

March 2024

Rev. Dr. Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

March 3

Text: Matthew 26:26-30 “Jesus’ Dinner Prayer”

It's Communion Sunday. When it is time to come to the Table, Joshua gets up and goes down to the nursery. He gets his son, three-year old James, to come upstairs to be served at the Communion Table.

It's Communion Sunday. Dan has his service dog, Bailey, with him as he moves to the Bread and Cup. Bailey nibbles on the crumbs that have fallen to the floor. Pastor Lisa says, "That's okay. Isn't Bailey one of God's creatures?"

It's Communion Sunday. We come down the side aisle of the sanctuary and each of us stops at the hand sanitizer to cleanse our hands. It is a sign of our concern for health and a symbol of our being cleansed of our sin.

I wonder if Jesus looked straight into the eyes of Judas when our Lord said, "This is for all of you." (Matthew 26:27)

All of the disciples said they would not betray Jesus (Matthew 26:35). How many times have I said the same thing to Him?

When I read this week's focal text (Matthew 26:26-30), I thought of something I saw on a church website for a congregation in Big Rapids, Michigan. It said, "If you are looking for the perfect church, we are not it." I love that honesty! In that Upper Room, Jesus gave signs of forgiveness for those He knew to be less than perfect.

It's Communion Sunday. Some stay in their seats because they think they are not worthy of coming to the Lord's Table. Perhaps they could look around the Upper Room and see betrayer Judas and denier Peter and doubter Thomas, all being served.

It's Communion Sunday. Jesus said, "Take, eat." Jesus said, "Drink from it." And today He still does.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Volume 2 of *John Wesley's Teachings* (Zondervan), Thomas Oden wrote: "By receiving Holy Communion again and again, this new life is nurtured. If baptism is analogous to birth, the Lord's Supper is analogous to a constant feeding of the reborn life, which bears the fruits of the Spirit."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "For the Table spread with Your love, I give You my thanks..."

March 10

Text: John 17:1-16 “Jesus Prays for His Disciples”

The other day, a teacher was shot in the classroom by a six-year old student. Deeply wounded, she focused on getting the other students to safety rather than tending to her own wounds. That incident came to mind when I read this week's focal text. Jesus is on the way to His death, but He stops and prays for His disciples (John 17:1-16). Even as He acknowledges that one of the disciples failed Him (John 17:12), He continues His prayer for them.

In John 17:1-5, some form of the word "glory" (glory, glorify, glorified) appears five times. The basic Greek word is *δόξα*. (Do you recognize "doxology"?) It means to hold in high esteem. It means to hold full of honor. It means to magnify one's praise. Then, in verse 10, Jesus says He has been glorified in these on again/off again disciples. Even though there have been times when the disciples were less than worthy, Jesus continues to lift them up. That ought to be encouraging to us when we have had less than faithful days.

We often wonder about "eternal life." In John 17:3, Jesus says that eternal life is knowing the true God and knowing Jesus Christ. Edgar Goodspeed translates it this way: "And eternal life means knowing You as the only true God." Charles B. Williams calls Jesus the "messenger" of that true God. E. V. Rieu refers to Jesus as the "apostle" of God, the Father. Eternal life is knowing that God and knowing the One Whom God has sent.

When my wife died, I got hundreds of sympathy cards. Many of them assured me that "I am praying for you." I have, with thanksgiving, saved those cards and keep them in a giant bowl near my dining area. What a joy to know that friends and family are praying for me! But can you extend that joy by realizing that Jesus Christ Himself prays for His disciples! (These verses are sort of like a card from Jesus!)

This afternoon I sent an email to a friend to let her know my schedule for the week. Just a few moments ago, she called me to check to see how I was doing and to see what my plans were for the week. She had not gotten my email. I sent it again. She still did not get it. I don't know what is going on with our computer systems. But it has got me to wondering if Jesus has tried to send us the message that He cares enough to pray for us. Have I failed to receive the message of love that Jesus has tried to send to me?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Alfred Ackley (no. 310, *United Methodist Hymnal*, United Methodist Publishing House) wrote: "I see His hand of mercy; I hear His voice of cheer; and just the time I need Him, He's always near."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank You for loving me..."

March 17

Text: John 17:17-26 “Jesus Prays for the Church”

This week’s focal text has multiple points of theological pondering: sanctification, holiness (v. 17, v. 19), Word of God (v. 17), evangelism (v. 20), Church (v. 20), Trinity (v. 20, v. 22, v. 24), Unity of Church (v. 22), Love of God (v. 23), Creation (v. 24), Love of humankind (v. 26). It is hard to figure out just where to begin!

One theme runs through all of these dimensions: God’s initiative. You have sent me (v. 18, v. 21, v. 23, v. 25). God has given glory (v. 22). God has sent love (v. 23). God’s beginning love (v. 24). One student of the Bible has written that the Gospel according to John has at least sixty references to God’s initiative, God’s sending. God’s accepting love is sent to us and, by grace, we respond with thanksgiving and service.

In my backyard, there is a big glass jar that is fastened to the top of a pole. When that jar is empty, nothing happens, but when I put “bird seed” into that container, soon my yard is filled with sparrows, robins, cardinals, finches - all sorts of winged creatures... and even what must be a bushy-tailed bird (some people call it a squirrel). I take the initiative in putting out the seed and the birds respond. God takes the initiative in sending us love in Christ Jesus. How do we respond?

My family is scattered. My sister is in North Carolina. I have a grandson in Michigan, another in South Carolina, another in Virginia. Then, there is a nephew in Colorado, a niece in Idaho, a nephew in Texas, another in Oklahoma, and another in Mississippi. Then, when I start listing the next generation, I name New Jersey and California. Despite these geographic ranges, we are one family. I mention this because God calls into God’s family people of all races, all locations, all sexual orientations, all circumstances--- yet in Christ Jesus, they are one (John 17:22). What an amazing initiative is God’s love!

I have a Bible that gives cross references throughout the Scriptures. I can quickly see other places in the Bible that tell the same story or give the same emphasis. For this seventeenth chapter of John (our study for last week and this week), there are forty-nine cross references. This tells me that these verses capture the revelation that breaks through throughout the Bible. God loves us and seeks ways to show that love to us. How do we respond?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Molly Phinney Baskette (*How to Begin When Your World Is Ending*, Broadleaf Books), has written: “God is always doing more than one thing at the same time.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your love has come to me, O God...”

March 24

Text: Luke 22:39-46 “Praying in Distress: Jesus’ Garden Prayer”

I think I want Luke to write my life story. I say that because Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to make the disciples look good when they accompanied Jesus to the Mount of Olives. When Jesus went aside to pray that hard prayer (“If You are willing, remove this cup from me...”), all four Gospel writers say the disciples fell asleep. Only Luke finds a kind and forgiving way to explain their sleeping while Jesus struggled. Luke says the disciples slept while Jesus was in such distress because of their grief (Luke 22:45). As for me, I like the way Luke put a positive spin on a less-than-faithful situation! I hope he’d do the same for me! (I can’t help but notice that Jesus asked them why they were sleeping.)

Jesus knew that even when we express our hopes and desires to God in prayer, there is still the caveat “not my will but Yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Truth to tell, I seldom add that to my prayers. How about you?

Once I was pastor at a church that had a painting of this scene at the Mount of Olives, Jesus kneeling in painful prayer. The huge artwork was hanging as the center spot at the front of the sanctuary. Everyone (except the pastor and the choir) faced this painting as they sat or stood for worship. One day a member came to me and asked if we could take down that painting, or at least move it somewhere it was not “front and center.” “Why do you want to do that?” I asked. He answered, “It’s hard week-after-week to have to look at Jesus praying that He could get out of the burden of saving us.”

I mentioned all this to a member of the family that had donated the painting. One of them said, “Isn’t that the whole point? Seeing Him praying like that reminds me of the sacrifice He made; ‘the burden of saving us’ was indeed a burden. That makes what Jesus did even more loving.” (The painting was still there when I moved to my next appointment.)

Jesus advised the disciples to pray “that you may not come into the time of trial.” This call to prayer echoes the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples: “Lead us not unto temptation.” Our Lord looked ahead and saw that these followers would betray, deny, and desert Him. I hear Him making the same request of me, knowing that there are trials/temptations that will overcome me. Do I pray, or do I sleep?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Cost of Discipleship* (MacMillan), Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “Suffering and rejection are laid upon Jesus as a divine necessity, and every attempt to prevent it is the work of the devil, especially when it comes to His own disciples...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your will, O God, Your will...”

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March 31

Text: John 11:17-44 "Confident in the Hope of Resurrection"

When I was growing up, our family had a practice of quoting Scripture before we ate supper. Each of us - my father, my mother, my two sisters, and I - would recite some favorite and meaningful verse from the Bible. Then, after someone said the blessing, we would dig into our evening repast.

My stomach was evidently not as spiritual as some of my family. Others would quote long passages of Scripture, but my stomach muttered, "Hurry up!" I finally figured out a plan to help with this problem. Rummaging through the King James Bible translation, I found an ideal verse for just this situation. For several evenings, when my turn came, I happily rendered the shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35: "Jesus wept."

I was pleased that I had found a way to get to my supper more quickly. After about the fourth time that I had rendered that verse, my father asked, "Why did you choose that one?" I was not clever enough to think of some faith-based reason, so I muttered the truth. "I use that verse because it is so short." Daddy said, "Let me give another reason that John 11:35 is such an important verse. Jesus wept. Jesus cared deeply for his friends. Jesus recognized that Mary and Martha were suffering because their brother had died. Jesus broke into tears because he identified with the hurting that others also felt. Jesus was sad about what Lazarus had been through." Then, my father said, "That verse is very important because it reminds us how much Jesus cares for us."

I quoted that verse again the next night, but it came with a wholly different meaning. As I said the words, I nodded my head to show my acceptance of its broader meaning.

It seems strange on Easter Sunday to have this text about weeping and wailing, but it brings life's reality face to face with the resurrection. Jesus, still greatly disturbed (John 11:38), went to the tomb of Lazarus. With a great voice he called out to the dead man, "Come out!" And he did! Our Lord has given new life where there was only death.

Jesus weeps with me today, sharing the hurting and empty places of my life. With resurrected power, he looks at my brokenness and says, "Come out!" The gift of the resurrection!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Emil Brunner (*Faith, Hope, and Love*, Westminster Press) wrote: "The future for which the Christian hopes is not made by us [humans] but by God."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord, I hear Your call to come..."



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