

# February 2024

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

## February 4

### Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 "Pray Without Ceasing"

The other day, I was at a breakfast meeting of local clergy. One of the pastors asked, "What are you doing for your sermon this coming Sunday?" One colleague smiled and replied, "My life is a walking sermon."

Maybe that quip gives us a handle for this week's study text. If I "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), then my life must be a walking prayer.

How does this work? For example, how can I give thanks in every circumstance (1 Thessalonians 5:18)? In a time of tragedy, maybe I can give thanks that God has given me sensitivity to loss. In a time of defeat, I can give thanks that God has given me an opportunity to learn how to do better. In a time of victory, I can give thanks that God has given me the joy of celebration.

That does not mean that God has given me loss or defeat or even victory. It means that God has given me gifts for each of these circumstances. How else can I "pray without ceasing," until my prayer-life includes the full range of life?

When I was in the sixth grade, I had a classmate who would bow her head in prayer before each test. One time she got back her grade and saw that she had flunked the test. I teased her and asked her if she had prayed before she studied for the exam. She shook her head and mumbled that she had not had time to study that week. Hmmm.

We pray with our attitude as much as we do with our words. To "pray without ceasing" is to live with an attitude of thanksgiving, an attitude of supplication, an attitude of intercession, an attitude of repentance, an attitude of trust, an attitude of service, an attitude of relationship, an attitude of resurrection.

When are my prayers just words?

When is my life praying?

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

In her book *Bathed in Prayer*, Jan Karon has quoted William Law who said, "There is nothing that makes us love someone so much as praying for them."

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Hear my words, O God, but help me match my life to Your will. Let me 'take time to be holy,' but move my very being and doing to holiness..."

## February 11

### Text: Matthew 6:1-8 "Putting Practices of Piety in Perspective"

Our group read Matthew 6:1-4. It didn't make sense to me, so I asked the young pastor who had been assigned to watch over us college students at the national youth event: "Why do the hypocrites get rewarded for making a big public deal in their almsgiving?" He thanked me for my question and said he would get back to me later.

Two days later, he called me aside and said, "I think I have an answer to your question." He continued, "The hypocrites got the reward they wanted: public recognition and praise." So, I asked, "What about those who give their alms 'in secret'? What is the reward that God gives them?" He replied "Let me get back to you." I guess the event ended before he had the chance to answer my question.

In a commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew, Alan Hugh M'Neile answers my question: "The reward will be given in the coming Kingdom." And I know that in Christ Jesus that Kingdom - some know it as Kin-dom - is breaking in upon us even now.

About the time we take a breath after struggling with verses 1 to 4 about almsgiving, Jesus continues and applies the same spirit to our prayer life. No matter the words we use, God knows the secrets of the heart. (Jesus is not saying we should not pray together. In fact, in the example prayer He gave, He uses plural words - Our Father...Give us...Forgive us, etc.) Secular society has different standards and values than does the faith community. In these verses, Jesus is reminding us to pray (and give alms) by the standards and values of His followers.

In a translation called, *The New Testament in the Language of Today*, William Beck has made a helpful rendition of verse 6: "Pray to your Father who is with you when you're alone." For me, that is both an encouragement and a caution. Encouragement: Just when I think it is all up to me, Jesus reminds me that I am not alone; God is with me. Caution: On the other hand, just when I think I can behave as I want to because no one is looking, Jesus reminds me that I am not alone; God is able to see my secrets.

Giving and praying are clearly part of the journey.

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Do I Stay Christian?* (St. Martins), Brian McLauren begins a prayer: "Source of all truth, help me to hunger for truth, even if it upsets, modifies, or overturns what I already think is true..."

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Listen to my heart, O Lord, and open me to Your will..."



## February 18

### Text: Matthew 6:9-13 “The Lord’s Prayer”

In our corporate praying, most of us pray the Lord’s Prayer in forms that grow out of the King James translation. Other translators stir new images from the familiar words that Jesus taught.

For example, instead of offering “Thy kingdom come,” Moffatt renders it “Thy Reign begin!” Some ask for forgiveness of “our debts”; instead of “debts,” some say “trespasses.” Some say “shortcomings” (Weymouth). Some say “offenses” (George Lama). Some say “the wrong we have done” (New English Bible). Some say “what we owe to you” (J. B. Phillips). There is a richness in our Lord’s words!

As noted in last week’s commentary, Jesus uses plural pronouns in this prayer: Our, Us, We. He is acknowledging that we are in this together. Even when I am alone when I pray the Lord’s Prayer, I am identifying myself with the family of God --- Our, Us, We. The faith is not to be lived in isolation. It is a community venture.

The phrase “Lead us not into temptation” is a prayer of confession. We know how we fail when we are faced with temptation/trial. It is a way of saying, “Lord, deliver us from such because we know we would fail.” That is a particularly appropriate prayer during this season of Lent.

Ancient manuscripts do not agree on how the prayer ends. We usually pray, “For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever and ever. Amen.” Check various translations and you’ll find that many do not include these traditional words. Some students of the Bible have said that the phrase is a liturgical addition and is not in the biblical text. The King James Version includes it. The Revised Standard Version does not.

Luke has a shorter version of this prayer. Luke 11:1-4 contains what Jesus offered when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. In many editions (and translations), there are footnotes offering that many ancient authorities have included phrases that are omitted here.

I was at a meeting once when we were invited to pray together the Lord’s Prayer. I began, “Our Father, Who art in heaven...” Next to me, a man began, “Padre nuestro que estas en el cielo...” I think God heard both prayers.

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

Andrew Murray (*Prayer Is the Answer*, Smith Freeman) wrote: “Though in its beginning prayer is so simple that the child can pray, yet it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which (we) can rise.”

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Our Father, Who art in heaven...”

## February 25

### Text: John 12:20-36 “Prayer in the Time of Trouble”

It must have been hard to have to hear what Jesus had to say, right after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It’s certainly not what his followers wanted to hear after that grand spectacle when the crowds shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!” (John 12:13)

As John tells the story, right after that praise-worthy moment, some Greeks who happened to be in the crowd said they wanted to get to meet Jesus (John 12:21). But then Jesus started talking about how a grain of wheat has to die before new life can emerge from it. Then, He says that anyone who follows Him must be a servant (John 12:24, 26).

It gets more difficult. Jesus then begins to tell those who would follow Him that He was going to die (John 12:33). That’s not exactly a good way to recruit disciples! That’s a long way from “Hosanna”!

But, there is an encouraging word when Jesus offers that He is light so His followers don’t have to live in darkness (John 12:35-36). The Greek word for “darkness” is *skōtia*. It is a word that not only means “absence of light,” but also means “obscurity.” What are the things that obscure/block out our relationship with Jesus? What are the relationships that obscure the Light of Christ? Are there ways in which my life blocks the Light of Christ from others?

Even when He speaks of His death, Jesus sees victory. In John 12:24, he describes how a grain of wheat dies, so there can be much fruit. He anticipates that eternal life will be a gift for those who know death in this life (John 12:25). He asserts that His own death will be an occasion for triumph (John 12:32).

Much fruit (John 12:24). Eternal life (John 12:25). Father will honor (John 12:26). The light is with you (John 12:45). Children of light (John 12:36). With Jesus, even difficult times can bring us good news.

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

Leonard Sweet (*Me and We: God’s New Social Gospel*, Abingdon Press) has written: “The darker the night, the brighter the stars. The deeper the roots, the higher the promise of bloom and beauty... Darkness helps us see the stars that ultimately lead to Jesus. The light is found only in the darkness, just as peace is found only through suffering.”

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Light of the world, and shine in the midst of what works to obscure Your presence. Come, Lord Jesus, and walk with me on this journey...”



# March 2024

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## 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 *dōxazō*. (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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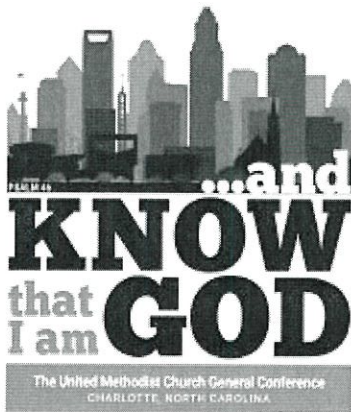
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# April 2024

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## April 7

### Text: Luke 24:36-49 "Power to Witness"

The risen Christ told the amazed disciples that they were to be witnesses of His death and resurrection. This witnessing would proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all people (Luke 24:46-48). The word used for "witnesses" (v. 48) is *μάρτυς*. It is the word used for those who will testify in court as to what they have witnessed. It is also a word that is sometimes used to describe a martyr. (The disciples must have wondered, "Is this what I signed up for?")

Let us look at our own place before the risen Christ. We, too, are called to be witnesses. What shall we say that we have seen? Do our lives match the words we use when we give witness? What would it mean to be a martyr in today's American culture?

Jesus promises the disciples (and us) the power to do these things (Luke 24:49). Take note of two Greek words for power (both used in the New Testament) and take note of which one is used here. One word means power by privilege and position. The other word means power by abundance and miracle. Yes! Our power is abundantly given as a miraculous gift from God.

As Luke tells the story, the disciples are to start right where they are (Jerusalem) (Luke 24:33, 49). My temptation is to wait for the perfect opportunity - always sometime in the future - before I make a conscious witness for Jesus. Our Lord wants me to start right where I am, among the people I know now, in my community where now I see homeless and needy, in my attitude toward folks different from me, in personal financial decisions, uh oh! This is getting real!

Some years ago, I was in a small town in Jamaica, part of a work team that was building a church building in that community. Digging. Laying bricks. Hauling Trash. More digging. It took two more work teams after us to complete the project. A couple of years after that, an overwhelming hurricane poured through Jamaica. It was devastating to all the houses in town. It tore up the small business district. In fact, we got the word that the only safe building in the entire town was that church building. In building it, we had no idea if it was more than a simple place of worship. It ended up saving lives in more ways than one. Witnessing is like that. God is able to use it far beyond what our ordinary days can see. Thanks be to God!

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

Theodore Jennings, Jr., has written (*Good News to the Poor*, Abingdon): "A grace that allegedly saves my soul while leaving the concrete and visible relations of my life unaffected is merely illusory."

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You came that I might see You, Lord Jesus. I go now to tell others..."

## April 14

### Text: Mark 12:28-34 "Finding Commonalities; Orienting Mission: The Golden Rule for All"

Truth to tell, for a long time I sat in front of my computer, trying to think of something to say about this familiar text. Love God. Love neighbor. What else can be said? So, I decided to go into town and get lunch. On my way to the restaurant, I passed a small church tucked back off the road. Out front it had a sign board with this message: "Live by faith and not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

That's it! If I try to love my neighbor by sight, I see too many things that I do not like. I see politics with which I do not agree. I see carelessness about the Gospel. I see selfishness that wants to take advantage of others. I see ego-driven decisions. If I love my neighbor by sight, there is not always much there to love.

So, the apostle Paul has told us to love by faith. Faith that God loves that neighbor. Faith that God is seeking ways to work in that neighbor's life. Faith that love is the gift that keeps on giving.

And the same goes for me. I do not always love myself - my failures, my emptiness, my disappointments. But, if I am to love self, as well as neighbor, the gift of faith is still the key to loving myself: Faith that God loves me, faith that God is seeking ways to work in my life. Faith that love is the gift that keeps on giving.

For that matter, how can I love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)? Sometimes my heart is frail; sometimes my soul is struggling; sometimes my mind is confused; sometimes my strength is lacking. But, Jesus has invited us - shall we say instructed us? - to love God with the best we have got, even though our best falls short of perfection. "All of my heart" includes the broken places. "All of my soul" includes the uncertain places. "All of my mind" includes those chaotic places. "All of my strength" includes my very weakness. Bring it all to God, not just what you think you've got worked out.

Then, when I got to the restaurant for lunch, I had their Mandarin Walnut Salad with Grilled Chicken. It was delicious. God is good.

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

Emil Brunner (*I Believe in the Living God*, Westminster Press) wrote: "True Christian faith is not 'to believe something,' but to trust and obey the One who speaks to us in the Bible and through the creed, with our whole heart."

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You first loved me, so now I love..."



## April 21

### Text: Matthew 15:21-28 “A Gentle Woman’s Great Faith”

Jesus stepped across ethnic boundaries and healed the daughter of a Gentile woman (Matthew 15:28). He wanted her to be coming to Him in faith, so he teased her a bit (Matthew 15:24, 26). When he said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he might have been quoting an old Jewish proverb, but he was probably making the point that Jewish customs and Gentiles customs were different. Few, if any, Jewish households would have had family pets, so He is acknowledging that He is dealing with someone of another background and tradition.

When she responds out of her own tradition (Gentiles kept dogs as pets), Jesus knows that she is aware of the ethnic differences, but moves to acknowledge her “great faith” (Matthew 15:28). The love and power of Jesus leapt across human divisions.

What life divisions do we need to address? Race? Gender? Religion? Geography? Politics? Sexual orientation? Culture? Who is “the other” in our daily encounters?

The church I attend has a bi-weekly Zoom meeting to explore racism. Recently, we have been reading and discussing a book that challenges racist behavior. Our leader often begins a session by asking, “Is there anything you read for tonight that you’d like to talk about?” Almost every time, the first thing mentioned is something with which one of us disagrees. Surely those anti-racism theories are not aimed at nice people like us! In a couple of nights, our group is going to see a drama that argues that being nice is not enough. What about justice? What about equity? (Surely this play is not going to be about nice people like us!)

Most students of the Bible teach that the Gospel according to Matthew is aimed at the Jewish community. (It begins with seventeen verses of Jewish history.) That reality means that this account of a Gentile woman with faith underlines the boundary-free love that Jesus exhibited.

Jesus took the initiative to go to the district of Tyre and Sidon. This was Gentile territory and Jesus would have known that as he headed that way. When is my life “foreign territory” for Jesus? And, yet, He still comes looking for me!

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

Ibram X. Kendi (*How to Be an Antiracist*, One World) has written: “Ethnic antiracism: A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between racialized ethnic groups...”

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator of us all, help me move across boundaries to meet more of Your people...”

## April 28

### Text: John 4:21-42 “Samaritans Encounter the Messiah”

There are a ton of places in this week’s focal text (John 4:21-42) where we might dig in to find rich gifts for our faith journey. Marriage (v. 17). Prophet (v. 19). Worship (v. 20). Jerusalem (v. 20). Salvation (v. 21). Jews (v. 22). God (v. 24). Spirit (v. 23, v. 24). Truth (v. 23, v. 24). Messiah (v. 25). Christ (v. 25, v. 26). Disciples (v. 27). Gender (v. 27). Food (v. 32). Harvest (v. 35). Samaritans (v. 39). World (v. 42). Whew!

Let’s start with the last word in this text: “world.” The Gospel writer John uses this word almost sixty times in his telling of the story of Jesus. John begins by saying that this Christ not only created the world, but also lived in this same world as we do (John 1:10). And, in one of the most familiar passages of Scripture (John 3:16), John reminds us that God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son. And now when Jesus has this encounter with a Samaritan woman (Yes! A woman! In that time, men did not talk with women in public.), John closes the account with the testimony of the outsider group (Samaritans) who now see and claim that Jesus is the Savior of the world, available for all.

The Greek word translated “world” is *κόσμος* - *cosmos*. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press) points out that this word also means “orderly arrangement.” God’s intent for the world and its people is harmony, community, togetherness - an orderly arrangement. When we reflect God’s created purpose, we do not choose up sides (John 4:21). It is not *my way* or *your way*; it is *our way*.

In this encounter, Jesus gave two examples of “we are in this together.” He shared with a woman - and gender boundaries were overcome. He shared with a Samaritan - and ethnic boundaries were overcome. No wonder the disciples were astonished (John 4:27). No wonder “many Samaritans” felt a new acceptance (John 4:39).

I am left to ask myself this question: How big is my world? What are dividing lines that I create that separate what God created to be together? And I hear the closing verse of this week’s text: “...this is truly the Savior of the world.”

#### What Someone Else Has Said:

*In Meet the Methodists* (Abingdon Press), Charles Allen quotes John Wesley: “Solitary religion is not found (in the Gospel of Christ)... The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness... This we have from Christ that he who loves God, loves his brother also.”

#### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Creator of the world, You call us to live as one people...”