno de sus sentidos... ¡Los ojos ven, las manos tocan, los oídos escuchan, los pies corren hacia el ser amado! Todos los pecados que el corito de mi niñez me enseñó a evadir eran ahora celebrados aquí, en la Biblia, en este hermoso Cantar de los Cantares que es de Salomón.

El tiempo de Cuaresma por lo general se presenta como un temporada para la expiación; un tiempo para hacer sacrificios y prevenir que nuestros sentidos disfruten de aquellas cosas que deseamos. Pero la Cuaresma también es un tiempo para los sentidos. La práctica de ayuno que tanto se fomenta en este tiempo, tiene mucho que ver con la vista, los olores y el tacto. Las cenizas, las velas encendidas, el incienso y la oscuridad que utilizamos en nuestras liturgias, tienen que ver con la vista, el olor, el tacto y el oído. La Cuaresma nos invita a experimentar la Divinidad con todos nuestros sentidos y toda nuestra sensualidad.

Una lectura queer de las Sagradas Escrituras es necesaria durante el tiempo de Cuaresma; es imperativo que nuestras realidades encarnadas se sumerjan en el mar del Amor Divino que nos arroja con un amor tan intenso que se puede sentir como brasas de fuego que nos queman lo más profundo de nuestro ser. La Cuaresma, con sus cenizas, sus velas encendidas, su incienso y su oscuridad nos hace sedientas y sedientos por el Amado, con una sed que no puede ser apagada por todas las aguas del mundo. Es una temporada para abrirnos a la sensualidad de nuestra relación con la Santísima Divinidad.

Mis ojos ya no tendrán cuidado de lo que miran, porque cuando miro, toco, escucho y utilizo todos mis sentidos, ahí es cuando mejor puedo experimentar el penetrante amor del Amado Divino cuyo amor nos transforma.

[ENGLISH TRANSLATION BELOW]

## **Song of Solomon 8:6-7 (Common English Bible)**

‘Set me as a seal over your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death, passionate love unrelenting as the grave. Its darts are darts of fire— divine flame! ‘Rushing waters can’t quench love; rivers can’t wash it away. If someone gave all his estate in exchange for love, he would be laughed to utter shame.

### **With All My Senses**

There was a children’s song we sang in Sunday school when I was a kid. Perhaps you are familiar with the lyrics: “*O be careful little eyes what you see / O be careful little eyes what you see / There's a Father up above / And He's looking down in love / So, be careful little eyes what you see.*” I sang a Spanish translation of this song, as I grew up in a rural American Baptist congregation in the mountains of Puerto Rico. The song goes on to mention every one of the human senses. The idea was to make sure that the children didn’t stray from the straight and narrow path by allowing our senses to be perceived those things that our “Father up above” would consider a sin.

For decades, that song was ingrained in my mind. For decades, I thought that being in touch with my senses was a sin. All that is good, all that is pure, all that is worth is the spirit world. The flesh, however, was left out. Sensuality – that most basic of human needs — to enjoy, express, and pursue pleasure through the senses was forbidden.

The Song of Solomon provided an escape from this dualism. As an adolescent, I sheepishly discovered the Song of Solomon. I read through its verses and learned that there was a young couple, trying to hide in plain sight, as they sensually enjoyed their embodied realities. In great detail, the lovers share with the audience their sensual attraction, engaging each part of their embodied selves... Eyes see, hands touch, ears hear, feet run towards the loved one! The lovers celebrated their sensual selves under the watchful eye of the God in heaven who rejoiced with their thirst for each other! All the sins that the song taught me to avoid were being celebrated here, in the Bible, in this beautiful Song of Songs which is of Solomon.

Lent is often portrayed as a time to atone; a time to make sacrifices and to prevent our senses from enjoying that which we most desire. But Lent is also a time for the senses. The practice of fasting has to do with sight and smells and touch. Ashes, candles, incense and darkness in our liturgies have to do with sight and smells and touch and hearing. Lent invites us to experience the love of the Divine with all of our senses and all of our sensuality.

A queer reading of the Holy Scriptures is necessary every Lenten season. It is imperative that our embodied realities are immersed into the sea of Divine Love that envelops us with a love so intense it is felt like flames burning our innermost selves. Lent, with its ashes, candles, incense and darkness makes us thirst for the Loved One with a thirst that cannot be quenched by water. It is a season to open up to the sensuality of our relationship with the Holy One.

My eyes will no longer be careful with what they see, for when I see and touch and use all of my senses, I can best experience the penetrating love of the Divine Lover whose love transforms us.

Rev. J. Manny Santiago  
Executive Director, The Crossing Campus Ministry  
Madison, WI

## **MARCH 13, 2017**

The Episcopal Church's liturgy for Lent includes a prayer that reads, "Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made..." As we journey through the season of Lent, these are important words for us to hear.

Jesus' use of the word "hypocrite" originated in ancient Greek theater, and was the common term for an actor. Actors used masks so they could play more than one role. But the image came to be used in the popular sense of a person whose inner character did not match the mask they presented to the world.

The Rev. Frank Logue points out that there are times when a mask is a helpful thing. For example, putting on a "brave face" when visiting someone you are very concerned about in the hospital. However, in the Gospel, the one mask Jesus finds unacceptable is the one we wear when facing God.

We need to remember that God is the one who knows us intimately and loves us anyway. God wants us to live lives that are whole and full. That fullness begins with our hearts turned openly toward God. Today, the journey continues.

Neil Kaminski  
Priest, Holy Trinity Episcopal  
Hot Springs Village, AR

**MARCH 14, 2017**

**Psalm 23:1-4 (NRSV)**

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

**The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Resist Alone**

Psalm 23 is one of the most known psalms, if not the best known, by church goers and the un-churched alike. It is the most popular psalm to say at funerals. It is such a popular psalm that it is taught early in Sunday school. I can't even remember when I learned it, yet it is there, in my memory. It comes out naturally and automatically in Spanish and in English in moments of great trouble: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want..." We say it. We repeat it. We encourage others to say it in moments of grief and difficulties. But do we really know what it means? Do we know the context?

Scholars say Psalm 23 was composed to address a crisis. Some say it is a psalm of David; others say it is a psalm for David. What's important is its function--to remind the audience of the relationship between God and God's people. Perhaps most importantly, it functions to remind readers about the beauty of living life in the here and now even amid the usual darkness that accompanies day-to-day life.

This psalm provides me with such assurance because if the Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing. Everything is so beautiful and so peaceful. Everything turns romantic; I am in a gorgeous landscape of green pastures and waters that restore my soul. That relaxes me.

Snap out of it!  
Right this minute!

If the Lord is my shepherd, that makes me a sheep, a dumb, hard-to-take-care-of sheep that needs constant watching because I'm always going where I'm not supposed to, constantly frustrating the shepherd for my stupid moves.

I am a sheep, constantly prone to behavior that requires the shepherd to keep me in line--perhaps by whacking my buttocks--to lead me to the grass and the waters that give life...away from the decisions I might make that lead me to the valleys of death.

Yet, even when I go through the valley, the shepherd is there.

We are living in tumultuous times.

We are going through times of crisis for immigrants, times of great stress for African-Americans, times of anguish for people who are Transgender, times of vulnerability for all who are marginalized. We are going through times in which hatred, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism, religious intolerance, and ignorance seem to be at center stage.

These are things that make us feel like we need our Shepherd to come and walk with us through the valley of death, so that we will not fear evil, but face it with courage and resist!

There are no easy ways for us to manage the anger, the frustration, the fear, the grief, and the sense of powerlessness many of us in this rising climate of injustice.

We have heard about bomb threats to Jewish congregations and institutions.

We have seen progressive churches and LGBT organizations being vandalized.

All of this motivated by the rhetoric of hatred used by president 45.

When is it going to stop?

How much more do we have to see?

How much more in "the name of God" can they keep doing to us?

Yes, we *can* and we *must* resist the powers of evil, as we go through the valley of death in the time in which we live, for our Shepherd--with the rod and staff--shall comfort us.

Amen.

Rev. Dámaris E. Ortega

Minister, United Church of Christ Congregational

Plainfield, NJ



**MARCH 15, 2017**

**Ephesians 5:11-12 (NIV)**

<sup>11</sup> Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. <sup>12</sup> It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.

**Exposed**

I grew up with a rather unfavorable view of tattletales and snitches. "Keep your mouth shut," I was told... "What goes on in this house stays in this house..." "There are certain things that are not to be discussed."

But I've come to understand that there is a big difference between confidentiality and cover-up. One protects privacy; the other protects vice.

According to philosopher Edmund Burke, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. Corruption can only thrive in contexts of silent acquiescence.

Secrecy itself is quite seductive to individuals and of institutions. Information is power and those who have it and control the access to it are powerful. Evil requires that power be limited to only a select few.

In the 1960's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was constantly accused of inciting violence with his Civil Rights marches. Dr. King responded that his aim was not to incite violence but to expose the violence that the physical repressions of racial segregation imposed daily on the oppressed. King saw himself not as an inflictor of wounds but an exposer of trauma, the trauma caused by cuts that had already scarred the human dignity of the disenfranchised.

Exposing evil is risky business. But the greater threat is the deadly silence of those who consistently sacrifice moral conscience on the altar of social order.

God, there are so many areas where we find delight in the devices of darkness. Give me the courage to shine Your Light even when eyes have adjusted to the dark. Amen.

Dr. Kenneth L. Samuel  
Senior Pastor and Organizer, Victory for the World Church  
Stone Mountain, GA

MARCH 16, 2017

## Holy Misery

To borrow Sophia's signature story beginning, "picture it ... Sicily ... 1922 ..." Okay, maybe that's a little too far back. Picture it ... Memphis ... 2017 ... a crowded bar with a makeshift stage. A curtain made of cheap silver streamers. A group of patrons so diverse that words couldn't begin to describe it. The music crescendos then stops. Through the curtain steps an ample, beautiful drag queen with a blond wig crowned with massive golden flowers. Her dress looks like the bastard love-child of a disco-ball and the streets of heaven, a glittering gold that would have done any disco-dancer proud.

She lifts the microphone to her over-glossed lips and has us on our feet - cheering, shouting, chanting. Once in the palm of her well-manicured ivory hand, she quiets us, welcoming us to her bar. After a few jokes about body parts I'm pretty sure she doesn't have, she asks if there are any first-timers and extends them a special welcome, bringing loud cheers from the crowd. Then, she does something I could never have anticipated - she begins to preach.

Wipe that look off your face. I'm telling you the truth!

This improbable drag queen in a dingy little bar on the wrong side of town cut loose and had church. She told us that in her bar, there were not gays or straights, races or religions and absolutely no politics. In her bar, we were there for one reason and one reason only - to have a good time. She said if we weren't there to have fun, we needed to hit the door running now before her show started.

Like many good Christians, I sat in church the next morning with a slight hangover, buoyed up by a few hours of sleep and some very strong coffee. I listened to the warbling sopranos as they sang the familiar hymn, "Words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty." Then it happened. As I looked across the grim, determined faces of the adults in my church, and as I watched the few young people zoning out checking their phones, a silent revolution took place inside me. None of these people looked happy. I decided I was done with holy misery.

In John 10:10, Jesus said "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Is this miserable "faith and duty" Christianity really what abundant life looks like? I think the drag queen has a far better understanding of the Easter story than most church people. She understands that life is meant to be lived, to be enjoyed and most of all to be shared.

Rather than chocolate, caffeine, or red meat, maybe we need to give up something different for Lent this year.

This year, maybe we need to give up the idea that the more miserable we are, the more holy we are.

This year, maybe we need to give up the idea that the church is a duty and make it a community - a space for loving and living where all are welcome.

This year, maybe we need to give up hating ourselves for what we can't change and embrace ourselves as the creations of God that we are - children he loves just as we are!

This year, maybe we can give up that little part deep inside ourselves that always wishes we were something else, something more.

Then we can let go of holy misery and embrace holy communion.

***The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. John 10:10***

Rev. David White  
Jonesboro, AR

**MARCH 17, 2017**

Romans 35, 37-39 (New Revised Standard Edition)

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Human beings often ask the questions, 'Is there a God? What is God like? Does God care about me?' One of the classic answers is given in philosophical terms: God is all powerful, all loving and all knowing. 'If God is all loving, why do bad things happen' is usually the question that follows.

I think we get a far better answer to the question of who God is in Paul's letter to the Romans. It is cast in the form of a promise and an assurance. The God who acted in Jesus Christ is love. And there is nothing that can separate us from that love. That is a deep and abiding promise. NOTHING... not suffering, hunger, discrimination or violence will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

This promise comes from the one who brought Jesus back from the dead. It comes from the one who said despair, doubt, evil and death have been conquered once and for all. And in that conquering showed that life, love and hope are the final answers in this world...not death, hatred and despair.

It amazes that the same God who created the heavens and the earth—who could breathe the breath of life into each of us— is the same God who knows us and loves us so much that the hairs on our head are numbered and known. What do we know about God's love?

God's love is an assurance that even in the darkest moment, we are not alone. Even when it feels like injustice and hatred have won the day, justice and hope are the final answers. It is the trumpet call we hear that reminds us of God's promise that we will never, never be alone. And at the very heart of God—as shown in the life of Jesus—is love, a love so great that all are loved, regardless.

The next time you ponder the questions, Is there a God? What is God like? Does God care? Remember, Paul. At the end of his life, he wrote, "...I am convinced neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor heights nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). The answer is a resounding YES to all three questions.

That's who God is.

You and I are loved by the same God who created the world...the same God who said at the end of time there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying (Revelation 21:4).

Hear the good news. You are loved by God!

Thanks be to God.

Rev. Stephen Copley  
President, Faith Voices Arkansas

**MARCH 18, 2017**

1 John 4: 20-21

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you are charged with loving because of your faith, not in spite of it. Neither man nor woman has the right to condemn. Considering there are those who don't believe, worship, love or act according to our own beliefs, it is the threshold of our faith that we extend the unconditional love and fortitude that has been delivered to us through the word of God.

In this day and age, too commonly religion is being used as a political and social tool to separate and divide according to one's own personal gain. Lent affords us an opportunity to ponder the image of God and allow its reflection to guide us toward celebrating all people regardless of race, immigration status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.

In the spirit of honoring our oneness, receive this favorite prayer of mine.

Spirit of Life, be in our hearts and minds as we come together today to pray for our world. We come today as people of privilege, grateful for this blessing and hopeful for our future. Let us know that each of us comes from our own tradition to lift high our spirits in unity. Knowing we are part of an interconnected web of life, let us acknowledge and embrace our oneness. Teach us how to be loving and able stewards of this world. Help us acknowledge our differences as we seek common ground, each of us working for the good of all. We recognize there is hurt and sorrow, deeds that confound us, and actions for which we can find no justification. Yet, we know also that there is untold good, folks who work every day for the benefit of all people. Let us stand with them. We pray that we have the strength to recognize the inconvenience of our soul work to overcome the apathy that invades us during these difficult times. While we recognize the occasional tiredness in our bones and in our hearts, we call on the strength of the Spirit that we might be the best body of people that we are called to be. Yes, let us be the good we want to see in others. Let us work to be the change we seek as we renew these goals in our hearts and spirit.

Daniel G. Ball, Faith Outreach  
Human Rights Campaign Mississippi

**MARCH 19, 2017**

### **Carry Your Own Water**

As we engage in the process of reflection, recommitment and renewal attendant to the Lenten season, I want us to focus on one of the two essential elements of life. In this instance we will not consider the air we breathe (as important as it is) but rather we will consider water.

Water is understood in some ways to define human experience, nourishing and sustaining all life on planet Earth. Water is indeed a gift of nature. Water is a product of imagination and an inescapable part of the ecological reality of life. Our very bodies are comprised of and dependent upon water.

Water is precious and we have come to understand ever more profoundly since the lead- poisoned disgrace of Flint, Michigan and the unethical, immoral threat to the Mississippi River posed at Standing Rock that "Water Is Life!"

In recent days I spent time on the continent of Africa and there the bare essentials of life are more clearly visible in daily existence. Among the common experiences of living is the requirement of water. I cannot count how many times throughout the day I witnessed the process of either people carrying water from one place to another or pumps and wells being accessed to draw water.

In my quiet moments, it occurred to me that in truth, one cannot expect someone else to carry the water. In many regards, each of us should carry our own. Consider the phrase, "to carry someone's water."

As a former high school basketball team manager, I know something about the position of "water boy" who is charged with catering to the players' comfort. Often, people view serving as water boy is the lowest job in the team hierarchy. Yet, without the water provided by the waterboy, dehydration, cramps and the inability to perform are guaranteed results.

In these future-defining times, we ought endeavor to imagine and embrace new possibilities to creatively carry our own water. To carry water is to take on primary responsibility, to ensure something is accomplished, to resist and to take action – even though the people elected, appointed and others holding positions of authority should be the ones doing the work.

I pray that a renewed internal urgency will arise in each of us to be responsible agents in justice-making. All persons are diminished when any one person, group or segment of our society is diminished. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was correct in 1963 and even more correct today, "No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Oh, Holy One and Creator, grant us more grace and divine fortitude to unceasingly pursue your kin-dom here on earth. Remind us always of your requirements to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with you, our God.

Amen.

Reverend Cedric A. Harmon  
Executive Director, Many Voices A Black Church Movement for Gay and Transgender (LGBTQ) Justice  
Washington, D.C.

**MARCH 20, 2017**

**You are known; you are loved; you are called to become all of you (Psalm 139)**

Lent is always a fraught time for me.

Growing up, I was enrolled in a Catholic school, but I attended a Southern Baptist Church. While the high liturgical seasons of the Catholic tradition captivate my imagination, I am most drawn to the communal style of church seen in most Baptist congregations. For a while, the only liturgical season I knew was around Christmas when our church campaigned for the Lottie Moon offering. I didn't know it was Advent, the season of deep hope and yearning for a new world found in the Incarnation, in the birth of becoming.

On the flip side of the birth of becoming, there is Lent—whose climax is Holy Week—during which we remember the death of Jesus and anticipate his resurrection. The 40 days of Lent are moments when we give ourselves permission to find the center of our own difference and breathe.

These days, I'm learning to breathe for what seems like the first time in my life.

I am learning to be known.

I am learning to be loved.

I am learning that I am called to become all of me.

Psalm 139 helps us connect with the Divine energy that shortens the distance between folks and communities, between our lived experiences and our bodies.

I was in high school when I first came to know this particular psalm. A substitute teacher—who was also a youth minister at a local Southern Baptist Church—encouraged me to memorize it. Little did I know, it would grow to be an important reminder of who I am and who I was called to be during a time of great difficulty when my gender nonconforming Masculine of Center Trans Latinx body was an apparent threat.

I have had to reach back into the folds of my memory to recall that my created being—though different in this world to and for many—is wonderfully made.

To sit with this psalm and really breathe in the words that I am known and loved and created wonderfully is not only in opposition to what I am told each day, but it helps me lean into an imaginative hope that maybe one day our communities will know us as the Divine knows us, will love us as the Divine loves us and will call to us from the deepest places of our gifts and graces just as the Divine does.

I think Lent is a season where we can relax and begin to breathe in the words of this psalm.

For many Trans, gender nonconforming persons and people of color, we spend a long time getting to know ourselves. We have been socialized to believe lies about ourselves...that we are not made in the image of the Divine, that we are deeply flawed, that we are in need of repair.

What's amazing about breathing in the words of this psalm during the season of Lent is that we have a chance to rest in trust that the Divine knows us in all of our complexities, is holding us in the deepest darkensses of our twisted journeys and is calling us to become all we are called to become.

As the psalmist says, we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, PhD  
Nashville, Tennessee

MARCH 21, 2017

Matthew 22:37-39

<sup>37</sup> Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the first and most important command. <sup>39</sup> And the second command is like the first: "Love your neighbor the same as you love yourself."

Nowhere in Scripture are we told we get to choose our neighbor. This point very much hits home whenever a new child of God is received into the household of faith via baptism. We become part of the family of God; and much like our human families, we have no choice in selecting those family members. We are incorporated into a motley crew of diverse personalities, behaviors and traits. Yet all are joined together in one body as God's beloved. This is the flawed, but perfectly human/divine community into which we have been called.

Within my faith tradition, we promise in our Baptismal Covenant to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. To me, these vows scream out the word ACCEPTANCE – acceptance of ourselves, and acceptance of others. Yet acceptance is a very difficult behavior to master. Including those of us who live under the covering of the rainbow flag, we find acceptance a rare commodity within ourselves and within our communities. It is difficult to accept the other as our neighbor, especially when we are unable to accept ourselves and one another.

It's always easier to accept one who already accepts us, but the Lenten journey of walking in the Way of the Cross is about the hard work of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly (Micah 6:8) even with people who challenge us and our sense of self. This is what loving our neighbor as ourselves looks like. Jesus calls us to love as we have been loved and accepted by God. That means not merely acknowledging another's existence, but loving, respecting and accepting the other.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Whistling in the Dark*, writes:

*Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves... You see where they're vulnerable. You see where they're scared. Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves. You're still light-years away from loving them, to be sure, but at least you see how they are human even as you are human, and that is at least a step in the right direction.*

How would it feel to embrace the other like this? What is it like to know that we are loved by God with utter completeness? Love and acceptance mean praying for those who wish us ill and respecting the dignity of every human being – the other and ourselves.

Rev. Father Errol Montgomery-Robertson, M.Div.  
Pastor, Lighthouse Community Church, Biloxi, MS  
Chaplain, Mississippi Rainbow Center

**MARCH 22, 2017**

**GOD WHOSE NAME IS LOVE**

It's Lent, the historic and traditional Christian observance of the time leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection. Focus is on reflection, prayer, repentance and sometimes self-denial as a discipline. (It used to be common to "give up" chocolate, smoking, any vice thought we could do without, at least for 40 days.) As I considered a focus for Lent, it seemed that the "KISS" system might work best for me: Keep It Simple, Sister! This is a dynamic world we live in, filled with things that overwhelm and assault our senses, so simple works for me. My question, my prayer, then became "Lord, what would you have me do?" God's response was not about giving up anything. Rather, God's response was about giving out God's greatest gift: love.

Love ~ not just for those who live with me or look like me, speak like me or believe like me. And what about those who seem just downright unlovable? Love is much bigger than that. It's rooted in the prayer, the trust and the assurance that loving others – all others – is the right thing to do. Jesus' instructions are very clear ~ "Love one another just as I have loved you" (Matthew 13:34). Lent is a great time to think about that and, most importantly, to act on it. Pray first, then love all persons without boundaries and without fear, but with purpose and with determination.

In a recent forum, prayer was highlighted as a Lenten practice not for personal benefit but as a way to get closer to God and be more like God. "Every prayer is an act of love, made to the Author of love" (Dr. Albert Rossi, The Jesus Prayer). This Lent, I'll do my best to walk in love, keeping it simple. I'll ask God to walk with me and make me strong in the effort.

Let's do this together—loving and praying for each other, without exception. I'm reminded of Florence Hoatson's closing words of the very first hymn I learned as a child:

"Bless us everyone, singing here to thee, God whose name is love, loving may we be."

Susan Read  
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church  
Hot Springs Village, AR



**MARCH 23, 2017**

**John 10:10**

I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly...

As we journey through the season of Lent, we enter the narrative that led Jesus to Jerusalem and to the Cross. We journey through a time when we remember that it is from dust we have come and to dust we shall return. We enter this season willingly. Therefore, we should be willing for this dust--the elemental essence of our lives--to be caught up in the dust that was Jesus' life, the dust underneath his feet, the dust underneath his nails, the dust that rooted the Cross, the dust that teaches us the way we are to live and breathe and BE.

Jesus came introducing life in all its fullness. Through his life, he brought a message of love that was like light, a light that continues to reveal the grace and truth of God in ways that changed the climate around him. His message of love for all permeated the air and was as threatening to some as it was comforting to others. Yet, the message of Jesus' love could not be destroyed.

The way love breaks into the world today is as threatening to some as it is comforting to others. Yet, we know love in its fullest form brings with it light, grace and truth.

May those who believe in Jesus' message of life be caught up in the abundance of God's love for us all. May it root itself within our very being. May the DNA of the dust of our being be caught up in the dust of Jesus' being that our lives might be marked with the realities of knowing the truth of Life—abundant life, for all.

Loving God, strengthen us for the abundant living of these days that others might find grace and truth in the love that comes alive in us through you. Amen

Rev. Michelle Shrader  
Associate Minister, Central Methodist Mission  
Mission Partner Cape of Good Hope District  
Cape Town, South Africa

**MARCH 24, 2017**

Deuteronomy 30:15-16

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

Lent is known as the season for fasting, the time when we deny ourselves pleasure in an effort to purify ourselves before God.

For many, this isn't the only time during the year in which we're encouraged to deny worldly pleasures and focus only on a relationship with Christ. Too often, a fear of losing sight of God's mission in the world causes people to ignore the gifts and pleasures of God's creation and encourage or force others to do the same.

We hear this often from those who believe strongly that LGBTQ+ people have chosen a lifestyle over a more righteous life prescribed by God. When we are too focused on purity, we can't see the ways that God is at work in all relationships.

Perhaps surprisingly, the season of Lent can offer an encouraging new look at pleasure and purification. For starters, Lent is only 40 days, not a lifetime. At its origin, Lent was the time of fasting and prayer before baptism in the Early Church. The point was not to prove worldly pleasures are bad but simply that we can live without them because what we need most in this world is God's love.

Any time we live as though we can't do without something (for me, the Google app on my phone), we are in need of a Lenten reminder, a reminder that in order to choose life, to live in the land God has given us, we don't need our favorite foods or guilty pleasures. All we need is to remain faithful to God.

Lent is about choosing life in God by walking in God's ways and observing God's commandment to love one another by shedding the things that rule our lives because we think we can't do without them.

Rev. Hannah Hooker  
Jonesboro, AR

**MARCH 25, 2017**

### **There is No Law Against Such Things**

I'm a straight, white guy raised in Mississippi. I've brought a lot of baggage into this world. I guess we all have.

In the summer of 1997, I was in a 12-week formation program for seminarians when I met Michael. He was the smartest, most theologically grounded, mature and pastorally gifted person in our program. A natural leader. He was Roman Catholic, and I could tell he would become a wonderful priest.

About a month into our term, I learned Michael was gay. He was the first gay person I knew as a friend. He gave me a great gift. He let a good ole boy from Mississippi ask him every dumb question I had.

He helped me change everything I had been taught.

St. Paul writes that the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and temperance." Then Paul adds an important declaration: "There is no law against such things" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Later that summer Michael asked to take time off so he could travel to the 50th anniversary celebration of a gay couple who were friends of his. At the time I had been married two years, but deep in my heart was the hope that I would one day celebrate my 50th anniversary with my wife. If I am lucky and faithful enough to do so, in June 2025, part of my toast will be to Michael and to that gay couple who persevered from 1927 to 1977 in "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and temperance."

They did so without the support of legal marriage and social privilege I've enjoyed.

Not long after summer ended, Michael's dreams of priesthood ended as well. Though he was committed to his vow of celibacy and faithful to that commitment, his denomination removed him from the ordination process in a fearful purge. What grace, goodness and leadership his church lost in that mean act.

I'd like to think that wouldn't happen today, but it does.

God knows there is no justifiable law against love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and temperance. But churches and governments have a way to go to make our laws consistent with God's.

Rev. Lowell Grisham  
Rector, St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Fayetteville, AR

MARCH 26, 2017

## Remember to Love

The culture we live in defines everybody.  
And they define everybody for us.

They tell us what thoughts to think about people. They provoke the emotions we should feel about them.  
In many cases, society even dictates how we relate to them, live in relationship to them.

This includes us.

Elements of our being have been categorized as positive or negative by popular culture. Whether or not we want to be, we are exposed to society's opinion of us. Some days there is ease in combating the tendency to believe those opinions because we know better. Then, there are those days where we question our worth and wonder, are they right?  
What do you think? What is your opinion of yourself?  
Deeper than that, what is God's opinion of you?

The psalmist reminds us:

*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth (Psalms 139:13-14).*

These days, we are called to look ourselves in the mirror and make sure the loudest voice we hear is our own...reflecting God's love for us. We cannot forget that God values us. Therefore, we cannot misappropriate the value we have of ourselves either.

We must not equate our love of self with the way others devalue or look down upon us. Instead, it we must see God in ourselves and in one another and honor that in our interactions.

It is up to us to stand in solidarity with each other in a way that creates a new culture, a culture that has the potential to transform lives. We do that by radically loving one another no matter who we are, where we come from or what our situation is.

Let our love reflect God's love so that the virtue of our being promotes togetherness and healing.

God loves us all.

Let us love one another.

To the immigrant who has been told "you don't belong here," you are God's creation, made with a purpose.

You will always belong. (Jeremiah 29:11)

To the LGBTQ community whose love and life have been invalidated.  
You are a child of God, and God is love. (1 John 4:8)

To the indigenous peoples who have experienced disrespect, devastation and/or loss, God is your refuge.  
(Psalm 147:3)

To the poor often overlooked, God sees you, and God cares. (Matthew 10:30-31)

To the differently abled, people underestimate you. Don't believe them. Focus on whatever you want and do it. Knowing God is with you; you will succeed! (Philippians 4:13)

To women who have not been honored fully, God loves you and delights in everything you do and all that you are! (Isaiah 43:4a)

To the veteran who has fully known war but struggles to live in peace, God will be your strength! (2 Corinthians 12:9)

To native Africans, now known as African-Americans whose people continuously experience oppression, suppression and depression in many forms, redemption is yet at hand! (Isaiah 41:10)

No matter what we've been through in our lives, let us never forget that we are loved, valued and cared for. After all, we are STILL God's very own!

Rev. Carissa Rodgers  
Pastor, Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church  
Little Rock, AR

**MARCH 27, 2017**

## **Climate Change**

They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul... And Saul approved of their killing him. (Acts 7:58-8:1; excerpts)

Stephen was stoned to death because he dared to follow a rabbi who had been condemned and crucified by dogmatic religious authorities and paranoid Roman officials.

Saul never threw a stone at Stephen, but he gave consent to Stephen's murder by holding the coats of Stephen's assailants and by offering no conscientious objection.

In his eulogy at the funeral of three of the four little girls massacred in the infamous Birmingham Bombing, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that the slain little girls had something to say to America not merely about their murderer, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy that produced the murders.

Reflecting on the Slain Nine at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, many are now painfully conscious of the ways in which a culture represented by the Confederate flag helped incubate the assassin who struck at Mother Emanuel.

It's time we confront the climate that produces hate that manifests itself in the attack on Black and Brown bodies, the massacre at Pulse in Orlando, Florida; vandalizing a Jewish cemetery, banning Muslims from the country.

Notwithstanding the seismic advances in LGBT Equality, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people still live in climates where they are regarded as abominations and second class citizens.

We know the rhetoric: "Love the sinner; hate the sin," as if it's actually possible to disembodify a person and separate one from his/her sexuality.

We know the rhetoric: "The gay issue is not my issue," as if no person in your family, in your community and in your religious body live their lives in fear daily.

We should know, also the horrific actions our rhetoric helps to foster—suicide, substance abuse, homelessness, humiliation, dehumanization.

And we should know the rhetoric: If we struggle together, fight injustice at every turn and stand in solidarity as members of the Human Family, this world will be transformed.

**God, even if we pull no triggers and throw no stones, show us the blood that is still on our hands. Help us to be the change that we want to see. Amen.**

Dr. Kenneth L. Samuel  
Senior Pastor and Organizer, Victory for the World Church  
Stone Mountain, GA

MARCH 28, 2017

**1 Corinthians 13:4-8a**

He came painfully to meet me, each step requiring effort. He was gaunt, shaky, looking exhausted. I would never have recognized him on the street—my best childhood friend whom I had come home to see. He was in the latter stages of AIDS, in the early nineties, before treatments became more effective.

We went through school together, were in the same Cub Scout den, had spent years talking and laughing as friends. Neither I nor his family knew he was gay until he came home to die.

In the face of his deep suffering and pain and my deep grief, we had a great day together. We laughed a lot, told stories and talked openly for the first time about our lives and loves. We ate fried chicken. We planned his funeral. We celebrated the Eucharist with the priest from his home church. It was a day spent in the light of God's love and of our love for each other. My friend was so uplifted by the love he received from his family and friends in his hometown he decided to return to New York and pursue further treatment.

Six months later, he died.

He lived and died in peace, convinced of God's saving and loving presence.

This passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is famous, partly for its frequent use at weddings. It can work in that setting, but Paul is concerned with a love more profound than the romantic love that can bring two people together. God's boundless and persistent love shapes and supports each of us, along with all of God's Creation. It is, therefore, our calling to reflect that love out into the world, to walk in love as God loves us.

When we act in love for each other, powerful things happen— healing, understanding, increased faith and hope, a changed world.

This is the great calling of God's people and of God's Church.

The terrible tragedy is that too often Christian people and churches fail to live out that calling.

Paul insists that when we fail in that way all our claims of spiritual power – tongues, prophecies, martyrdom, preaching, theology, ethics – are all hollow and useless, just a metallic clanging disturbing the peace of the world.

***God of Amazing Grace, guide us, individually and as communities of faith, to walk in love towards all, towards all, towards all.***

Now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest is love.

Rev. Chuck Culpepper  
St. Alexis Episcopal  
Jackson, MS

**MARCH 29, 2017**

Queerness is not the rainbow.

Queerness is the illusive colorless piece of crystal that shows ordinary sunlight for what it truly is.

There is no real origin, purpose or definition for queerness. But you can tell it's nearby by the fabulously vibrating color on the sidewalk or the walls.

We pray during this Lenten Season that we always be in the presence of that queerness, that revelation and destruction of falsehood, that beloved one of truth.

Amen

V. Rev. Kiprian Wanamaker  
Greek Orthodox Priest/Sufi Dervish



MARCH 30, 2017

***We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, MSG***

I've been run out of more churches than I can count on one hand.

It was so bad I started believing something was wrong with me for being queer and being transgender.

When it seemed that all hope was lost, I dug my heels in. I dug deeper into the Word and spent more time in prayer. What I realized fairly quickly was that I wasn't the one that was wrong.

I was broken, but not because of my sexuality or gender identity; I was broken because of all the misguided ideas I had about God.

I was broken because of my treatment by the church.

I was broken by the idea that my body would never be the body God intended for me because I was so intent on changing it.

I was broken by all the hatred being spewed by my family, friends, even complete strangers.

I was broken but not beyond repair.

I was broken but not discarded.

I was broken but not forgotten.

God thrives in us when we are broken. God takes our pieces that are scattered along the ground and makes something absolutely stunning from the wreckage.

It was in my lowest moments that I started to heal. It was healed while lying on my bed, crying my eyes out, screaming into my pillow, begging God to change me. I begged God to fix me and make me better.

I thought something was wrong with me.

I thought something was wrong with me because that's what I was told by a countless number of people.

Then God answered me.

God didn't fix all my problems overnight. God didn't make me straight or cisgender. God took who I was in my innermost being and made me whole.

God took my brokenness and used it to change my heart.

Through my friends, I made myself a new family. I have a group of people who love and accept me unconditionally for who I am.

Through them I see the love of Christ I had heard so much about growing up. I am loved for my queerness, not in spite of it. This community continues to help me heal.

Presently, I spend my time teaching middle school kids. The same love that was shown to me by my LGBTQ+ community is being shared with the children I encounter every day in my classroom.

I'm no longer calloused and hardened by the hate.

Every day, I pour love into these other beings that who are desperate for love and acceptance in a world where they, too, are often judged because of their bodies.

My body is under fire for being trans; their bodies are under fire for being black.

We learn much more from each other than how to solve equations; we learn to love ourselves and to love each other in spite of what others in the world says about us.

The same love Christ gives to me; I share with them.  
The same love that Christ gives to them; they share with me.

We don't have to be the same to love each other.  
We don't have to be the same to care for each other.

God's lesson to my broken and damaged soul was a message of love. By loving myself and realizing God's love for me, I'm able to share that same love with those I encounter every single day.

During this time of Lent, I urge you to find someone unexpected to love. I'm not saying to find a new romantic partner; I'm saying look for the unexpected and share your goodness with those around you.

If you are broken, I pray you find a community of love to help you heal.  
I pray they strengthen you and your faith.

It's only through love that we are made whole.

***So I bow in prayer before God. Every family in heaven and on earth gets its true name from God. I ask the God with God's great glory to give you the power to be strong in your spirits. God will give you that strength through God's Spirit. I pray that Christ will live in your hearts because of your faith. I pray that your life will be strong in love and be built on love. And I pray that you and all God's holy people will have the power to understand the greatness of Christ's love—how wide, how long, how high, and how deep that love is. 1Christ's love is greater than anyone can ever know, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with everything God has for you. With God's power working in us, God can do much, much more than anything we can ask or think of. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever. Amen.*** Ephesians 3:14-21, ERV

Jordan McBride  
Jonesboro, AR

**MARCH 31, 2017**

John 9:1-5

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

This is one of my favorite Gospel stories.

Every time I hear people wonder why something bad has happened to someone, I think of this text. Sometimes, it's impossible to know the answer. Bad things do happen to good people. We could philosophize for hours about why, but it wouldn't change anything. Sometimes, we really want to find someone to blame, but that wouldn't change anything either. "It is what it is," as a friend of mine likes to say.

Getting caught up in those questions is a waste of time and energy, time and energy we could be using to display the works of God. And how do we do that? By following the teachings and examples of Jesus.

"As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me." Those are words to live by.

When we reach out to those in need with compassion, when we offer ourselves in service, when we love one another as Christ loved us; then, we are doing the work we were sent to do and showing forth the light of Christ.

It is what it is. Now, let's get to work.

Rev. Dr. Susan Hrostowski  
Priest, St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church  
Collins, MS

APRIL 1, 2017

## The Heart of Lent

Jonah 4:1-11

God and I are having a few issues at the moment.

It's OK. I figure if God is God, then the Almighty can handle it.

The crux of my angst these days has to do with how the God of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New Testament mix together to make any cohesive sense. How does one reconcile Old Testament God who equals bash and smite, destroy and abomination with Jesus, the thorn in the side of the religious establishment?

I struggle.

Wanna know my favorite Bible story in the Old Testament? It's Jonah...particularly when Jonah is just waiting and watching for God to smite those wicked Ninevites. Turn them into dust and ashes, God! You show 'em!

Patiently, bleached out Jonah sits, looking down from his holy perch, waiting day after day in the frizzling heat to watch the destruction of people he despises.

While Jonah waits, God causes a plant to grow to give Jonah respite and shade. The same God sends a little worm a-nibbling, and the plant withers away. When the shade is removed, Jonah is furious! He begs God, "Just kill me now!"

Yet, God shows mercy. He shows mercy to the Ninevites who don't know their right hand from their left...and God shows mercy to Jonah, the one who wants them killed. Mercy, apparently, wins in the end.

At the heart of Lent is reflection. "Who is God and what is my place in this world?"

For those of us in the LGBTQ community who have been wounded by various versions of religion--Christian or otherwise--it is hard to have faith. It is hard to believe there is a God who cares for the individual, especially those of us who so often are the target of judgment, harassment and discrimination.

So, we wrestle with God in our struggle for peace and acceptance and a place at God's table.

May we learn, in time, our right hand from our left. And until then, continue to show mercy.

Erica Robinson  
Madison, MS

*Erica Robinson lives with her wife, three youngest children, three noisy dogs and a very rotund cat in Madison, MS. They are communicants at St. Columb's Episcopal Church in Ridgeland, MS where #allarewelcome!*

**APRIL 2, 2017**

A week from now we will begin the slow, reverent march of time through Holy Week. It is the most holy of weeks in the life of the Church. I am always struck by the profound range of emotions that Holy Week embraces. We see the tenderness of relationships on Maundy Thursday. Just before Jesus' arrest, he washes the feet of the disciples in John and celebrates the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)-both of these signs of the relationship between Jesus and his friends that will live on beyond the grave through the disciples' life with one another, both of these signs of service. On Good Friday, we gaze at Jesus hanging upon the cross, gathering up in himself all of the world's sin, pain, and suffering. On Holy Saturday, we find the silence of a world that - even when death seems to have the final say -- lies in wait for its salvation. At the Easter Vigil, an ancient liturgical celebration, we celebrate Jesus' passing from death to life, and the darkness of night is illumined by the Paschal (or Easter) candle. And then on Sunday morning, as the light of a new day pours into our life, we hear the glorious announcement of the resurrection and find in Christ the gift of new life.

In our busy lives, church services are often hard to make. There is so much that calls to us - much of which is necessary, important, and worthy. But this walk to the cross and beyond isn't just about something that happened two thousand years ago. Holy Week is so powerful because it is a framework in which we can make place (and make sense of) the wide range of experiences and emotions in our own lives-the relationships with those we love and those with whom we live in community; the pain, fear, suffering, grief, loss, and disappointments we experience; the waiting when hope seems all but completely lost; and finally the celebrations of new life that arise in the midst of all the messiness and pain of our lives, the million second chances that seem to come our way. It's as if on this week Christ gathers up the entirety of our lives, holds and lovingly absorbs them, and then hands them back to us redeemed and made new. **The story of Holy Week is not just the story of Jesus' life; it is the story of our lives as well.**

But all this activity is not meant to be ours alone.

As we celebrate the resurrection, may the newness of life we have experienced spill over and out into the world around us.

May we remain mindful of those outside our doors who long to hear the Good News of the Gospel - that in the midst of darkness and death, the light of new life shines.

May we see and speak and bring into being alleluias all around us.

And may God's grace make this, and so much more, possible in our world today.

Rev. Teri Daily  
Priests, St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
Conway, AR

**APRIL 3, 2017**

## **Different Yet Alike**

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks uses the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis to talk about what it means to celebrate diversity.

The sin in Genesis 11 is trying to make everyone alike as a way of making ourselves powerful. God's answer was to confuse language and scatter people over all the earth. Generally, we see Acts 2 (the story of Pentecost) as a healing of that division.

But what if the root sin of Genesis 11 still persists?

Look all around, at nature and at humans. We have been created different.

God delights in diversity.

I must confess. Sometimes differences make me uncomfortable; I want everyone to be more like me. It's because of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, etc.

Much of our current division and hate stems from fear of the other.

There are two ideas I must always seek to hold in tension: being alike and being different.

I am called to see, in the face of another, the image and likeness of God, for we are all children of God. I am also called to recognize in the other the great uniqueness that only this person embodies.

In doing this, it is possible I may begin to celebrate the great diversity of who we are created to be. To do anything else is to take upon myself the power to decide who belongs and who does not.

My great moments of growth have come in those times when I was forced to really see someone who was different from me and to recognize in them the image of God.

My challenge to you is to find a place where you can simply observe people. Notice how different all of us are and take delight in the difference.

The other challenge is to think of who you are still having trouble including as a fellow child of God and try to see the beauty that God created in them.

The diversity of creation is not something we are called to fix, but to celebrate.

I deeply believe this is the beginning of the healing love of God and neighbor.

Rev. Richard Robbins  
Retired United Methodist Pastor  
Madison, MS

APRIL 4, 2017

**Amos 5:24**

<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I woke up this morning to the sound of hail pounding against my window. The slow, gentle rain that had run most of the evening had escalated to a fearsome force.

Nature is like that; a drop or two is inconsequential. As more drops join together, they become more significant and more powerful.

The prophet Amos recognized this: Justice is so powerful it “rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

It is Lent; it's going to be a long forty days in the desert. I'm already thinking about water. In the Gospel of John 7:38, Jesus talks about “living water” to the Samaritan woman: *If anyone believes in me, rivers of living water will flow out from their heart. That is what the Scriptures say.*

The rivers of that living water flow out of God and consequently, out of those who believe in God. Water that sustains becomes rivers--thousands of millions of individual drops flowing in a narrow area, creating change, altering the landscape, cleansing everything in their paths.

What comprises these “living waters?”

Jesus mirrors Amos' message on justice. Jesus calls all who “labor under a heavy burden” believers. Regardless of race, gender, economic status, sexual orientation, ability, family structure and yes, gender identity, Jesus calls us believers to become this ever-flowing stream.

We LGBTQ folk are offered a higher calling; we are to be part of this flood that includes believers who mistreat and even hate us. Jesus wants us to rise above the easy reaction--to hate back--and become agents of change, part of the flow of Justice.

Think about that.

We are called to be the force of change INSIDE the force of change.  
It is a lofty calling of Lenten proportions--Deny your natural reaction.  
Love everyone.

Harold Hughes  
Certified Lay Servant  
Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church  
Little Rock, AR

**APRIL 5, 2017**

Psalms 139:13-14

If you're used to Lent like I'm used to Lent, every year we are asked to deny ourselves something for the 40 day period. Often, we choose to give up things like sodas or junk food, or we impose a restriction on television consumption or something similar.

In the LGBTQ+ community, we are innately well versed in denying ourselves.

If your story is anything like mine, you'll understand.

I didn't come out until I was almost 30. I spent at least 15 of those years denying an integral part of who I am to myself and to the world around me for fear of being 'less-than' to the people who matter most to me. So when Lent rolls around, I like to try to find things I can do that I'm not already doing to contribute to the building up of the Kingdom both around and inside of me.

I try to choose things that make me a better vessel.

I am a business owner in the city in which I live. Being a photographer, I have a studio. My studio has become a hub for the local LGBTQ+ community. We host game nights and open our doors several times a month as a meeting place for LGBTQ+ support groups. Because of this, I get to meet so many people, each one of whom is uniquely different than the next. It's really kind of beautiful.

One of my most favorite passages from scripture is Psalm 139. I've always been fond of this psalm because it helps me connect to myself as a valued creation of the Creator. Let me explain.

I'm an artist. I create things. I make images. I make art. Everything I make is a part of me...is an essay of who I was that day...or how I was feeling...or a portrayal of the thoughts I was having. I spend time making decisions about my art...angels, textures, colors, sizes, shapes...everything.

Every piece I create is important to me because it came from me. And, if my art, which isn't even living or breathing or human, can be so important to me, how much more important can each of us be to God? After all, Psalm 139 says God wove us together in our mother's womb.

God's fingerprints are all over each of us. We were made in God's image. We come from God---each of us well thought out and delicately designed.

For a window of time, our faces are known only to God; we are God's art.

I try to see God in the people around me. I try to remember that God's fingerprints are all over them just as God's fingerprints are all over me. I try to stay connected to the idea that the people walking this earth with me are pieces of art---masterpieces---the intentional handiwork of the Great Designer.

I don't always do a good job of this. Sometimes I fail to see God in the eyes of those around me. Usually when this happens, it means I've stopped connecting to the fact that I, too, am one of God's masterpieces.

When I forget my worth, I forget the worth of others as well. Imagine if we didn't fail at seeing God in others. Imagine if we didn't fail at seeing God in ourselves. What if every time we looked at another person what we saw was the intricate, deliberate work of the greatest artist and designer there has ever been?

My LGBTQ+ Family, I see you.



I see the fingerprints of the Great I AM all over you.

You are worthy and beautiful.

You are perfectly and purposefully designed.

This Lenten Season, I commit to being in intentional prayer for our community of people especially. Daily, I will take time to lift each person represented by each of our letters to God in hopes that as a community we can learn to see God in each other and ourselves.

May Grace and Peace be yours...always.

Melissa Donner  
Jonesboro, AR

**APRIL 6, 2017**

But really, what does the Lord require of us?  
Micah 6:1-8

What does the Lord require of me?

What does the Lord require of you?

What does the Lord require of us?

Those are pretty powerful questions to ask ourselves in this time and place.

In the last few years it seems, as a nation, as a people and as a church, we've been driven further apart. It's as though we've forgotten, especially us Christians, that the life of a faithful follower of Jesus comes with demands we are called to live out; expectations God intends for us to meet.

God makes it very clear what is expected of us--to do justice! Act justly! See the world through God's eyes, with eyes longing for justice and souls rich in mercy. Never stop working for a world that apportions justice equally to all humanity.

God is not asking us to only love justice. You can love it all you want, that's great. But what God is longing for more than anything else is that we do justice--that we become engaged in activities that stand up against racism and inequality, oppression and marginalization. Sola Scriptura (scripture alone) is not going to solve the world's biggest problems, especially when we don't even abide by its words. Neither will prayer alone. Ascribing to the belief that scripture or prayer alone will correct all that is broken in our world is to live blindly and ignore what God demands of us.

Truth be told, we've abandoned our faith. We've traded it for a whitewashed, white supremacist, male-dominated, power-hungry, privileged, class-dominated gospel that is as delusional as those who buy into it.

We've created a diluted version of Christianity, one that aligns itself with those who claim to hold a higher moral authority while ignoring the plight of those who can barely make ends meet. We've watered down scripture to completely disregard the alien, the poor, our elders.

We have and continue to fail the Gospel.

Every Lenten season we are invited to journey into the wilderness with Jesus. More often than not, we think to do this have to give up stuff, stuff that impedes our ability to enter into deeper communion with God. The problem with giving up stuff for Lent is that seldom do we stick with such discipline. We're dedicated and committed to those 46 days. But God is calling us to a commitment that goes beyond just a mere 46 days. God is calling us to a lifelong journey of committed discipleship, and through the prophet Micah, God has spelled it out for us.

God is yearning for justice. "Learn to do good. Seek justice; help the oppressed, defend the orphan; plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17). God is calling for our work of justice to tear down walls of systemic implicit and explicit racism, that we work towards a world free of all phobias - transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia--all the phobias that only seek to drive deeper wedges into our common humanity and extend mercy to all God's children.

We extend mercy when we reject temptations to take advantage of orphans, widows, the poor and the foreigner...when we don't plot evil schemes against one another.

Mercy is extended when we treat each other justly; when we love our neighbors; when we're compassionate with one another; when we look beyond race, gender identity and sexual orientation;

when we acknowledge that yes, all lives matter, but some lives--Black and Latino lives-- require special attention because for far too long this country has built a capitalistic empire on their backs.

God is calling the church to stop confusing justice and mercy with political affiliation. God is neither Democrat nor Republican. God is neither capitalist nor socialist nor communist. God is sovereign, Creator and Lord of all.

We face some trying and challenging times ahead, but God has already made it clear what is expected of you, what is expected of me, what is expected of us:

Do justice. Do what is right and fair for others.

Love mercy. Be compassionate and faithful in your love.

And always, always, always ... Walk humbly with God!

Daniel Morales  
UKirk Campus Pastor, University of Miami  
Miami, FL

APRIL 7, 2017

Micah 6:8

O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what is required of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

My soul is craving Justice.

Mercy.

Love.

As I look at fractured pieces of humanity—broken black lives, human trafficking, grinding poverty and starvation—I long for healing. I long for wholeness.

The traditional African worldview, I learned, is that everyone would have *wholeness of life*. This means harmony, order, good neighborliness, love, cooperation, sharing, fairness, honesty, transparency. All of humanity functions more workably and peacefully when we *all* have wholeness of life.

*Sin* as an individual “action” is a Western concept. In African Traditional Religions, *sin* means a *distortion of humanity*; it means structural systems are broken down, robbing people of harmony, order, peace, distorting wholeness of life.

How can there be peace without equitability and sharing?

Salvation, then, comes when wholeness is restored—when justice is served!

This is the biblical understanding of *wholeness*, *sin* and *salvation* as well.

They are not individual but communal.

They require community to work together.

I’m left to wonder on the one hand, how do we—with our individual actions—bring about communal change? On the other hand, what is community but a collection of individuals?

I have no action plan to this healing. All I know is to seek the Spirit and listen to that still, small voice, guiding my next move, my next heartbeat.

...but if I wanted an action plan, I’d look to this passage below in Isaiah, especially in The Message translation. It is an echo of Micah 6:8. It may be as good a plan as we have.

Isaiah 1:13-17 says:

Quit your worship charades.

I can’t stand your trivial religious games:

Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—

meetings, meetings, meetings—I can’t stand one more!

Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them!

You’ve worn me out!

I’m sick of your religion, religion, religion,

while you go right on sinning.

When you put on your next prayer-performance,

I’ll be looking the other way.

No matter how long or loud or often you pray,

I’ll not be listening.

And do you know why? Because you’ve been tearing

people to pieces, and your hands are bloody.

Go home and wash up.

Clean up your act.

Sweep your lives clean of your evildeings

so I don’t have to look at them any longer.

Say no to wrong.  
Learn to do good.  
Work for justice.  
Help the down-and-out.  
Stand up for the homeless.  
Go to bat for the defenseless.

***God of Justice, Mercy and Love, help us turn our religion away from the confines of the church doctrine toward the heart of the community to pursue wholeness of life for all of Your children. Amen.***

Susan Cottrell  
Author, *True Colors: Celebrating the Truth and Beauty of the Real You*  
Austin, TX

**APRIL 8, 2017**

Joel 2:28-29, NRSV

Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

It's easy to feel disconnected from the generations past and those to come. We assume our elders are conservative in the literal sense of the word, deeply invested in conserving the totems of comfort from their younger years. Elders assume young people are infatuated with change for the sake of change, unappreciative of the history that led to the current moment. Of course, there are always exceptions, but often each generation often feels somewhat misunderstood by the other and suspicious of their motives. And yet, overcoming this perceived generational gap is so essential to living into the community God intends us to be.

When I worked with the North Carolina Justice Center as a graduate student in my early twenties, I was often pleasantly surprised to find retirees older than my grandmother at rallies and interest meetings supporting causes like equality for LGBTQ folks, racial reconciliation and women's rights. They seemed so out of place in my mental picture of who cares about these sorts of things. Soon I realized they were just as pleasantly surprised to see me.

I walked across the parking lot with a woman in her nineties one day. As I helped guide the tennis balls on her walker legs over cracks in the pavement, she thanked me for taking time to come to the meeting we'd just finished. "It's encouraging to see young people taking up the cause," she said. "We've been at it for so long, and we're tired. I'm glad to see the work will continue."

She needed my energy; I needed her witness. I wouldn't have known where to begin, but because she dreamed the dreams for all those years, I could see the vision.

Friends, when we embody God's loving kindness to all, we are the dreams of our elders. Maya Angelou knew this long before I did, writing from her own context: "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise."

Who dreamed you? Who gave you a vision and a hope with the bright, clear light of the Holy Spirit?

If they are still living, I invite you to thank them.

If they have gone on to glory, I invite you to honor their memory by continuing their good work by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Elizabeth Henry  
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APRIL 9, 2017

Failure

I started this Lenten season with a new discipline.

As with many people, Christian or not, I have looked at Lent as the time for self-improvement—a more rigorous form of the New Year's Resolution.

Like various diets, Lent has been the time to give up something that wasn't good for me --drinking, sugar, conspicuous spending.

But this year I wanted my Lenten practice to align with my values and not my vanity.

I decided to give up meanness through practicing unexpected acts of generosity.

The practice was to pick a person each day and do something a little out of the ordinary for them. Imagine if someone sent flowers just because they were thinking of you. It's a total pick-me-up. I wanted to gift people with that feeling.

Like so many Lenten seasons before, as the days progressed, my commitment to the practice waned. And, like former seasons, as I started to slip I heaped on the self-critique:

*"Where is your discipline?"*

*"What kind of spiritual person are you that can't manage an act of generosity once a day?"*

Now I'm beginning to think that not succeeding is part of the point.

After all, Lent is the season during which we prepare ourselves for the inexplicable, unimaginable wonder of the Resurrection. Sometimes preparation involves failing at what we thought we were doing in order to see more clearly what success hides.

When my acts of generosity became more compulsory and less generous, I lost interest.

The ritual faltered.

My failure enabled me to see what I was really about.

It wasn't pretty.

I came to recognize that my desire to want to be seen as a good person was much stronger than my desire to actually be a good person.

I had some smugness around my practice that seemed so much purer than all those people giving up sugar or wine or dairy. Yet, in my failure, I got honest.

Failure showed me the difference between generosity and the appearance of it.

I have returned to my Lenten practice in a faulty, less regimented way. I have a clearer intent to reconnect with God by deepening my connection with the people in my life.

*What does all this have to do with LGBTQ reflections on Lent?*

I had the privilege of working at the Human Rights Campaign at a time when our community was moving in a positive direction. We had setbacks, but the general feeling was that the larger culture was waking up to LGBTQ equality.

Those less enlightened would end up in history's dustbin.

We were succeeding; or, at least, some of us felt as if we were.

Few of us feel as if we are succeeding now.

With 45, we see so much progress stalled or rescinded many of us wonder what was real in the work we had done previously.

Reflecting on the failure of our present moment can open our eyes to what we couldn't see before.

LGBTQ liberation can never succeed if it isn't also...always...about the liberation of all people who have experienced persecution.

Whether it's a mother of young children forcibly deported from her home by ICE forces; a Muslim woman whose hijab is violently snatched off on the subway; a church goer brutally murdered in Bible study by a young man schooled in white supremacy; we are part of these stories even when they are not overtly marked by sexual orientation or gender identity.

These stories aren't new.

They have been with us even when we were "winning" on the LGBTQ front.

For many of us less directly affected, it is only when we come face-to-face with the current disaster of this moment that we can begin to see fully what has been happening to so many in our communities.

Preparing for God is about connecting with the suffering around us, yes. It's also about being attuned to our own unwillingness to see that suffering.

This Lenten season, may we recommit to the practice of making room in our hearts for God in our flawed and compromised bodies and in flawed and compromised world.

The resurrection will come when least expected and will linger longest in the places where suffering is the most intense.

We will be prepared for it when we prepare our hearts to witness the suffering of all God's children.

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**APRIL 10, 2017**

WHOSOEVER?

I am the Christian mother of gay sons who happen to be believers in Christ as well.

I was raised in a particular denomination that at best struggles, and at worst refuses to believe that an LGBTQ person can be a believer.

I believe in my heart differently.

Not only can I look into the eyes of my sons and hear them confess their belief, I have been blessed to travel and speak and look into the faces of many beautiful LGBTQ individuals who know Christ as their Savior.

Lent is a traditional observation of many Christians in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its' purpose is to prepare the believer in Christ to come to the Holy Celebration of the Cross, the grave and ultimately the victory of resurrection Sunday!

The Cross of Jesus leveled the playing field for all mankind!

No longer do we have to be of Jewish descent or meet the criteria of Old Testament law to be part of the family of God. The sacrifice of Jesus for the sin of all mankind has been accomplished. Now, WHOSOEVER calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved!

WHOSOEVER means just that. LGBTQ or straight, the requirement is the same.

In Christ there are no second class family members!

As we move through this blessed Lenten season, how do we prepare for this family celebration?

The royal commandment that sums up all scripture is to love the LORD your God with all you heart, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

One of the most powerful moments is when a person who was anti-LGBTQ comes alongside one of those 'neighbors' who happens to be LGBTQ and because of the life and love of that individual has a change of heart.

WOW!

We are living in changing times. Hearts and minds are being challenged to revisit calloused prejudices. Many eyes are on the LGBTQ community and its' allies. There are still too many out there who hate, but it will not be said of us!

As we prepare ourselves to come to the celebration of Christ's resurrection, the world will know us by our LOVE!

WHOSOEVER means YOU...precious, believing LGBTQ child of God!

Mary Jane Kennedy  
Brandon, Mississippi

**APRIL 11, 2017**

## **Never Too Late**

In the story of the crucifixion, Jesus was crucified between two thieves, Dismas and Gestas.

Traditionally, Dismas has been referred to as the unrepentant thief; Gestas, the repentant one. Gestas, the unrepentant thief mocks Christ and says "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). Dismas, the repentant thief, simply asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus enters his kingdom. Christ replies, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). For some reason this year this stuck out to me more than any other year.

Dismas and Gestas were facing the end of their lives. Gestas mocked Christ; Dismas looked to Christ for salvation. The one trait the two men share is they are both thieves. They were both guilty. One repented; one did not.

It's never too late to change.

No matter how late in life, we have choices...always.

According to Johnny Cash, "All your life, you will be faced with a choice. You can choose love or hate. I choose love."

In terms of background, as a heterosexual, white, Christian, man in Arkansas, I align closely with most people of this state. However, as an ally to the LGBTQ community, I understand a majority of Arkansans don't embrace equality like I do.

It was later in my life when I embraced equality due to my upbringing, the church I attended, and the people around me. Many of us in the south share common backgrounds. Still, all of us have the ability and potential to make the choice to change. Every day we have the ability to choose love over hate. I pray daily that more people will make that choice.

This Lenten season, I hope more people in our state will open their hearts and minds and choose love over hate. We can help. It won't be easy, but by showing love, having open dialogue with, and showing a better way, we can help them make that choice to change.

It is never too late to try, and it's definitely never too late to change.

Chad Jones  
Arkansas Progressive Christians