

August 2024

August 4, 2024

Text: Psalms 96, 98

“Rejoice with Singing and Dancing”

Last Sunday, after the worship service, a woman, who had been sitting two rows in front of me, came up and said she enjoyed my singing. Good grief! I must have been bellowing! I guess that is the kind of joy and celebration the psalmist was recalling in these focal texts.

Part of the psalmist’s celebration is remembering God’s creating and saving power (Psalm 96:2, 5), but part of the “singing and dancing” is in anticipation of justice in the world (Psalm 96:13). The Common English Bible translates that verse: “He will establish justice in the world rightly...”

Truth to tell, I am more excited about God’s saving power than I am about God’s “justice power.” In my world of privilege, I may be on the wrong side of God’s work for justice.

Some students of the Bible think that these psalms were written in celebrating Israel’s return from exile in Babylon. Have you ever had a moment in your life which seemed to be a new beginning? Perhaps it was a new relationship. Perhaps it was getting past a divisive moment of struggle. Perhaps it was living in the joy of the forgiveness of a time of sin. New beginnings can be a time for celebrating God’s grace-giving presence.

Did you get a chance to look at some of the daily readings that go with this week’s lesson? Notice the variety of settings that evoked celebration.

In Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam and the other women start dancing and singing when the Red Sea parts and the Israelites escape the pursuing Egyptians. In Jeremiah 31:13, people of all ages—young and old—are excited as they return from exile.

In Numbers 21:16-18, Moses and the travelers burst into song even in the midst of the desert. In Jeremiah 33:1-11, the prophet anticipates great moments of joy because he knows that God will deliver on God’s promises.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist invites the people to praise God even in the midst of distress. In Psalm 145, the poet calls for praise of God both “because of” and “in spite of.”

Wow! What a range of situations! What a consistent appropriateness of the praise of God! What a variety of singing and dancing! These texts invite us to celebrate God...to celebrate with voice, to celebrate with life decisions, to celebrate with work for justice, to celebrate in relationships, to celebrate—shall we say—with life!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *A Journey of Love and Miracles* (iUniverse), Ken

God’s Gift of Scripture

with **BELTON JOYNER**

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

Website: nccumc.org/bible-study
Podcast: nccumc.fm/gods-gift-of-scripture

and Pat Birt write for people traveling with cancer: “Practice your faith no matter where you are. God deserves the praise and thanksgiving. He is always there for you!”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, the fullness of Your grace sets my heart alive with joy; help me show that joy in how I live...”

August 11, 2024

Text: Deuteronomy 14:22-29

“Feasting and Resting Together”

The other day I was in a favorite restaurant of mine. One of the staff came over to chat for a moment. He told me that he had decided to leave that job and to get training to become a financial advisor. He said, “I want to help people learn how to use their resources wisely.”

I nodded and said, “Let’s pretend that I am your client and I want you to help me use my money in a good way.” He smiled. “Let’s try.”

I began, “Okay. Let’s suppose I have—oh, let’s say—\$55,000 a year. And the first thing I want to do is to make sure that I give a tithe to my church.”

The mystery on his face said more than any words he spoke. His unspoken thought was, “What is a tithe and why would you want to give that to a church before you know how much you’ll need for groceries and rent and gas for your car?”

In Deuteronomy, presentation of the tithe (ten percent) was an occasion for feasting and joy (14:26), but notice the fullness of the story: “As for the Levite residents in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.” (Deuteronomy 14:27)

The feast is to be shared with Levites, resident aliens, orphans, widows (v. 29). I find great joy in my life in the church, but this verse asks something else: “With whom am I sharing it?”

It is easy to share it with folks who are like me, but there is a larger community of need with whom I am to share.

The background study text (Leviticus 23:39) says that we are to be in a rhythm of work and rest. That's easy enough for me, but what about those for whom there is no time to step away from duty and responsibility and labor? How can I share my feast with them? How can I share my rest with them?

Deuteronomy 14:26 reminds me that these journeys of faith are journeys of community: "you and your household rejoicing together." And the community expands to include "the Levites," or, as we might say, "those who do not look like us, think like us, dress like us, act like us." The tithe is about community.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press), Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote: "...in the church, a great deal of time and energy are spent in the act of worship: In worship, we are busy looking in the right direction."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "O Lord, take me; use me..."

August 18, 2024

Text: Psalm 148

"Celebrating with Gratitude and Thanksgiving"

Oops. I misread the number of the psalm for this week's study! Rather than looking at Psalm 145, I have been digging into Psalm 148. Keep that in mind as you read the next few paragraphs!

The word "praise" appears thirteen times in this one psalm! The Old Testament word translated as "praise" is *halal*. Its primitive meaning is "to be clear." We praise God because we find it clear that God provides; we find it clear that God forgives; we find it clear that God creates; we find it clear that God loves and restores. So, let us be clear in our praise of God! Our praise is such that it is clear what we are doing.

The easiest praise is probably the praise we offer with our voices. The hymns we sing and the prayers we pray and the litanies we express—they all include our offerings of praise.

More difficult, however, is living a life of praise. We praise God by caring for God's creation. We praise God by relating well to other people. We praise God by sharing our resources. We praise God by working for justice. We praise God by studying God's Word.

The psalmist calls on all creation to join us in praising God: angels (v. 2), sun, moon, stars, waters (vv. 3-4), the weather (v. 8), all creatures of creation

(vv. 9-10), all kinds of people of all ages (vv. 11-12). The heading in my New Revised Standard Version translation of this chapter is "Praise for God's Universal Glory."

Now that I realize that I have been writing about a psalm different from the one assigned for this week, I see that the themes are the same, the emphases are the same, and the call to praise is the same. Guess what! I am not going to re-write those paragraphs about Psalm 148!

I recognize that the praise of God is real when I see a life that lives the same values as the words of praise. Looking at the title of this week's lesson, our gratitude and our thanksgiving are real when our lives match our words. It is a journey.

What Someone Else Has Said:

The *United Methodist Hymnal* (UMPH) has this hymn by Francis of Assisi (Hymn 62): "All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, O praise ye! Alleluia! O brother sun with golden beam, O sister moon with silver gleam! O praise ye! O praise ye! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Creator God, I offer my life in praise of You..."

August 25, 2024

Text: Luke 15:1-32

"Rejoice with Me: Celebration in Community"

This week's lesson grows out of three parables that Jesus told. Although we usually focus on themes of repentance (Luke 15:7, 10, 21), there is another emphasis the three stories have in common: community.

When the shepherd finds the one lost sheep, he calls his friends and neighbors together for celebration (Luke 15:6). When the woman finds the lost coin, she invites friends and neighbors to come to celebrate (Luke 15:9). When the prodigal son returns home, the father calls for a community feast to celebrate (Luke 15:23-24).

The real test of repentance—notice that in each story?—is what happens later. Does the lost sheep stay with the flock? Does the newly found coin stay available? Does the prodigal son live his life any differently?

Maybe that is the value of calling the community together. Now, there are those who can check on the reality of the repentance. Now, there are those who help the repentant one to walk the new path. Now, there are others to join in celebrating life's new beginning.

Even our Lord brought together a community for his ministry. The Christian experience is not a solo journey. I need around me people with whom I

agree and people with whom I disagree. I need around me those who will tell me when my faith temperature has cooled. I need around me those who give me encouragement and energy. And I need to be a voice of support and caring correction for others.

The New Testament's word for "repentance" is *metanoeo*. It literally means "to think differently" or "afterwards to change" or "turning around." Each of us needs to ask: "Where are places in my life where I need to repent?" It is not a one-time event; it is a constant journey. No wonder we need a community around us!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Prayer and Devotional Life of United Methodists* (Abingdon Press), Steve Harper wrote: "We are so prone today to individualism and isolationism that we can fail to remember that the kind of communion we are describing is never divorced from interaction with others....When John Wesley conceived of the people later called Methodist, he resolutely rejected all ideas and structures which would generate or reinforce independent and disconnected discipleship."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: "Again I repent, O God, and seek the community that will sustain my journey..."

September 2024

September 1, 2024

Texts: Esther 4:1-9, Psalm 6:1-10

"Overcome by Grief"

This is a little embarrassing, but let me be honest. I remembered the story of Esther, but I had to go to the table of contents in my Bible to find the Book of Esther. (It's nine pages between Nehemiah and Job.) We are going to be living into the Book of Esther for all this month.

Today's lesson from Esther, along with one of David's psalms, form the biblical background for reflections on grief.

King Ahasuerus was so enamored with Esther's beauty that he eventually made her queen (Esther 2:17). He did not know that she was a Jew. Mordecai (Esther's cousin) looked out for her after her parents died. He was a faithful Jew, so when the king made plans to kill all Jews, Mordecai went into a time of great grief (Esther 4:1-3).

Psalm 6:1-10 is an example of the deep mourning and grieving that God's people do when tragedy or suffering or danger become immense. Day and night the psalmist bears the stresses of such

grief. But notice how the psalm ends: the poet is confident that God hears his plea and God will overcome the enemies.

Death. Poor health. Church losses. Gun violence. Political division. Broken relationships. What are the grief-stirring parts of our journey today? Can we come to God with the same plea as did the psalmist? Can we offer our prayers with the same confidence that God has heard our pleas?

Esther is still in the king's court. Mordecai sends her a message of distress (v. 8), trusting that she will be faithful for her people. Stay tuned! We'll be going through Esther's story the rest of this month.

Mordecai is not ashamed to ask for Esther's assistance. I contrast that with our hesitancy to call on others to help us when grief and loss overpower us. Hathach, one of the king's inner circle of helpers, has been assigned to look after Esther (v. 5) and at her request he goes to Mordecai. I contrast that with our unwillingness to be in dialogue with someone from "the other side."

The psalmist reminds us. God is still in charge.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Bishop Will Willimon (*Don't Look Back*, Abingdon) has said: "Don't deny, rush, but—above all—don't avoid your grief."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "I bring my grief, O God..."

September 8, 2024

Texts: Esther 2:12-20; 4:10-17; Psalm 56

"Esther's Fear"

The king has made Esther his queen (Esther 2:17). Things look pretty good for her, but there is one royal stipulation that even she has to obey: No one is to go into the king's inner court without being called there (Esther 4:11). And now, as the story unfolds, Mordecai wants Esther to go to the king on behalf of the Jews. She knows this is illegal (Esther 4:16), but she agrees to go in spite of her fear. Stay tuned!

In our own time, faithful people may well fear what will happen to them if they go to bat for the poor, offer to help an immigrant, give respect to an opponent, seek justice for all, accept a sexually-different person...you get the idea. Like Esther, we are still called to situations that come equipped with fear and uncertainty.

The psalm for today's lesson (Psalm 56) is a claim upon trust in God in times of fear. The psalmist suggests that the worst thing that can happen is that we be put to death for a good cause and even that is not so bad because "You have delivered my soul from death." (v. 23). What a confidence in a time of fear!

Clara Welch has wondered “How are we called to place the needs of others over our needs and to act for the good of the whole, even if it is at the expense of our individual good? In our individualistic society, when must we make choices between exercising our individual freedom and doing what is in the best interest of others?” That is exactly the situation in which Esther finds herself. No wonder there is fear!

Esther 4:14 may sound more familiar to us in the King James translation: “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Have you ever faced such a moment? Now, push has come to shove...now is the moment. I had always feared that I should have to make a stand against the crowd, and now is such a time. I look around and there is no one to step forward except me. Racism pushes back, but I must go forward. For you, is this time “such a time as this?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jon Meacham (*The Soul of America*, Random House) has said: “Fear is about limits; hope is about growth...Fear points at others, assigning blame; hope points ahead, working for a common good. Fear pushes away; hope pulls others closer. Fear divides; hope unifies.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “I bring my fears to You, O Lord, and pray for Your better tomorrow...”

September 15, 2024

Texts: Esther 7; Psalm 83

“The King’s Anger; Mordecai and Esther’s Retribution”

Okay. If you have read this week’s focal texts, you know that Esther keeps her faith and calls for the freedom of her people, the Jewish community. The king is so angry that someone would try to take away Esther (and her people) that the king ends up hanging to death the man (Haman) who had tried to destroy Mordecai and the Jewish people (Esther 7:10).

We might think “Hooray!” God’s people have been saved and the evil man got what he was due. But the voice of the apostle Paul comes to correct us.

Look at Romans 12:16-21. That is an entirely different way of dealing with evil. But, I think what has happened here is a sign that God can use wrong-doing for God’s purposes. It may not be God’s will that Haman be killed, but when it happens God can use it for God’s care of God’s people. God would have no doubt preferred that Haman be converted to a good way of life, but when that did not happen, God used Haman’s death for good purposes.

In Psalm 83, the psalmist pleads with God to make things right. In Psalm 83:2, note that the enemies

are not named as Israel’s enemies but as God’s enemies. The psalmist seems to be reminding us that what is right and what is wrong is not measured by our preferences but by the intent and will of God.

Look at Psalm 83:2 again. Notice that God’s enemies “have raised their heads,” a sign some writers have suggested to be a sign of arrogance. Contrast that with Psalm 83:16, when the psalmist wants the enemies of God to have their faces “filled with shame,” but notice why: “that they may seek Your name, O Lord.” What enemies of God “raise their heads” in our time? Injustice? Racism? Prejudice? Sexism? Privilege? How are we being a part of God’s warfare to overcome these enemies?

There is, of course, a major irony in the hanging of Haman (Esther 7:10). He is put to death on the very gallows he had constructed so Mordecai could be hanged (Esther 5:14). The evil we would do can come back to haunt us. Sometimes, after we plant the seeds of evil, the plant that grows makes food that poisons us. But the story of Esther and Mordecai is not over. Get ready for next week!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Christ, the Church, and the End* (Judson Press), Mickey Eford wrote: “Being angry at injustice, immorality, unfairness, or just sin in general is not something to be diminished. This anger must be exercised, however, with great caution so as not to become a means of venting one’s own hostility.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use me, O Lord...”

September 22, 2024

Texts: Esther 3:1-11; Psalm 109:20-31

“Haman’s Disgust: Our Racism”

The lesson for this week goes back toward the beginning of the story. We learn that Haman is high in the administration of King Ahasuerus (Esther 3:1). And now we know how the plot ends, with Haman’s death by hanging (Esther 7:10). What is the difference...or more accurately, *who* is the difference? Esther! It is amazing how much God can do with the help of one person!

As the account unfolds, Haman argues that the Jews do not obey the same laws as the king’s followers do (Esther 3:8). I wonder if we Christians are ever accused of following values and standards that are different from the rest of the world.

These days, we would label Haman’s attitude toward the Jews as racism. He lumped together a whole group of people and said none of them were worth anything. Are there groups these days whom we paint with such a broad brush?

Psalm 109 describes what it is like to be on the receiving end of such prejudice. Even the children of the oppressed are to wander around (v. 10) and

be orphaned (vv. 9, 12). The psalmist pleads for relief from such hatred: the psalmist asks God...act on my behalf (v. 21), help me (v. 26), save me (v. 26). In response, the psalmist promises to praise God with thanksgiving (v. 30).

Ephesians 6:10-20 offers the apostle Paul's advice on how to combat evil. Do so with truth (v. 14). Do so with righteousness (v. 14). Do so with peace (v. 15). Do so with faith (v. 16). Do so with the Word of God (v. 17). Do so with prayer (v. 18). Are these the ways we usually stand against "the wiles of the devil"?

In Esther 3:5, we read about what upset Haman so much that he wanted to kill Mordecai and Mordecai's people (the Jews). Mordecai would not bow down before Haman, thus honoring him above others. Haman thought it was beneath his dignity to even lay hands on Mordecai, so he decided the thing to do was to kill all Jews. I am left to wonder if I have ever turned against a whole group of people because I had a bad experience with one member of the group. Oh, dear. This is supposed to be about Haman and not about me. Oops.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Matthew Desmond (*Poverty, by America*, Crown) has written: "(Racial) integration means we all have skin in the game. It not only disrupts poverty; on a spiritual level, over time it can foster empathy and solidarity."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Help me look into my heart, O God, and find those things that close off some of Your children..."

September 29, 2024

Texts: Esther 8; Psalm 30

"Joy"

There is a lot of confusing stuff in Esther 8, describing how legal announcements were made back in that time. The bottom line was a new freedom for the Jews and they found many ways to celebrate (v. 17). If we look over a bit further, in Esther 9:18, we read about the beginning of the Feast of Purim. It was a time of partying and eating. They made sure that even the poor could be a part of it (Esther 9:22). It's a time of joy that the Jewish community still observes today.

Psalm 30:5 has the familiar assurance: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." The psalmist recognizes that it is not always morning. The heading in my Bible says this psalm was written after suffering from a grave illness. There was a time when the psalmist was in great prosperity (v. 6) and he began to feel that life was always a bed of roses. Suddenly, he thought God had hidden from him (v. 7) and the psalmist was "dismayed."

The psalmist recognized that God's victory is not

always obvious and not always quick. It may not even be what we recognize as "victory," but we can move with the confidence that "mourning will be turned into dancing" (v. 11).

There is a tradition in the church that I attend not to sing anything with the celebration of "alleluia" during Lenten season. It is an acknowledgment that there are days in the journey that are not days of celebration. Life sometimes is tough. Life sometimes is misery. Life sometimes is defeat. But, Easter Sunday bursts with songs and anthems and prayers and litanies that shout "Alleluia."

"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

These five lessons from the Book of Esther have traveled through grief, through fear, through anger, through racist disgust, and now through joy. There may be a little of Esther in each of us. There may be a little of Mordecai in each of us. There may be a little of Haman in each of us. There may be a little of King Ahasuerus in each of us.

In a sense, these strange happenings in the Book of Esther may have told our own life story. But, thanks be to God, the story ends with joy and celebration. And now I make claim upon that joy and celebration for my story!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Kathryn Whitaker (*Live Big, Love Bigger*, Ave Maria Press) wrote: "It's when we dive into the depths of pain and suffering that we develop an intimacy with God that is learned in no other way."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank You for staying with me on the journey, O God..."

October 2024

October 6, 2024

Text: Matthew 1:1-17

"The Identity Born in Us"

This week's lesson is the first of four on the question: "What Shapes Our Identity?"

Do you like to memorize Scripture? Why don't you commit this week's focal text to memory? Gasp! Look at those names! It is a list of 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus.

Each of us is shaped by family—birth family, adoptive family. I am grateful for a family tradition that nourished me in Christian faith, that expected me to be a good student, that gave me a support system. That has not been everyone's experience.

Some are shaped by family tradition; others are shaped by resisting family tradition.

Matthew was addressing a predominantly Jewish audience. It would be important to those readers to recognize that the Messiah came with roots in that tradition. Their practice would be to trace roots through the father, so it includes Joseph, not as the biological father of Jesus (See Matthew 1:18), but as a nurturing parent.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph had gone there to register because Joseph was in the family line of David (Luke 2:4). Bethlehem was called “the city of David.” That connection to the line of David was important in understanding who Jesus was.

What in your own journey do you want to pass on to the next generations? What in your own journey do you hope will not influence the next generations? How do you go about helping that happen (or not happen)?

Would Jesus have been different if he had grown up in Chicago instead of in Nazareth? Would Jesus have told stories about a farmer or about a woman who lost a coin or about a traveler on the road if he had not seen these things as he grew up?

Reflect on your family. How have you been shaped by where you lived? How have you been formed by family expectations? How have you formed new traditions now passed on by your family? Where do you see God’s hand in all of this?

Uh, how are you doing on memorizing Matthew 1:1-17? (I’m glad my family did not expect me to do that!)

What Someone Else Has Said:

Pope Francis (*The Joy of the Gospel*, Image) wrote: “...because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Give strength to my family, O God...”

October 13, 2024

Text: 1 Samuel 1:20-28

“The Identity Given to Us”

One of my prize possessions is the first Bible that I owned. I was seven years old and my daddy said that I was beginning to read well enough that I should have my own Bible. I remember that he opened up a Cokesbury catalog and let me pick the one I wanted.

It is a King James translation; it has a blue cover. And, as a reminder that this was my father’s gift to me, my name is inscribed in his handwriting. This memory begins to help me understand the title of this week’s lesson: “The Identity Given to Us.”

That is what is going on in the focal text: 1 Samuel 1:20-28. The boy Samuel—the man Samuel—begins to get his identity as his mother left him for the priest Eli to raise in the temple. There he grows. There he learns. There he serves. There he challenges. There he ministers. Samuel’s identity as a prophet comes alive.

Let me share another personal family story. Toni and I named our son with the traditional family name: Belton Joyner III. When he was a teen-ager, he began to go to conference youth ministry events. His name tag, of course, read “Belton Joyner.”

Because I had once been director of conference youth ministry, folks would recognize the name and come up to him and ask about me. He wanted to claim these faith journeys as his own, not as mine. He began to put “B.J.” on his name tags. It stood for “Belton Joyner,” but others did not know that and would all call him “B.J.”

For the rest of his life, he stuck with that nickname, and it all began because he wanted the family faith story to be his, and not just a mirror of mine.

Samuel found out what many of us have experienced. Our faith identity may be given to us, but it becomes even more powerful when we claim it as our own.

1 Samuel 3:19 adds to the drama of Hannah’s leaving Samuel at the temple: “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.” Hannah stayed in touch—look at 1 Samuel 2:18-20—but the identity now continued in Samuel.

Our identity is shaped by what is passed on to us. Truth to tell, sometimes it is in resistance to that identity that we find our own. Who is living out the faith tradition that you pass on? We might say, “Who is the Samuel that we present to the temple?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book *Me and We* (Abingdon Press), Leonard Sweet wrote: “It is no historical happenstance that individualism and depression (melancholia) developed simultaneously in Western culture from 1600 upwards.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for those who have shaped my journey of faith...”

October 20, 2024

Text: Genesis 25:27-33

“Our Identity in Relationship”

This series of lessons continues to look at how our identity is formed. Using the story of Jacob and Esau as an example, it speaks of how relationships help to form us.

Esau was the older brother and in those days that

gave him enormous rights and privileges, including inheritance of the father's wealth. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 21:17.) Jacob's jealousy of those benefits led him to lie and cheat in order to get them for himself (Genesis 27:18-29). But, see more of this relationship in Genesis 33.

But it is not only family relationships (positive and negative) that shape us, but other social and educational and even historical relationships that help to form us. I am formed in part by John Wesley, but he lived three hundred years before me. I have been shaped by friends and colleagues, many of whom you have never known. (Do the names Art Brandenburg, Blaine Taylor, Sally AsKew, Jon Gray mean anything to you? They have been important parts of my journey.)

Now, I am left to wonder: "Would my name be on anyone's list of persons who have shaped his or her identity?" And, there is an additional question: "Was that influence for good or for harm?"

In one of the daily readings for this week (Luke 17:3-4), Jesus is teaching his disciples about relationships. Our Lord acknowledges sometimes those close to us will stumble. But that is not to be the end of the relationship. Challenge the sin that you observe and when there is repentance, you are to forgive. Keep on forgiving! Even if they make the same sin seven times, if they repent seven times, keep on forgiving! That is a pretty important understanding of how our identities are shaped by relationships!

Relationships are a two-way street. It helps when the traffic is flowing both ways. The story of Jacob and Esau illustrates how the openness to God's presence can restore what has been broken and can heal what has been hurt.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In David Brooks' volume *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (Random House), the writer gives this account: "...Bill Millikan, who founded the organization Communities in Schools, came to the table one night. He's in his seventies now. 'I've been working in this field for fifty years,' he says, 'and I've never seen a program turn around a life. Only relationships turn around lives.'"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank you, Lord, for 'them'..."

October 27, 2024

Text: Matthew 4:18-22

"The Identity We Choose"

Over the past weeks of this month, we have been reflecting on how our identity ("Who I am") is shaped. Family. Circumstances. Relationships. Each of these helps form our identity.

The lesson this week says that in the final analysis, our identity is shaped by our choices. Matthew 4:18-22 tells how Jesus called Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Each of them said, "Yes." The text does not tell us if Jesus called others who said "No."

Have you seen the TV program "Chain Reaction"? Contestants are given a word (such as "Horse") and have to guess what word might follow that word. Let's say they guess correctly that the next word is "Shoe." Now, what word follows "Shoe"? It starts with an "L." Ah! "Shoe lace!" And what word follows "lace?" Lace trim? Lace ribbon? Lace dress? Which "next word" is the show looking for? Okay. You get the idea. Each choice you make has a consequence for what comes next.

Let's get specific. If you choose Jesus, it makes a difference in the next choices you make. Your moral decisions...your relationships with others...your use of time and money. We choose an identity and it makes a difference in what we choose next!

To make one choice is often to say "no" to another. James and John, sons of Zebedee, leave the family fishing business to follow Jesus. Peter and Andrew leave their nets—their way of making a living—to follow Jesus.

What have I had to leave in order to follow Jesus?
What have I been unwilling to give up?

Most of the people who read or listen to this week's lesson have said "Yes" to following Jesus. We are glad to claim that identity. However, there are tons of things on which we don't agree.

What would Jesus have me do about relationships with China? What would Jesus have me do about the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals? What would Jesus have me do about what is taught in the public schools? What would Jesus have me do about gambling on sporting events? What would Jesus have me do about the state lottery? For that matter, what would Jesus have me do about me?

I guess we know from the New Testament story that sometimes we get it right ("Yes, I'll follow you," said Peter) and sometimes we get it wrong ("No, I don't know that man Jesus," said Peter.)

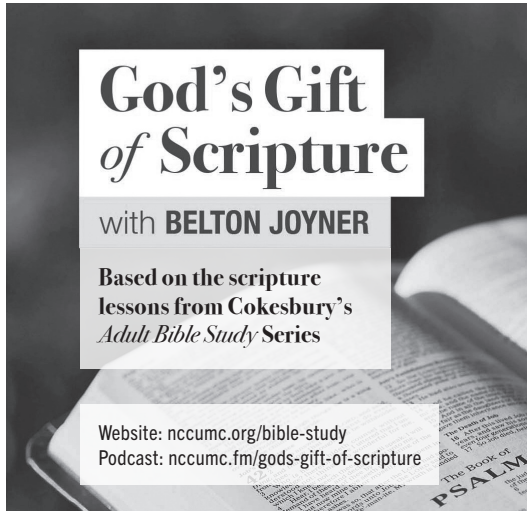
That is why we must keep our relationship with the Lord fresh and current. It certainly defines who we are.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Samuel Kamuanga (*La Clé de David*, self-published) wrote (my translation), "When we invoke the name of Jesus, we are in contact with his person, his character, his authority...his power, his action, his influence."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "What a Friend we have in Jesus!..."



Listen to the Bible Study Online:

Belton Joyner enriches and enlivens our study of scripture with his insightful writing. You can also engage with the Bible Study through an audio version of his weekly commentary, narrated by Belton himself.

To listen online, type nccumc.org/studyaudio into the search bar of your internet browser (Chrome, Firefox, Microsoft Edge, etc.). You can also subscribe to the weekly podcast on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Media Center Serves Individuals and Congregations of our Conference

Anyone involved with a United Methodist Church in the North Carolina Conference may borrow resources through the mail, free of charge. There is no membership fee to participate. Our entire collection of over 4,000 resources is listed in an online catalog along with reader reviews, browsing by topic, and more. Most of our resources are for use with small groups, but we also offer many books, videos, and other resources for individual study and leadership training.

Website: nccumc.org/media-center

Contact: Laura Dallas, ldallas@nccumc.org or 984-257-0981.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

700 Waterfield Ridge Place
Garner, NC 27529

The United Methodist Church
North Carolina Conference



NON PROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
RALEIGH NC
PERMIT #2483