

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

December 6, 2015
Text: Exodus 20:8-11;
31:12-17
“The Lord’s Day”

The other day I read an article about how science was helping Orthodox Jews observe the Sabbath. The religious practice of that community of believers is to avoid any kind of work on the Sabbath. (Some wear slippers so they don’t have to do the work of tying their shoe laces.) Work, for many Orthodox Jews, would include turning the dials on a stove, so all food on the Sabbath has to be eaten cold. One of the manufacturers of stoves devised a timer system; the heat is set before the Sabbath begins and then automatically turns on during Sabbath time. Thus, one can have a hot meal without having to work a dial on the Sabbath.

I’ve had my own journey in trying to observe the Sabbath. When I was in college, I got the notion not to buy the Sunday paper because it came on the Sabbath; then it dawned on me that I should not

bible+study

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

buy the Monday paper because it was produced by people working on Sunday. As they say, it made sense at the time.

What are we to do with this clear commandment to observe the Sabbath? Jesus ran into this debate. On one such occasion, he tried to explain Sabbath life to some folks who were real sticklers for Sabbath keeping: “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). In another situation, he proclaimed himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8) and then said, “So the Law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:12).

Sabbath is intended for the rhythm of life. Breathe in. Breathe out. Maybe one way to honor that rhythm is to see Sabbath as a time for “something different.” If I pretty much lie around all week, would Sabbath be a day to do work? If I go full tilt all the week, would Sabbath be a day to relax? If I am alone most of the week, perhaps Sabbath could be a time to try to connect with people. If I am constantly busy with people, Sabbath could be hours apart, quiet, reflective. If I struggle in causes of social justice all week, for me Sabbath would be a time to

Thank you to our readers for responding to the Vine Nov. issue survey. Your help is appreciated!

stay in touch with my personal relationship with God. If I “major” in my own spiritual journey, Sabbath time could be energy devoted to reaching out to and for others.

Sabbath is God’s gift of shifting gears. No wonder Sabbath is a day of gathered worship.

What Someone Else Has Said: Mathew Sleeth (24/6, Tyn-dale) has written, “Sabbath is simply presented not as a rule to be kept but as a freedom to enter into.” And Sleeth quotes Andrew Wylie, “The Sabbath is the link between the paradise which has passed away and the paradise which is yet to come.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord of the Sabbath, be near...”

December 13, 2015
Text: Leviticus
22:17-25, 31-33
“Acceptable Offerings”

Few of us sleep with the Book of Leviticus under our pillow in hopes of osmosis of biblical insight. There are lots of things in this book that we Christians simply ignore: “You must not

cut off the hair on your fore-heads or clip the ends of your beard” (Leviticus 19:27); “Anyone who hunts any animal or bird that can be eaten...must drain its blood out and cover it with dirt” (Leviticus 17:13); “Do not wear clothes made from two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19); and verse after verse describing sexual behavior, food consumption, and how to treat your slaves. What are we to do with all of this? After all, God says, “You must keep my commands and do them; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 22:31).

At least three times, Jesus said, “You have heard it said of old...but I say to you...” [or as the Common English Bible translates it “You have heard that it was said to those who lived a long time ago...but I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33)]. This follows right on the heels of our Lord’s assurance that we are to obey even the least of the commands of God (Matthew 5:19). So, Jesus, which is it? Do we obey what was said to those folks “back then” or do we obey what you say to us now?

What has not changed from the

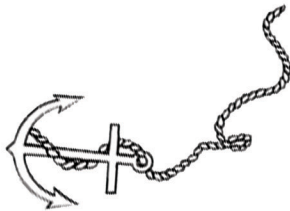


laws of Leviticus to the proclamation of Jesus to the Spirit’s presence with us in 2015 is the central value of obedience. The value that shaped the law of Leviticus, the value of what Jesus taught, and the value that the Spirit breaks into our midst now is all one value: obedience.

John Wesley made a distinction between ceremonial (or priestly) law and moral law. Jesus is clear that love of God and love of neighbor is the core of the moral law (Matthew 22:35-40). It is in obedience to that command to love that we make an acceptable offering to God. That is the holiness that is pleasing to God (Leviticus 22:32), the holiness that is exemplified in obedience. And obedience is love.

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Loving God* (Zondervan), Charles Colson wrote: “It has always been this way: God’s calling His people to obedience and giving them at best a glimpse of the outcome of their effort...Some might think this divine pattern cruel, but I am convinced there is a sovereign wisdom to it. Knowing how susceptible we are to success’s siren call, God does not allow us to see, and therefore glory in, what is done through us. The very nature of the obedience He demands is that it be given without regard to circumstances or results.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, break with fresh vigor upon our casual ‘yes’ and move us toward radical obedience. In the Lord Jesus, open us to the love that honors Your name as we love our neighbor...”



December 20, 2015
Texts: Exodus 13:13-15, Luke 2:22-32
“Dedication of First-born”

During these days of Advent, we spend most of our time looking forward, looking ahead to Christmas. It is a time of anticipation. We even sing, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” “All Earth Is Waiting,” and “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” We are on a countdown to the Big Event!

Interestingly enough, our study texts for this week do just the opposite. Instead of looking ahead, they look back. The text from Exodus (Exodus 13:13-15) hinges on remembering how God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. In fact, the Israelites are told that this is not just a story about “some people way back then,” it is when “the Lord brought us with great power out of Egypt.” Us!

And then the passage from Luke (Luke 2:22-32) tells about Mary and Joseph looking back to the ritual cleansing required by the Law from Moses. They make this trip to Jerusalem, because they look back to this ceremony that remembered how God released (ransomed) Israel from slavery. Making a sacrifice in behalf of the firstborn was a way of recalling how God saved the firstborn of the Hebrews (Exodus 12:12-13). Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for this service that looked back to how God saved God’s chosen people.

It is Simeon who makes the connection between what has been and what will be. He knew the story and he “eagerly anticipated” (Luke 2:25) the fulfillment of that long journey. When God’s Spirit led Simeon to the temple while Jesus was

there with Mary and Joseph, Simeon realized that the past had now become the present in order to claim the future! And he expands the story to claim that it is for “all peoples” (v. 31) and is for both Gentile and Jew (v. 32).

So, in this Advent season 2015, we stand with Simeon, in one hand gripping the past of deliverance from slavery in Egypt and in the other hand holding on to the future promised in Christ Jesus. Here we are in the middle between yesterday and tomorrow, and the link is the One whose birthday we prepare to celebrate. The apostle Paul says this Christ is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 2:15) and the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 2:18). Released, redeemed, in life, in death. That about covers it, doesn’t it? Merry Christmas.

What Someone Else Has Said: Imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote Maria von Wedemeyer (*Love Letters from Cell 92*, Abingdon): “A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the door’s being opened from outside, is a far from inappropriate metaphor for Advent.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Then, now, tomorrow, oh Lord...”

December 27, 2015
Texts: Matthew 23:2-12, Mark 12:38-44
“A Generous Gift”

Well, I guess we can’t accuse the folks who choose these texts for lingering too long in Bethlehem! The Sunday for this lesson is two days after Christmas and we are moving ahead to some of the teachings of Jesus.

In the first of the study verses, Jesus is making a distinction between those who put on airs and those who simply go with the low flow. He illustrates this by referring to those who are extra pious (Matthew 23:5). One conclusion I draw from this is that fake humility is as bad as fake dignity.

In the second study text (Mark 12:38-44), Jesus describes the familiar scene of the widow who put a couple of small coins into the offering plate (probably a trumpet-like container that would echo loudly when large amounts were put in). He contrasted her “all she had” gift with those who gave a little icing off the top of their cake of wealth.

In our eagerness to be fair to everyone, we sometimes slip into an “anything goes” frame of mind. Our Lord has shown that there is a difference in what pleases God and what displeases God (Mark 12:40). As Eugene Peterson paraphrases Matthew 23: 12: “If you puff yourself up, you’ll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you’re content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty.”

This is more than a teaching about financial stewardship. When one joins The United Methodist Church, one promises “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.” That’s a good check list for each of us. It includes financial accountability, but also includes other dimensions of the spiritual journey. The standard to which Jesus points is “don’t show off as if what you do is a big deal, but do all that you can do.” (That’s a very rough translation of a combination of Matthew 23:12 and Mark 12:44!)

So, if this poor widow had bragged about how she had given everything she had, it would have voided Jesus’ praise of her. Or if she had made sure everyone knew how humble she was about all of

this attention, that would have diluted the Lord’s celebration of her gift. It’s a matter of balance, isn’t it? And that’s hard to do. Maybe that is why our best living is living by grace.

What Someone Else Has Said: Cal and Rose Samra (*More Holy Humor*, Guideposts) quote Mary Ann Herman who said: “When it comes to giving, some folks stop at nothing.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee...”



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BIRTHS: Congratulations to Charles (Fairway: Southern Pines) and Whitney Albright upon the birth of Langston Charles Albright, Aug. 30.

Brent (Corridor: Christ) and Natalie Levy announce the birth of a daughter, Emma Catherine, Sept.4.

Congratulations to Tyler (Heritage: First: Rocky Mount) and Lauren Williams on the birth of Gabriel Henry Williams, Oct. 9.

We celebrate with Nick and Miriam Jeffries (Corridor: Camp Chestnut Ridge) the birth of a son, Micah, Oct. 16.

Patrick Keely (Sound; Rainbow UMC) and wife Leslie celebrate the birth of a son, Weston, Oct. 29.

DEATHS: **SEAWELL,** Claudia McPherson, widow of William Seawell, died Aug. 17.

BOURNER, Yvonne, wife of Frank Bournier (retired), died Aug. 29. Service was held Sept. 4 at Creedmoor UMC.

OWENS, Olivia Inez Stallings, widow of Harley Owens, Jr., died Aug. 17. Service was held Aug. 20 in Goldsboro.

CHEEZEM, Sherry, wife of Clyde Cheezem (retired), died Sept. 19. Service was at Salter Path UMC.

NORMAN, Hazel Wiggins, widow of John Samuel Norman, died Sept. 29. Service was held Oct. 2 in La Grange.

HERBERT, SR., William “Billy” Ernest (retired), died Sept. 30. Service was held Oct. 6 in Roanoke Rapids.

BROOKS, Carolyn, wife of Rex Brooks (retired). Service was held Oct. 15 at Mount Pleasant UMC.

GLOVER, Fran, wife of Keith Glover (retired), died Oct. 14. Service was held Oct. 20 at North Raleigh UMC.

LINEBERGER, James W. Jr., (retired), died Oct. 12. Service was held Oct. 22 at First UMC in Cary.

HOBBS, James, (retired), died Oct. 22. Service was held Oct. 27 at Davis Street UMC.

CROW, Loise Massey, widow of William Addison Crow, died Oct 24. Service was held Oct. 29 at Southern Pines UMC.

FRYE Lacy "Buck", (retired), died Oct. 30. Service was held Nov. 2 at Page Memorial UMC, Biscoe.

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Starting a new church can feel like starting a business. As we began **Crossroads: North Campus** just two months ago, I felt a strong conviction that if we began this church as a business and not a compassionate community of Christ followers, Jesus might just come in and flip over our tables. We needed a starting point for serving the least and the lost in our community - we chose sandwiches and water.

On a Wednesday night our missional community made PB&J's. The next day in the August heat, a small gaggle of us took those sandwiches and a cooler of cold water to downtown Fayetteville, handing them out with an invitation to pray for any needs. Some passed. Some loved the food and water, but didn't want prayer. Most



Rev. Kyle Burrows is Crossroads: North Campus Pastor

were not only grateful for the provisions, but were happy to pray with us.

We knew we were not saving the world. We knew we looked silly. We hoped we were helping. But this was something... and something is better than nothing. It's a starting point to encounter people at a crossroads in life.

We've decided to get out and show up, somewhere... anywhere... because God is everywhere. And I think he is waiting for us to show up.

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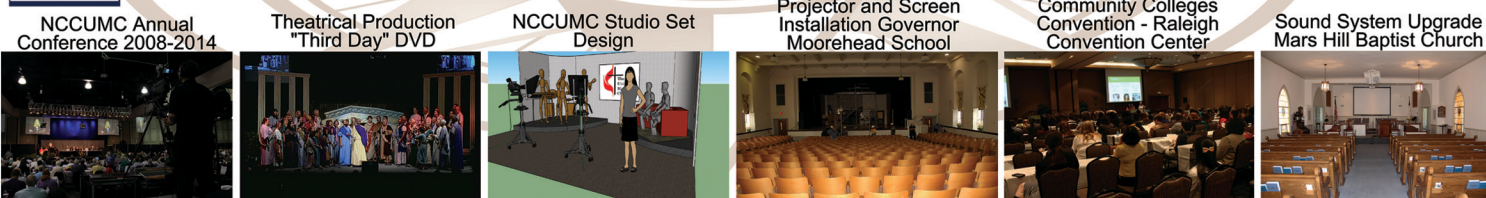
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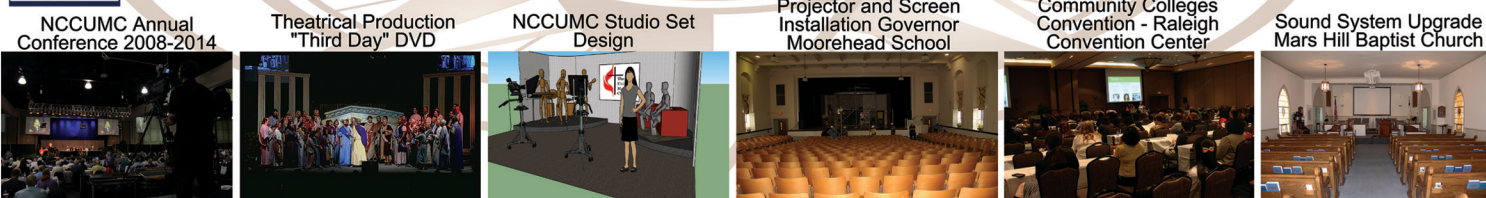
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