

North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church
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By Belton Joyner, Jr.

bible+study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

common truth (Isaiah 59:14)?

It does not take much imagination to find my name in a couple of places in that list. How about you? That’s the bad news.

What is the good news? God promises to send a redeemer (Isaiah 59:20). In Hebrew culture, the redeemer was usually the next of kin who did what was necessary to pay off the debts of the deceased. Can we hear an echo of our brother Jesus? (“...Thou our Father, Christ our brother...”—stanza three, hymn 89, *United Methodist Hymnal*) Jesus, the redeemer, pays off the debt when we die to sin.

God revealed to Isaiah God’s plan to redeem God’s people. It is more than just a promise; it is a covenant (Isaiah 59:21). A covenant always involves two parties, even if one of the parties is more powerful than the other. God’s gift of a redeemer (Isaiah 59:20) is a covenantal gift (Isaiah 59:21). We become God’s covenant partners. And the debt can be paid.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Ed McMinn has written [*Daily Devotions for Die-hard Fans: Duke Blue Devils*, Extra Point

Publishers---(Yes, there is such a book!)): “In our capitalistic society, we know all about redemption. Just think rebate or coupons. To receive the rebates or the discount though, we must redeem them; we must cash them in. ‘Redemption’ is a business term; it reconciles a debt, restoring one party to favor by making amends...We need a redeemer, someone to pay the debt that then gives us the forgiveness of sin we cannot give ourselves. We have such a redeemer. He is Jesus Christ, who paid our debt not with money, but with his own blood.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of forgiving grace...”

August 9, 2015
Text: Jeremiah 7:1-15,
“A Choice to Be Just”

Last Spring, I went to Florida to visit my friends Ken and Pat Birt. One of my favorite things about the trip was some time we spent at Myakka State Park. We drove around the park in their convertible, getting out every once in a while to take a

nature trail walk. The Myakka River and its companion lakes are part of the unblemished rugged beauty of the park. Lovely.

But, throughout the park there are signs warning visitors not to get too friendly with the alligators. In fact, one leaflet advises that any alligator that loses its fear of people will have to be destroyed. “Don’t get too close,” one sightseer said. “Those ‘gators are mighty fast.” I didn’t think I needed to be alerted, but when I wanted to get a close-up picture, Ken yelled, “Use the zoom lens!”

Who would need to be warned not to get playful with a twelve foot alligator? Don’t we know better? Maybe not. Who needs to be told that stealing is bad, that adultery is forbidden, and that telling lies is ungodly? Who wouldn’t know those things? But, there it is: Jeremiah 7:9. It seems obvious, but the prophet knows his target audience pretty well. They still need the warning sign. It’s not alligators that disturb Jeremiah; it is the sin of people who ought to know better.

vip report

DEATHS:

ALEXANDER, Kathryn Stutts Bradley, wife of Gayle Alexander died June 18. Service was held June 29 in Burlington.

CROWDER, William R (retired) died May 30. Service was held June 8 in Greensboro.

PARVIN, Velma "Boots" , widow of J.B. Parvin died July 1. Service was held July 3 at First UMC, Washington.

STAFFORD, Sidney "Sid" (retired) died July 3. Service was held July 7 at Louisburg UMC.

WOOD, Peggy Duncan, former NC Conference pastor died June 1. Service was held June 4 in Lexington.

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God is serious about all this. If God’s people fail to heed the warning, “I will cast you out of my sight...” (Jeremiah 7:15). God is serious about all this. If you stop taking advantage of the oppressed, then I’ll be with you; if you treat others justly, then I will be with you (Jeremiah 7:5-6).

Why do we have to be warned not to feed the alligators? Experience and observation reveal that there are those who will risk their lives in order to see what happens when you offer a slice of pizza to a ‘gator. Why does Jeremiah have these verses that caution believers about things that they ought to know are wrong? Experience and observation show that some of us will risk our very being in order to do foolish and evil things. Alligator-feeding and sin can be made to look like fun, but we do well to heed the warning.

“Improve your conduct and your actions, and I will dwell with you in this place” (Jeremiah 7:3). That sounds like a deal.

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Short Stories by Jesus* (Harper One), Amy-Jill Levine comments, “...the poor are just as capable of sinning as the rich...”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “I hear Your warning, O Lord...”

August 16, 2015
Text: Ezekiel 18:1-13, 30-32
“A Call for Repentance”
There are a lot of rabbits to chase in this week’s text, but let’s zero in on just a couple: (1) individual responsibility and (2) the need for repentance.

On the first point: most of us have a working list of things that justify our wrongdoing. It might be “I grew up so poor that I had to get

by any way I could” or it might be “I grew up so rich I developed no personal responsibility.” It might be “My parents were so strict that it is no wonder I rebelled” or it might be “My parents were so lenient that I got away with everything.” It might be my cultural background (“Where I grew up, everybody hated *fill in the blank*”). It might be my bad luck in relationships (“Of course, I ran around on my spouse; he never did love me”). It might be the pressures of advertising (“I bought that 82-inch HD TV because it had such a great picture”).

Whatever excuse is offered, Ezekiel says that it won’t work. “Only the one who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4). God does not fall for the blame-game. Individuals bear the accountability for decisions, words, and actions. On the positive side, God is pleased when an individual chooses to do what is right (Ezekiel 18:5a, 9b).

On the second point: the prophet offers a way for sinners to be restored to God’s favor (Ezekiel 18:32). It is repentance (Ezekiel 18:30). The Old Testament primarily uses two words for “repent.” One of them (*nācham*) means “to be sorry or regret.” The other (*shūwb*) means “to turn back or turn around.” As we can tell from the Common English Bible translation of Ezekiel 18:30, the prophet says that what pleases God is not so much our attitude as it is our action: “Turn, turn away from your sins...” (Ezekiel 18:30, CEB). Repentance is more than feeling bad about our sin; repentance is doing something about it.

The prophet is clear that God does not want people to choose the way of death, of brokenness, of emptiness. But, some-

times, in order to have the fullness of life, we have to change our ways (Ezekiel 18:32). Interestingly, the word translated “live” (“Change your ways, and live”) can also be translated “made whole.” Repentance is part of becoming fully who God would have us be.

What Someone Else Has Said: Sara Miles (*City of God: Faith in the Streets*, Jericho Books) writes: “Repentance requires paying attention to others, and learning to love, even a little bit, what God loves so much: the whole screwed-up world, this holy city, the people God created to be his own.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “It’s me; it’s me; it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer...”

August 23, 2015
Text: Zechariah 7:8-14
“God Demands Justice”
The portion of Zechariah that we study this week was probably written after the people of Judah had returned from exile. They were busily trying to re-establish life in Jerusalem. All the memories of being in captivity in Babylon were no doubt playing in their heads. All of the work-to-be-done must have greeted them each morning. What about the kin folks who had stayed in Judah when others had been hauled off? (“I need to find Aunt Rachel and see if she is okay.”) What about finding supplies for re-building my family house that got torn down while we were in Babylon? (“Where can I find the tools I need because Home Depot was destroyed by the enemy?”) You get the picture. If ever there was a time for priorities to be adjusted to a particular time and circumstance, this would be it. If ever God’s people were to be cut

a little slack, this would be the time.

But not so fast! The prophet Zechariah calls the roll of those one might overlook in such a time of national emergency: the woman left without a breadwinner, the child left without parental care, the neighbor who is “different,” and the person who is flat broke (Zechariah 7:10). Getting Jerusalem restored was important work, but so was caring for “each other.” The temptation is to define “each other” as “me and my kind.” Zechariah brings God’s larger challenge: “each other” includes “the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor” (Zechariah 7:10).

I saw a photograph taken during the 2012 presidential debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The two men were pointing at each other as if in accusation. Someone added the words that we might hope each was saying about the other: “created in the image of God.” That’s the reminder from Zechariah. When we look at those who seem so different from us, we do well to remember “each other” is “created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27).

That makes a difference in how we treat one another. Kindness. Compassion. (Zechariah 7:9). The name “Zechariah” means “Yahweh has remembered.” If God has remembered, has recalled, those whom we might call “lesser,” so must we. No matter how busy we might be doing other good things, we are to “show kindness and compassion to each other.”

What Someone Else Has Said: In *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Kingswood Books), Richard Heitzenrater wrote, “To aid the helpless poor

is one thing, but to make them your friends is quite another. The faith community has the model of Jesus as its guide: Jesus makes the poor his ‘bosom-friends.’”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “Open my eyes to others...”

August 30, 2015
Text: Malachi 3:1-10
“Return to a Just God”
There is a story of a man who was going to be baptized by immersion. The pastor said, “I am going to put you all the way under the water as a sign that all of you and everything you have is being claimed by the Lord.” As the pastor dipped the fellow into the water, the man being “dunked” reached into his pocket and lifted out his wallet. He held it high above his head,

making sure that his pocketbook did not get wet. Hmmm.

The family was out for supper at the local diner. “Yum,” the pork chops were good. “Yum,” the sweet potato fries were good. “Yum,” the carrot cake dessert was good. Dad was pleased with the delicious meal and the careful service. He added twenty percent as a tip and smiled at the waitress. The five-year old looked at her father and asked, “Why did you give her twenty percent and only give God ten percent?” Hmmm.

Two men found themselves stranded on a deserted island. It was unlikely that any ships would pass that way. It was unlikely that any rescue planes could spot them. The situation was dire indeed. One of the men was in a state of panic: “We are doomed! We are doomed!” The other man

was calm and at ease. “How can you be so calm when we are doomed?” the one man screamed. “Oh, they will find us,” the other replied, “and soon.” “How can you be so sure?” “Because I make \$2,000,000 a year and I tithe. My pastor will find me.” Hmmm.

Malachi offers a challenge from God. The tithe (ten per cent) had a long history as part of the Hebrew tradition. It helped the poor, the immigrants, the orphans (Deuteronomy 26:12). It helped the Levites, the priests who maintained community worship life (Numbers 18:21). It helped one stay right with the Lord (Leviticus 27:30). So, in Malachi (around five centuries before Christ), the prophet brings this challenge from God: “Test me...see if I do not open all the windows of heaven for you...” (Malachi 3:10).

What Someone Else Has Said: Caesarius of Arles, a fifth and sixth century bishop wrote (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT XIV*, Inter-varsity Press): “Listen, impious one. You know that everything belongs to God; you will not give the Creator of all things something of his own?”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “It’s Yours, O Lord...”



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Excerpts from a Research study of Church Values

United Methodist Communications conducted this research in several phases. The first phase involved focus groups with pastors, leaders and members in four U.S. cities in different regions of the country. These qualitative findings provided direction for the development of the surveys. The phone survey included pastors randomly selected from United Methodist databases. Leaders were selected randomly among current subscribers of Interpreter magazine, who have been designated as key leaders by pastors in their local church. Findings for general church membership resulted from an online poll among United Methodists conducted through an outside consumer research panel.

Roles Affect Perception of What it Means to be United Methodist

In the U.S., perceptions of United Methodist values differ by a person's role and experience. What has a high degree of importance to a pastor may be of much less significance to a church member, and especially to those who don't attend regularly. But most United Methodists agree that an emphasis on God's grace is very important, as well as having a Communion table where all are welcome.

These are some of the findings of an extensive new quantitative study by UM Communications conducted in November-December 2014.

More than 39% of member respondents are United Methodists because they were born into United Methodist families. Beyond that, the reasons respondents gave as to why they became a member of The United Methodist Church were varied. Beliefs and teachings were the second most frequently mentioned reason for affiliation (17%), followed by liking the people, liking the pastor, or marrying into a United Methodist family (all 8%). Some like the church's emphasis on social issues (4%), while 2% find a convenient location to be the prevailing factor.

Most Important Values

The survey found some pronounced differences between what pastors, church leaders and members consider important values for The United Methodist Church.

Members' responses were quite fragmented, but more than half of members surveyed agreed that an emphasis on God's grace, open Communion, acceptance of all people, church fellowship, a strong Scriptural foundation and an emphasis on mission and outreach in local community were very important values for The United Methodist Church.

Pastors were more solidly in agreement, with more than 90% of those surveyed declaring the importance of an emphasis on God's grace, open Communion, an emphasis on local mission and out-

each and a strong Scriptural foundation. But some of the values which rated high for pastors were low for members; for example, a balance of personal and social holiness was of top importance to less than one-third of members surveyed while 81% of pastors put it in the "very important" tier. Church fellowship was more important to leaders than any other group, and they were more interested in bringing people to Christ than were other members (88% vs. 45%). Both leaders and pastors cited an emphasis on worldwide mission twice as frequently as members.

"What we're seeing is that people in different roles with different experiences have different perceptions," said Sherri Thiel, interim chief executive of United Methodist Communications. "Church leaders are more likely to share pastors' values, possibly because their roles bring them into greater contact with work at the denominational level, while members are more focused on personal and local experiences."

Differences Among Members of the Same Groups

The survey found that United Methodists who attend church regularly were twice as likely as those who attend infrequently to say a strong Scriptural foundation and an emphasis on bringing people to Christ were among the most important values for The United Methodist Church.

There were appreciable differences between pastors with different theological training where some values were concerned. For example, just 54% of pastors who attended non-United Methodist seminaries cited being a connectional church as a very important value, compared to 72% of pastors who attended United Methodist seminaries. Being "accepting of different views" was very important to only 44% of pastors from non-UM seminaries vs. 68% of pastors from UM seminaries. But when it came to identifying values that were uniquely United Methodist, there was little to no disparity.

Among leaders, women and men had differing viewpoints on some topics; 73% of women said being accepting of differing views was very important, compared to 51% of men. Women were also more supportive of worldwide mission and outreach (73% vs. 57%).

Did You Know?

For all the power of his eyes and voice, John Wesley measured five-feet-three inches tall and weighed 128 pounds!

Susanna Wesley was one of the few women of her time to have a college education. She was committed to teaching her children the scriptures and encouraged them to be devout followers of a life of faith.